

**‘Negative Capability’:  
A contribution to the understanding of creative leadership**

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**Abstract**

Our aim in this chapter is to suggest how the idea of ‘negative capability’ may contribute to an understanding of the creative leader. We begin by exploring the origins of the term negative capability and its meaning in the creative arts and in psychoanalysis. We then assess its value as a concept in relation to leadership. Creative leadership is called for at the edge between certainty and uncertainty, both a necessary and a difficult place to work in the current context of organizational life. Whereas, positive capabilities direct leaders and followers toward particular forms of action rooted in knowing, negative capability is the ability to resist dispersing into inappropriate knowing and action. We suggest that appropriate combinations of positive capabilities and negative capability can generate and sustain a ‘working space’ or ‘capacity’ for creative thought at this edge between knowing and not knowing. Creative leaders are characterised by their ability to generate such spaces not merely for themselves but also for others within the organization. Some of the problems for organizational leaders in working with negative capability are raised and explored.

**Keywords**

Certainty/uncertainty; creative leadership; negative capability; positive capability.

**Introduction**

The aim of this article is to propose a way of conceptualising the qualities required for creative leadership by drawing attention to the tantalising yet elusive notion of ‘negative capability’.

A leader’s ‘positive capabilities’ are those which are generally described as the skills, competencies, knowledge and technologies of leadership. The underpinning image of leadership is based on knowing and is manifested through activity, work and achievement. There is, however, a quite other dimension of leadership, based on not knowing, on not doing, on being-done-to, and on being no longer in control of one’s own situation. It is the capacity to work creatively with this dimension of human experience that the poet John Keats called ‘*Negative Capability*’.

In leadership studies, and in leadership training, the overwhelming emphasis is on *positive* capabilities, and for this reason our focus is on understanding the relevance to creative leadership of *negative* capability. Our proposition is that at the edge between certainty and uncertainty a capacity for creative thought is formed by the appropriate combination of negative capability and positive capabilities.

## **‘Negative Capability’: the origins and meaning of the term**

Keats described negative capability as a state in which a person

*‘is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’*. (Keats, 1970: 43.)

Since Keats’ first – and only – use of the term ‘negative capability’, in a letter to his brothers in 1817, ‘one of the most puzzling of all his letters’ (Bate, 1964: 236-7), it has had a rich life of its own. Mainly focussed on its original context, the exploration of the nature and origins of artistic creativity, it has also been applied to religious experience (Scott, 1969; Toynbee, 1973), to the role of the psychoanalyst (see, for example, Bion, 1978: 8-9; 1984a: 124-5; 1990: 45-6; 1991: 207; Eisold, 2000; Ghent, 1990; Green, 1973; Hutter, 1982; Leavy, 1970; Rosen, 1960), and, most recently, in the fields of management and organization studies (Bennis, 1998: 148, 2000; Handy, 1989: 54, 183).

Keats was only twenty-two years old when, in a period of intense exploration and speculation, he coined the phrase in a sequence of attempts to describe the ‘prime essential’ of a poet (Muir, 1958: 107). Following such experiments as ‘scepticism’, ‘pessimism’, ‘Wordsworthian humanitarianism’, ‘disinterestedness’ and – closest to our theme – ‘humility and the capability of submission’, ‘negative capability’ was the final ‘dovetailing’ of concepts in Keats’ emerging understanding of the poetic imagination (Bate, 1964, chapter x; Caldwell, 1972: 5).

