When Magic becomes Words and Words become Magic
Systemic Leadership and Organisation Studies

The paper covers the author’s reflection of the learning during the first year of Systemic Leadership and Organisation Studies

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Abstract

This paper describes my learning process during the year of 2009, when I attended the course “Systemic Leadership and Organisation Studies”.

The heading of the paper symbolises the integration and reflexive process between theory and practice that has supported my learning process. The base is the systemic theory, where system, relation, communication and language are the important factors. My practice is from the position of a project leader.

“When magic becomes words, and words become magic” reflects the never-ending-story of learning, when theory and practice can be integrated in the learning process.

This paper is a part of the course “Systemic Leadership and Organisation Studies” to be validated by the University of Bedfordshire.
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Introduction

During the last year, I have attended the course “Systemic Leadership and Organisation Studies”, given by Kensington Consultant Centre and Magelungen.

Systemic leadership is about how we create reality within the process of communication, where language is the important tool. In terms of projects, it can be interpreted as how we create a common picture of what we are going to do and how we are going to do it.

In this essay, I will describe my learning process in the course connected with my every day working life as a project leader. The essay is mainly written for colleagues in the area of project leadership.
I was inspired by Peter Lang (lecture 21st of October, 2009 at Magelungen) when he said “do not talk about the theory as an internal thing, talk about it as a pattern in the external world”. These words actually verbalized my feeling and thoughts of how theory and practice is a reflexive process – how theory and practice in interaction enrich each other.

The title of this essay - “When magic becomes words and words become magic” – represents my journey the last year, following the movement of my personal experience and learning this year. Interaction between theory and practice has enlarged my knowledge and made me more secure in my professional leader style.

In this essay I will explore what impact the course in “Systemic Leadership and Organisation Studies” has had on my daily life as a project leader and how my daily practice has influenced my learning process. The question I will work with is how this learning process has enlarged my knowledge and how it has been put into practice.

**Context – Project Leader**

In my working life, I am a consultant within the area of conducting transformation and change management in areas where IT is important. Depending on the assignment and the customer, I can have different roles but mostly with a leadership nuance in it. Often, I am in the position of project leader.

A project is a temporary organization, with an assignment of meeting particular goals and delivers in accordance – all within a defined time period with starting and ending date. A project is often organized cross the ordinary line organization.

In Swedish there is just one word for project leader, while English have two words – either project leader or project manager. I have on purpose chosen the word project leader, since it is in my interpretation more what I am doing – leading people towards a goal in a project setting.

“Project leader” is built by two words – and both words reflect the daily work of a project leader. The first word – project – represents the skills a project leader has to have, when it comes to planning, following up, structuring, organizing, handle resources, etc. The second word – leader – represents the abilities you need to have to succeed as a leader in the project environment.

In this paper, I will address the second part of project leadership – the abilities needed to succeed, in co-creation, within a project environment.

**Learning Process**

The learning process for me has been a reflexive process, where theory and practice has been mirrored in each other and giving light to each other. The process has gone through the brain and through the feeling – both by intellectual understanding and by insights in the moment in professional life.

“When magic becomes words” is when theory and literature has helped to verbalise former experience of daily wonders in practice. “…and words become magic” represents when the
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understanding by verbalising the wonders actually enlarges and enriches my abilities in the area of project leadership.

The learning process can be divided into three separate parts; the course events, the minutes and the practice.

The course
The course has been built in nine 2-days events, where the course participants have met with the course management, to study different areas within the systemic leadership context. Literature has been read beforehand. The events have been a process of exploring the literature from the participants’ personal experience.

Minutes as a Letter to my Colleagues
Already at the first session, I decided to write minutes in the format of a letter to my colleagues at the consultant firm. I did choose this format, since it gave me the freedom to include personal reflections in connection to my professional life as a consultant and a project leader.

The minutes has been a great support in my learning process – both in the moment to conclude and consolidate the learning from a specific course session, but also to follow the learning process step by step in retrospective. The minutes have been a mean to formulate thoughts in writing, but also a resource to get feedback on (from colleagues and other course participants).

