



Conceptual Article

Leadership and communication: Application of dialogical communication model to leadership dynamics

“Communication as dialogue is seen as a creative process, allowing the development of potential of all those involved in leader relations, and as such it moves beyond the relative fixity of roles” (Ashman, and Lawler, 2008: 266) and beyond the paradigms of control and transmission which lay at the heart of majority of literature on leadership theory.

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This study aims at bringing a dialogical communication model to the center stage of leadership and management theory by using Bakhtinian philosophy of dialogical relationships. The philosophy of dialogical relationships provides a useful theoretical basis for gaining deeper insights into organizational communication processes and contributes to a critical approach to leadership theory. Emphasis is placed on understanding the nature of communication from the dialogical perspective and questioning conventional leadership communication based on the paradigms of control and transmission.

Keywords: Leadership, Bakhtin, dialogic relationships, communication, organization

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LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

The conventional leadership theories have adopted the paradigms of control and transmission. Leader is often viewed as occupying a top position in a hierarchy, holding the control, and transmitting the vision and objectives. This study provides a strong counter-argument to the conventional perspective on leadership by revealing the essence of its problematic point. The heart of the problem lies in the perception of communication. Within the literature on leadership, “communication is often regarded as an essential aspect of the leadership relationship or as a prime leadership skill” (Ashman, and Lawler, 2008: 253). The way communication is understood within leadership theory is evident from the plethora of definitions of leadership (e.g., Stogdill, 1974). In these definitions, transmission of the leader’s vision to

others in the organization (e.g. Conger, and Kanungo, 1998) and use of influence on an individual are the underlining elements. “Leaders communicate as a means of motivating followers to act [...] the essential behavior or skill is communicating: what is communicated generally is seen as having to do with a vision of the organization’s future” (Antonakis et al., 2004: 190–191). It is easy to see that communication is perceived as one-sided. Control is a significant part of leadership theories. Here, control implies that, through deliberate strategies, a ‘leader’ can deliver a vision and mission to and affect a ‘follower.’ While recent leadership models challenge the foundations of traditional leadership theories based on power, control, force, and authority (e.g., transactional and transformational leadership models) and new leader-

ship models emerge such as shared leadership (e.g., Kouzes, and Posner, 2002), distributed leadership, collective leadership, co-leadership, blended leadership (e.g., Caress and Scott, 2005; Carson, Marrone, and Tesluk, 2007; Steinheider, Wuestewald, and Bayerl, 2006), and relational leadership (Cunliffe, and Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006), there is one basic line pertinent to above leadership models: they are all based on the enhanced traditional communication model grounded on the source, the message, the recipient, and the feedback. In their article *Existential Communication and Leadership*, Ashman and Lawler (2008) comment, "Taking account of the intimate connection between leadership and communication it is remarkable that the concept of communication is taken so much for granted in the literature on leadership" (254). The review of the leadership literature displays that communication is understood as something that is done by leaders to followers where the follower is viewed as the passive party. Control belongs to leaders, who transmit the direction of the organization to followers. Ashman and Lawler (2008: 254) argue, The conventional view appears to be that communication is a process that involves no more than the transmission and reception of information [...]. Thus, problems of leadership that are often seen as occurring as a consequence of faulty communication can be corrected by simply opening up channels and reiterating or clarifying the content of the message (Fisher, 1974). Communicating, therefore, becomes a competence or skill to be acquired by the leader as a means of overcoming the followers' inability to comprehend their role in the organizational scheme of things. Frequently the solution to organizational difficulties is to communicate more or communicate better, with no sense that perhaps the root cause of the problem is a failure to grasp what communication truly entails and thus overlook the argument succinctly voiced by Watzlawick et al. (1967), that one cannot *not* communicate (emphasis in original).

