

THE FOURTH WINDOW

LEADERSHIP POLARITIES

In search of good leadership and facilitation



Lourens van der Post

“ I hear people everywhere saying that the trouble with our time is that there are no great leaders any more. If we look back, we always had them. But to me it seems that there is a very profound reason why there are no great leaders anymore. It is because they are no longer needed. The message is clear. We no longer want to be led from the outside. Each of us must be our own leader. We know enough now to follow the light that’s within ourselves, and through this light we will create a new community. ”

Lourens van der Post

Instead of electing strong leaders, we can create leadership between us.



LOFTY SHARES AN EXPERIENCE OF COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Are leaders and leadership the same thing? Not necessarily. There are so many kinds of leadership.

At CDRA we have monthly reflection sessions where we share our experiences with each other and think about what they mean for our future practice. We often make concrete changes or improvements to our work or organisation on the basis of issues raised at these meetings. This is a form of leadership in which we are all leaders. To me, this seems to be the essence of participatory democracy, where, instead of electing strong leaders, we can create leadership between us.

The challenge is how to ensure that these leadership processes are well designed and facilitated, that they enable all voices to speak, and that they have direction. Perhaps this leads us to a different role for leaders, a different way to bring leadership – a facilitative form of leadership.

The question of leadership seems to be on everyone’s lips these days. With our planet in a mess, we need good leadership like never before. But do we need the strongest, toughest leaders, or should we be looking for something else? Strong-arm tactics don’t seem to have helped the world lately.

Understanding the leadership polarities model

A polarity is a relationship between two things that are opposite but not opposing, like night and day, sweet and sour, masculine and feminine, or the fire and water temperaments. Their differences may be interesting but how they co-exist with their differences is more interesting. They are complementary opposites.

In the context of leadership and facilitation, an awareness of leadership polarities can enhance the effectiveness of organisational development work.

The six basic leadership roles, according to the Leadership Polarities model, are:

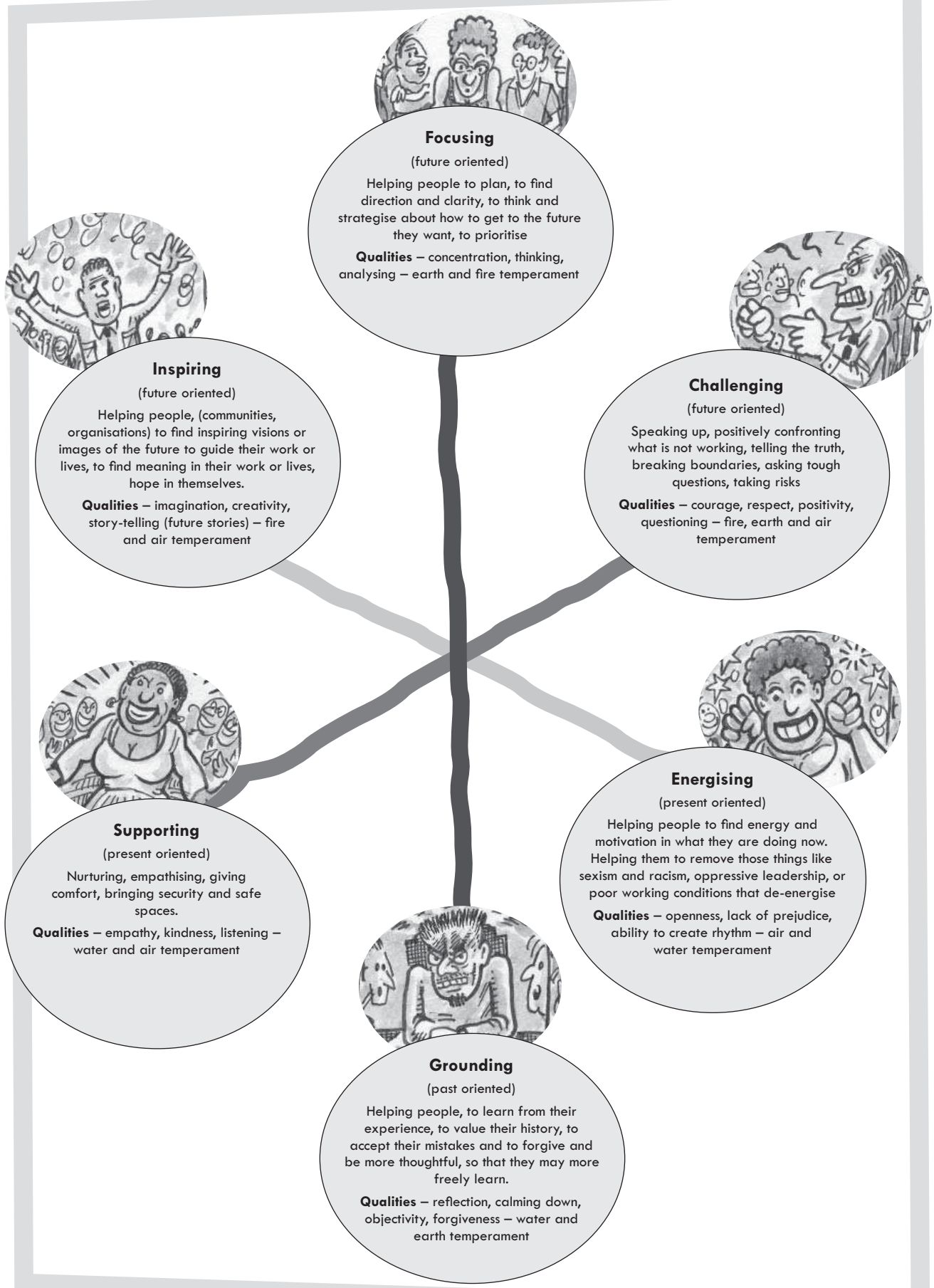
Inspiring	↔	Energising
Focusing	↔	Grounding
Challenging	↔	Supporting

These roles relate together according to three sets of polarities: Inspiring/Energising; Focusing/Grounding; Supporting/Challenging.