Practice in daily work life
In my present assignment, working as a project leader in IT context within a life insurance company, I have had the opportunity to practice the approach of systemic leadership daily. The project consists of 80-100 persons, working part- or fulltime, divided into 5 sub-projects.

Literature Review
The literature in the course has been inspiring and tickled my curiosity in many ways. To walk through the literature will be challenging, both in terms of picking the relevant parts for my focus area and not missing the overall flavor of systemic leadership, as I interpret it. Still, my focus in the literature review is what has touched me and is connected to project leadership.

Peter Lang (Magelungen, 2009) introduced an abbreviation in one of his lectures – SNAP, representing Systemic, Narrative, Appreciative Practice – as a description of our work. I will use this abbreviation as a structure for the literature review.

Systemic practice from a literature point of view
Systemic theory has developed from system thinking, where the system complexity is the pre-requisite to both identify problems and look for solutions. Gregory Bateson introduced language and communication into system thinking. Instead of looking at reality as fixed and true, Gregory Bateson shifted into language and communication, where he sees communication as a process (Lang, 2009).

According to Peter Lang (Magelungen, 2009), Bateson changes problem identification from “what is the problem” to “how does the problem show itself”. Instead of seeing the problem as a state,
Bateson views on the problem as a part of the system and the process. The problem is a function in relation to a complicated situation, and therefore a part of the communication process.

The systemic principle can be expressed in terms of patterns of connections – in how people make meaning, in how they act and in the interplay between the two (Oliver, 2005). Kevin J Burge (in press) is developing it further, when he discusses systemic insight. To develop “a description of a human system which provides insight into the pattern of communication that is co-created among persons and the way this pattern constructs social arrangements such as identity, relationships and culture”.

A systemic approach, as I see it, is based upon patterns of connections of communication and action which together builds the identity and culture of the defined system.

**Narrative practice from a literature point of view**

As said above, communication is an important part of the systemic thinking. Communication makes our reality – it actually, construct things such as identity, relationships and culture (Burge, in press). Naturally, language and story-telling is important for us in how we perceive ourselves in connection to others.

To perceive ourselves in connection to others can also be expressed as identity in flow – the identity of a person, but also the identity of a project. Identity is not fixed, according to Peter Lang (Magelungen, 2009). Identity is always in a flow and created in relation to others – a sort of we-identity.

According to Gareth Morgan (p. 327, 1993), “...the identity of a system is its most important product”. And he continues with “...if you wish to change a system, it may be more important to work on its sense of identity than on the goals it is trying to achieve”.

Since identity is such important product for the system, and it is created in relation with others, it is essential to work with the identity. Identity is created in the stories we tell each other (Lang, 2009).

**Appreciative practice from a literature point of view**

When walking through literature concerning Appreciative practice, the key area is Appreciative Inquiry (AI). It can be defined as “Appreciative Inquiry is the study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when the function at their best” (p. 1, Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2003) or “Appreciative Inquiry is about conversations that matter” (p. 78, Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

Appreciative Inquiry has often been presented as a method – the 4D method (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2003) – as a structured way to transform organisations in an appreciative way. The method builds on conversational topics in four steps:

1. Discover – “what is”
2. Dream – “what might be”
3. Design – “what should be”
4. Destiny – “what will be”
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This method in itself is interesting, but more interesting is the underlying principles – and the approach and values the working method stands for. To me, appreciative inquiry means more as an approach or an attitude than as a method – it is a way of living.

Appreciative Inquiry is built on three basic assumptions (Barge, Oliver, 2003);

- organisations are socially constructed through language and stories
- inquiry is intervention – by asking questions, the attention will go into a certain direction
- builds on what works well – focus on the good things instead of problem-seeking.

I will continue referring to Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003). In their book they stipulates eight principles (see enclosure 1), that are the base for Appreciative Inquiry. Even if the eight principles are presented separately, they are interconnected. I have chosen to discuss the principles that have touched me most.