Negative capability suggests a peculiarly human capacity for ‘containment’: that is, the capacity to live with and to tolerate ambiguity and paradox, and to ‘remain content with half knowledge’ (Ward, 1963, p. 161), ‘to tolerate anxiety and fear, to stay in the place of uncertainty in order to allow for the emergence of new thoughts or perceptions’ (Eisold, 2000: 65). It implies the capacity to engage in a non-defensive way with change, without being overwhelmed by the ever-present pressure merely to react. It also indicates empathy and even a certain flexibility of character, the ability ‘to tolerate a loss of self and a loss of rationality by trusting in the capacity to recreate oneself in another character or another environment’ (Hutter, 1982: 305). Bridgwater focuses explicitly on this openness and capacity for identification with the ‘other’:

By ‘negative capability’ Keats meant the lack of personal identity, of preconceived certainty, which he believed to mark all great poets. It was necessary, Keats believed, for the poet to be, above all, open to impressions, sensations or whatever, which means that the ‘camelion’ (chameleon) poet is forever changing his/her ideas. (1999: xv.)

At first sight, it may seem ridiculous to think of a leader as a chameleon or as lacking personal identity: ‘forever changing his/her ideas’. The current cult of leader-as-personality or –hero, ‘turning companies around’, stresses the very opposite of such chameleon-like colour changes; that is, the need to nail one’s colours to the mast, to embody the organization’s vision, and to be proactive, creating environments not just responding to them. However, as with many organizational paradoxes, ‘the truth is not

in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes' (Charles Simeon, 1847).

At one extreme, the articulation and constant re-presentation of the vision – giving a lead and sticking to it – may indeed be a key element in the success of any organizational venture. At the other extreme, however, effective leadership can involve seeing moment by moment, day by day, what is *actually going on*, in contrast with what was planned for, expected or intended. In order to assess the impact of events in this way, and to adapt, shift and adjust as necessary, 'chameleon' leaders might indeed be thought of as putting their *self* to one side, in order to allow their minds be changed by 'truth-in-the-moment' (French and Simpson, 1999; Simpson and French, 2006). The heart of the paradox is that it may only be by changing and re-visioning the organization's reality as it evolves that a leader can preserve the focus on the task.

For example, in 1982 Jim Burke, CEO of Johnson and Johnson, took charge of the 'Tylenol crisis' when several people died after poison had been inserted into Tylenol capsules. Burke removed the product from the shelves, against the wishes of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the FBI, who were concerned that this action would alarm the public – and at a cost of \$125 million. Burke explained, "we put the public first. We never hid anything from them and were as honest as we knew how to be." This included appearing on the *Donahue* television programme and on *60 Minutes*. The corporation had not worked in this manner before – nor had it faced such a crisis. "Only one person here supported what I was doing" recalled Burke, "when I decided to go on *60 Minutes* the head of public relations told me it was the worst decision anyone in this corporation had ever made, and anyone who would risk the corporation that way was totally irresponsible, and he walked out and slammed the door."

In his honesty and openness, refusing to try to avoid the problem through politically expedient actions or explanations, Burke made himself and the corporation vulnerable. This did indeed represent a genuine risk, and may have opened up a route for escalating blame and recrimination.

In terms of the framework we are offering, we would say that Burke was able to mobilise both his positive capabilities and his negative capability in a way that, in the event, turned out to be appropriate. He describes the importance of his training in market research and consumer marketing, his contacts in the media, and being guided by a "philosophy of life" that was sorely tested. This combination of positive capabilities and negative capability, in this particular situation, generated a space within which the corporation, the media and the public at large were able to find and create a new way to think about the problem. In addition, nine weeks after the first headlines new tamper-resistant packaging was in production. Burke suggests that they managed to design the new packaging "overnight practically, when it would have normally taken two years." Within a year Tylenol was back as the top over-the-counter analgesic in the US. The organization could continue its task, and Burke appeared on the front cover of *Fortune* magazine, lauded as an innovator (Bennis 1998: 151-4).

The fact that this case is cited as a model example of corporate responsibility and

crisis management has led to a number of ‘formulaic’ responses to crises, largely based on sending the company CEO out to deal with public and media. However, the imprisoning in India of Union Carbide’s CEO, Warren Anderson, following the Bhopal poisonings is just one example that illustrates the danger of a one-dimensional understanding of Burke’s achievement. The danger arises from treating the essentially creative, dynamic and contingent relationship between positive capabilities and negative capability as though it were simply a skill or a technique. Burke was not applying a learned formula. What he knew was indeed important in the Tylenol crisis, but it was the integrity with which he accepted and addressed what he did *not* know, as well as what he did, that generated a capacity within which everyone involved could engage creatively with the problem.

