



PLAYING, LEADERSHIP AND TEAM DEVELOPMENT IN INNOVATIVE TEAMS

A Reflection on Theory Confronted with the Perspective of Experienced Leaders

Helga D. Hohn

Summary

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Introduction

In this summary, the important findings and conclusions of this book are presented. As a practitioner and researcher I am interested in the connection between theory and practice and I often find that a difficult transition exists between the two. This book confronts theoretical reflections with the practical perspectives of experienced leaders. The research is positioned in the domain of group processes and leadership on the relations-process level, which refers to the atmosphere in the team, leadership issues and the psychodynamic development of the group. The summary ends with conclusions and applicational advice for leaders of teams with an innovative task.

Problem Statement and Synopsis Research Approach

The main research questions pertain to an analysis in three theoretical domains contrasted with the perceptions of innovative team leaders. Using this discursive approach, the main questions of the book are presented as follows: ‘What are the conditions a successful innovative team requires on the relational-process level and what is the kind of leadership that is needed in a successful innovative team?’ The contribution of this book to academic discourse is a conceptual renewal through reflection comparing different theoretical domains in dialogue with representatives from practice.

It is written within an interpretative frame. This means that a substantial part of the research derives from the examination of theory and conclusions drawn. The comparison with the practical experience of senior team leaders using a questionnaire study is the second part of the research. The result of both, the literature surveys and the questionnaire study, are treated as separate outcomes and are discussed in the conclusion.

Findings from the Literature Analysis

The presentation of the literature analysis begins with the controversy between small group theory and team literature (chapter four).

Further findings of the literature survey pertain to concepts distilled and reviewed in the three domains of developmental psychology and psychodynamic models (chapter three), group dynamics of small groups and teams (chapter four) and creativity theory (chapter five). The concepts which were selected for this summary were chosen on the basis of novelty and applicational value.

The Group Dynamics of Small Groups and Teams

In the chapter about group dynamics, a tour d'horizon is taken along the development of theories on the group dynamics of small groups and teams.

Although in most social science research the definition of small groups and teams is seen as identical, for this book, the literature of small groups and teams is considered separately in order to investigate possible differences between them. In innovation and management literature, much attention is given to working with teams. In this area, emphasis is put on problems relating to technology, procedures, goals and high performance with little emphasis on the social dynamics of the team. The knowledge developed by the social sciences in the 1960's and 1970's on the dynamics of small groups is rarely used if not at all. The question arises whether the findings and theories gained in the research of the 1970's are valid for the small groups currently called teams? Although in the literature of the social sciences they are generally seen to be the same this analysis of small group and team literature shows substantial differences.

Small Group Research Philosophy Psychological Theories Organisational Development	Self-Directing Team Philosophy Performance and Output Orientation Management Application
<p>Values and Metaphors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + grows metaphors, person culture + developmental, humanistic models + development oriented <p>Objective; Process Targets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + have we achieved understanding + process understanding - consultation + personal development, risk <p>Group process / person oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + simple structured task + task manipulated dependent variable to study group process + reflection on group process + pace depends on group + problem creation + low material reward <p>Concepts about learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + individual 'learns' and reflects in group + learning in and between groups 	<p>Values and Metaphors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + fight/power metaphors, task culture + rationalistic models, survival of the fittest + business oriented <p>Objective; Goal Targets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + have we solved the problem + best solution - expert stance + goal development, risk <p>Task process / performance oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + structured and complex task + group process manipulated in order to help task + conflict management + high speed + problem solving + high material reward <p>Concepts about learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + team has to be creative + learning organisation

Figure 1: Small group dynamics versus team literature

The differences show fundamental contrasts in their basic approach. As can be seen in figure 1 the developmental point of view of the 'small group' literature contrasts

markedly with the team literature which focusses more on business output. It seems that the product and procedure oriented practitioners do not speak the language of the social process and that the process and development oriented researchers do not speak the language of performance and output.

One proposed explanation is that one domain developed a language that the other domain did not (or would not) speak. The metaphors and 'logics' consolidating this mindset prevented them from finding common ground. This difference in perspective and language, is in my opinion one of the reasons why the two philosophies make little use of each other's knowledge. They literally have little to say to each other, which is a pity as is demonstrated in the conclusions of this book.