The conventional view of communication presented in the majority of the literature on leadership ignores the dialogical aspect of communication. Perceiving communication as one-sided is fraught with the misconception that one can have control over communication, can create an uncontaminated, objective, and stable 'vision' for all, and can produce change alone. This study aims at highlighting the dialogical aspect of communication by bringing to the center stage of the leadership theory a dialogical communication model by using Bakhtinian philosophy of dialogical relationships. The philosophy of dialogical relationships provides a useful theoretical basis for gaining deeper insights into organizational communication processes and contributes to a critical approach to leadership theory. Emphasis is placed on understanding the nature of communication

from the dialogical perspective and questioning conventional leadership communication based on the paradigms of control and transmission. Such approach leads one to challenge the creation of ready-made guidelines and prescriptions for 'leaders'. Therefore, this study does not advance rules or principles for dialogical leadership, but rather offers the "moral attitudes," (Ashman, and Winstanley, 2006) which are derived from the dialogical model for communication.

The attempt to integrate the concept dialogical relationships into the leadership theory is not new. For instance, this attempt was undertaken by the relational leadership model (RLM) (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), RLM used the Bakhtinian construct of 'dialogical relationships'. Yet, despite its promising ideas of a leader who "recognizes the inherently polyphonic and heteroglossic nature of life; and engages in relational dialogue" (Cunliffe, and Eriksen, 2011: 1425), it still conceives dialogical relationships as a process that occurs between the leader and the follower, the dichotomy that would be strongly objected to by Mikhail Bakhtin.

The dialogical model for communication states that none of the actors involved in communication can have dominating and permanent control over the message creation process and in communication, there is no transmission of the 'message', but a co-creation of the 'message' by all the actors engaged in the communication process. The dialogic model criticizes the traditional approach to communication by moving away from the paradigm of transmission and control. The dialogical model has been initially developed for marketing communications (see Karimova, 2012 for the description of the model), but can be successfully applied to the communication process in any field.

This study applies the dialogic model for communication to leadership theory by offering an alternative approach to leadership, but first, it provides a brief overview of the dialogical model for communication and then it develops 'moral attitudes' to dialogical leadership from the standpoint of Bakhtinian concepts.

A DIALOGIC MODEL

The 'Message'

Dialogic relationships are described by Bakhtin as interaction between various voices, or between various 'consciousnesses'. The word 'consciousness' is used by Bakhtin not in the psychological sense, rather, it underlines the difference between 'body' and 'consciousness' where body has a beginning and an end while consciousness "can have neither a beginning nor an end" (Bakhtin, 2003: 291). It is identical with the "*personality* of an individual: everything in a person determined by the words 'I myself' or 'you yourself',

everything in which a person finds himself and senses himself, everything he answers for, everything between birth and death" (Bakhtin, 2003: 292). Although, Bakhtin does not provide a strict definition of the term 'dialogic relationships', he highlights a common aspect of the dialogic structure,

Everywhere there is an intersection, consonance, or interruption of rejoinders in the open dialogue by rejoinders in the heroes' internal dialogues. Everywhere a *specific sum total of ideas, thoughts, and words is passed through several unmerged voices, sounding differently in each* (Bakhtin, 2003: 278).

In management, too, the message can be a sum of ideas, thoughts, and words that may generate different voices of each actor involved in a management communication. Therefore, in organisational communication, the message can be perceived as dialogic in its nature.

Interactivity as Co-Existence

'Self', for Bakhtin (2003), is determined by the category of 'other' and its existence is impossible without it. "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness" (Bakhtin, 2003: 287). In order for the 'self' and the 'other' to exist they should exist simultaneously, or, as Holquist (1994) asserts, "self/other is a relation of simultaneity" (19). The existence of the 'self' is shared with the 'other'.

'Unfinalized' 'Self' and Stabilized 'Other'

In these self/other relationships, the 'other' is "in the realm of completeness" (Holquist, 1994, p. 26), while the 'self' is of an unfinished nature. The time of 'self' is constantly open and has no beginning and no end. "Beginnings and ends lie in the objective (an object-like) world for others, but not for the conscious person himself" (Bakhtin, 2003: 290).