I will start to discuss the first principle – The Constructionist Principle – more in detail, since it has had a great impact on me during this year. Thereafter I will shortly present three of the other principles that also have had an impact on my leadership.

The Constructionist Principle is based on social constructionism – the focus is on how reality is built. Already in early 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein started to ask whether we can know the truth (Wittgenstein, 1922). His conclusion was that there is no truth independent of the impact of human language. In his view reality gives us language, that our words, images and ideas are reflections of the world out there (Morgan, 1993).

In Wittgenstein’s later works (1958), he reverses the view stating that reality gives us language. Instead he suggested that words, images and ideas are the means for creating our reality – not neutral reflections of reality (Morgan, 1993). It can be said that we do not describe how we see the reality, we see the reality as how we describe it – our language build our reality. And it can be concluded in “Words Create Worlds”.

The Positive Principle is an interesting principle – is it only the positive things that is worth talking about? I believe that the question is broader than that; it is about building relationships and atmosphere in a group or in a system. By working with positive questions the atmosphere in a group will be more open.

Berger and Oliver (2003) are discussing what the opposite do with an organisation – what kind of impact “deficit language and problem-solving approaches” have on organisations. First of all, this way of working will not result in new visions, since this approach will keep you in the present with its restrictions. Secondly, the approach will promote a “blame-game”, since someone has to be accountable for the problems. Finally, “deficit language and problem-solving approaches” will take energy out of the organisation – focusing on problems will exhaust the organisation.

Still, are problems a forbidden area for discussions? I would like to connect with the Anticipatory Principle – Images Inspires Actions. If a problem can be defined as a “frustrated dream” (Lang, Magelungen, 2009), then it can be talked about from a future perspective. How does the dream look like, what pre-requisites are in place, what abilities and skills are utilised? Working with those
positive questions from a future perspective, the image will inspire to actions for solving a particular problem.

It can also be formulated as “Appreciating the intentionality in the negativity”. (Lang, Magelungen, 2009).

I would also like to point out the Wholeness Principle, since it has been an important working principle for me personally, even before I knew about AI or systemic leadership. To enlarge the “reality” by different perspectives will give a more proper view of “reality” – and a good opportunity to co-create a good solution.

Finally, I would like to incorporate thoughts on a developed Appreciative Inquiry – Reflexive Inquiry (Oliver, 2005). Oliver discusses a consultant’s position and how the patterns of thinking and action have an impact on the organisation the consultant is working with. This reflexivity between consultant and organisation is relevant for the leader as well. As Oliver says when practising (leading project) reflexivity choices are made on how to think and act – and there is a responsibility and accountability for the choices.

Discussion – Connecting Literature with Practice

The literature discussion above, has given me a lot of learning in terms of reflections. Sometime, the theory has been overwhelming and too great for me to grasp. The challenge, as I have defined it, is to get it into my normal working life – to take the great thoughts and words and transform them into my everyday working life.

In the discussion below, I will integrate the principles and theories presented into my life as a project leader. I will present insights, where theory has helped me to explain things I have just done without knowing why (where magic becomes words). I will also present concrete actions, where I consciously work with certain aspects in systemic leadership as I interpret it (where words become magic).

Project – a part of a larger system

First, I would like to address one of my first insights, where theory has helped me to explain something I knew worked, but not why – where magic becomes words.

Projects are often defined by its limitations. There are different styles when leading projects – some project leaders use the limitations as walls around the project to protect the project from outside influences. Limitations can only be changed by the Steering Committee, the project leader is reporting to. There is a strict hierarchal structure as a platform for the project setting.

My metaphor has always been that the limitations should be seen upon as a rope on the ground around the project. Sometimes you have to walk over the rope to look upon the project from outside, sometimes you need to adjust the rope to better suit the project and its surroundings. The rope is supporting you to know what in the wholeness your responsibility is, still it is just a part of the whole that has to work. Limitations might be adjusted by the reality as such. Steering Committee will be informed of smaller adjustment – larger ones have to go through normal decision process.