Playing and Creativity

In developmental theories of psychology, playing is seen as an important activity in the development of creativity and in the maturation process of children. Piaget defines it as a function of assimilation, Vygotsky goes further and relates it to creativity and for Winnicott it is an absolutely necessary condition for development. To repeat Vygotsky's words: 'Playing creates a zone of proximal development and is a major source of development itself'.

The applicational value of introducing 'playing' into the world of innovative teams seems rather pragmatic and obvious. It legitimises the things teams already do anyway. As such, it is a domain that should be explored further by those interested in innovative team behaviour and the success of teams. In terms of analogy, playing is important for the development and creativity of teams. The team might develop into a more creative, mature unit using play to step out of standard patterns. To end with a quote from Buijs 'Homo innovans is more homo ludens than homo economicus' (1984, Stelling 1).

Metaphors of 'Intermediate Space'

One of the most intriguing topics as well as one of the most elusive, is the metaphor of 'intermediate space'. The term, 'the intermediate area of experience', was coined by the psychoanalyst Winnicott in his article on transitional phenomena (1971) and is the source of most of the metaphors of intermediate space. To Winnicott, the 'intermediate area of experience' means a mental space of the very small child who begins to become conscious about the world around it, but is not yet capable of handling such a dangerous environment. The infant creates a mental play area where transitional objects, like a teddybear, 'live' and are used as a bridge between itself and the outside world. According to Winnicott, the 'intermediate area of experience' is needed for the development of creativity, and in adult life becomes the 'place' where cultural experience occurs.

We are not used to speaking of 'intermediate space' in terms of innovative teams. The applicational value of this elusive metaphor is not self-evident. But if looked at in terms of today's virtual worlds, the idea of a virtual space in one's mind reserved for

playing and creativity is perhaps less far fetched. The growth of virtual worlds might cause us to explore and protect our inner psychological space, especially the ones where existential values, appreciation for the arts and religion are located. For teams, the concrete connection between the intermediate space with autonomy of the team members, physical room and resources come close to the conditions needed for this 'intermediate area of experience' and I believe they are of applicational value.

Leadership of Teams and Creative Climate

In most definitions of leadership, it is assumed 'that leadership involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people in an attempt to structure the activities and relationships.' (Yukl, 1998). In general, research on the leadership of groups involved in creative and innovative tasks suggests a preference for a participatory and supportive leadership style for complex teams.

Creative climate is a metaphor for the social components of the environment, the social 'atmosphere'. The assumption is that some 'social climates' are better for the successful generation of creativity and innovation. Main differences found between group climate and creative climate theories are freedom, challenge and risk taking.

The conditions, or what is often called the rules for creative sessions encourage speaking freely within the group. We observe that the rule, *postponement of judgement*, enhances acceptance of self and others which allows trust to develop. If the leader conducts a creative session using the rules developed by Osborn, the attitude enhanced by these rules sees to it that in a well conducted creativity session, a smooth and well functioning group process is achieved.

Leadership as described in creative climate theories confirms the supportive leadership stance. Theorists find that a supporting style of leadership is a pre-condition for successfully leading innovative teams. Understanding how to achieve a creative climate in co-operation with group dynamic skills is obligatory for facilitators and leaders of innovative teams.

Stages of Individual Development and Stages of Group and Team Development

One characteristic that the stage models of psychological development have in common is the following: with successful development of the person or the group, more complexity (cognitive and emotional) and more difficult tasks can be handled. Another shared characteristic is that if a developmental stage does not take place, the benefits of that stage are lost. The stage must then be 'repeated', otherwise a missing link remains.

Of key importance is that both the developmental and the group dynamic fields advocate that timing and sequencing are crucial to the successful development of an individual or a group. Every individual, as well as every group, must grapple with issues concerning trust, authority, norms, goals and decision making. For teams, the

more the leader and the team are able to handle these issues, the better their performance will be.

Creative Climate in the Context of Organisation

It is a cybernetic legacy to describe systems like groups within a larger context, rather than separately. In group dynamics, the system theorists consider groups as part of larger systems. They work with them in the context of the whole organisation. Project teams must manage their actions concerning their relationship with their organisation. The interaction with this larger system determines the viability of the team and its output.

