

## THE ART OF PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP: A TOOL FOR SOCIAL AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

Maša MAGZAN

Zagreb School of Economics and Management, 10000 Zagreb, Jordanovac 110, Republic of Croatia  
E-mail: [masa.magzan@zsem.hr](mailto:masa.magzan@zsem.hr)

Accepted 1 November, 2011

**This paper describes the art of participatory leadership as a response to management challenges in the 21st century. Fostering collective wisdom and collaborative action, it is an essential tool for social and organisational development during times of uncertainty. Within descriptive mode of analysis, this study investigates how various methodologies used in participatory leadership can help people to work together for change, collaborate in interdisciplinary teams, transcend old paradigms, and create radically more effective, sustainable and creative outcomes in groups. Reporting from various examples, the study focuses on how and why the practice of opening the collective intelligence in organizations and communities may serve as a central driving force for unleashing the creativity as well as supporting and coordinating innovative and sustainable solutions. Data on participatory leadership practices is collected using the following two types of sources: official documentation provided in relevant online resources, and the information from the global community of participative leadership practitioners called Art of Hosting (AoH). The goal of the study is to reveal how the usage of participatory leadership methodology helps finding new solutions for the common good and by thus represents a valuable tool for successful organizational and communal development and change.**

**Keywords:** participatory leadership, art of hosting, change, social development, organizational development

### INTRODUCTION

*"We have entered the epoch of Responsibilities, which requires new, more socially minded human beings and new more participatory and place-based concepts of citizenship and democracy..."*

Mac Johnson

Organizations today are facing challenges never experienced before. Organizational success is largely depending on the organization's ability to unleash the creativity of people who want to make a difference and create change. Managers at all levels in any organization are increasingly becoming responsible for creating a cultural context that is a fertile ground for innovation and entrepreneurial thinking. For that reason, growing number of organizations are using the concept of 'distributed leadership' or leadership at all levels. It assumes excellent employee development and involvement and is a logical response to the requirements of the new organizational environment marked by innovation-driven competition which demands that

teamwork and leadership are distributed across many players, both within and across organizations, up and down the hierarchy (Ancona, 2007). Companies such as Southwest Airlines who involve their employees in problem solving and innovation are poster child for distributed leadership which assumes that 'the more organizations disperse leadership throughout their structure, the more effective they are' (Ancona, 2007).

In the wider social context, engaging groups and teams in a meaningful conversation, deliberate collaboration, and group-supported action for the common good becomes more necessary than ever before. This is because solutions to the complex problems such as poverty, political violence and global warming, can be only found when people from diverse sectors like business, government and NGOs work together (Magzan et al., 2010). In other words, in order to successfully deal with the various social and environmental challenges we face today, we need to 'develop far more collective intelligence

as a society and as a global civilization -- and then apply it with wisdom.' (Atlee and Por, 2006).

### **The whole can be greater than the sum of the parts**

The idea of collective intelligence is spread in numerous books and websites, professional meetings, online discussions, and informal conversations. Today "collective intelligence" became such a common a phrase that Google lists over a million pages using it, together with hundreds of thousands of other pages using similar terms such as "collective IQ," "collective wisdom," "community intelligence," "group intelligence," and so on. The establishment of the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence<sup>1</sup> in October 13, 2006, was a turning point in CI evolution. It is important to note that although people have been talking about the collective intelligence for decades, its true life begun with the new communication technologies and Internet because they allow huge numbers of people all over the planet to work together in new ways. The successes of systems like Linux and Wikipedia suggests that the time has come for many more similar systems to emerge. We should benefit from the fact that it is now possible to harness the collective intelligence of thousands of people around the world to work closely together at a scale that was never possible before in human history.

An example of CI in action would be the climate change project called Climate CoLab (Malone, 2011). An online community of people from all over the world is working together and creating, analyzing, and discussing detailed proposals for how to address global climate change. This productive global conversation continues to link people together from around the world - over 13,000 visitors coming from 131 countries on all the world's continents. The intention of the project is to educate general public about climate change issues, but also to facilitate a more productive global dialogue with emerging plans and policies being better than anything otherwise would have been developed.