\(^1\) The project’s surroundings could be the line organisation or other projects, but also vendors and customers.
In practice, I have in my role as a project leader been observant on key persons in the line organization. Building relationships with these persons have always been important, both on a formal and informal basis. This has been a good base for handling the “rope” between the project and the project’s surroundings. This has been “magic” for me, even though I never really could explain why it worked.

So, “when magic become words...” A project is a part of a larger system, and the success factor is to build connections between the project and its surroundings. But why is it so important to build connections? I knew it by heart before, but now I believe I have words for it.

Building connections (relationships) are important to both build the identity and a culture:

- To co-create a common story not only inside the project, but together with other parts of the system the common story will help the project where the project is not represented
- To get other perspectives into the project work will enlarge the “reality” for the project here and now in delivering
- To get other perspectives into the project will also highlight the future situation, when the receiver of the project result has an opportunity to define what the surroundings might look like in the future
- Continuous process of co-creation between the project and its surroundings will naturally support the deliverance and handling over from the project to the receivers of the project result

Relationship can easily be interpreted as connection built on similarities. But as Peter Lang (Magelungen, 2009) said when introducing Bateson: “To identify a difference, it also creates a relationship”. Looking back at a previous project, I had an insight connected to this quotation. In an international environment, the “we and they” atmosphere could not be changed until the respect for each others’ competences were established.

The systemic principle, connected with narrative approach, can be concluded in “the patterns lived and the stories told” (Oliver, 2009). A project leader has to be observant on the patterns needed to include the project in a context – and at the same time be aware of and take care of the story told about the project.

Since “making meaning is something we do together” (Cronen, V. Lang, P. Lang, S. In press), the project leader has a responsibility to arrange for meetings where meaning-making will occur.

**Project Leadership – Systemic, Narrative and Appreciative Tools**

The challenge for me is to integrate systemic way in my everyday professional life, to make it a natural way of leading projects. In this chapter, I will present the tools I have introduced in my way of leading projects influenced by systemic thinking. There are no “major methods” or giant switches in my work, rather small changes and “tricks”.

The first – and for me personally – most obvious change is how I structure and plan the project overall and in details. There has been a change from a result-oriented planning process into a.
planning process with attention not only to the result, but also to persons and the system. These three perspectives are always part of the action plan and everyday life.

The most important change has been my consciousness about the story told about the project. The first step is to identify the story told. What is said in the corridors? How is the project treated in management meetings? How is the jargon in the project? But also, how do the project members look upon themselves?

The next step is to analyze whether that story is constructive and beneficiary for the project. Either the story should be re-enforced or it should be changed. In my present project, I wanted to change the story to be more delivery-oriented – “the project that delivers”. The project had a story of delays and increases in budget – and hard-working, but exhausted project-members.

The first step was to get into a more achievement oriented culture. Instead of looking at where we “ought to be”, the focus was on every achievement done. This was stated in weekly status mail, sent to stakeholders to the project. But we are also working with pointing out “the good things” in every project meeting and steering committee meeting.

A part of getting the achievement oriented culture in place is to see problems that occur as a part of the natural process in the project. We do our things, we identify a problem and we take care of the problem in a good way. The rhythm in project work is to identify and take care of problems, and go forward. The message is that we have a structure, a process and an organization that is capable of this rhythm.

The project management team has had one workshop to conclude what has been done the last 12 weeks. The result was amazing – both the list of actual results and the atmosphere it created in team.

As I said earlier, there have been small changes and “tricks” that have helped me in my ambition to transform my leadership into a more systemic, narrative and appreciative practice. I will present some of these “tricks” I have worked consciously with. I connect them with the appreciative principle discussed in the literature walk-through.

