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Bringing Purpose to Life: Reflexive Thoughts and Possibilities

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Abstract

Organisational purpose is an important topic. It comes up regularly in leadership and management conversations. We pay attention to a tendency to consider purpose as something static, abstract and reified. Despite a natural desire to simplify, and referencing Peirce, Stacey and others, we show the complex shifting of meaning. It is relational, emerging within, and between, people. Context, the passing of time and local interpretations are important themes in considering the utility of what we might call purpose.

Here we use a reflective autoethnographic approach to illustrate our ideas, arguing against the separation of subjectivity and objectivity, and for a process-oriented way of thinking of purpose in leadership and management.

Introduction

In this paper, we recognise the importance of 'purpose', in business and organisational life, but believe it is a problematic idea. A sense of purpose can be a source of comfort and direction, or a focal point. It can be a spur for action, and a catalyst for creative 'unsettlement'. A sense of purpose can lead to action, but it can also neuter thinking, and reduce challenge, both within individuals, and in how we relate to one another. A sense of purpose touches all that it is to be a person in the company of others: logic, emotion, instinct, imagination, doubt and much more.

Notice that we have immediately switched here from talking about 'Purpose' – as a capitalised entity, that deeper 'aim' or 'reason' as used by management, organisational or personal development consultants – to talking about a 'sense of purpose'. Deeper purpose may exist – at least as 'patterns' - but that is not our subject here. Our subject is that 'sense of purpose' – we argue that the process of sense-making in everyday life is a more useful way to understand purpose – than as an abstract, static 'thing'.

We are drawn to the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and others. Process philosophy is concerned with change and development, and we are going to work with a more ‘process-oriented’ way of thinking, albeit with a tendency to revisit the work of earlier contributors to the topic.

In the process-oriented approach, propositional themes are discussed tentatively, accepting that their interpretation emerges from an interaction between individual perception and the context, and remains unfixed and flexible – it may change from moment to moment. The language uses verbs – we talk of organising, becoming, engaging and interacting – rather than nouns. We recognise that there are multiple interpretations, and we are interested in the whole process of understanding.

We will also refer to the pragmatist tradition of US philosophy, and, for example, the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). According to management scholars Nonaka and Zhu (2012): ‘...pragmatists take the experienced world as contingent, indeterminate, changeable.’ (p375):

- Contingent, in the sense of depending on surrounding conditions.
- Indeterminate, by which we mean it cannot be fully known or defined.
- Changeable, by which we mean liable to unpredictable variation.

Peirce and Whitehead were also interested in language, and how we come to understand what we are doing together, in the company of others. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), was also fascinated by language. In particular, he draws our attention to ordinary language, and what this might enable, or hinder. He pointed out that we often complicate things too much. We do not pay enough attention to the meaning of ordinary words – and, in so doing, we distract ourselves from what is important and become confused by own abstractions. We believe that Wittgenstein’s thinking on this has much to offer practically.

Our approach is also autoethnographic, a form of qualitative research in which authors use self-reflection, and writing, to explore personal experience. For Boje and Tyler (2009) it is an approach that allows for an exploration of the ‘multiple layers, multiple selves ... [in the] interplay of narrative and story’ (p. 177). This story is then used to generate wider cultural, political, and social meanings (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Throughout the text that follows, you will find short texts written by one of the authors (Pete) as a result of several reflexive conversations with Rob. These are his reflections on his experiences working on a project for BBC News in the 1990s. These were important formative experiences. There is no claim that they have occurred exactly as described – instead they form a narrative of previous experience that still shapes Pete’s consultancy practice today. In this sense our methods are of reflexive explication (Franklin, 2007; R Warwick & Board, 2013).

Some believe that such an approach is problematic, because it is subjective. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu tackles this objection head on in his book *The Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu says: ‘Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental, and most ruinous, is the one set up between subjectivism and objectivism.’ (p 25). Bourdieu recognises that by focusing exclusively on either what is believed to exist independently of human perception – the objective – or exclusively on the subjective, we risk missing something important.

Better, we believe, to try to work with both. We believe it is better to pay attention to the whole gamut of being human: hope, logic, anticipation, fear, doubt, calculation and so on. And to how we interact with other people – and on the temporal nature of all this.

It is by doing this, by exploring how purpose comes to life in the grittiness of everyday conversation and action, that we can generate the possibility of breaking out of the patterns and habits that sometimes limit and constrain us. If we can change what we notice, that can give us more options, creating more freedom, as we participate in the work of bringing purpose to life.

