

*The Poetics of Leadership International Conference* - Crossfields Institute, UK and IFLAS, University of Cumbria, 7-8 September, Lake District, UK.

## **Negative Capability and Conflicting Narratives in Leadership Development**

Charlotte von Bülow  
Crossfields Institute  
Stroud, UK

Peter Simpson  
Bristol Business School  
University of the West of England

### Author biographies:

Dr Charlotte von Bülow is Senior Lecture in Leadership at Bristol Business School and founder and Director of the Crossfields Institute Group, an awarding organisation, HEI and research institute for social innovation established in 2007. Crossfields Institute focuses on education, professional practice and leadership that facilitate transformative ways of life and working practices in a complex world. Charlotte has held a range of senior leadership positions and her global consulting practice is currently focused on the USA, Scandinavia and the UK. In 2020, she completed her doctorate entitled 'The Practice of Attention in the Workplace'

Dr Peter Simpson is Associate Professor in Organisation Studies at Bristol Business School. He has published widely in international journals on leadership, change management, organisational complexity, group dynamics, and workplace spirituality. He co-authored with Robert French *Attention, Cooperation, Purpose: An Approach to Working in Groups Using Insights from Wilfred Bion* (Karnac, 2014) and co-edited *Worldly Leadership: Alternative Wisdoms for a Complex World* (Palgrave, 2011, with Sharon Turnbull, Peter Case, Gareth Edwards and Doris Schedlitzki).

## **Working with Conflicting Narratives in Leadership Development**

The beauty of stories is that they can capture organisational experiences with such richness of feeling and detail, a reality if you like. However, what does it mean when narratives conflict – what ‘reality’ are we working with?

In this paper, we share some ‘leadership stories’ from our involvement in providing strategic change facilitation and leadership development to an organisation going through transition. These narratives have been obtained from interviews with ‘the leader’ (the chief executive), staff at a range of levels (senior and middle management, administrative, operational), and external stakeholders (investors, donors, supporters). We have also gathered ‘non-personal’ narratives - told by balance sheets and the organisational infrastructure, for example.

The use of stories in organisational inquiry has its origins in two literatures, folklore/anthropology and narrative analysis. In the first (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975), the focus of attention is on stories that take on the quality of a “myth”. One of the characteristics of myths is that they capture the dimensions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, which relates to one of the ‘contradictions’ that we have observed. For example, the myth of the ‘caring leader’ is prominent ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the organisation – and not just amongst staff but also as told by the leader himself. However, others tell different stories, painting this leader as the source of several difficulties. Gabriel (2015) suggests that some leader stories are archetypal, arising from unconscious fantasy, manifesting, variously, as 'a saint... a devil... a devious schemer... and a sacrificial lamb' (p.319). We ask: what are the implications of such contradictions for our approach to leadership development?

Narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Czarniawska, 1998) is concerned with the continual re-creation of our understanding of our place in the world, with the interpretation of communications, paying particular attention to a critique of the coherence and fidelity of the narrative, and with an emphasis on links with values, reasons, decisions and actions. This suggests that the analysis of leader stories might make a particular type of contribution to the facilitation of strategic change. For example, the organisational context is one of uncertainty – both in finding solutions to the problems forcing the organisational transition as well as the process of creating an as yet unknown future (Simpson, 2010). Many of the narratives of organisational leadership that we have heard weave a complex picture of past, present and future in an attempt to make sense of the current situation and envision fresh possibilities.

In this paper we reflect on a very specific aspect of some recent organisational research. In particular, we will look at the phenomenon of ‘caring leadership’ through a reflection on some ‘conflicting narratives’ of leadership and care within a charitable organisation. We do not seek to resolve these conflicts – to somehow explain them away – but rather to explore a less common way of thinking about them. We suggest that there is a tendency to evaluate differing narratives from the perspective of our knowledge or values base. In short, there is a tendency to ‘take sides’ and mobilise an analysis or argument in favour of one or another position. By contrast, our approach is to explore what the practice of Negative Capability might offer in our work as researchers. We also consider what this practice might offer to leaders and other organisational members.

