

From Crisis to Adaptation: The Function of Transformative Leadership Conversation

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ABSTRACT

This essay is in response to the need for schools to move from crisis to adaptation. The essay is informed by the question: how might school leaders use conversation to effectively engage adaptation? Adaptation is about transforming systems. We find that with adaptation as the aim, Transformative Leadership Conversation can be used to guide schools from crisis response to adaptation. The essay lays out suggestions in a theory of action for how school leaders can use conversation to move from crisis to adaptation. These suggestions include the use of framing, questioning, and listening.

Keywords: adaptation, leadership, transformation, Transformative Leadership Conversation

The necessity of adaptation becomes apparent when responding to crises (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Adaptation, though, is a longer-term and more complex process than making swift decisions and taking quick actions during highly tense and unpredictable times. Adaptation is about transforming systems (Doyle, 2017; Sarta et al., 2021; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Adaptation framed as transformation has profound implications for how school leaders structure conversation to ignite and sustain the collective action from which adaptation occurs. In this paper, we advance Transformative Leadership Conversation (TLC) as a concept and practice that can be used to effectively guide school leaders in moving from crisis response to transformative adaptation.

Transformation is a substantively different process than what occurs when individuals and groups adapt to a crisis. The theologian Richard Rohr (2020) describes transformation as the simultaneous unraveling of a patterned way of being and a discerning re-orientation to meaning and reality. Rohr's view is consistent with transformation theory, in which Mezirow (1994, 2008) argues that transforming social reality starts by changing mental structures from which assumptions, decisions, and actions originate. Adaptation framed as a transformative process has profound implications for school leaders, particularly in how they structure conversation to ignite and sustain the collective action from which discontinuous change occurs. TLC offers school leaders a framework to move from crisis to adaptation.

ADAPTATION THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION

Adaptation does not happen by chance. Sarta et al. (2021) note that adaptation is intentional, relational, conditional, and convergent. Adaptation occurs through continuous learning among organizational members and learning as an organization (Doyle, 2017; Ramalingam et al., 2020; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Learning is easily espoused as an organizational practice more so than it is developed as a way of organizational being (Argyris, 2008; Garvin, 2000). School leaders can adopt learning frameworks like improvement science, adaptive leadership, or appreciative inquiry, but the general guidelines offered in these models fall short of addressing how to make learning happen. To illustrate, experimentation as a component of adaptive leadership does not explain how leaders turn on-the-ground empiricism into meaningful knowledge. Similarly,

the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles of improvement science do not guide leaders in how to use questions and listening to facilitate knowledge construction with people. TLC addresses these limitations.

TLC combines three forms of conversation – dialogue, sensemaking, and learning – to activate the capacity of individuals and groups to take ownership of social realities they desire to cultivate (Bohm, 1986; Edmondson, 2002; Weick, 1995). We define TLC as sensemaking and learning dialogue used to fundamentally re-structure social conditions through conversations that activate the innate motivational energy of individuals and groups. The purpose is to fundamentally change social arrangements through conversations that reframe ways of seeing reality so that new ways of being can emerge through new ways of doing (Mezirow, 2008; Rohr, 2020). TLC starts with an understanding of what dialogue is and what it is not.

Talk is constant in education, but actual dialogue is rare. Dialogue is a search for meaning about a subject and its natural properties and propensities (Isaacs, 2001). Dialogue is not simply talking about ideas or communicating information; it is not a discussion or rhetorical debate to persuade; and it is not discourse used to control or regulate people (Bohm, 1986). True dialogue is a meaning-making process in which thoughts that underlie actions are explored individually and in community with others (Isaacs, 2001; Schein, 2003).

Sensemaking sets a purpose of dialogue – to construct a mental representation of a desired future (Ancona, 2011; Weick, 1995; Weick, et al., 2005). Weick (1995) describes sensemaking metaphorically as a cognitive map in which uncertainty surrounding complex organizational processes is made visible through descriptive mental representations. Similar to a map, a mental representation is established before a transformative journey begins, and while on the journey, this mental representation informs decisions made along the way (Ancona, 2011). Learning moves dialogue into action by making sense of complexities, tensions, and nuances that unfold as school members work individually and collectively to turn aspirations into reality (Argyris, 2008; Garvin, 2000; Schon, 1983).