It appears paradoxical, but positive capabilities provide the basis for mobilising negative capability. For example, it is the knowledge that I do not know that allows me to do nothing. It is my confidence in my own judgement that allows me to accept that, for the moment, my judgement is failing me.

Allowing oneself to be influenced, as Burke did, by the experience of the reality of the moment was indeed Keats’ practice as a poet: ‘His own personality seemed to him to matter hardly more than the strings of the lyre; without which, indeed, there would be no music audible, but which changed no single note of the music already existing in an expectant silence’ (Symons, 1901: 1626-7). While the *form* of a poet’s intervention is very different to that of an organizational leader, their effectiveness may be based on a remarkable similarity of intention and desire: ‘to be a voice, a vision; to pass on a message, translating it, flawlessly, into another, more easily apprehended tongue’ (ibid.). Through the exercise of negative capability the leader becomes, like the strings of a lyre, an instrument – not for music or poetry, but for organizational inquiry, learning and creativity: ‘what is deepest in the human mystery gives way only before a *Negative Capability*’ (Scott, 1969: xii-xiii).

Following Wittgenstein’s method of ‘family resemblances’, we would argue that the pursuit of creative imaginings and insights links a distinct ‘family’ of roles, that includes poet, psychoanalyst, theologian or philosopher – *and leader*. Whilst these roles may have ‘no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all’, Wittgenstein’s method suggests that ‘they are *related* to one another in many different ways.’ (Wittgenstein, 1963, paras 65; his italics.) Our suggestion is that the key link is negative capability: *all of these roles depend for their effectiveness on developing and mobilising negative capability*.

However, insights into resemblances between roles can only be of practical value if differences are identified with equal clarity. A leader may, after all, be a poet, a philosopher, a theologian or even a psychoanalyst, but this does not mean that the reverse is also true. Without highlighting differences, it is all too easy to draw interesting but contestable conclusions about the ‘leader-as-poet’ or about ‘philosopher-kings’ (Plato, *The Republic*: 473d).

Organizational leaders must be oriented towards the unknown, creative insight of the moment and hence towards ‘the edges’ of their ignorance. However, unlike poet or analyst, the ‘insight’ sought by leaders is much more obviously conditional,

contingent as it is on *the task of the organization*. When leaders search out those new thoughts which can only arise at the edge of uncertainty and not-knowing, they do so in order to establish or to maintain their competitive advantage and to ensure that their organization can thrive in the face of competition and of market forces, or to make sure that the needs of clients are met. For the most part, they are not in search of creativity *per se*. They do not follow the insight wherever it may take them. Rather, they must search for the idea relevant to the organization in its context. As a result of insights gained, the leader may, of course, come to redefine this task, even quite radically, but that would be a by-product.

### **Leadership ‘at the edge’ between certainty and uncertainty**

An analogy with the visual arts may illuminate the relationship between negative capability and positive capabilities. It also explains why it is that the overwhelmingly ‘positive’ and practical notion of ‘capability’ is amplified rather than contradicted by being described as ‘negative’, and why developing one’s negative capability involves ‘not a negation of self but an affirmation of self’ (Hutter, 1982: 305).

In the visual arts potent use is made of the idea of ‘negative space’. In looking at an object or a scene, our tendency is to notice and to observe its features – whether it be a vase, a tree or a chair. However, every object – or ‘positive form’ – also has ‘negative spaces’ around or within it. An artist’s ‘awareness of shapes and relationships’ can be enhanced by focussing on these negative spaces, ‘switching attention from the meaningful objects to the shapes they leave empty against the background’ (Gombrich, 1977: 258): ‘In teaching people to draw, one of the most difficult things is to convince them that objects are not all-important – that the spaces around the objects are of *at least* equal importance.’ (Edwards, 1987: 152; her italics.) It is indeed ‘counter-intuitive’ to think that one’s ability to draw an object can be improved by focusing on the spaces around it (Edwards, 2000: 123).