Negative Capability is the capacity to be present without resorting to a body of knowledge for explanation - to practice what Stacey (2012) calls a ‘sensitive awareness’ to all aspects of the

situation that is faced as it is, in all its uncertainty and confusing complexity. Stacey argues that when lacking knowledge, the leader requires wider awareness, which may contribute to practical judgement:

The exercise of practical judgement is highly context related; it is exercised in highly uncertain, unpredictable and unique situations... [It] calls for a wider awareness of the group, organisational and societal patterns within which some issue of importance is being dealt with. This requires a sensitive awareness of more than the focal points in a situation, namely awareness of what is going on at the margins and of what is being taken as the focus. Practical judgement is the experience-based ability to notice more of what is going on and intuit what is most important about a situation. It is the ability to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty as well as the anxiety this generates. (p.108)

In our research writing and practice we are exploring a definition of Negative Capability that is more limited than is typically found in the literature. Whilst often associated with a range of related capabilities, some of which are also found in the quote from Stacey above, we are interested in the value of this more limited understanding. The broader range of what we suggest are associated capabilities include the following:

- the capacity to tolerate anxiety applied to leading change in situations of uncertainty (French, 2001; Grint, 2007).
- the capacity to resist conceptual closure (Chia and Morgan, 1996), remaining, as Keats put it, content with 'half-knowledge'.
- Openness is another prominent theme, both in relation to reality (Cornish, 2011) and as a quality of receptiveness (Simpson *et al*, 2002).
- 'diligent indolence' is added by Saggurthi and Thakur (2016: 185), who define Negative Capability as 'the ability to delight in doubt and revel in uncertainty without feeling compelled to rationalize half-knowledge or to reach for facts or fall back on existing knowledge structures, resisting conceptual closure and in a state of diligent indolence and passive receptivity, move toward a knowing with the power of one's imagination, sensations, and intuition.'

## **Leader Narratives**

**CEO** (40 years service. Narrative focuses on Purpose and Societal Need)

*I don't question our organisational purpose, but languaging it is an issue. We are committed to contributing to the creation of a regenerative economy based in the stewardship of the earth. This is all about love.*

*'Social and Cultural Renewal' – that is our strapline. We need to go beyond sustainability and develop an economy that is regenerative. Take the idea of growth – it is not always appropriate. It's got to be nuanced.*

*We need to discover ways of connecting. Love is central. We do not need to soak stuff up but we need to be part of something bigger... We cannot become insular again.*

*...our wages remain low but we need to look at what a Living Wage means in our context. People now talk more about lifestyle that we used to in the early days but it*

*has to be more than that. Working this out is all part of what it means to learn how to create a regenerative economy: some of the questions don't have easy answers.*

*...our values and purpose require leadership that recognises shared responsibility and final accountability... I'll encourage people to go and exercise this authority that comes from shared responsibility.*

*The uncertainty and not knowing is an empowering tool, because then it leads to intuition and grace. ... I want people to feel that they can fail safely. In all of this, I hope my love comes through...*

**Long-Standing Senior Manager** (40 years' service. Narrative focus on Organisational Issues)

*This organisation asks for commitment and sacrifice - 80 hours a week is not uncommon, and everyone is on a low salaries for the sector and the region.*

*Some of us – and I am one of them – have always been idealistic and dreamy... We knew that “everything is going to be alright” That's all gone now – we live in a more uncertain, anxious world. Young people are smarter about the balance of work and home and don't have the fantasy that my life and career has been built on. They don't imagine that they can have it all.*

*Care drives the place but this is mostly self-driven and I am not sure whether this works any more. There is a pressure that people will rise to the challenge. It's true that no one asks... but this organisation would fail if individuals let the ball drop...*

*We need to take care of each other, but this is difficult stuff, it's really difficult to do it all. We are short of resources but to do what we are all committed to doing, we need continued, detailed, intensified care for people, for the land, for plants, for the children...*

*The truth is that we are not that good at taking care of people. We try hard when situations arise - like financial or health difficulties. People feel cared for then. But we need to be better at acknowledging each other's work, supporting each other.*

*The CEO is good at praising in public but getting regular meetings – having a check-in - is not a strength of his. Even when you try 'managing up' it is difficult to get to meet with him.*

**Store Manager** (Early 30s, young family, recently promoted. Narrative focus on Personal Need)

*I have lived here 5 years here and have a real sense of ownership and a commitment to the organisation. We are involved as a family – my wife works in the office. There is an assumption that when you come to work here that you will make it your life.*

*A lifestyle rather than just a job. A major downside – particularly as far as my wife is concerned – is that work really infiltrates home. I am at their beck and call 24/7 on top of spending a lot of time at work. I am guilty if I take time off. For example, whenever I am on vacation I am called every day. The word sacrifice is used a lot, and that's probably right.*

*It's true that it is like a family – if there is a need, help comes. For example, whilst the salaries are not great, there is a good benefits package to care for employees. But on the other hand, there is a real feeling of not being heard, that your voice doesn't matter. It's such a big organisation, it's easy to feel unacknowledged.*

