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**RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTIONISM IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

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*Abstract: The global context of the world in change is leading to new challenges for organizations. Social constructionism can be a useful approach for the organizational intervention. Language, dialogue, co-creation are important resources that can generate innovative tools, more possibilities in constructing the transformation of organizations. This article explores the social constructionism, particularly the relational constructionism version in leadership area. This perspective is focused on the multiple relations created through language, which is the social action itself, being an ongoing process. The relational constructionism stimulates the creation of collaborative relationships between members of organizations, opening and discovering new perspectives to act and to create changes. The positive conversations are very important in stimulating the imagination, the motivation of participants and open multiple voices that bring value together and generate involvement and change.*

**Keywords:** *leadership, multiple relations, organization development, process ongoing, relational constructionism*

**Relational Constructionism**

This article focuses on relational constructionism, a relational version of social constructionism in which leadership as a relational process prevails. Gergen (1994) proposes a new approach, social constructionism that focuses on the processes of understanding and addressing changes in the postmodern society, in a wider sense, but specifically on organizations. Social constructionism may be defined as a perspective which believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985, p. 265). Weick (1995) suggests that organizations are socially constructed. Organizations can be seen as relational and dialogical language communities (Cunliffe, 2008). The constructionist approach emphasizes the ability to create realities through language, in its varied forms of presentation, stimulating a process of continuous creation (Cojocaru, 2005; Cojocaru, 2013). "The type of knowledge generated from this perspective is knowledge about what forms of reality language constructs" (Cunliffe, 2008). Relational constructionism focus on how people are creating meanings intersubjectively through their embodied dialogical activities (Cunliffe, 2002b; Gergen et al. 2001). Everyday life is intersubjectivity constructed because we live in a 'web of relationships' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). We are always a 'self-in-relation-to-others', and the managers need to know how they relate with others, to understand how others view the world, and to create opportunities for open dialogue (Cunliffe, 2008). Relational constructionist perspective is emergent in the interactions and relationships between the participants (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Relational constructionism is a social science perspective with its own assumptions about ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Hosking, 2011). It has its 'own interests, possibilities and the potential value lies in this context' (Hosking, 2011). Realities are socially constructed in social-relational processes; multiple 'social realities are made in multiple social relations' (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Relational processes centre language constructing, reconstructing

relational realities. These relational realities include constructions of a relational self in relation to others. The relation processes are ongoing processes in which realities are always in construction (Hosking, 2011). Relational constructionism assumes multiple local or regional ontologies (Benton & Craib, 2001). Alvesson & Deetz (2000) consider the dualism of objective-subjective, real-relativist as local-cultural, local-historical. According to Hosking (2011) in relational constructionism 'talk of the individual as possessing a self, a mind and individual knowledge' gives ways to speak about relational processes. Many simultaneous inter-acts contribute to this ongoing process (re)constructing the reality. In relational constructionism language is viewed as a key medium in which 'inter-acting goes on' (Hosking, 2011). Language derives its significance from the ways it is used in human relationships (Gergen, 1994). Relational constructionism includes the role of history and culture in all areas of practice including organizational studies (Benton & Craib, 2001; Gergen, 1994). This perspective theorizes power as a quality of all relational processes and realities and deals with 'how' of constructing and saying little about the 'what' or the 'content' (Hosking, 2011; Cojocaru, 2012). Relational constructionism is opened to more open approaches that are participatory, collaborative, appreciative, and dialogical. Appreciative inquiry (Strivastva & Cooperrider, 1990) assumes a relational, dialogical view of persons and processes. These approaches are ways of working that open up 'power to' rather than 'power over'. Dialogue (Gergen, 1995) open space for creativity, for improvisation, participants learn how to learn (Isaacs, 1996), and participation is viewed as a relational way of being and knowing (Reason, 1994).

