

WE HAVE TO DEVELOP LEADERS' ABILITY TO RESONATE

Ingo Winkler and Sabine Pelzmann

Contemporary leadership is concerned with considering the individual employee, listening to all employees, letting employees participate in decision-making, and creating a supportive and inclusive organizational culture. These concepts have found their way into leadership development and training programs and are, hence, trained to existing and future leaders as excellent leadership practice.

We believe that there is one crucial capability that has been neglected so far. This capability concerns leaders' ability to resonate with the organization and the broader social and environmental system. To resonate means relating to the social, material, and natural world in responsive and dialogical ways. We argue that leaders with this capability are mainly concerned with understanding themselves as an integral and interdependent part of a system with social, material, and natural dimensions and not with merely influencing followers and the organization.

Our argument broadly follows the ideas of the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, who engages in critical sociological analysis of late modernity. Amongst other things, he is known for his work on social acceleration in modern societies. As the logic of growth penetrates almost all aspects of human life, he observes a change in the temporal structures of modern society. That implies not only acceleration of production, transport, and communication processes but also impacts people's lives as they continuously strive to achieve more in the same (or even less) time in almost all domains. However, as human life accelerates in that sense, people experience a simultaneous decline in the quality of their lives that appear to be a constant rush for more and more. Likewise, there are deteriorating effects on the social relationships in our societies as relationships tend to turn into nothing more than means to achieve more in one's life.

Based on his sociological analysis, Rosa formulates alternative accomplishments of social life in modern

societies, accomplishments that seek to show alternative ways of how people can relate to their world. In his 2019 book *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, he contrasts two approaches that people in modern societies follow when engaging with the world. One approach seeks to control and determine the world, and the other builds on establishing responsive relationships with the world. Rosa argues that the latter approach of being in resonance with the world has the capacity for people to be in touch with and moved by the world. Such an approach would allow for more favorable relationships between human beings and their social, economic, ecological—and as we argue—organizational world.

Rethinking Leadership Training

Bruno Latour, in his 2018 book *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, addresses the systematic disregard for people's dependency on their natural environment and the denial of climate change caused by civilization. In academic circles, Latour, who passed away last year, is well known as one of the developers of Actor-Network Theory, a theoretical and empirical approach challenging the assumption that it is only humans who have the capacity to act. Rather actors can be human and non-human, such as technology, ideas, concepts, insects, and natural habitats; all mutually involved in a network of relationships. In that sense, natural actors, such as animals, plants, climate, geology, and habitats constitute non-human actors of equal agency to humans because these actors' reactions to human impact and their capacities and actions influence the possibility of humans to form a society. Latour argues that the 21st century constitutes an age of a new geo-social condition informed by the systematic denial of the interdependency between human beings and their material conditions of existence. He claims that humans must return to the awareness that they coexist with nature, and they must comprehend that they are a part of nature and not nature's conqueror.

C. Otto Scharmer, in his 2007 book *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*, argues that humans

Humans require new abilities grounded in a new quality of consciousness.

require new abilities grounded in a new quality of consciousness. Scharmer is a senior lecturer in Work and Organization Studies and devotes much of his work on understanding conversation as a central element in the development of evolution and consciousness. He describes four different types of conversations: Downloading, Debate, Dialogue, and Collective Presence—the latter constituting a generative dialogue resulting in deeper states of relationship and connection. For Scharmer conversations link us to the power of collective intelligence. They can connect us to our deep source of collectively creating and bringing forth the world. When operating from that deeper stage of conversation, we begin to act as elements of a whole that is larger than our self. In his 2008 article in *Leader to Leader*, “Uncovering the Blind Spot of Leadership,” Scharmer advocates thoughtfulness as a state where leaders—individually and collectively—become aware of what they do, how they act, and why they act on the organization in particular ways. He suggests letting go of our present self to be able to meet our inner source of inspiration and will. What he calls “presencing” is a form of resonance between our current self and our best future self, which helps us to become aware of how we are connected to the world and how we can co-create the future and co-evolve with it.

