FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP: RE-FRAMING NARRATIVES TO NAVIGATE CONFLICT AND DIFFERENCE

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The current paper explores the facilitative role of leadership in the context of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. It highlights the importance of skilled facilitation in navigating complex, multi-stakeholder environments characterized by divergent perspectives and interests. The authors suggest that conflicts can sometimes be unlocked by re-framing the kind of narrative that parties and peace-makers jointly inhabit; in these cases, peace leadership works at two levels—to enable a narrative re-framing and to facilitate appropriate peace-making within-the-frame. When successful, these two rather different leadership functions enable constructive dialogue toward shared understanding and commitment. The paper develops the notion of hybrid configurations of leadership, illustrating how various leadership styles and processes coexist and interact. It suggests how peace-leaders may use narrative re-framing to help create more inclusive narratives that transcend divisions and locate conflicts in a wider context. The conclusion calls for further research into the hybrid styles of leadership appropriate to varied types of facilitation and suggests practical implications for leadership research, development, and practice, particularly in sustaining adaptive spaces for open communication and develop mutual respect in contexts characterized by conflict and difference.

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Introduction

The emerging literature on peace leadership highlights both the traits and characteristics of individual peace *leaders* as well as the broader dynamics of peace *leadership* as a social process (McIntyre Miller, 2016). Peace leadership is hence defined as "the intersection of individual and collective capacity to challenge issues of violence and aggression and build positive, inclusive social systems and structures" (McIntyre Miller, 2016, p. 223).

Such concerns mirror wider trends within the field of leadership studies and the interdependencies between human and social capital in the development of individual and collective leadership capacity (Day, 2000). Such conceptualizations fit well with Drath et al.'s (20088) call for a revised ontology of leadership—from leaders, followers, and goals to direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC)—and more recent work on collective (Ospina et al., 2020) and systems (Ghate et al., 2013; Senge et al., 2015) leadership. Peace leadership, it seems, is fundamentally collaborative and compassionate; concerned with bridging, bonding and boundary spanning (Long et al., 2013) to bring together divided individuals, groups and/or communities in pursuit of the "common good" (Crosby & Bryson, 2005).

In the current paper, it is argued that the challenges of peace leadership are similar to those in other areas where multiple stakeholders must work together to tackle "wicked" problems (Grint, 2010; Head & Alford, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Such challenges are characterized by a plurality of perspectives, agendas, and interests that can only be effectively addressed through constructive dialogue (Reitz, 2015), but such dialogue may be almost inconceivable in the context of histories of conflict and trauma. There are many aspects to "constructive dialogue," including (*inter alia*), processes that enable but contain emotional and interpersonal dynamics of relationships, the quality of listening, the ability to separate one's interests (what one hopes to achieve) from the position one takes in relation to others, the capacity to represent these interests in a way that is not simply a reaction to the positioning of others, and so on. Where this is well facilitated, the various partners can share and listen to one another's experiences and aspirations, develop shared understanding, acknowledge each other's values, aims and outcomes, and craft new narratives that transcend divisions.

A crucial condition is the capacity of each of the parties to reimagine their possible futures: this imagining stems from the kind of story they believe themselves to be part of. Often, formal conflict resolution processes follow a typical "unfreeze-change-refreeze" narrative (mirroring Lewin's (1947) change as three steps process), where parties are invited to join a climactic event in which—they hope—justice will be done, and a new dispensation will emerge. Such a climactic event may be a formal arbitration, mediation or treaty negotiation, or a more extended series of shuttle diplomacy, but the narrative construct is the same: it centers the focus of all parties (especially of the peace-makers) in a rising tension toward this climax. It takes great skill and persistence, and considerable social capital, to bring parties together in such an event, careful construction and administration of the choreography of all the parties and several distinct stages (Linstead et al., 2009). There are many opportunities for leadership along the way, as well as during more obvious face-to-face encounters, as described in the next section. Desired outcomes might range from (transactional) resolution of contested interests to a more (transformational) reconciliation among previously estranged or opposed parties.

Hybrid Configurations of Leadership

Drawing on our experiences of researching and participating in complex, multi-stakeholder partnerships we suggest that skilled facilitation is an important, yet under-appreciated, part of the leadership landscape. Such activity can play a central role in securing DAC among diverse partners yet does not fit the leader-follower dynamic typically associated with leadership.

Building on his extensive theory and research on distributed leadership in schools, Gronn (2009, 2011) introduced the notion of "hybrid configurations of leadership" to both illustrate the combination of leadership styles/processes that occur concurrently within any particular situation, as well as encouraging a shift from normative prescriptions of how leadership *should* be done to nuanced analysis of how leadership is *actually* accomplished in practice.

Such a perspective demonstrates both the extent to which existing power dynamics may mitigate against the widespread distribution of leadership (e.g., Chreim, 2015; Gronn, 2015) as well as identifying the important role played by informal leaders and intermediaries with limited formal power/influence (Bolden & Petrov, 2014). The simplistic distinction between "leaders" and "followers" can blind us to the complexities and nuances of interpersonal relationships and the ways in which power and influence can be exerted outside formal lines of management and authority (Collinson, 2006). It also neglects the inherently multi-level nature of leadership (Kuipers & Murphy, 2023) and the nested systems within which leadership, and followership, occur, where no one is ever just a "leader" and "followers" are active contributors to the leadership process.