Since collective intelligence is a holy grail of social change and social creativity, if we could better understand how to support it, increase it and facilitate it, we would be more able to effectively co-create a better world. Since organizational effectiveness stems from how well the group works together, the same applies to organizational development. The research has shown that collective

intelligence "is not strongly correlated with the average or maximum individual intelligence of group members but is correlated with the average social sensitivity of group members, the equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking, and the proportion of females in the group (Wooley et al., 2010). In other words, those groups whose members had higher levels of 'social sensitivity', and that is 'willingness of the group to let all its members take turns and apply their skills to a given challenge, the group was more collectively intelligent' (Dizikes, 2010). Therefore, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts because the intelligence among groups of people who cooperate well shows that such intelligence extends beyond the cognitive abilities of the groups' individual members.

### **THE ART OF PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP OR THE ART OF HOSTING**

*"Hosting is an emerging set of practices for facilitating group conversations of all sizes, supported by principles that:*

- maximize collective intelligence;
- welcome and listen to diverse viewpoints;
- maximize participation and civility; and
- transform conflict into creative cooperation."

The core team of practitioners, Upper Arlington, Columbus Ohio<sup>2</sup>

Since the solutions to the problems we face today cannot be found in one single view or perspective, but are most often hidden behind the collective knowledge and potential of all stakeholders, the complexity of the environment in which we both work and live require the change in how we work together. The power of participatory leadership is in using the intelligence that exists everywhere in the community, the company, school, or organization. Participatory leadership means dialogue and conversations that foster collective learning and wisdom for more collaborative, sustainable, and innovative solutions.

A set of practices called the Art of Hosting (AoH) represent tools that give birth to the participatory leadership. The group process methodologies used in Art of hosting are techniques such as Open Space Technology, World Café, Appreciative Inquiry and others.<sup>3</sup> What they have in common is the potential to release creativity and collective knowledge through building an individual's contribution to the group. Such tools help facilitate „group conversations of all

<sup>1</sup> source <http://cci.mit.edu/>

<sup>2</sup> source <http://www.artofhosting.org/thepractice/>

<sup>3</sup> source <http://artofhosting.ning.com/forum/topics/chris-corrigans-facilitation>

sizes, supported by principles that: maximize collective intelligence; welcome and listen to diverse viewpoints; maximize participation and civility; and transform conflict into creative cooperation.”<sup>4</sup>. In other words, AoH represents a set of practices based on the common sense and that is to bring stakeholders together in conversation when new solutions for the common good are needed. This practice explores hosting on both an individual and collective level and serves the needs of both, social and organizational development and change.

Therefore, the art of participatory leadership or the art of hosting relies on the principles of 'self organization, participation, ownership and non-linear solutions because they are the keys for both individual and collective discoveries'<sup>5</sup>. This is different and complimentary to more traditional ways of working that are often based on rational planning and full control of the progress. The "Art" part refers to that fact that people don't work with pre-determined methods but rather approach each conversation from a design perspective, offering the best design for the context based on the simple principles of good conversation. The „host“ part refers to the new role of the leader whose work with people is based on inclusion, cooperation and augmenting the collective potential of the group needed for the change and development. Besides having knowledge and courage to ask the right question in order to engage the group into a meaningful conversation, a new leader has to be skilful facilitator of conversations that lead to creation of enduring solutions. Let us now briefly explore the requirements for creating and hosting meaningful conversations.