When integrated, sensemaking and learning dialogue brings meaning and action together through three interactive dialogues: dialogue with self, dialogue with others, and dialogue with the social context. Dialogue with self raises awareness of preconceptions, assumptions, and biases that shape our mental representations of a desired reality. Dialogue with others moves sensemaking from one’s mental representation toward a community-constructed understanding of a desired reality. Dialogue with the social context examines how relational dynamics are or are not moving toward an aspirational reality.

In sensemaking and learning dialogue, leaders ask questions more so than talk. They listen with curiosity to gain perspective and understanding from other positionalities. They facilitate thinking and conversations so that new meaning around a central concept can form (Isaacs, 2001). They foster mutuality and reciprocity with others. The very act of sensemaking and learning dialogue situates transformative power within the inner resources and capacity of people, and our natural human resources and capacity generate the energy to keep adaptation in motion (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP CONVERSATION IN PRACTICE

Engaging in TLC is not easy. Educational leaders confront contextual and personal tensions in using elements of sensemaking and learning dialogue. Limited time, external pressure, restrictive strategies and policies, and job demands are common external constraints that impede dialogue (Isaacs, 2001). Personal constraints are often self-derived, generated from naturally programmed communication patterns, personal insecurities, and limited conceptual and self-awareness.

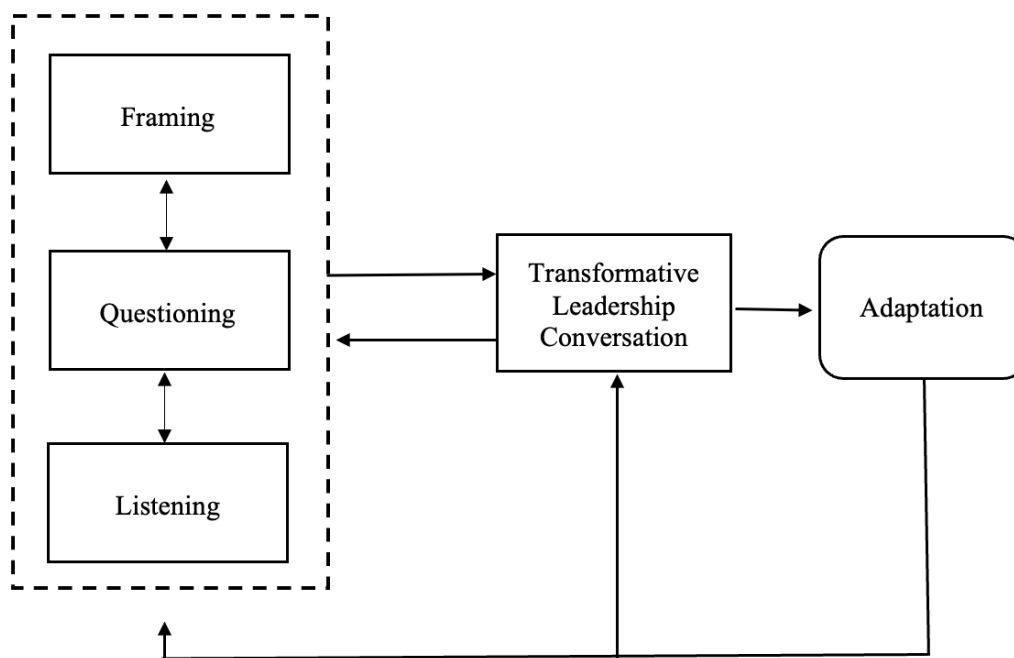
Adaptation is not easy. Tensions experienced in TLC are similar to those that surface in leading adaptation. Interestingly, with complex work, simple frameworks are useful. John Lederach (2005) learned through his years of successfully brokering complex peace treaties that a simple framework creates space from which complexity can build and spread as relational conditions warrant. The theory of action for TLC is derived from this logic. As illustrated in Figure 1, leaders engage adaptation using TLC through framing, questioning, and listening.