*Overall, I would say that for a lot of people the problems have been outweighing the benefits for a long time. Everyone is so busy that there is no time to care.*

**New Business Manager** (Early 30s, young family, recent MBA. Narrative focus on Theory)

*There has been a big shift in ways of working here. For the first 35 years, farming staff lived on the farm: I think of this as a model of Work – Life Integration. Now things are very different as people tend to live and have their social life elsewhere: they want Work – Life Balance*

*The Board has a similar perspective to visitors to the community: they have a helicopter / balcony view and want to share how 'amazing this place is'. People are moved by this place when they come here and this is down to the core people.*

*I have some serious questions about what we think we are trying to do here. The Board offers an opportunity for a bigger scale of impact but are we ready? They have incredible connections and talent but are we in a position to take advantage of this? Are we a community, a small one at that, or are we wanting to change the world?*

*Too many people feel underpaid and overworked and there is an expectation that we will do it for love of the work. I don't disagree that love of the work is important, that we should care, but it should only be a part of it, not all.*

*This is a risk in relation to the retention of staff. Millennials are not prepared to sacrifice in the way that is expected. The question is asked: what am I sacrificing for? One of the herdsmen commented that we're not even the best dairy in the county.*

*I am not sure how many people understand that this is a structural issue. The CEO's strength is that he has an amazing network of funders. His weakness is that he is not a task master. The COO, on the other hand, is a better task master but the resistance to hierarchy and authoritative leadership in this place is highly problematic.*

## The Experience of Leadership in Uncertainty

Setting the scene:

- Strategic change in the organisation
- CEO's narrative: "this organisation is about cultural and social renewal"
- Divergent perspectives of senior managers, staff & major sponsors
- Identifying complexity in the creative tensions in the organisation



## Tensions: creative or constraining?

Idealistic priorities	vs.	Relevance to modern (business) world
Age, Wisdom, Experience	vs.	Transition to next generation
Growth (emphasize revenue)	vs.	Consolidation (emphasize expenditure)
External Impact	vs.	Internal Management
Source skill and capacity from within	vs.	New blood, fresh ideas
A living organism is messy	vs.	Competitive business is polished



## Tensions: creative or constraining?

Freedom and autonomy	vs.	Collective discipline and accountability
A local community	vs.	A force to change the world
Attention to people	vs.	Attention to projects
All take responsibility for change	vs.	Change is led from the top
Reinvest business income in the business	vs.	Business income funds non-profits
Emphasis on philanthropy	vs.	Emphasis on revenue generation



## Negative Capability...

Letter to George and Tom Keats, 22 Dec 1817

‘...when a person is capable of  
being  
in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,  
without  
any irritable reaching after fact &  
reason’



## Definitions of Negative Capability

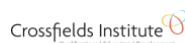
- ▶ ‘the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and remain content with half knowledge’ (Ward, 1963: 161)
- ▶ ‘a capacity to tolerate feeling ignorant or incompetent, and a willingness to wait (and to carry on waiting) until something genuinely meaningful and relevant begins to emerge.’ (Casement 1991: 9)
- ▶ ‘...create a mental and emotional space, in which a new thought may emerge... an intermediate space that enables one to continue to think in difficult situations’ (Simpson, et al., 2002: 1211, 1213)



## Negative Capability...

Letter to George and Tom Keats, 22 Dec 1817

‘...when a person is capable of  
being  
in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,  
without  
any irritable reaching after fact &  
reason’



## Negative Capability: A tentative deconstruction

- ▶ A state of being ([presence in the present](#))
- ▶ Awareness without intentionality - not directed towards an object or outcomes ([being with / beholding](#))
- ▶ Not drawing upon 'positive capabilities' - withholding the desire to know, judge, solve, act ([being without / letting go](#))
- ▶ A capacity that is not demonstrable nor externally verifiable ([an internal negative space](#))
- ▶ Requires a decision and application of will to hold empty that 'space' ([a capability](#))



Crossfields Institute  
Qualifications | Education | Development

## Caring Leadership? Conflicting Organisational Narratives

- ▶ Exploring in our practice how to work with tensions on theme of 'caring leadership'
  - ▶ Being with (uncertainty...)
  - ▶ Being without (leaping to solution or resolution)
- ▶ Are there irresolvable tensions in the complexity of the following Conflicting Narratives?
  - ▶ CEO
  - ▶ Senior Manager 1
  - ▶ Senior Manager 2
  - ▶ Senior Manager 3



