Running head: TO DANCE TOGETHER

Con versare: To Dance Together

Conversation is the natural way we humans think together --

Wheatley

John Inman

Masters candidate, Adult Education

Oregon State University

Graduate School of Education

Corvallis, Oregon

Con versare: To Dance Together

*Conversation is the natural way we humans think together--*

*Wheatley*

"Some friends and I started talking…"(Wheatley, 2002, p. 25). In the world of complex plans and processes, most successful change starts with a simple conversation between people with shared interests. Societies are transformed and communities created through the simple act of friends talking together. Talking together in conversation is far more than people expressing opposing points of view as in a discussion; it is truly a dance in which people turn around together in a heart felt sharing of ideas, feelings, and emotions.

In western culture, conversation is a practice that has not been nurtured and developed and is certainly not a commonly talked about leadership attribute. In this paper I explore the role of conversation for the leader leading in a living system as well as the role of the leader in fostering conversation. This may be one of the most important conversations for leaders leading in our century and one that can transform our organizations into healthy sustainable communities.

It is difficult in our culture to move beyond debate and discussion and into conversation. A major challenge for western leaders, is how to move away from the mechanistic controlled approach historically exercised by leaders to an approach that nurtures and fosters self-organization and leverages knowledge creation through conversation.  Communities as living systems are complex networks of relationships and conversation is a

critical aspect of creating sustainable communities. The first step for the leader is to understand what a living system is and that he/she is leading in a one. There are many definitions of living systems. The one selected for this paper is oriented to knowledge creation through conversation. Fullan 1999, pp. 15-16 (as cited in Hannay, Smeltzer Erb, & Ross, 2001,) explain,

> The secret to living companies, complex adaptive systems, learning communities or whatever we wish to use, is that they consist of intricate, embedded interaction inside and outside the organization which converts tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge on an ongoing basis. (p. 273)

This view of an organization as a living system provides a baseline for exploring leading in a living system founded on conversation. Conversation provides the medium for communities as living systems to self-organize and learn together.

<center>Conversational learning</center>

Complex networks of conversational relationships are another way to describe intricate and embedded interactions characteristic of living organizations as described above. Emergence in these living systems is based on the creation of new knowledge and as described by Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002), new knowledge creation is based on conversational learning. (pp. 198-199) Further defining conversational learning, Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) explain that "Conversational learning represents a meeting point of multiple individual voices woven into an interconnected whole. Mutual interdependence resides at the heart of valuing the local truth

of each of these voices for social learning through conversation" (p. 43). Wheatley (2002) in *Turning to one another* states,

> I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate, or public meetings. Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well. (p. 3)

It is through fostering conversations that leaders are able to facilitate sustainable growth in organizations and communities that thrive in complex and uncertain times. With current understanding of organizations and communities as living systems, it is unlikely that current thought about the dynamics of communities will regress back to a mechanistic paradigm. Learning how to lead within this new paradigm is more important than ever. And to do so means understanding living systems based on conversations that lead to self-organization and emergence.

When people in a community come together in conversation, the learning experienced and the new knowledge that emerges provides the foundation for innovation and change.

> Conversation can serve as an essential foundation for mutual trust and sharing of experiences among members of an organization. When organizational spaces such as communities of practice and self-organizing teams emerge, conversation can catalyze visions, innovations for new development, and learning (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002, p.

4).

When in conversation, the participating members create the boundaries within which the conversation takes place. This is a self-organizing phenomenon and is a dynamic process of order emerging out of chaos. It is also central to conversational learning as a self-organizing process that also creates its own boundaries based on the diversity within its complex network of relationships.

The making of a conversational space can be equated to the autopoietic (self-making) process of a living system. The term "autopoiesis," first coined by Maturana and Varela in 1987, refers to a mechanism whereby a living organism, whether physical, mental, or social, becomes a self-organized, autonomous system by specifying its laws and determining what is proper to its existence. (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002, p. 54)

Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) describe learning in conversation as an experiential approach to leaning. "…conversational learning *is* a process whereby learners construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge through conversations"(p. 51). It is the process of creation of new knowledge that makes conversational learning an important foundation for emergence in a living system where diverse networks of relationships in conversation self-organize into new and innovative forms.