For many, it is common sense that our current world within and outside organizations is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. In addition, our collective experience with the Covid-19 pandemic, current threats to global security, and the urgent need to become more sustainable in ecological and social terms

bring to the surface the call for competencies such as “handling complexity,” “handling uncertainty,” and “handling ambiguity,” while paving a way into a viable future. Questions arise such as: How can we enable organizations and their members to cope with societal, environmental, and economic challenges that are not yet foreseeable? How can we prepare organizations to use technologies that do not yet exist? What do people need to navigate in a networked world that requires an understanding of diverse perspectives and convictions? How do we interact with each other respectfully and responsibly while acting towards environmental and social sustainability?

Responding to these questions, organizations establish leadership trainings to develop leaders’ capacity to be tolerant of ambiguity, to be able to act under conditions of uncertainty, to remain confident in dynamic contexts, and to provide a sense of certainty to employees and other actors inside and outside the organization. These and other change-related competencies are well described in the leadership literature and constitute an element in almost all leadership development programs. In addition to such programs, we establish flat, open, flexible, transparent, and team-oriented structures and apply principles of collegiality and co-creativity. Also, the already mentioned technique of presencing is used in change processes to grapple with the sources that inform the development of social systems.

However, prevalent leadership development programs continue focusing on the development of practical competencies regarding the *How* of exerting influence. Such competencies should enable leaders to better lead people by knowing, for example, how to inspire followers, articulate problems, provide feedback, and address resistance. Some leadership development programs also address how leaders understand their own role, for example, whether they see themselves as contributing to the organization’s purpose or as someone who wants to put a unique footprint on it.

Acknowledging the value of these competencies, we argue that leadership development and training should also zoom in on the capability of leaders to resonate with

the organization and the organizational environment. This capability is crucial for the experience of being part of a social system and embedded in social and ecological domains, which in turn informs leaders’ responses to the organizational world.

Resonance as a Way of Relating to the World

Rosa distinguishes between two ways human beings relate to the world; one focuses on controlling the world, and the other grounds in engagement with the world. He argues that modern societies are dominated by the approach that seeks to control the economic, social, ecological, and organizational world. He contrasts this approach with one that builds on resonating with the world in corporeal, psychological, and social terms. Resonating implies experiencing the world not as something that must be known, made accessible, controlled and instrumentalized—all aspects of contemporary leadership in organizations—but as something that human beings engage with. In this sense, humans’ relationships to the world are responsive relationships of experiencing a world where they feel embedded and connected and are responsive to signals from their surroundings.

According to Rosa, resonating with the world first implies being ready to become touched by the world.

*Resonating with the world
first implies being ready
to become touched by the
world.*

That means being open towards the world and being ready to be moved by experiences, events, other people, and relationships. That is far from promoting esotericism in terms of nurturing access to some hidden, mystical aspects of the world. Instead, it suggests that the ability to resonate with the world requires a degree of emotional sensitivity and intrinsic responsiveness. The openness towards becoming touched by the world around us turns this world into something worth to be experienced and, therefore, also something exciting.

The second element of resonating with the world concerns the response to being touched. Being touched evokes an emotional response in us, and according to Rosa, only then can one speak of an emerging relationship of resonance between a human being and the world. Not only are we touched, but in turn, through our response, we seek to touch the world around us, establishing a connection and relationship of communication. Communication, in that sense, means listening, understanding, and responding, not turning a deaf ear to influences from our surroundings because they are considered disruptive, unmanageable, unhelpful, or just not in line with what we, as leaders, want to achieve.

In the third element of resonating, our self changes. Rosa explains that experiences of resonance with the world transform us and the world simultaneously. We see the world with different eyes and encounter it differently. Becoming transformed is a specific effect of resonating, an effect that cannot be created by

Communication ... means listening, understanding, and responding.

We see the world with different eyes and encounter it differently.

for example appropriating the world (e.g., watching an instructional film on how the leader-follower relationship can transform both instead of making such an experience oneself) because appropriation does not mean that we are also affected.