Crossfields Institute  
Qualifications | Education | Development

## CEO - Narrative focus on Purpose and Societal Need

- ▶ We are committed to the creation of a regenerative economy... This is all about love.
- ▶ 'Social and Cultural Renewal' is our strapline.
- ▶ We need to discover ways of connecting. Love is central.
- ▶ We need to look at what a Living Wage means... to learn how to create a regenerative economy
- ▶ ...our purpose requires leadership that recognises shared responsibility and final accountability
- ▶ I want people to feel that they can fail safely. In all of this, I hope my love comes through



Crossfields Institute  
Qualifications | Education | Development



## Senior Manager Narrative focus on Organisational Issues

- ▶ This organisation asks for commitment & sacrifice  
- 80 hours a week is not uncommon
- ▶ We knew “everything is going to be alright”... now we live in a more uncertain world.
- ▶ Care drives the place but this is self-driven... organisation would fail if we let the ball drop...
- ▶ Need to take care of each other. We are short of resources to do what we are committed to doing...
- ▶ We are not good at acknowledging each other's work
- ▶ CEO is good at praising in public but... it is difficult to get to meet with him.



## Store Manager: Narrative focus on Personal Need

- ▶ I have a real sense of ownership... There is an assumption that you will make it your life.
- ▶ A lifestyle rather than just a job... work really infiltrates home. I am at their beck and call 24/7
- ▶ It is like a family... The salaries are not great... a good benefits package to care for employees.
- ▶ But there is a real feeling of not being heard... it's easy to feel unacknowledged.
- ▶ Everyone is so busy that there is no time to care.



## Business Manager: Narrative focus on Theory

- ▶ Big shift in ways of working here. First 35 years Work-Life Integration... Now Work-Life Balance
- ▶ The Board have a helicopter/balcony view... how ‘amazing this place is’
- ▶ The Board offers an opportunity but are we ready to take advantage of this?
- ▶ Underpaid and overworked and an expectation that we will do it for love of the work.
- ▶ Retention of staff. Millennials are not prepared to sacrifice
- ▶ Structural issue... resistance to hierarchy and authoritative leadership



## The Potential Contribution of Negative Capability

- ▶ Contribution must be determined in relation to the particular role and context
- ▶ Engaging with ‘wicked’ problems, resisting pressure to resolve the irresolvable
- ▶ Reality-based rather than projection / illusion; acceptance of ‘hard truths’
- ▶ Precursor to toleration of... ambiguity, anxiety, feeling ignorant, need for patience
- ▶ Precursor to quality of... thinking, dialogue, imagination, creativity



## Keats Letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818

‘...sharpening one’s vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression ...We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist — We are now in that state — We feel the ‘burden of the Mystery’...’



## References

- Casement, P. (1991) *Learning from the Patient (Parts I and II)*, New York: Guildford
- Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (2004) *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Chia, R. & Morgan, S. (1996) 'Educating the Philosopher-Manager De-Signing the Times.' *Management Learning*, 27(1): 37-64.
- Cornish, (2011) 'Negative capability and social work: insights from Keats, Bion and business', *Journal of Social Work Practice: Psychotherapeutic Approaches in Health, Welfare and the Community*. 25(2), 135-148
- Czarniawska, B. (1998) *A Narrative Approach in Organization Studies*, London: Sage Publications.
- French, R. (2001) "Negative capability": Managing the confusing uncertainties of change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 14(5): 480–492.
- Grint, K. (2007) Learning to Lead: Can Aristotle Help us Find the Road to Wisdom? *Leadership*, 2(2): 231-46.
- Gabriel, Y. (2015). 'The caring leader – What followers expect of their leaders and why?' *Leadership*, 11(3): 316-334.
- Mitroff, I.I. and Kilmann, R.H. (1975) 'Stories that managers tell: a new tool for organizational problem solving', *Management Review*, 64(7): 18-28.
- Saggurthi, S. & Thakur, M.K. (2015) 'Usefulness Of Uselessness : A Case For Negative Capability in Management' *Academy of Management Learning and Development*, 14 (4) 520-533
- Simpson, P., French, R. and Harvey, C. (2002) Leadership and Negative Capability. *Human Relations*, 55(10), 1209-26.
- Simpson, P. (2010) 'Engaging with the unknowable through narratives of personal experience', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 23(2): 173
- Stacey, R. (2012) *The Tools and Techniques of Leadership and Management: Meeting the challenge of complexity*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ward, A. (1963) *John Keats: The Making of a Poet*. London: Secker and Warburg.