The rest of this paper covers:

- a critique of how purpose is usually discussed
- some theory, and a discussion of how understanding is developed socially. We look at how we create abstractions that can become ‘more real than reality’, and explore the importance of relationships and context on the meaning we make.
- some ideas for action for all those who are ‘leading’, wherever they find themselves in an organisation.

From ‘purpose’ to ‘purposing’

We start by considering a conventional way of looking at purpose. Organisational purpose is defined by Bartlett and Ghoshal (1994) in their Harvard Business Review paper:

Purpose is the embodiment of an organization's recognition that its relationships with its diverse stakeholders are interdependent. In short, purpose is the statement of a company's moral response to its broadly defined responsibilities, not an amoral plan for exploiting commercial opportunity (p88).

Here Purpose is an 'embodiment' and a 'response' – it is what the organisation does (some might call this 'Mission').

This definition implies, but does not make explicit, that there is also a why, somewhere behind the what; it is embedded in the word 'moral'. At some level, a choice is being made about what to do – and there is a reason for that choice.

We are interested in how the *what* emerges from the *why*, and vice versa: the impact they have on each other, how they are connected. But the definition does not offer us much guidance on that complexity, or on how it relates to the *how* – the way work is done.

The definition above also recognises that purpose is often written down in a statement. It then forms an organisational artefact that people engage with.

On the one hand, this artefact provides a sense of clarity. But this can, we suggest, lead us into two related traps:

- *reification*, talking or thinking about something intangible as if it is a concrete entity;
- *abstraction*, where we risk losing the emergent meaning, as experienced differently by each of us, in different contexts.

To illustrate the dangers of these traps, one has only to listen in to a conversation where the topics of 'culture', 'leadership', 'strategy', and so forth, are discussed. These are straightforward words used to convey complex social processes, often in the form of models and frameworks.

Consider Rob's attendance at a seminar on 'Organisational Purpose'. He writes:

I met Pete a hundred meters or so from the venue. Pete knew the people well, but it was the first time I had met them, which probably made the goings on more acute. We filtered in, and as we were late we sat at the back. The topic under discussion – purpose. The conversations in the room progressed, and the twenty or so people got increasingly focused on the subject.

But, it struck me, the more the subject was being discussed, the more abstract it became. It seemed that people had images in their own minds that meant something important, and specific, to them, but it all lacked a common meaning, other than at the most superficial level. The conversation progressed, as the group discussed the ordering between purpose, vision and strategy. It occurred to me how distant this was from the problems that people face in going about their everyday activities. And how difficult it is to do anything when we cannot agree what that 'anything' is.

We can trace the tendency towards reification and abstraction back in Western thought to the work of Immanuel Kant (Griffin, 2001). In Kant's work, the emphasis is on a dualism between people and organisations, and the collapse of contradictory, but ever present, tensions that people actually deal with.

Causality is formed in a way that implies that the future can be understood based upon the unfolding of pre-set factors. Ideas are put forward as things, with little recognition of their contested meaning, and of how it is the 'contest' that brings the issue to life.

By contrast, consider Bent Flyvbjerg's investigation into the development of a bus garage in the northern town of Aalborg in Denmark. In his book *Rationality and Power*, Flyvbjerg (1998) painstakingly plots the course of conversations, strategies, stated intentions, power plays and politicking over a number of years. Flyvbjerg draws more on Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* – practical and cunning wisdom. In this account, there is an interweaving of all sorts of interests. Meanings of stated objectives in documents are creatively constructed, as people edge towards their own hopes and agendas, and challenge those of others.

Here we start to sense the nature of lived experience, on a day-to-day basis. This is much more where our interest lies. In this sense 'purpose' gets the same treatment as those other staples of management discourse – culture, leadership, strategy and so forth. But to discuss purpose differently, as a shifting process of human relating, is difficult. It is difficult because that assumes that we both notice the culture that we are all part of, and that we relate to it in similar ways.

The French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that the more expert or acclimatised we are in a social process, the harder it is to notice and talk about. He used the term *habitus* to define a way of approaching what matters to us, that in which we have a stake. It includes our schema, sensibilities, dispositions and tastes. He suggested that as we

become embroiled and expert in *habitus* we fail to notice those unwritten rules that govern how we relate to each other. He illustrated the point in the following example:

When you read, in Saint-Simon, about the quarrel of hats (who should bow first), if you were not born in a court society, if you do not possess the *habitus* of a person of the court, if the structures of the game are not also in your mind, the quarrel will seem futile and ridiculous to you.