Framing

TLC is atypical of most communication and talk used by educational leaders. For this reason, TLC requires thoughtful, ongoing mental framing as leaders engage informal interactions and plan conversations to elicit meaning-making dialogue (Cook & Yanow, 2011). Framing is mental planning that occurs in advance of conversations (Fairhurst, 2005). For TLC, framing has two purposes: to set the subject of conversation and to establish a structure for the conversation. In framing the subject, leaders identify the general concept to talk about and they reflect on the readiness of individuals and groups for transformative work. The general concept functions as a mental representation that informs ongoing dialogue with self, with others, and with the social context.

Figure 1

TLC Theory of Action



Framing also involves conceptualizing a conversational structure (Fairhurst, 2005) through contextual-awareness and self-awareness. TLC can occur in one-on-one conversations with another person, in a department or team meeting, in planned dialogue circles, or in other organizational arrangements. The purpose is to mentally prepare to enter dialogue from a position of interest and curiosity, being receptive to thoughts different from one’s own, listening to feelings and emotions behind words, and seeking understanding, not judgment (Bohm, 1986; Isaacs, 2001).

Questioning

Questions, as Berger (2014) notes, have become valuable currency for leaders as they negotiate challenges, explore opportunities, and address seemingly intractable social problems. The right questions can spark re-imaginings, inspire creativity, uncover performance tensions, chart new visions, and directions, and engender collective action. Not all questions are the same, though, and not all questions excite thoughts and actions from which adaptation evolves (Berger, 2014; Brooks & John, 2018). TLC organizes questions by three purposes: Investigation, Imagination, and Integration.

Investigative questions are intended to get participants to explore thoughts, feelings, and assumptions that shape their understanding of a desired reality. These questions surface experiences from the past, they connect with experiences in the present, and they move people toward the future. The purpose is to arrive at shared meaning about a reality people aspire to construct and then to use the meaning to study the social environment. For instance, many schools have embraced social and emotional learning as strategies to prepare students for a dynamic future. Using social and emotional learning as a target, example investigative questions might include the following: (a) What is social and emotional learning? (b) What does it look like when students are demonstrating emotional intelligence and social intelligence? (c) How have structures in the past promoted or impeded engagement in social and emotional characteristics? (d) What would social and emotional learning look like when alive and present? Notice that these questions are simple and clear. They start with “what” or “how” and lead people to investigate how a reality was experienced in the past, how it exists currently, and what they might aspire to achieve in the future.

Imaginative and integrative questions steer dialogue toward the social context, focusing sensemaking and learning on changes conjectured to nurture and support a transformed reality. With imaginative questions, dialogue progresses from using inquiry to generate meaning (investigative) to using inquiry to inspire action and innovation (imaginative). This type of questioning allows conversation participants to co-construct how the desired outcome of adaptation might be organized for action. In a sense, a kind of action roadmap is developed which can include but is not limited to, an identification of

action paths, a specification of action players, and a vision of new possibilities. In placing design in the hands and minds of people and their knowledge, imaginative questions inspire autonomous motivation to engage in action (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Imaginative questions are framed to elicit ideas on how an individual, group, or collective might achieve a desired reality. In continuing with social and emotional learning, examples of imaginative questions for a group to explore might be: How might we re-design group work to build social competencies? How might we use student assessments to build a growth mindset? What might a lesson to integrate disciplinary knowledge with emotional competencies look like? Actual imaginative questions will differ depending on the context and people involved, but the purpose remains the same – to imagine how an individual, team, or community might bring a reality to life.

Integrative questions, a distinct but necessary adjunct to the first two types of questions, sets the stage for collective learning. Integrative questions use dialogue for participants to learn how adaptation is unfolding. The intent is to keep social structures moving toward a desired reality by generating usable knowledge in and through action. With integrative questions, participants reflect on the functional value of actions taken to drive adaptation. Example questions based on the social-emotional learning topic might include the following: (a) How well are we using new assessments to develop students' emotional competencies? (b) How have instructional practices changed to develop social competencies? (c) How are student relationships with learning changing with the curriculum?