Many visual ‘puns’ or illusions depend on this relationship between positive and negative images. For instance, in a well-known brainteaser (reproduced in figure 1), a focus on the ‘object’, reveals the silhouette of a vase. When one concentrates on the *negative image*, however, it ‘turns into’ two faces in profile looking at each other. In this case, either image could, in truth, be negative or positive, depending on which image the eye selects. No value judgement is implied; it is not *better* to focus on the ‘empty shape’ than on the ‘meaningful object’: ‘The concept most difficult to grasp, perhaps, is that the *spaces unify the objects*. Or better said, the spaces and the objects link together to form a unified image.’ (Edwards, 1987: 152; her italics.)

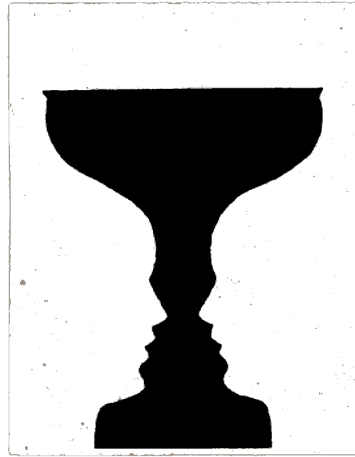


Fig. 1: Positive form/negative space [FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In a similar way, it may be counter-intuitive to argue that it is the ‘negative’ attributes of leadership – not knowing or not acting, for instance – which unify the leader’s positive capabilities of knowing and acting. Or, to echo Edwards’ phrase, a leader’s negative capability and positive capabilities link together to form a unified whole.

Here too, one is not *better* than the other. Nor are they *opposites*: the opposite of one is incompetence, and of the other, dispersal. ‘Dispersal’ – into *explanations, physical activity* or *emotions* – is Needleman’s term (1990: 167) for the way we behave when our negative capability is not adequate to the demands of a situation. Unable to hold the tensions and anxieties and to live with problems that may be intractable, accepting paradoxes and dilemmas for what they are – unable, that is, to gather or conserve our energies – we ‘disperse’ them. For example, we rush too quickly into action, or without adequate consideration we break problems down into apparently manageable ‘bits’ in an effort to make them *seem* manageable after all. (See French, 2001).

Most importantly, the unified whole created by the linking of positive and negative is not solid: negative capability brings to it a holey-ness. Not knowing and not acting leave spaces that are essential for establishing a creative capacity. A cup made of clay, paint and glaze (the positive capabilities) designed to form an appropriate space (negative capability) has the capacity to contain liquid. In a similar sense, an appropriate combination of positive capabilities and negative capability can create a capacity to work at the edge between certainty and uncertainty, containing the thoughts and feelings of the individual in a manner that allows the pressures towards dispersal to be resisted. In this place, new thoughts may be received or conceived and then worked with or allowed to ‘take’, to settle and mature. This work is far from ‘easy’, however, because it can bring the individual in his or her role face to face with the very uncertainties, mysteries and doubts that we prefer to avoid: ‘When those mysteries begin to touch a man directly, when they become, as Keats would call them a “burden,” the mind grows increasingly less capable of ignoring them.’ (Ryan, 1976: 157).

The establishing of a creative capacity might be seen as stepping beyond the

‘formulation and articulation of a vision’, in order to open up potential spaces for new visions. It amounts to taking up illusory spaces or ‘intermediate’ positions between what *is* and what *could be*. The ‘*entrepreneur*’, for example, exploits creative gaps by ‘taking up’ the ‘space between’ – *entre*, between; *prendre*, to take. In psychoanalytic terms, this is the intermediate space identified by Winnicott as the space of *play* (Winnicott, 1971).