<div align="center">Leading in a living system</div>

The role of leadership is dramatically changed when we

focus on self-organization. Leaders no longer simply set direction and launch large-scale change programs to get there. First and foremost, it is necessary for a leader to have a shift in how he/she views the world and her/his relationship with the world. Leaders are able to move into this new paradigm as they change perceptions. As stated by Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002),

Seeing ourselves as necessarily related to all who dwell in the biological network that we call life stands us within a very different conversation than that of the individual mind looking out for individual interests. Such a standpoint takes us beyond even that of the beneficent earth dweller who is steward of everything on the planet. The place of communion with the other clearly recognized the mutuality of life with life. Such recognition ultimately changes the very way we interact, which in turn changes the experience of our living. This conversation is nothing short of a profound communion with life itself. (p. 28)

Once a leader has shifted her/his paradigm to a living systems perspective, several capabilities then prove essential to lead in a living system that is characterized by collaboration and networks of conversational relationships. Brown and Isaacs (1996) describe these capabilities as the ability to frame questions that matter, convene learning conversations, support Appreciative Inquiry, foster shared meaning, nurture communities of practice, and use collaborative technologies. (p. 4)

*Questions that matter*

Conversations between people with shared interests expand quickly into large networks of relationships if they are based on questions that matter. Questions that matter are those questions that a network of people feel are important. Wheatley (1999) explains, "We seek to connect with and work with those whose self-interest seems to include our self-interest. We affiliate with those who share a similar sense of what is important" (section II, ¶ 2). Networks based on shared interests self-organize into powerful forces for change and innovation. At the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL, an outgrowth of Xerox's pioneering Palo Alto Research Center (PARC)), networks based on shared interests are called communities of practice. "These self-organizing networks are formed naturally by people engaged in a common enterprise -- people who are learning together through the practice of their real work". Further "…the knowledge embodied in these communities is usually shared and developed through ongoing conversations" (Brown and Isaacs 1996, p. 2). Whether the community in question is social, business, family, or cause oriented, conversation based on shared interests started by friends simply talking together is the core process leading to change and innovation.

Since shared interests are founded on questions that matter, Brown and Isaacs (1996) introduce framing strategic questions as the first capability of a leader who would like to foster collective inquiry. "Strategic questions create dissonance between current experiences and beliefs while evoking

new possibilities for collective discovery" (p. 4). Wheatley

(1999) discusses discovering what's meaningful. She explains,

>  I've come to believe that both individual and
>  organizational change start from the same need, the need to
>  discover what's meaningful to them. People will change only
>  if they believe that a new insight, a new idea, or a new
>  form is important to them (section III, ¶ 2).

>  She further states "Meaningful information lights up a

network and moves through it like a windswept brush fire"

(section III, ¶ 11). Brown, Isaacs, and Margulies (1999) write

that,

>  …asking questions that matter is one of the primary ways
>  that people have, starting in childhood, to engage their
>  natural, self-organizing capacities for collaborative
>  conversation, exploration, inquiry, and learning. Asking
>  questions is essential for co-evolving the 'futures we
>  want' rather than being forced to live with the 'futures we
>  get'. (p. 1)

>  Each of these authors creates a strong case for the

necessity to frame questions that matter. A leader who is able

to disturb the system through asking provoking questions is a

leader able to stimulate conversations that are critical to

emergence in a living system.