1. The Constructionist principle - Word create worlds
   - The principle “We talk about people that are not present in a way that they would feel pleased to hear” is expressed in the project
   - How we talk with each other in the project
     “How can I support you, so you can support me?”
   - Be careful of how words are used, for example change “must” into “need”
   - Naming of project specific issues

2. The Positive Principle – Positive Questions leads to Positive Change
   - Using metaphors like “if it is Christmas Day tomorrow, how does your wish list look like?”
   - When something does not turn out the way we planned or liked – “what did we learn from this?”

3. The Anticipatory Principle – Images Inspires Actions
   - Express concrete pictures of the future as “when we have migrated 500 000 insurances at Christmas”.
   - Work in meetings and workshops with a future perspective – “now when we are in June, 2010 ....”
4. The Wholeness Principle – Wholeness brings out the best
   o In every group and every meeting, I reflect on the composition of the group – which perspectives are represented and which we are missing.

These are just some examples on small “tricks” I have done in my daily work as project leader. The main thing for me is the consciousness I need to have in my actions, and have the perspective on result, persons as well as on the system.

Reflections – my personal learning journey

“When magic become words” came to me in the beginning of the course – it framed my hopes for what the year would give me. Through the year, I realised that the learning was wider than verbalising magic – the words actually expanded the magic which fulfilled the sentence by “…and magic become words”.

For me, the process of formulating and verbalising the magic has been the main kick, in dialogue with the course participants, but also in the process of writing. I started up with writing minutes after the first course event, and the process of writing has been very important to me.

Reading the letters has given me perspective on my own learning process. In the first letter I reflected on how “scary” it was with all literature and that the presented theory was only a lot of words that did not really touch me. As I continue to read the letters, I can see that I enjoy the literature and the theory more – it created an intellectual framework to me. I got challenged by the theory and the literature.

As time goes by, I can also see how the intellectual framework materialises into concrete changes in my daily work as project leader. Intellectual understanding becomes conscious actions.

Writing this essay has been a joyful travel! I expected that I would feel a lot of pressure, but it has been more of a relieving process. It has given me an opportunity to sum up the learning and concretize what it has become for me as a project leader. By exploring “When magic becomes words and words become magic”, I have had the opportunity to consolidate my learning.

Conclusions

I realise that writing this paper has given me still another perspective on “When magic becomes words, and words become magic” – it is a never-ending-story. During my writing, new insights have come to me, either intellectually or by experience. The consciousness on the reflexivity between magic and words (action and theory) in it builds new knowledge – and the writing process clarifies and refines the knowledge into a higher level.

I would like to thank my fellow course participants, the course management and my colleagues joining and co-creating with me in my learning process. I welcome you to join me into the future.
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Enclosures

Enclosure 1: The eight principles of Appreciative Inquiry


1. The Constructionist Principle – Words Create Worlds
   * Reality, as we know it, is a subjective vs. objective state
   * It is socially created, through language and conversations

2. The Simultaneity Principle – Inquiry Creates Change
   * Inquiry is intervention
   * The moment we ask a question, we begin to create a change

3. The Poetic Principle – We can choose What We Study
   * Organisations, like open books, are endless sources of study and learning
   * What we choose to study makes a difference. It describes – even creates – the world as we know it.

4. The Anticipatory Principle – Image Inspires Action
   * Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future
   * The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action

5. The Positive Principle – Positive Questions Lead to Positive Change
   * Momentum for large-scale change requires large amount of positive affect and social bonding.
   * This momentum is best generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core

6. The Wholeness Principle – Wholeness Brings Out the Best
   * Wholeness brings out the best in people and organisations
   * Bringing all stakeholders together in large group forums stimulates creativity and builds collective capacity.

7. The enactment Principle – Acting “As If” is Self-fulfilling
   * To really make a change, we must “be the change we want to see”
   * Positive change occurs when the process used to create the change is a living model of the ideal future

8. The Free Choice Principle – Free Choice Liberates Power
   * People perform better and are more committed when they have freedom to choose how and what they contribute
   * Free choices stimulates organisational excellence and positive change