In situations where "peace leadership" is required, deeply held social identities and beliefs mitigate against the ability of any single individual being regarded as a credible leader between opposing factions. As Haslam et al. (2020) suggested, no matter what skills, knowledge, expertise, and/or qualifications an individual possesses they will only be perceived as a "leader," and able to exert social influence over others, to the degree to which they are perceived as "one of us" and "doing it for us." A social identity approach reminds us that the legitimacy, or not, of a "leader" is always in the eye of the beholder (followers). In order to bring about change within communities and societies comprising divergent interests and agendas, leaders need to act as "entrepreneurs of identity" (Haslam et al.)—actively promoting narratives that connect rather than divide; building bridges rather than walls.

A Narrative Perspective on Facilitation and Leadership

The discussion so far has focused on the processes of peace-making in general terms, assuming that the categories "conflict" and "peace" are universal and objective. But almost any situation can be construed as conflictual or peaceful—maybe both at the same time; and even where all the parties involved recognize the situation as conflictual, this may be weighted differently (i.e., differing levels of significance) and associated with different meanings (e.g., seen as part of a long-standing multi-generational matter or a transactional dispute that can be negotiated and resolved in a relatively short time).

By way of illustration, while writing this article one of the authors watched a television interview between the BBC journalist Laura Kuenssberg and the Russian ambassador to the United Kingdom, Andrei Kelin, in which he "accused the UK of 'waging war' on Russia by supporting the country [Ukraine] with weapons and resources" (Kuenssberg, 2024). Kelin went on to suggest that life is continuing as "normal" within Russia and, when pressed on his country's reliance on arms and support from "pariah states like North Korea and Iran" he stated "For us, it's normal people, we have been friends, and we have a lot of common interests with North Korea and Iran … Anything bad—we do not see it" (Kuenssberg). In situations with such wide variations in the perceived nature, severity, and solution to "conflict," engaging people in meaningful debate that might lead to a constructive resolution almost inevitably requires the involvement of skilled intermediaries, capable of mediating and moderating between competing interests and carving out a shared narrative which each party can relate to (for more on this in relation to the war in Ukraine see Grint, 2022).

While much work focuses on *how* peacemakers might intervene in particular situations and *what* skills/attributes they might require in order to do so, here the focus is on the shared meanings they help facilitate. Rather than focusing on *roles*, an alternative might be the narratives in which people become "*characters*" within particular storylines. The narrative turn allows for an examination of facilitative leadership in three novel ways: (1) changing the elements of the stories that people believe themselves to be enacting; (2) changing the kind of story; and (3) re-framing the role of peace-leadership.

CHANGING THE ELEMENTS OF THE STORY

From the first perspective, facilitation is seen as a means for enabling groups with differing perspectives or agendas to construct and share stories of who they are, what they value and what they hope to achieve.

Cobb and Rifkin (1991) suggested that there are two important aspects associated with the construction of such narratives. Firstly, all coherent stories consist of a *plot*, *characters*, and *themes*, and as suggested earlier, the language of peace-making often follows this structure. Secondly, it should be recognized that stories are *interdependent*, such that construction of one account (e.g., that of "victim") is dependent on the existence of other accounts (e.g., that of "offender"). Where one story (or a key aspect of the plot, characters, and/or themes) is changed—such as when someone characterized as "beastly" is revealed to have some "beauty" about them—it has a cumulative effect on the coherence of existing narratives which may have to be rewritten accordingly.

The authorial stance of the story is important in terms of which perspective is given precedence and is, hence, a key mechanism through which dominance and oppression are sustained over time (Linstead et al., 2009). In such contexts, facilitation has an important part to play in opening up and listening to narratives that tend to be marginalized or silenced, as well as creating and sustaining spaces for the weaving together of narratives and/or co-constructing new stories. The role of facilitative leadership is hence not about imposing a vision, making decisions, and/or determining tasks/goals but to enable these to emerge through open interaction between various stakeholders/parties.

SHIFTING STORYLINES

From the second perspective, it is possible to consider how facilitators can approach the task of peace-making as changing the kind of story that parties believe themselves to be in. Approaching this as a design challenge, it is suggested that "changing the story" is different from "negotiating a settlement," in that it has the potential to be generative in its own right, such that independent mediation and arbitration may no longer be required.