The capacity to work at the edge, in the intermediate space, enables a leader to move back and forth between a state of knowing and one of not-knowing, *to continue to think* in the ‘limbo’ state between certainty and uncertainty, or to seek out and cross the edge into the unknown, in order to return with new insight. In Martin Buber’s phrase, this is the capacity to stand on ‘the narrow ridge’, which Friedman describes as the central metaphor of Buber’s life. On this ‘narrow rocky ridge’, leaders can no longer rely on ‘the sureness of expressible knowledge’. Instead, they face the possibility of ‘meeting what remains undisclosed’ (Buber, in Friedman, 1993: 10). One thing is certain, and it may be this that makes the margin both a frightening and an exciting place to be: by standing on the edge of their knowledge and facing their ignorance, leaders always face the prospect of *learning something new*.

However, the actual *experience* of ‘being at an edge’ is seldom considered in all its emotional ambiguity. Paul Tillich, for example, described the edge (‘boundary’) as the best place for acquiring knowledge. However, he was in no doubt about the inherent ambiguities and tensions of living and working in that space:

Since thinking presupposes receptiveness to new possibilities, this position [at the boundary between alternative possibilities for existence] is fruitful for thought; but it is difficult and dangerous in life, which again and again demands decisions and thus the exclusion of alternatives. This disposition and its tension have determined both my destiny and my work. (Tillich, 1967: 13.)

Everyday language suggests that the edge is powerfully present as a metaphor in organizations. It can represent many things, such as danger (‘*dead-lines*’), exclusion (the ‘glass ceiling’), power relations (‘toe the line’), or success in relation to others (‘leading’, ‘cutting’ or ‘competitive’ edge). For Buber and Tillich, by contrast, living on the edge was a way of life, a way of being. It seems they *had to* seek out the boundary, in order to engage with the world with integrity.

Something similar is true of leaders. In some way they too *need* to live on the edge. Why else would someone put themselves through such an experience? Those theories that emphasise a leader’s ‘character traits’ or ‘style’ may have identified the ‘internal’ component, as it were, of leadership: unsettling though the experience may be, some people *enjoy* getting to the edge of uncertainty and discovering new insights as a result. In a similar way, some people enjoy rock-climbing: it gives them a sense of being fulfilled rather than ‘edgy’, and of pushing the limits, alive through being in danger. Contingency theory, on the other hand, recognises that in certain cases the circumstances themselves can create the leader. Certain conditions may demand people with the ability to work in this intermediate space where new thoughts may arise, people who have, to use Tillich’s word, the necessary ‘disposition’ to cope, even if only for a moment, with the tension inherent in not knowing and not acting.

## Creative thought at the edge

It is unfashionable to talk about ‘the search for truth’. The post-modern deconstruction of ‘grand narratives’ problematised all essentialist notions of ‘Truth’: ‘men are...’, ‘women are...’, ‘organizations are...’, ‘leadership is...’. In one sense, however, ‘truth’ has always been an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie, 1955/6). What may have been lost, in the deconstruction of oppressive or controlling notions of ‘truth’, is the creativity and energy that can be mobilised by the search, the broadening of imagination that can occur when one is somehow in touch with or touched by the truth of *this* moment and context, limited and provisional though it inevitably is.

‘Negative capability’ then would be a capacity to give free rein to the imagination. The disparate, absurd, inchoate, illogical, impossible would not represent stop-signs. It can be taken for granted that equipped with this gift any person might attain hitherto unrecorded – because personally unique – imaginings. All that prevents that from happening is the restraint ordinarily imposed in the face of ‘uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’ and a need for the security of ‘fact and reason’; it is these that balk the flight of fancy. They induce sobriety, make for order, propriety, punctuality, accomplishment, but – this is what counts – they block the way to truth.’ (Leavy, 1970: 177.)