The dialogic model implies that each actor involved in organizational communication resists limiting his or her own 'self', but looks at the 'other' in its "consummated wholeness" (Holquist, 1994: 28). For example, in an organisation, the 'middle manager' refuses to enclose its own 'self' within the closed boundaries of the 'middle manager', but looks at other actors of the organisational system within fixed clearly determined boundaries. Yet, the 'middle manager' perceives its own 'self' through the 'other', therefore, its perception of 'self' has also the particularities of the 'top manager', the 'non-managerial employee,' and the 'consumer'. In addition, each actor engaged in the organisational communication process can play various roles within a certain time and space.

For instance, the 'middle manager' can perform the role of the 'consumer' of the company's products/services. Thus, it is impossible to delineate clear-cut boundaries between the 'middle manager', the 'top manager', the 'non-managerial employee' or the 'consumer'. One cannot tell where the boundaries of one element finish and where another's begins. Thus, the division into various actors within an organisation does not exist from the point of view of each entity about its 'self'. This division exists only from the perspective of each actor about the other entity who tries to impose stability on the 'other'. The same logic can be extended to the perception of the 'follower' and the 'leader.'

Constant Change

From the Bakhtinian point of view, change can be seen as a "grotesque matter" (Karimova, and Shirkhanbeik, 2012), where the message is always in the process of 'becoming' as it is constantly changing within the time and space, and cannot be 'fully determined'. Change "is not something that goes on only at special moments of crisis or catastrophe" but is the result of "small choices made at every moment of our lives" (Morson, 1991: 1084). Change, for Bakhtin, is happening all the time, not at a particular moment in time and space.

The Unique Perception

The position of one body can be defined only in relation to another body and the nature of this relation is determined by an 'observer' who looks at it from a particular position in time and space. Two entities cannot occupy simultaneously the same place but only different places. Each entity is perceived in a unique way because each 'observer' occupies a unique position in the time/space matrix. On the basis of this argument it follows that not only is the 'self' unique in every observer, but also that the observer's *perception* of 'self' which differs from the perception of the 'self' by the 'other' and from others' perception of the 'self' in an observer.

Once an observer acknowledges that there is no control in communication and the 'message' is co-created, the feedback cycle becomes obsolete. Thus, the observer realizes that his or her understanding of the 'message' is not the message itself, but the message is the co-creation of all the actors involved in communication. There is no message that is sent or transmitted from the 'sender' to the 'receiver', or from the observer to the observer. Thus, there is no feedback loop and there is no control over the 'message' and the actors involved in the communication process. Therefore, we move away completely from the paradigms of control and transmission.

The dialogical model for communication and the principles analysed above enable one to advance the

'moral attitudes,' which can be useful for understanding 'leadership' dynamics.

MORAL ATTITUDE FOR THE 'LEADERSHIP' COMMUNICATION

The following 'moral attitudes' are necessary for the 'leadership' communication.

1. Simultaneous co-creation is central to 'leadership'. In the 'leadership' communication, there is no 'leader' as well as there is no 'follower'. In order for the 'self' and the 'other' to exist, they should exist simultaneously. Leader/follower is simultaneous co-creation with no boundaries between them.

2. All actors involved in communication are 'active' participants. They are involved in the process of co-creation of the 'message' and revealing 'possibilities'.

3. The 'vision' is a co-creation of the parties involved in communications. Therefore, there is no transmission of the 'vision' from the 'leader' to 'follower'. Consequently, 'leader' does not have control over the communication.

4. Change is constant. There must be an understanding that change is not a certain moment in time and space, but a constant process. Each entity involved in communication is in a continuous change. This attitude must lead to the realization that each participant is situated in the position of vulnerability and 'answerability.'

5. There is no dominant control in communication. The participants should challenge their modes of thinking and reconsider the notions that have been occupying a central place in communication such as 'power' and 'control', as well as "the stereotyped image of the strong, independent leader" (Ashman, and Lawler, 2008: 257).