In the creativity domain it is currently emphasised that context is important to be aware of in a creative process. The system model of Csikszentmihalyi states that the world around us shapes our perceptions and that we must take this into account. 'A group needs to have values, skills and qualities in order to call a made product creative and 'persuade' the outside world so that this will be perceived as being creative.' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

The applicational value of context and situational approaches is considered to be high. However, the topics are more complex than might be assumed at first sight. Cybernetics and systems theory are underlying concepts in the models of context and boundaries. One must be aware of misunderstandings between cybernetics and social science. Yet with clear definitions, the findings from small group research and from creative climate research could be credibly and with added value, combined usefully for innovative teams.

Results from the Questionnaire Study

The questionnaire was designed based on the concepts from the literature research. Its first frames were derived from the theoretical chapters. The resulting questions and statements were discussed and reviewed in two rounds with representative experts from the different professional domains. The questionnaire was then sent to 106 leaders of whom 75 were willing to partake in the research.

Leaders of different professions were asked, as 'experts in practice', to state their viewpoints in order to obtain current insights and experiences, critical appraisals and ideas. The five different professional domains the leaders come from are: Facilitators/Consultants, Innovation Managers, Artistic Leaders, Project Managers and Social Scientists.

These professional fields were chosen to obtain a broad range of innovative management shown in a spectrum from routine to innovative tasks. In this spectrum the professional leaders work in the non-routine domains. Three professional fields, Facilitators, Innovation Managers and Project Managers, are directly related to innovation in business. The Artistic Leaders were chosen as a contrast group but also work within the defined spectrum and the Social Scientists were asked both for their

professional knowledge about the social domain and as a theoretical contrast group. In the following section the resulting outcomes of the theoretical explorations tested against the perceptions of the leaders are summarised.

Theme: *Playing and Trust*

Playing has an important role for successful innovative teams.

Basic Trust (in oneself and others) is essential if the team wants to be successful.

Theme: *Social Process and Team Development in Innovative Teams*

Successful functioning of innovative teams implies that time must be spent on the developmental process of the group.

In the start-up phase, the team members engage in activities like positioning and finding out whether they share the vision, whereas in the performance phase the team members are focused on effectiveness, they identify with the team and help each other. Contrary to theoretical expectation, in the start-up phase, the team is also concerned with task activities.

Theme: *Creative Climate and Tolerance*

To attain a creative climate, a team needs an atmosphere of tolerance and 'free room' in its environment.

Tolerance for destructive thoughts is an important prerequisite when working with innovative tasks.

Theme: *Leadership Style and Role*

A leader of a successful, innovative team has a supportive leadership style in order to allow for, and foster, a creative climate.

Leaders and team members have different roles toward the outside world in reporting to hierarchy and sponsors, and in absorption of pressure. Contrary to theoretical expectation both team members and leaders were involved in finding out about support in the organisation.

Differences between Professions and Genders

To investigate the contrast between the groups, the following statement was proposed.: Leaders from different professional fields have differing perceptions of the social dynamics of teams, and therefore, have different opinions about all statements and questions of the questionnaire.

Secondly, it was proposed that leaders of different genders have differing perceptions

about the social dynamics of teams, and therefore, have different opinions about the statements and questions of the questionnaire.

Surprisingly, very few significant differences were found between the professional domains and between the two sexes. The 75 senior leaders gave evidence of agreement for over 83% without significant differences in their views concerning leadership and group process.

If theorists proclaim that different tasks require different process and handling of the task how can we explain that the questionnaire shows so little differences between the perceptions of the leaders of different professional fields?

Interpretation on the Shared Perceptions

Different explanations are proposed as interpretation:

There is tacit knowledge to be found in the actions of practicing leaders and senior managers. According to Gergen once theory is written and published it starts to be part of our cultural thinking. Another explanation could be that innovation is the common denominator which could outweigh the differences between the leaders.

It is also possible that group dynamics are a universal characteristic of a team and are more important than domain differences between the professions. The perceptions of leaders are alike, because they all have to deal with the complex process of leading a team through an innovative task. Therefore, they perceive the relational process in the same way even if their professional fields differ.