*Convening learning conversations*

When a living system is disturbed, emergence of new and

innovative forms result; i.e., systems self-organize into new

forms. Based on these questions, conversations are created that

are meaningful to the community. Once a leader frames critical questions, he/she must insure that there is space created for conversations based on questions that matter. Therefore, the second capability of a leader leading in a living system is her/his ability to create opportunities for these conversations. Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) explain,

> Making space for conversation can occur in many dimensions: making physical space, as when a manager gets up from behind the desk to join colleagues around a table; making temporal space, as when a family sets aside weekly time for family conversation; or making emotional space through receptive listening. (p. 64)

Not only is creating space for conversation an active process by a leader, it is also an outcome of the dynamics of the community in conversation. Based on the greatness of the differences between members in conversation, conversational spaces either expand or contract. New knowledge can only emerge when diversity in perception exists. Conversation across differences can be difficult but is necessary. Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) talk about a paradoxical quality to the conversational boundaries that provide space for conversation. "…the space created by the boundaries can create a space that is safe and open enough for the conversational exploration of differences across various dialectical continua" (p. 65).

The role of the leader as facilitator plays an important part in nurturing conversations. Learning to facilitate learning conversations helps a leader create the space for conversational

exploration of differences as well. Rough (1997) proposes that "The dynamic facilitator is midwife to new ways of being and knowing how to facilitate is the core competency of leadership in the world to come" (Final Thoughts, ¶ 4). Insuring space for conversations and insuring that there is space within conversations for differences are both important aspects of a leader able to create conversational spaces.

*Supporting appreciative inquiry*

Closely aligned with creating self-organization within an organization is the shift from the focus of problem-solving to an appreciative approach for the creation of opportunities for growth and innovation. "Shifting the focus in this direction enables leaders to foster networks of conversations focused on leveraging emerging possibilities rather than just fixing past mistakes" (Brown and Isaacs 1996, p. 4). In the mid-seventies, David Cooperrider and his associates at Case Western Reserve University challenged the pervasive approach to change management theory, that of human systems as machines and parts as interchangeable and fixable. They created the concept of Appreciative Inquiry as an alternative approach. Hammond (1998) explains,

> Appreciative Inquiry suggests that we look for what works in an organization. The tangible result of the inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organization wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been. Because the statements are grounded in real experience and history, people know how to repeat

their success. (p. 7)

Shifting away from fixing past mistakes is a challenge for leaders trained in problem-solving; however, this is one of the most critical capabilities for those wishing to lead in a living system. The insight here is that all of our systems are living systems, those trying to control and fix them just have not figured this out yet.

*Fostering shared meaning*

One of the capabilities that may be more familiar to leaders transitioning to leading in living systems is the concept of fostering shared meaning or as some say, 'the vision thing'. Common to shared meaning is vision, stories about the community, and shared values and metaphors, all concepts that are familiar to many leaders. The effort of creating shared vision is not, however, one of leadership developing the vision behind closed doors as is common in many organizations. Shared meaning is fostered through conversation throughout the complex network of relationships that make up the community. This is a dynamic process and the conversations never end. Wheatley (1999) states,

> The leader's role is not to make sure that people know exactly what to do and when to do it. Instead, leaders need to ensure that there is strong and evolving clarity about who the organization is. When this clear identity is available, it serves every member of the organization. Even in chaotic circumstances, individuals can make congruent decisions. Turbulence will not cause the organization to

dissolve into incoherence. (p. 131)

Shared meaning develops and emerges through conversation and is not something that is simply put on the wall for show. The leader's role is to insure that conversations about shared meaning are taking place and that the opportunities for conversations are pervasive in the community. A leader must insure that there is added time in team member's schedules for daily reflection. The understanding that comes from reflection helps the whole community make sense of the shared meaning and is crucial to nurturing meaning making as a critical aspect of a self-organizing living system.

*Nurturing communities of practice*

Within a community there exist networks of informal relationships revolving around common interests or practices. A great portion of learning and knowledge creation happens in informal relationships called communities of practice.