‘Imagination’ and ‘the way to truth’, these are the very stuff of the revival inspired in and by the Romantic movement: ‘To live by the Imagination is Blake’s secret of life’ (Raine, 1991: 5); ‘I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination – what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not.’ (Keats, 1970: 36-7; letter to Benjamin Bailey 22 Nov, 1817.) From his work as a psychoanalyst, Victor Rosen identified some common factors underlying ‘disturbances in the capacity for imagination’ in a variety of clinical conditions. They read like the conditions which lead to stagnation in organizations:

a relative inability to relinquish images and concepts once formed, an inability to retain the elements of a decomposed image through a series of transformations, a disturbance of the synthetic function, an incapacity for ‘controlled illusion’ or ‘make believe’ with difficulties in coping with perceptual ambiguity. (Rosen, 1960: 230.)

The great ability and contribution of the leader is to represent or embody a thought, whether for good, as with Nelson Mandela or Ghandi, or for evil, as with Hitler or Pol Pot. Some leaders also have the ability to create, discover or develop the thought itself, but this is in no way a prerequisite for effective leadership. Indeed, the modern idealisation of originality – in the arts and sciences, in academia and in business – may in some ways be a societal side-track. To have claimed originality in many other societies would have been to exclude oneself voluntarily from being taken seriously (Illich, 1993: 8-13; Lewis, 1967: 210-11), or even to endanger oneself: ‘[they] were guilty of “innovation”, a term virtually synonymous with heresy’ (Giakalis, 1994: 22). In an organizational context, it does not matter whether leaders conceive a thought themselves, or copy, borrow, buy or steal it – although there may be an organizational equivalent of Eliot’s contention that ‘immature poets imitate; mature poets steal’



(Eliot, 1920: 125).

However, this notion of ‘thoughts’ depends on a definition that is wider than that of thought as a rational product of the human capacity for thinking, as expressed in language. Thoughts can be unconsciously held as well as consciously expressed. A dream is a ‘thought’ – whether a dream at night-time, a daydream or a vision: “I have a dream!”. ‘Thoughts’ can also transcend the individual as manifestations of ‘social’ thinking, as myths, for example, or ‘social’ dreams (Lawrence, 1998), or as the kind of group, organizational or social dynamics that Bion called ‘assumptions’ (Bion, 1961).

In organizational contexts, a vision statement is a thought, as is an organization’s culture, which is a collective thought, expressed in ways of behaving, relating – and thinking. Willmott’s penetrating analysis highlights the way in which the idea of organizational culture can be used as a ‘thought’ which will infiltrate and control from within the thinking of employees ‘by managing what they think and feel, not just how they behave’ (1993: 516). A product too is a thought ‘produced’; an organizational structure is the ‘realisation’ of a thought; a strategic plan is an evolved or ‘emergent’ thought; the physical lay-out of offices or the shop floor, the hierarchy of roles and responsibilities, the headings on note paper and the signs at the entrance: all of these are thoughts made manifest. One might even say that the leader too and the organization as a whole exist as thoughts in the minds of stakeholders. It is for this reason that we are sometimes unable to understand the remains of ancient civilisations: what we dig up are the physical representations of embodied thoughts, and we have lost the thought.

In this sense, organizations are thoughts made visible. They can also become a ‘forum’ (‘market place’ and ‘political arena’) for thoughts that are ‘in the air’, waiting to be found. Bion has argued that ‘thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts’ (1984b: 111). If this is true, then the way to find new thoughts in organizations is continually to develop new mechanisms for thinking that are adequate for discovering the as yet un-thought thoughts of the moment. The reason that teams, focus groups, departments, roles, ‘away days’, partnerships – and leaders – *can* achieve such remarkable things is that at times they provide precisely the ‘mechanism for thinking’ that is necessary to crystallise a new idea. Such moments may arise when leaders and followers know that they do not know, so that the risk of thinking new thoughts – or the urgent need to do so – is shared by all. Within a context of sufficient self-belief, the shared and acknowledged ignorance of all is sufficient basis for the shared endeavour. The combination of leaders’ and followers’ positive capabilities and negative capability may then create a capacity, a space, to contain anxiety well enough for new thoughts to arise.