Lack of differences between genders fits in with other research results on leadership and is less surprising.

Conclusions

Conditions for Successful Innovative Teams on the Relational Process Level

Both the theoretical survey and, to a similar extent, the practitioners perceptions indicate the keys to fostering a creative climate.

The keys are to emphasise playing, freedom to have destructive thoughts, challenge and risk taking. The leader's perceptions from the questionnaire study support the idea that successful innovative teams do play. Playing and understanding the importance of playing is a new theoretical insight which should lead to new thoughts regarding the relational-process level of a successful innovative team. With it come implications concerning the development of trust and the intermediate space where play occurs. Playing and risk taking are in close relationship, because playing breaks boundaries, creates new structures by reorganising symbols, making room for discoveries and allowing diverse perspectives. By not focusing on financial matters or strict rules, playing fosters the inner freedom to follow that which is liked or fancied, and combines it with that which comes up by chance. Playing is, in a way, the inner

expression of what we perceive on the outside as freedom, challenge and risk taking.

Leadership of Innovative Teams on the Relational Process Level

To lead an innovative team is a paradoxical challenge for a leader. On the one hand the team needs time to create and to destroy, needs freedom to take risks, and freedom to break with procedures and rules without being punished. On the other hand at the same time a team must work efficiently toward a goal within the constraints established by organisational resources and culture. These paradoxical elements have to be somehow 'managed' by the leader.

Interestingly in the literature survey we observed a similar discrepancy between the group dynamic theories of small groups and the growing literature on teams as depicted in figure 1.

The paradigm of the social psychology's small group literature is more focused on 'knowing why', whereas the paradigm that the team literature is 'knowing-how': skills, 'hands on' knowledge or experience, or quick procedures without much depth. In the following model we can see that the innovation process and the required leadership must incorporate both paradigms. High divergence needs to be allowed to encourage a really creative process while high convergence is needed to obtain efficiency and effectiveness. The leaders of an innovative team must manage both processes and combine them if their teams are to be successful.

I propose two leadership modes to describe this process. The *generative* mode is the leadership behaviour that encourages divergence, fosters exploration and originality which leads to new ideas. The *focusing* mode is the leadership behaviour that encourages convergence, directs the process leading to performing the task within the given constraints.

generative mode of leadership	focusing mode of leadership
vision development	goal management
play/fun metaphors	fight/power metaphors
development oriented	business oriented
have we created new ideas ?	have we solved the problem ?
pace given by creative process	pace given by planning and monitoring
A--> ?: challenge and risk taking	A-->B: defining action
exploration of conflicts	crisis and conflict management
finding freedom, chaotic	acting within constraints, ordered
emphasis on intrinsic motivation	emphasis on extrinsic motivation:
autonomy and challenging conditions	material and immaterial rewards

good group dynamics are a condition for both modes

Figure 8.4: generative and focusing modes of leadership of an innovative team

Both the focusing and the generative mode are necessary to manage the innovative process. As described in the paradox of leading innovative teams, the leader has to alternate between the different modes, which only together lead an innovative team to success.

In conclusion, I propose that the shifts between these modes are helped by good group dynamics. Good group dynamics allow the team members to bear the tension when switching from the generative to the focusing mode and vice versa. Therefore they are instrumental in resolving the paradox of leading an innovative team, allowing the leader to lead dramatic shifts to change the team's process mode and make the transitions that an innovative process requires.

Suggestions for practical application based on the findings of this research are given below:

Leaders should understand that leading an innovative team contains paradoxical aspects. The leader must be able to alternate between the generative and the focusing modes of leadership. He or she also needs to have an understanding of when and how to switch modes. Therefore, leaders should develop this flexibility both for themselves and for their teams.

Trust is the basis that supports the group process and activities. Therefore leaders should work on trust, acceptance and good group dynamics, which become more complicated and important as complexity of the project grows and the group becomes more diversified.

A creative climate involves room for playing and basic trust between the team members. The level of freedom to 'play' that the leader allows himself or herself is the same that he or she can allow the team. 'If the leader can't play, the team can't play.'