### **The Change of the Leadership Ideology and Nature of our Conversations**

*"The problems of the war and disharmony in our world is maybe because of all the conversations that never took place."*

Queen Margaret of Denmark

Knowing that 'creating an alternative future rests on the nature of our conversations and our capacity to relocate where cause resides' (Block, 2007), it is clear why any authentic transformation requires meaningful conversation and eliciting the wisdom of the group through maximizing participation. Since people increasingly want to participate in the choices that affect their lives and they want to make a

difference, leaders in nonprofit organizations, government agencies, businesses, professional associations and communities around the world are being called upon to engage people in a more collaborative way. In order to create organizational cultures based on participation and creativity where people can tap into their collective interior and intelligence, both the change in the nature of the conversation and a leadership ideology are needed. The reason for this 'global mind shift' in a new era of conscious co-evolution is the power of collective intelligence according to which any group itself has the wisdom and creativity needed to deal with the situation so the only thing needed is the context that corrals and focuses the group's insights toward a specific topic and a focus question. This changes the dominant conventional belief system where the task of leadership is to set a vision and bring others 'on board.' Furthermore, the default culture on leadership which most leadership training still focuses on assumes that:

*„Leader and top are essential.  
The future destination can be blueprinted.  
The work is to bring others “on board”.  
More measurement produces better results.  
People need more training.  
Rewards are related to outcomes.  
What worked elsewhere can work here.  
The future is a problem to be solved.  
Leaders should be a role model.“ (Block, 2007)*

As Otto Scharmer and many other thought leaders call it, shifting from an Egosystem awareness to Ecosystem awareness is the essence of leadership of our time. Since the research suggests that in groups „where one person dominated, the group was less intelligent than in groups where the conversational turns were more evenly distributed“ (Wooley, 2010), in order to tap into the power of collective intelligence, leaders role is to create conditions in which everyone can be involved. This notion of participatory leadership challenges the conventional thinking which holds the leaders are the role models that everyone should follow. Such ideology represents a form of parenting, and the alternative is to move away from it so instead of parental dominion, leadership functions as a form of partnership. This assumes that the role of the leader is to invite people, focus their attention on certain issues and design conversations that will take place.

In order to identify the thinking and tools for the needed transformation of the nature of our conversations, it is important to understand the essentials of having meaningful conversations. Here

<sup>4</sup> source [www.artofhosting.org](http://www.artofhosting.org)

<sup>5</sup> source [www.artofhosting.org](http://www.artofhosting.org)

are some of the basic tools for a good conversational design.<sup>6</sup>

1) The power of asking the right question - When inviting people into a conversation that matters, it is necessary to have an overall question that embodies the purpose of the meeting. This is the “calling question” and is best formulated together with key stakeholders. Asking the right question is the most effective way of opening up a conversation and keeping it engaging because a high-quality question focuses on what is meaningful for the participants, triggers our curiosity and invites us to explore further.

2) Gathering and harvesting - Instead of meetings which are preplanned and scheduled and are most often intended for production rather than hospitality, it is better to use the term gathering. Anthropologically, this signifies a form of our social genetic wiring that has existed among people of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds for centuries. It is a common practice that people gather and talk about things that matter to them. Also, instead of planning a meeting, plan to harvest your learnings during the gathering. This is more than taking notes in a meeting – people should be invited to co-create the harvest. A big piece of paper can be placed in the middle of the table so that everyone can reach it and put notes that capture ideas and findings. Since the group can see the connections and watch the emerging whole of the conversation, mind represent a great way to capture the essence of conversation.<sup>7</sup>

3) Make a wise decision, act upon it and stay together. - If the gathering needs to come to a decisions, make on based on consensus process. Have in mind that wise decisions emerge from conversation, not voting. After deciding what needs to be done, act, commit and do it. And finally, staying together refers to the fact that relationships create sustainability. Use well the power of trust which is the most precious resource of the group.

In the following section, it is time to discuss the practical implications of the art of orchestrating conversations.