Many stories are presented in a rather linear manner, focusing on the perspective/experiences of a lead character (or small group of characters) as they face a particular issue/challenge. The "hero's journey" is one such narrative, which commonly underpins leader-centric accounts of leadership (Allison & Cecilione, 2016). The narrative structure of such accounts (as outlined above) typically involves a transition toward a rising climax followed by denouement characteristic of action movies and rom-coms. The story structure is often referred to as "Freytag's pyramid" and includes five elements—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action (denouement), and resolution—as outlined by the novelist Gustav Freytag in the 19th Century (see Glatch, 2024). It gives a central position to a few key actors and events and people—especially the peace-leaders, mediators, adjudicators, and so forth. In such stories, other than the "plot twist," there are limited opportunities for engaging with competing narratives and little incentive to consider anything other than the perspective of the main protagonist(s). Often other important actors are pushed to the background, which can be critical where these are powerful constituencies whose acceptance of the outcomes might be in doubt. This is a key weakness of a "Freytag's Pyramid" storyline: it foregrounds the more obvious and linear plot, characters, and themes, but marginalizes many people and perhaps misrepresents their own experience of what they are caught up with.

Through skilled facilitation, however, it may be possible to reframe the genre toward a more complex narrative, consisting of multiple interweaving storylines, such as the "soap opera." Such framing draws attention to the simultaneous development of multiple plot-lines, the impact of wider social context on how the story unfolds over time, and the "never-endingness" of life in organizations and communities (Gosling, 2008; Linstead et al., 2009).

NARRATIVE REFRAMING

Taking narrative reframing as the core method for peace-making, we focus on leadership and facilitation of that method. We thus develop a revised concept of facilitative leadership, relying as much on process as on the facilitators themselves.

Such a perspective calls for a more collaborative approach to leadership where facilitators support the actors to explore plot and character developments; to develop interconnections between multiple plot-lines; to recognize and enable the significance of gossip, speculation, and anticipation about what might happen next; to acknowledge the positioning of narratives as part of a much longer storyline; and

to revisit past storylines to offer a sense of continuity alongside change (Linstead et al., 2009; Murphy & Gosling, 2022). Alongside such activities, it may be possible to introduce new characters and more complex themes—although this often involves an "audience" of onlookers who may prefer a simpler good-versus-evil storyline. Once again, we see that enabling the conditions for narrative reframing requires facilitative leadership in many disparate ways. While a soap opera framing enables a wider, more inclusive, emergent and on-going approach to peace-making, particularly well suited to the complex and ambiguous nature of community-level conflicts, other narrative forms may be appropriate in other settings. For example, a tragic narrative gives expression to the inevitability of conflict arising from moral shortcomings and bad luck, where peace-making is more about acceptance than resolution. Perhaps, apocalyptic narratives will emerge as a particularly relevant form in the midst of collapsing eco-systems, social institutions, and economies. Here, the focus is often on how a small group can retain valued morals and behaviors in the face of overwhelming forces (e.g., Gosling, 2017).

Conclusion

The narrative approach outlined in the current paper suggests a far richer and more nuanced appreciation of the role of facilitation in leadership than is implied within traditional framings of leadership skills and competencies (see Bolden & Gosling, 2006). To this extent, the current argument resonates with other work that calls for a more inclusive and engaged approach in which leaders are not necessarily those individuals with the most power or authority, but rather people who contribute as "stewards" (Senge, 1990), "coaches" (Goleman, 2000), "hosts" (Wheatley & Frieze, 2010), and a wide array of other roles and identities.

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2010) noted a multitude of "boundary spanning leadership" roles—such as gatekeeper, connector, mediator, ambassador, narrator, and inventor—many of which have little to do with formal authority or position within the hierarchy. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) outlined the significance of *enabling* leadership that facilitates connecting, brokering, and conflict management within the "adaptive spaces" between *operational* leadership (within formal organizational structures/processes) and *entrepreneurial* leadership (within groups and communities where new ideas and initiatives are generated). Stanberry et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of the roles of convener, connector, and chair within climate change partnerships. Finally, Khalil and Hartley (2024) demonstrated the need for "political astuteness"—defined as "deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to create sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes" (Hartley et al., 2015, p. 22)—when attempting to foster peace within violently divided societies.

Together these, and associated studies/frameworks, provide a basis from which it may be possible to begin (re)mapping the nature and importance of facilitation as key feature of the leadership landscape. Such approaches challenge the view of leadership as the imposition of a leader's vision, goals, and/or sensemaking to one that facilitates open, honest, and constructive communication between people with divergent interests, identities, and/or experiences (Fryer, 2012). As such, facilitative leadership is something to which many people contribute, which is focused on the processes of dialogue and collective sensemaking through which new, more encompassing, narratives may emerge. In the face of the fear, anger, and despair associated with entrenched conflict and/or apparently insurmountable challenges facilitative leadership is one of the main ways through which it may be possible to foster a sense of hope for a better future (Jaser & Tourish, 2024).

In scoping out an agenda for future research, it is advised to study the role of facilitation within leadership and the ways in which it helps enable the (co)creation of new narratives that transcend traditional boundaries and differences. For leadership development, it is suggested to promote collective and collaborative facilitation alongside individual skills/competencies, focusing on what it takes to create and sustain adaptive spaces (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017) in which people

with diverging interests can communicate openly in the pursuit of mutual respect and shared understanding. And, for leadership practice, it is recommended to recruit skilled facilitators who can act as independent intermediaries between opposing factions. Such issues are of relevance not only to "peace leadership," but anywhere that competing interests, understandings, identities, and/or agendas may come together… which is just about everywhere!

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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