The diagram over the page provides a simplified model of polarities, demonstrating how the roles and qualities of leadership need to be balanced against each other.



Facilitative leadership polarities – roles and qualities



The 6 roles of Facilitative Leadership



INSPIRING - FUTURE ORIENTATION

Helping people, (communities, organisations) to find inspiring visions or images of the future to guide their work or lives, to find meaning in their work or lives, hope in themselves.

VS



ENERGISING - PRESENT ORIENTATION

Helping people to find energy and motivation in what they are doing now. Helping them to remove those things like sexism, racism, oppressive leadership, or poor working conditions that de-energise them.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT ABOUT THESE TWO ROLES AND THEIR POLARITY.

Some leaders are good at inspiring (or bringing out inspiration) but get confused when their members or staff seem to lack energy. So members might be excited by the vision of the community or organisation but they could be de-energised by discrimination of some kind. When organisations lack rhythms (like regular staff meetings), they can become erratic, leaving people uncertain, stressed and tired. People get energy from having certain rhythms in their lives.

There can be a healthy tension between these two roles. In a way the energising role is saying to the inspiring role "Great to have you on board but please stay real!" The inspiring role may reply "Ok that's fine but let's not get stuck in the present, the future calls on us to think bigger than we are today!"



FOCUSING - FUTURE ORIENTED

Helping people to plan, to find direction and clarity, to think and strategise about how to get to the future they want, to prioritise.

VS



GROUNDING - PAST ORIENTED

Helping people, to learn from their experience, to value their history, to accept their mistakes and to forgive and be more thoughtful, so that they may more freely learn.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT ABOUT THESE TWO ROLES AND THEIR POLARITY.

The relationship between focusing and grounding is closely related to the action-learning cycle (see Chapter 5). A continuous flow of learning from the past into thinking about the future enables a healthy, independent and adaptable organisation or community.

The relationship between these two is cyclical (like night and day). Each must get its required attention for the other to be healthy.



CHALLENGING - FUTURE ORIENTED

Speaking up, positively confronting what is not working, telling the truth, breaking boundaries, asking tough questions, taking risks.

VS



SUPPORTING - PRESENT ORIENTED

Nurturing, empathising, giving comfort, bringing security and safe spaces.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT ABOUT THESE TWO ROLES AND THEIR POLARITY.

You should recognise this one immediately. When someone has made a mistake... do they need to be challenged or do they need a supportive arm around them... or do they need a bit of both? If an organisation, leadership or facilitator is too challenging it might feel alienating or too bossy. On the other hand if things are too supportive it might be too comfortable, too sweet or too lenient.

The relationship between these two roles is of complementary opposites. How can we bring sufficient challenge in a positive way to someone but within a supportive environment, so that people do take risks, but are willing to accept honest feedback, knowing that if they fail that they will be supported and not abandoned?

Working with leadership polarities

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GUIDING THOUGHTS ABOUT INDIVIDUALS

The Leadership Polarities model provides a great source of questions that individuals and organisations can use to assess themselves, celebrate their strengths and work on their challenges.

USING THE MODEL AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

The organisation (or team) might find the model useful for getting feedback from individuals in the organisation. Encourage people to ask these questions regularly and give feedback to each other.

Inspiring/Energising questions: How inspiring is my work? Do I also have energy day-to-day? Am I doing what I really want to do? What is getting in the way?

Focusing/Grounding questions: Am I focused? Do I have clear direction? Do I know what my priorities are? Am I learning continuously, finding the time to reflect and really learn from experience?

Challenging/Supporting questions: Do I get challenged by others when I need it? Do I allow others to challenge me? Do I ask for or get the support I need?

USING THE MODEL AT AN ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

The questions are similar, but have a collective orientation. It is often useful, before asking the questions collectively, to get feedback from each individual. It is not unusual for individuals in collective processes to be silent when their answers might be challenging to the more powerful members of the group.

Inspiring/Energising questions: Where is the organisation inspired and purposeful? Where are the conditions of work and the culture motivating or demotivating? What is helping or hindering?

Focusing/Grounding questions: Is the organisation clear and focused? Is it learning from experience in a conscious, ongoing and healthy way that is feeding into our thinking about the future? What is helping or hindering it?

Challenging/Supporting questions: Is there challenge or edge in this organisation? Can we be honest with each other in a positive way? Do we support each other when we struggle or fail?

1 EVERYONE IS DIFFERENT.

There is so much diversity in the world. The better we appreciate this diversity the more likely we are to be able to work creatively with it. Diversity is key to healthy organisations.

2 EVERYONE IS INTERESTING.

Scratch below the surface and even apparently dull people have an enlightening story to tell. Finding people boring says more about us than about them.

3 EVERYONE IS EQUALLY WORTHWHILE.

Each person matters (even you!). If you don't believe this you are in the wrong line of work.

4 EVERYONE HAS THE WILL AND ABILITY TO CHANGE AND DEVELOP THEMSELVES.

This may be buried and forgotten – our work is to bring it to the surface.