Investigative, imaginative, and integrative questions place people at the center of the adaptation process, allowing them to think, share, and learn with and from each other while honoring the unique gifts and perspectives each person brings. Asking questions nurtures the natural interest and curiosity needed to sustain adaptation. However, to keep sensemaking and learning dialogue in motion, there is a need for more than asking the right questions; just as important is how we approach and engage in listening.

Listening

Sensemaking and learning dialogue does not occur without listening, and while listening is recognized as a natural part of conversation, it is a practice that requires intentionality and earnest engagement (Brearley, 2015; Floyd, 2010). Whereas investigative, imaginative, and integrated questions may begin conversations, what Marshak (2004) refers to as deep listening nurtures and sustains discourse that has the potential to reach cognitive structures behind unconscious and conscious thoughts. Sensemaking and learning dialogue has as much to do with deep listening as with talking (Marshak, 2004).

Deep listening is a whole-body experience where the listener listens with her eyes, ears, mind, and heart (Marshak, 2004). It requires a mindset of curiosity, interest, and presence (Berger, 2014; Brearley, 2015; Murphy, 2019) with a focus on understanding the speaker's perspective, not judging, or evaluating, her thoughts and actions. Deep listening and questioning are inextricable and together keep sensemaking and learning dialogue flowing. In returning to questions, general investigative, imaginative, and integrative questions start conversations. Listening deepens and extends conversations by informing questions that relate to how individuals and groups think about the subject of the conversation (Murphy, 2019).

Adaptation requires continual assessment to determine where the organization is and where it is going. Intentional questioning and deep listening are central to ongoing evaluation as they place people and organizational structures in a constant state of appraisal. Within TLC, the purpose of listening is not to judge what is spoken according to pre-determined goals; rather, listening is a tool for learning, through people, about the concept of interest and how it relates to the people, organizational structures and processes, and future aspirations in an organization. The right questions uncover mental models that underlie action and behavior, and deep listening brings these to the surface to be examined. Leaders who engage TLC do so by approaching a conversation without the assumption that they already know the solution or even the diagnosis. Organizational needs often become clear as leaders take a listening stance that is led by genuine curiosity and inquiry. It is this process of deep listening that enables continual evaluation and adaptation.

Framing, Questioning, and Listening as an Interactive Process

Framing, questioning, and listening function effectively when leaders find balance and harmony among the parts. Framing sets the stage for the general purpose of the conversation and questions. Questions activate dialogue with self, others, and the social environment. Listening nurtures and sustains dialogue as information is shared, processed, and reflected on in ways that surface important understandings and lead to purposeful action and continued sensemaking and learning.

TLC engaged through framing, questioning, and listening is not a passive conversational approach. Leaders do not merely frame conversations, ask questions, and listen deeply in a structured, lock-step manner. Neither do leaders force

TLC to fit with the reality they aspire to shape. TLC, like adaptation, embraces complexities, adapts to non-uniform realities, adjusts to uncertainties and ambiguities, leans into tensions, and welcomes divergent thoughts and experiences. The intent is for people to work thoughtfully and cooperatively in how they adapt actions and interactions to transform social structures they aim to fundamentally re-order to align with the larger external environment.

CONCLUSION

To move from crises to adaptation requires a conversational structure that parallels the unique dynamics of transformation. This does not need to be difficult for school leaders, but it will require that leaders change how they use conversation. We suggest school leaders rely more on TLC than the more common use of talk as a control mechanism. TLC aligns with the natural state of individual and organizational adaptation. It enables leaders and groups to collectively embrace complexities, adapt to non-uniform realities, adjust to uncertainties and ambiguities, lean into tensions, and welcome divergent thoughts and experiences (Palmer, 1998, 2014).

The application of TLC will change the way leaders approach adaptation. Rather than relying on external controls, school leaders use conversation to empower change from within people. The intentional use of framing, questioning, and listening shifts power from hierarchical positions down to the minds, hearts, and hands of people whose individual and collective actions determine a school's future reality.

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