Each of these 'attitudes' are going to be explained further in detail incorporating the Bakhtinian thinking and aspects of a dialogical communication model (Karimova, 2012).

Simultaneous Co-Creation is Central to 'Leadership'

One of the essential aspects of Bakhtinian philosophy, as discussed earlier, discloses the simultaneous co-existence of self/other. 'Self,' for Bakhtin (2003), is determined by the category of 'other.' Moreover, in order for the 'self' and the 'other' to exist they should exist simultaneously.

Leader/follower is simultaneous co-creation with no boundaries between them. Although, the 'self' is defined by the 'other' and they co-create each other (Buber, 2008; Kierkegaard, 1989), 'leader' is not defined by 'follower' as relational leadership theorists assume (Gardner, and Avolio, 1998; Sosik, Avolio, and Jung, 2002), because 'other' is defined by Bakhtin as what 'self

is not.' 'Leader' is defined by what 'follower is not' which implies many different voices of 'others.'

All Actors are 'Active' Participants

Across the majority of literature on leadership theory 'leader' is viewed as a dominant communicating entity, while 'follower' is perceived as a passive communicating entity. Moreover, "frequently there is a strong temptation to objectify other people in the workplace in the same way that a piece of equipment is objectified – they become something 'for me to use to meet my own ends' and such a perception is often found in the treatment of 'followers' by leaders" (Ashman, and Lawler, 2008). Yet, each actor is mutually engaged in communication. Each entity possesses consciousness and ability to co-create the 'message' and/or the organization 'vision.' "This again runs counter to the notion that a relatively passive workforce is waiting to be engaged by an inspirational or visionary leader, who treats them as instrumental, in that engagement is seen as a means of greater organizational effectiveness (Watson Wyatt, 2006/7)" (Ashman, and Lawler, 2008). Viewed from dialogical perspective, leadership communication implies active engagement of all actors involved in the communication process.

The 'Vision' is Co-Creation

A dialogical communication model explains that each actor creates the *eigenform*¹ of the 'other', that is, a stabilized perception of the 'other.' Each communicating entity interacts with the *eigenform* of the 'other' (Figure 1, Arrows 1 and 2). Each communication entity also has a unique perception of the 'self' (Figure 1, Arrows 5 and 6). Moreover, this *perception* of the 'self' differs from the perception of the 'self' by the 'other' and from others' perception of the 'self' in each communicator. Both parties are involved in the creation of the 'message'. The 'message' is created according to how the 'other' is perceived by the communicator (Arrows 3 and 4) (Karimova, 2012).

The meaning of the 'message' intended for the 'self' in the 'follower' by the 'leader' is based on how the 'leader' understands the 'self' in the 'follower' and it is different from how the 'follower' understands his or her own 'self'.

¹ The existence of one element is determined by the existence of another. In these self/other relationships "the observer distinguishes an element by conferring stability upon it – the stable form being termed the *eigenform* and the process of distinguishing that stability being the *eigenbehaviour*" (Miles, 2007: 323).