Fourthly and finally, Rosa underlines the unavailability of resonance. Becoming embedded in the world—as opposed to dominating and instrumentalizing it—is a relationship mode that is fundamentally unavailable, that is, it cannot be planned, produced, controlled, and used accordingly. Hence, whether and when we are in resonance with the world and what causes it is outside our control.

For Rosa, resonating with the world is both the result and the expression of a specific form of relationship between two entities. In the leadership context, these are, for example, relationships between a leader and the parts of the world they encounter inside and outside the organization, specified in followers, teams, processes, customer systems, sustainability goals, ecological changes, and legislation, among other things. Resonating with the organizational world means turning away from the fixation on influencing the organization and towards establishing open-minded and open-ended relationships with the organization.

Developing Leaders' Capability to Resonate

Following Latour's, Scharmer's and Rosa's reasoning, we argue that the core of leaders' capability to resonate

with the system of the organization is the ability to perceive themselves as part of a whole with a social, material, and natural dimension. That requires that leaders see themselves as members of an interdependent world and that leadership implies to work on the social system's quality to resonate. That includes the understanding that we as humans are socially embedded and that our thinking, communication, emotions, and actions affect ourselves, others, and the relationships we establish. Hence, leaders are willing and able to engage in resonating relationships, face the world with confidence, and accept the necessary vulnerability to do so.

We argue that leadership development programs should be tailored in a way that they promote leaders' ability to establish resonating relationships within and with the organization. This translates into:

- Personal capabilities – Leaders understand themselves, their biography, and background and how these aspects contribute to their specific identity and leadership approach. Leaders see themselves as learners embedded in and dependent on a broader system.
- Methodological capabilities – Leaders are open and responsive and use these skills to act towards an uncertain and changing future. Leaders reflect upon their leadership power in order to avoid corruptive effects of power.
- Leadership capabilities – Leaders see themselves as an integrated part and as supporters of the organizational system. Leaders are aware of their social, ecological, and economic impact on that system.
- Cooperation capabilities – Leaders appreciate cooperation as productive for the organization. Leaders are open and tolerant towards others' opinions and can leverage diversity for developing participative solutions.

- Self-care capabilities – Leaders care for themselves, their families, and friends. Leaders understand themselves as drivers of their own life, can see changes and solutions even for difficult situations and can set boundaries.
- Transformational capabilities – Leaders can respond to the needs of the organization and claim responsibility for their own actions. Leaders can reflect upon and alter their behavior based on personal, ethical, and social objectives.

Some of these skills are trained and developed in awareness-raising seminars. However, they have yet to find their way into our ordinary leadership development programs. Leadership development still trains leaders to bring the organizational world under control and instrumentalize it. In contrast, we propose focusing more on empowering leaders to become aware of themselves, empathic towards others, open towards their embeddedness in social and ecological surroundings and, hence, more responsive towards the dynamics and needs of the organization.

Conclusion

Leadership as resonance is the attempt to make the internal and external organizational world approachable for everyone involved. Leaders should establish interrelatedness and promote opportunities for interaction among the various stakeholders of an organization. In doing so, they create the conditions that have the potential to spark responsive relationships for themselves and others, which in turn enables everyone participating in the organization to experience this participation as embedded and resonating.

© 2023 The Authors. *Leader to Leader* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of University of Pittsburgh.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



Ingo Winkler works as Associate Professor of Organization Studies and Leadership at the University of Southern Denmark. He studies contemporary leadership theory and challenges the narrow focus on the leader in both theory and practice. In doing so, he promotes the situated and socially constructed nature of leadership and the role of followers and leaders therein. His second research interest covers identities in organizations. Taking identity as a core concept to understand organizations and their members, he seeks to explain how organizations serve as sites for multiple and conflicting identifications. Ingo regularly publishes in academic and managerial journals.



Sabine Pelzmann works as an integrative coach, systemic consultant, teaching supervisor (ÖVS) and author. She is the owner of Integrative leadership and organizational development in Graz, Austria, and lectures in leadership, system theory and organizational development at several universities. She has worked with executives in expert-, profit-, non-profit-, and public organizations for more than 25 years. She is experienced in the conception and facilitation of change processes as well as the design of reflexive leadership development programs.