## **HOW CAN PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP TURN LEADERS INTO HOSTS AND CITIZENS INTO HEROES?**

In their most recent book *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now*, Deborah Frieze and Margaret Weathley (2011) are bringing stories from seven communities around the world about people who have walked out of limiting beliefs and assumptions and walked on to create healthy and resilient communities. One of the seven learning journeys is a story of citizenship in Columbus, OH where citizens of this mid-size, Middle American city are discovering their capacity to engage together to create a better future.<sup>8</sup> This is a story of how leaders of some America’s largest institutions—healthcare, academia, government who are giving up take-charge, heroic leadership, and instead chose to engage members of their community. Through their positional power and authority they act as “hosts,” calling together people from all parts of the system to work together to solve problems such as hunger, homelessness, education, public safety, healthcare and other important issues. Although this story is about small, local efforts, it has a power to move laterally through a network of relationships and finally emerge as large-scale change.

A great example of such potential is a worldwide action-research initiative called The World Inquiry into business as an agent of world benefit.<sup>9</sup> Catalyzed by Case Western Reserve University’s Weatherhead School of Management under the leadership of Ron Fry and Nadya Zhexembayeva,, this growing open-source network showcases the best in business-in-society innovations and sparks conversations about the role and potential of business to act as an agent of world benefit. Digital stories of exceptional business and social practices are shared and the best of the uncovered innovations are profiled in the Innovation Bank. This project uses the Appreciative Inquiry methodology as one of AoH tools as a way of mobilizing millions and millions of face-to-face conversations with business leaders, visionaries, students, scholars, social entrepreneurs, thought leaders, and wisdom companions including children, wise elders and spiritual teachers.

Here are some other examples of powerful AoH conversations that took place in various parts around the globe. In order to reveal the potential of

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<sup>6</sup> source

<http://www.evolutionarynexus.org/book/export/html/909>

<sup>7</sup> source

[http://www.artofhosting.org/download/Artofharvesting26\\_221.pdf](http://www.artofhosting.org/download/Artofharvesting26_221.pdf).

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<sup>8</sup> source

[http://www.berkana.org/pdf/FromHerotoHost\\_web.pdf](http://www.berkana.org/pdf/FromHerotoHost_web.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> source [www.worldinquiry.org](http://www.worldinquiry.org)

questions for opening up new possibilities, energy and accelerating transformation in organizations or communities, these conversations will be listed here in the form of calling questions. Unlike worldinquiry project, they do not rely on the potential of the internet as a medium that inspires world-wide creativity and connection, but use face-to-face dialogue initiated by the following powerful questions that provoke the images of the future, which is the first step in building the future:

“How will the practice of participatory leadership help the European Commission serve Europe?  
How will The Technical Schools in Denmark be attractive learning environments in 2015?”  
Vision Camp - students and leaders co creating the future Technical Schools in Denmark.<sup>10</sup>

“What is the next level of service to the world for the AIESEC international leadership community?  
What new questions does Leeds need to be asking itself for the 21st century? Awareness day in Leeds, How will meet the challenges of the next decade?”  
Directors seminar, EU Commission.<sup>11</sup>

The beauty of participatory leadership approach lies in the fact that the simplest truths are the most powerful. It is wide-known that human conversation is the oldest and easiest way to generate conditions for change. Vibrant global community of Art of Hosting practitioners functions just like an open-source operating system (think of Linux, for example) in which a worldwide community of developers continuously create new and different applications by using the same source code. Through their networks and relationships this source code is based on core principles and practices for how to host conversations which include: setting intention, creating hospitable space, asking powerful questions, surfacing collective intelligence, trusting emergence, finding mates, harvesting learning and moving into wise action. The power of such approach is that it allows people to do what they like best and that is to connect and create together.

Instead of a conclusion, there is an appropriate quote from another famous M. Wheatley's book (2009) "...in an increasingly dark time...it is difficult to do good and lasting work...in any country and in any type of work, we are being asked to work faster, more competitively, more selfishly - and to focus on the short-term...these values cannot lead to anything healthy and sustainable, and they are alarmingly

destructive. We may feel distressed, overwhelmed, numbed and afraid - we are living in a time when countless people are losing their faith in people and their futures. But beneath these feelings, we still desire learning, freedom, meaning and love...and people are still basically good and caring."

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<sup>10</sup> source: <http://www.interchange.dk/ourwork/clients/>

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