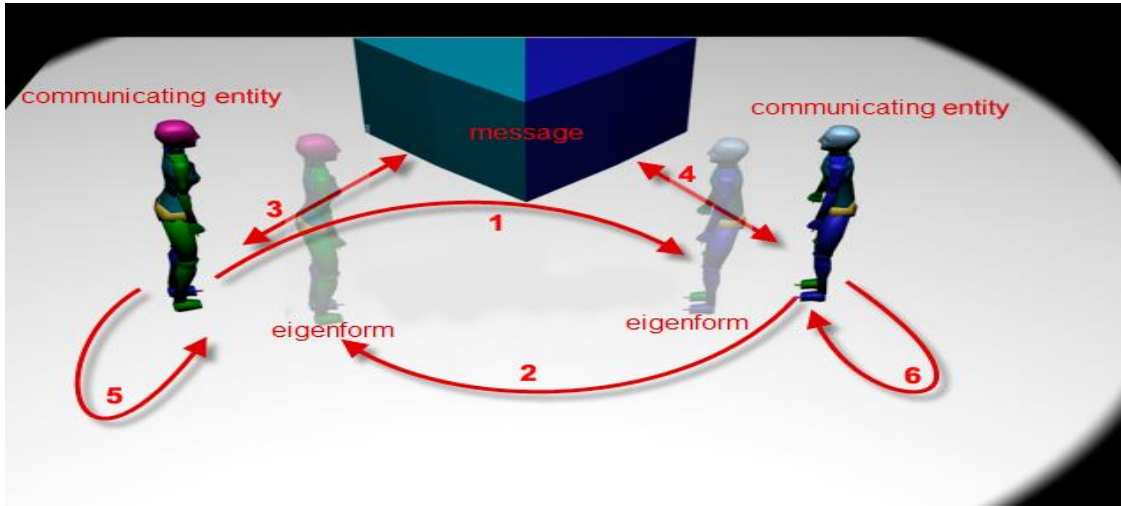


Figure 1: A Dialogic Communication Model

Note: From Karimova, G.Z. (2012). *Bakhtin and Interactivity, A Conceptual Investigation of Advertising Communication*. Academica Press, LLC, Palo Alto, CA, p. 101, Figure 12

This is why the meaning of the 'message' intended by the 'leader' for the 'follower' will not be the same as what the 'follower' understands. Thus, when the 'message' is being co-created by two or more communicators misunderstanding or, to be precise 'situational understanding,' may occur between the parties involved in any form of communication, including communication within an organization. One should realize that in the communication process the 'message' is a co-creation of communicating entities and one cannot have dominating and permanent control over the message creation process. This means, that there is no permanently dominating voice of 'leader' as well as voice of 'follower' (Ashman, and Lawler, 2008). Moreover, the message is 'unfinalized' because the unique position of each communicating entity defines his or her unique perception of the 'message'.

Self and other do not exist in binary opposition: self is always in the process of becoming the other. This process happens through dialogic interaction, and the self is continuously changing through time and space. As the self undergoes the process of change, so does its perception of what the other is. The experience of the other by the self within any moment creates the knowledge which defines the other by the self. This recursive, cyclic process brings to existence what Bakhtin calls the polyphony² of voices. It implies that there is no

'leader' and 'follower' dichotomy, but rather they create one system.

How does this cyclic process function? In each cycle of co-creation, the self recognizes a number of voices. These voices influence the *re*-cognition of other voices in the next cycle. At each moment both elements are 'becoming'. They simultaneously influence and are being influenced by each other. At each co-creation there are traces of the influence of interaction that took place the moment before. This is how the recursive nature of dialogue reveals itself in each interaction (the schematic representation of these arguments is found in the image of two-sided arrows 1 and 2). In other words, polyphony is the result of understanding, experience and knowledge of self and other by self in the continuum of time and space. The above arguments can found the following applications to the leadership theory:

1. There is no division between the 'leader' and the 'follower.' The 'leader' is always in the process of becoming the other where the 'other' is what the 'leader' is not (the message, the vision, the follower, etc.).
2. The 'leader' is involved in the cyclic process of co-creation. Understanding, experience and knowledge of 'leader' and other by the leader constantly change the 'leader' compelling the last to re-visit and re-view the 'other.'
3. The 'leader' does not create the vision alone; vision creates the 'leader'. They simultaneously influence each other.

Change Is Constant

The constant change implies instability and vulnerability of the position occupied by each actor engaged in

² Polyphony is characterized by Bakhtin as a multiplicity of voices where voice can be characterized as "the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness. A voice always has a will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones" ("Voice," 1994: 434).

communication. This implies that there are no permanently dominant or subordinate voices. Although, the voice of the 'leader' may struggle for authority and dominance, it can be undermined by the voices of 'others.' This continuity of conflicts between many voices competing and at the same time undermining authority allows one to say that there are no permanently dominant and permanently subjugated voices.