However, if the necessary negative capability is lacking, as a consequence of past failures but also perhaps of past success, these same groupings or mechanisms may not only become unproductive but might also have an entirely deadening effect on thinking. A new thought would be experienced as a dangerous thought that could not be contained. What on the surface might appear to be functioning successfully, in practice becomes what Bion called a ‘basic assumption group’, whose ‘complex forms of interpersonal defences’ prevent them from working ‘in an objective and consistent

manner' (Hopper, 1997: 443; Bion, 1961).

In his paper on leadership in the prison service, Abbott emphasises the benefits to be gained from the Prison Governor walking the landings of the prison and meeting people 'where they actually work'. In effect, he outlines the negative capability of the Prison Governor and its potential for creating a space where 'old thoughts' can become 'new thoughts'. Although his description does include some active verbs – for example, 'the opportunity *to do* casual management casework' (italics added) – the overwhelming sense is of passivity and receptivity leading to transformation. He talks, for example, of 'the opportunity *to be seen*', 'the opportunity *to listen*', and 'the opportunity *to observe*'. Most explicitly, he writes: 'Above all else it [walking the landings] provides the opportunity *to feel* the institution and having felt it *to work with and on the feeling*. The task is *to absorb* the emotion and thus allow people to take up their role free of negative emotion, which detracts from their performance. Often *just being there* will remove the emotion. Often *just listening* to the anger will move it.' (Abbott, 2000: 4; all italics added.)

As Armstrong has written: 'it seems to me that emotion in organisations, including all the strategies of defense, denial, projection, withdrawal, yield intelligence. And it is because they yield intelligence in this way that they may be worth our and our clients' close attention.' (Armstrong, 2000: 3.) Abbott's description makes it clear that the value to be gained from exercising negative capability in this way – that is, from paying close attention to emotions in the organization – is not only to be measured in terms of practical outcomes. There may indeed be immediate work to be done and important information to be gained that will translate into new strategies or practices. However, 'just being there' and 'just listening' – in other words, just offering containment – may be enough. This is a much broader view of the importance of working with emotion than that generally portrayed, for example, in the literature on 'emotional intelligence' in relation to leadership, which tends to take a more cognitive-behavioural approach and to talk in terms of the 'repair' of negative emotions and of 'using' emotions 'in functional ways' (George, 2000: 1036).

### **The problem of status**

The hypothesis about leadership that this article explores is based on the view that the conditions of organizational life demand the capacity to seek out and work at the edge of uncertainty in a new way. Because of their role, leaders today are powerfully caught between competing societal forces. On the one hand, there are the pressures imposed by the principle of *performativity*, which dominates our culture at all levels and 'serves to subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency' (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17). On the other hand, we are faced by the gap left by the disappearance of the certainties on which a personal and a work identity could once be constructed, as a result of the loss of institutional containment – from family to community, from workplace to church: 'These days patterns and configurations are no longer "given", let alone "self-evident"; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another's commandments' (Baumann, 2000: 7.)

On top of these pressures, leaders face one central imperative: in order to meet the demands of key stakeholders, especially shareholders, management boards and

politicians, they must ensure that their organizations achieve increasing wealth through competitive advantage. Indeed, changing political and economic pressures mean that what might once have been demanded primarily of business enterprises is now required too of public sector and even voluntary organizations. Although the language used in the different sectors varies, the impulse and the pressures are similar. As a result, it seems inevitable that capacities such as negative capability, which are intrinsically un-measurable, will tend to atrophy by being excluded from dominant organizational discourses.