More recent proponents of organizational learning like Brown and Duguid (1991, 2000), Nonaka (1994), and Wenger (1998) emphasize the pivotal role that informal organizational groups, known as "communities-of-practice," play in new knowledge creation and their dependence on collaborative interactions, acceptance, trust, listening, and safety. Communities-of-practice are being encouraged in places where innovation and spontaneous learning are nurtured, as they bring together groups of like-minded people that are not usually the sanctioned, formal groups within most organizational settings. (Baker, Jensen, and

Kolb, 2002, p. 45)

Current leaders often are not trained to nurture this type of informal relationship or to even notice that communities of practice exist. Since communities of practice revolving around common interests are so important to learning and knowledge creation in an organization, it is critical that a leader develops her/his capability to understand, recognize, and nurture them.

*Using collaborative technologies*

Communities of practice are no longer limited to a small geographic area. Technology allows us to create conversations that span the globe helping create extraordinary social change, often in a very short period of time. Many communities are globally expanding, creating broad social change through conversation via technological advances in communication. Chat rooms are available and centered around virtually any topic of interest, and those that have powerful messages move to global movements in a matter of days. Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) conclude,

> The virtual environment offers alternatives to people who may be quieter or more reticent in groups, for people whose language of origin is not English, for people whose cultural norms are not to be assertive, and so on. It is an easier medium for many of these people to express themselves and to speak more readily. In addition, it allows for and can encourage more reflective listening, because in the virtual space people perceive themselves as

having more choice about whether and when to respond than in a face-to-face conversations. This combination can offer potent stimuli and support for conversational learning. (p. 182)

Leaders leading in a living system embrace the tools that technology has developed to help build conversations around critical communities of practice. An example of this process can be explored by visiting the web site of Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, the creators of The World Café, at www.theworldcafe.com.

The World Café is a process for creating change that is rooted in living systems theory and the human need for conversation. Small, intimate conversations are hosted among large groups of people. As these small café conversations are networked together, knowledge grows, a sense of the whole becomes real, and the collective wisdom of the group becomes visible (Wheatley 2002, p. 155).

*Conclusion*

"Some friends and I started talking…" (Wheatley, 2002, p.25). As each of us takes ownership for building conversations about matters that are important, we join leaders of self-organizing systems in a world starving for leaders who understand that we are all part of the whole. Separateness is simply an illusion. We are a part of a living system and the quality of our conversations has a direct impact on the health and vibrancy of that system. As leaders, our ability to frame questions that matter, to convene learning conversations, support Appreciative Inquiry, foster shared meaning, nurture

communities of practice, and to use collaborative technologies

will determine our success in building conversations that have

the opportunity to change the world we live in.


There is no power for change greater than a community

discovering what it cares about. (Wheatley, 2002, pp.48-49)

References

Baker, A., Jensen, P., & Kolb, D. (2002). *Conversational learning: An experiential approach to knowledge creation*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.

Brown, J., & Isaacs, D. (1996/1997). Conversation as a core business process. *The systems thinker*, 7(10), 1-3. Retrieved August 3, 2002 from the World Wide Web: www.pegasuscom.com

Brown, J., Isaacs, D., & Margulies, N. (1999). Asking big questions, a catalyst for strategy evolution. In Senge, P., Roberts, C., Ross, R., Smith, B., Roth, G., & Kleiner, A. (Eds.), *The dance of change: The challenges of sustaining a learning organization*. New York: Doubleday/Currency.

Hammond, S. (1998). *The thin book of appreciative inquiry* (2nd ed.). Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing Co.

Hannay, L., Smeltzer Erb, C., & Ross, J. (2001). Building change capacity within secondary schools through goal-driven and living organisations. *School leadership & management*, *21*(3), 271-287.

Rough, J. (1997). *Dynamic facilitation and the magic of self-organizing change*. Retrieved January 1, 2003 from the World Wide Web: http://www.work911.com/cgi-bin/links/jump.cgi?ID=2210

Wheatley, M. (1999). *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Wheatley, Margaret J. (1999). *Bringing schools back to life:*

*Schools as living systems* [On-line]. Available:

www.berkana.org

Wheatley, Margaret J. (2002). *Turning to one another: Simple*

*conversations to restore hope to the future* (1st ed.). San

Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.