There Is No Dominant Control in Communication

The 'message' and/or 'vision' is what different participants understand about the 'message.' The 'message' is the accumulation of an infinite number of voices. Thus, the message is 'unfinalizable.' Even if there was a chance to indicate all the possible voices that are part of the message, the 'message' can never be stabilized and finalized because each participant changes within the space/time matrix, and so does the 'message'. Once a participant involved in communication acknowledges that there is no control in communication and the 'message' is co-created, the notion of misunderstanding becomes irrelevant. The observer realizes that his or her understanding of the 'message' is not the message itself, but the message is the co-creation of all the actors involved in communication. There is no message that is sent or transmitted from the 'leader' to the 'follower' and there is no 'leader's' control over the 'vision' and the actors involved in the communication process.

CONCLUSION

The above exposition of dialogical thinking and its application to 'leadership' communication, incite further thoughts on the potential for 'leadership.' "Communication as dialogue is seen as a creative process, allowing the development of potential of all those involved in leader relations, and as such it moves beyond the relative fixity of roles" (Ashman, and Lawler, 2008: 266) and beyond the paradigms of control and transmission which lay at the heart of majority of literature on leadership theory. Across this literature, the boundaries between 'leader' and 'follower' are clearly defined and 'leader' occupies a dominant position in control of the organisational 'vision' and the 'follower,' where the 'follower' frequently perceived as a passive participant of the communication. A shift in the perception leadership dynamics can occur with adaptation of an alternative approach and understanding of the communication process. The Bakhtinian philosophy enables one to view communication differently, and thus shedding light on our understanding of leadership dynamics. A dialogical communication model can

contribute to a critical approach to leadership theory and lead to the reconsideration of the role of the 'leader.'

This study does not equip actors involved in communication with rules and/or guidelines as it would contravene Bakhtinian concept of 'answerability.' 'Answerability' suggests that there are no ready-made answers and ethical rules, no alibi, but people are responsible for choices they make in their lives. Yet, this study brings the "moral attitudes" (Ashman, and Winstanley, 2006) or aspects forward for consideration, which can be summarized in the following way:

1. Simultaneous co-creation is central to 'leadership.'
2. All actors are 'active' participants.
3. The 'vision' is co-creation.
4. Change is constant.
5. There is no dominant control in communication.

What exists is a co-creation of the 'message' by all the actors engaged in the communication process. The responsibility, the development of "possibility" (Morson, 1991: 1088) can be achieved once participants realize that they all are part of one unified system and that they stepped inside the realm of co-creation of the 'vision' and 'direction.'

Development of guidelines of how to apply the dialogical 'leadership' into practice might be an important step in the development of dialogical 'leadership' communication, but it is also important to remember that each participant's discourse is tightly interconnected with the discourse of the 'other', or, in Bakhtinian words, "it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts" (Bakhtin, 1994: 345-346). These dialogical relationships in which participants are involved disclose those "potentials" (Morson, 1991: 1088) that are inherent in the discourses.

Another important note that can be made of the needs for further research is that different disciplines need to integrate the philosophy of dialogue because communication is an essential aspect of multiple disciplines. It is difficult to name all the disciplines that could adopt the dialogical thinking, but there are disciplines that started moving towards it. For example, Kent and Taylor (2002) adopt dialogical thinking to public relations and advance three ways that organizations can incorporate dialogue into their communication with publics; Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen (1998) analyze the importance of dialogue in media education, with a special view to foreign language education and to cross-cultural communication and Jabri, Adrian, and Boje (2008) adopt Bakhtinian perspective to change management.

Dialogical thinking may enable us to move not only beyond the concept where the 'leader' creates transformations in the organization and in 'followers' and even beyond the concept where transformation happens

in both the 'leader' and the 'follower.' Dialogical line of thinking moves much further admitting the constant transformation of the entire system which includes the 'polyphony' of various voices.

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