Among the discourses competing for space and legitimacy in organizations, the active and the technical dominate over the passive and the humane. Thus, leaders or theorists may argue strongly the case for ‘putting people first’, or for raising the status of training and development, introducing teamwork and encouraging a culture of openness, collaboration and involvement. Again and again, however, when the pressure is on, the ‘default’ position proves to be: control. Where performativity rules – that is, ‘efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio’ (Lyotard, 1984: 88) – ‘league tables’ come to measure the relative success even of schools and universities, of hospitals and health authorities, and of police forces and local authorities.

In such an environment, how is one to attribute value to low status aspects of behaviours such as waiting, patience, passivity, observing, illusion, imagination, detachment, disinterest, desire, trust, withdrawing, tempering, adapting, indifference, humility, copying? For example, at a time when leaders are encouraged to ‘communicate, communicate, communicate’, it may be hard to hear that they should also ‘ignore, ignore, ignore’. Similarly, ‘teamworking’ may appear to be given high status, but the ‘rules’ of dialogue, on which effective teamwork may depend, do not command the same automatic respect: ‘slow down’, ‘hold up assumptions for scrutiny’, ‘listen intently’ to others and to the ‘language’ of one’s own feelings. (Isaacs, 1993; Senge, 1990.) In a particular context, however, any one of these low status behaviours might trigger a combination of positive capabilities and negative capability in a way that facilitates the space – or capacity (French, 1999) – for a creative breakthrough. It is the breakthrough that will be recognised and rewarded.

Over half a century ago, Chester Barnard, President of the Rockefeller Foundation and previously President of the New Jersey Telephone Company, clearly reflected the low status of such language, when he wrote:

many things a leader tells others to do were suggested to him by the very people he leads... this sometimes gives the impression that he is a rather stupid fellow... In a measure this is correct. He has to be stupid enough to listen a great deal, he certainly must arbitrate to maintain order, and he has at times to be a mere centre of communication. (1948: 93.)

Not only does the language of negative capability have low status, the experiences it describes may in themselves be difficult and also lack the immediate appeal that attaches to the skills and competences of management and leadership. The *capacity for waiting*, for example, is central to creative activity, and yet, ‘Waiting can be the most intense and poignant of all human experiences – the experience which, above all others, strips us of affectation and self-deception and reveals to us the reality of our

needs, our values and ourselves.’ (Vanstone, 1982: 83.)

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have drawn attention to the relationship between the somewhat elusive notion of negative capability and the more accessible positive capabilities of leadership. In practice the two are dynamically related. Creative leadership is called into being at the point where negative and positive meet, or the space created by the tension between them. The leadership capacity created by the appropriate combination of positive capabilities and negative capability allows a transformation to occur from the unknown into the realm of the knowable. Once this transformation, or act of creation, has occurred the thought can be worked on and developed by the full range of positive capabilities, ‘enlarging inhibited reason in the realm of praxis’ (Rose, 1999: 32). In a situation where negative capability is well embedded in an organization, particularly in leadership at all levels – that is, not only in the person of ‘the leader’, but as an intrinsic function of *all* roles and a characteristic of systems and procedures at all levels – a climate can be created which stimulates learning and the development of new or expanded positive capabilities.

If the relationship between the negative capability and positive capabilities of leadership is, therefore, dynamic and fluctuating, then achieving the ‘right combination’ is bound always to be a provisional achievement, demanding constant, ongoing work and attention. Negative capability may indeed be a ‘gift’, as Kathleen Raine suggests (Raine, 1986: 322), a ‘native virtue of [the] mind’ (Caldwell, 1972: 7), or ‘an intrapsychic inheritance’ (Leavy, 1970: 187). However, like the capacity for language, it is a gift that is received by all, if unevenly, as an aspect of our humanity, and then developed equally unevenly over the course of our lives. If negative capability can be taken sufficiently seriously as a leadership capacity, then thought can be given to ways in which it can be developed both in leaders and in systems, in order to stimulate creative leadership throughout organizations.

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