### **Leadership as Relational Process**

Organizations are seen as 'potentially fluid field of meaning making' (Gergen, 2009, p. 321), being an ongoing process of development. Language is an important lens for understanding particular aspects of organizational life (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). Pearce (1992, p. 140) refers to language as a process of constructing social realities. Fairhurst & Connaughton (2014) in the paper *Leadership: A communicative perspective*, emphasises the leadership communication which is transformational and meaning-centered. Purvanova & Bono (2009) in their experimental study combined communication with transformational leadership and found that transformational leadership behaviors impacted virtual teams' behavior more than face-to-face. Balthazard et al. (2009) focused on the influences of personality characteristics on perceptions of transformational leadership. "Leadership is, by definition, performative in which reflexivity is routine and moral grounding thus becomes possible" (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). The relational constructionist perspective on leadership highlights the role of leaders as relational managers (Russell, 2003). The relational view underlines the importance of relationships between leaders and followers (Covey, 1993; Hall & Hall, 1988; Whitaker, 1983; Liu, 2014). Hosking & Morley (1988) sustained that we need to pay attention to the social constructions of organizations – how leaders construct organizational realities (Stanescu & Cicei, 2012). Realities are created by people who communicate through language, each of them influencing and limiting the responses of others (Cojocaru, Bragaru, & Ciuchi, 2012). From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people (Aytañ,

2014). People 'exist' in language. Language gains its meaning from its use in context (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1994; McNamee, 2004). Language creates identities, relationships, and cultures (Burr, 2003). The leaders influence and have great impact on the activity of the followers. According to Barge & Fairhurst (2008) leadership is a co-created, contextual, and attributional process and the ideas expressed are recognized by followers as progressing tasks. The leader who has an appreciative position in relation with his whole crew can create more possibilities to look at one situation and generates high-quality relationships.

The term *relational* appears in a wide range of domains 'reflecting the breadth of theoretical underpinnings' (Parker, Wasserman, Kram & Hall, 2015). "Relationships are central to human functioning and relational life is intertwined throughout our lives" (Blustein et al. 2004, p. 426). Relational practice and learning in leadership improve development of individuals and also the organization, leading to positive actions. This process implies high-quality relationships. High-quality relationships are formed by multiple high-quality connections with others over time (Parker et al. 2015). The main purpose of both is to create conditions for learning, change, and development (Morariu, 2014). The relationship is a powerful influence for change in the organizational field. A good way of learning potential is peer coaching, a multidisciplinary process that expands the relational resources to individuals focused on change (Parker et al. 2015). Peer coaching is a 'helping relationship that facilitates mutual learning and development' in organizations (Parker et al. 2015). Leadership coaching helps to improve interpersonal skill development, stress management, and strategic thinking (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009). Peer coaching increases self-awareness, greater adaptability, more active listening and inquiry, effective leadership and interpersonal connections (Parker et al. 2008). This relational process has higher success when the members of organization have the capability to build relationships of high-quality (Parker, Kram & Hall, 2012). High-quality relationships promote trust, support and openness, and produce high-quality connections when it is combined with high-quality communication (Gittel, 2003). Learning within relationships produces more performance, satisfaction and growth outcomes (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). A positive discourse leads to effective peer coaching.

Relational constructionism is interested to develop practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is based on knowing who we are and how to relate to others (Cunliffe, 2008). Leadership actors need to cultivate the wisdom to improvise their action (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). Phronesis, a form of practical wisdom can help leaders to see the good in a situation (Grint, 2007). Through phronesis leaders create invitations for others to create. Here, the reflexive abilities (Cunliffe, 2004) are important to make persons aware of how their assumptions influence how they think or act. Some authors identified the need for interpersonal skills in leadership (Whitaker, 1983; Zaleznik, 1993). To understand the reactions of their followers, leaders need to understand their own (Russell, 2003). Leaders can develop their reflexive abilities 'keeping some play in the system'. 'Keeping some play in the system' highlights the importance of leadership's role in creating and sustaining energy in the system (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). Energy has a positive effect (Quinn & Dutton, 2005) on the ability of leaders to coordinate the follower's action, and keep their energy high. The relational style of thinking (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004) in leadership creates relational processes that

generate energy during organizations by making wise choices in the moment of action (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). Relational leadership highlights the responsibility for creating ethical dialogue, respecting others' rights, ideas, recognizes that working through differences is inherently a moral responsibility, and involves practical wisdom (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

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