If, on the other hand, your mind is structured according to the structures of the world in which you play, everything will seem obvious and the question of knowing if the game 'is worth the candle' will not even be asked (Bourdieu, 1998, p77).

To the individual in the court, there are consequences in doffing one's hat inappropriately. One might risk offending others who are more important, with further consequences down the line.

Now we hear for the first time from Pete:

The project started in an empty space – just a small office in the corner of a disused studio. We started small, just two or three people. Six months later there were 70 people.

'Culture' formed as we knocked down walls and new people joined. Some were from the BBC, but others were from outside.

This created the opportunity to question a lot of things: for example, there was no need to do project management the "BBC way". But at the same time, the culture of the BBC was all around us.

For example, the team's expertise in news and in 'online' was recognised, but there was an assumption that we wouldn't "do anything stupid", as one of the senior editors put it.

Here Pete and his colleagues seem to have some freedom. And there is enthusiasm to fashion their own way, to achieve their goals. We also start to see the ambiguity that exists in certain terms such as 'culture', the 'BBC way', 'online'; these held contested meanings, particularly as Pete enters new relationships. He tries to understand what they mean in a new context, with new people; for others of longstanding service they were obvious, with no need for explanation.

We also see some clear messages that the freedom might also be causing waves. Things have gone awry in the past, perhaps? This reminds us of a misplaced action in the hat-doffing ritual that Bourdieu pointed to. A wider, more hidden sense of organisational purpose, and 'ways of doing it', were being played out on Pete and his colleagues, at the same time as they were asserting their 'freedom'.

This invites a question: what do we mean by 'purpose' and what happens in the process of understanding it? Wittgenstein pointed out a problem in philosophy in general, and in problem solving more specifically. He became sceptical about the entire topic of philosophy, because it confuses *everyday language* that people use to describe their challenges, and how they make progress. As he pointed out:

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language (Wittgenstein, 2001, Para 109).

In a work towards the end of his life, published in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein made a short, but important, observation:

Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself (Wittgenstein, 1969, Para 139).

Wittgenstein is pointing out that 'rules', or, in our case, a purpose that has been captured and written down, can only go so far. As hard as one tries to be clear, we will inevitably leave gaps between the crafted words, and what plays out in practice. We have to consider context and interpretation. Purpose therefore emerges from practice, as much as practice emerges from purpose. We shall come to this process shortly by drawing on the ideas of semiosis and abduction.

Developing understanding requires thought about what we are doing. On the one hand this might involve ‘stepping back’, in an effort of detachment, to notice what we have been doing. This is a process of reflection. Returning to Pete:

Sometimes I just accepted that a practice that was new here was not going to work, and gave in. Sometimes I would fight for particular kinds of behaviour. And everyone else was doing the same thing, to a lesser or greater degree.

This meant a lot of effort emotionally and intellectually – to reflect and introspect on what all these interactions meant and what to do about them. I spent a lot of time in private contemplation, wandering around the building, getting my thoughts together. I was in conversation with myself.

I was spending my time trying to notice what was going on, inquiring into it – on my own and with other people, and sometimes by speaking up or arguing for a specific approach.

Here, we see Pete’s struggle between what is to be achieved, and how one might go about it with others. We do not hear any of the actual dilemmas, but we do sense the difficulty, or pain, he went through, trying to link words and promises to actions. To find common meaning, where there are many differences. We hear the doubt in Pete’s voice, but also the engagement. This is stimulating work.

Purpose is emerging from the practice of actually working through problems, and how we make meaning from this process, with and alongside, others. And Pete’s reflection, and that of all the others involved, is part of the process.

As we have said, what is going on is hard to notice, and there are multiple meanings of it all. As Michel DeCerteau, the meticulous commentator on the fascinating mundanity of routine, points out in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (DeCerteau, 1984):

The characteristically subtle logic of these ‘ordinary’ activities comes to light only in details. And hence it seems to me, that this analysis, as its bond to another culture is rendered more explicit, will only be assisted in leading readers to uncover for themselves, in their own situation, their own tactics, their own creations, and their own initiatives (p. IX).

Even for ordinary, everyday activities there are multiple perspectives, and multiple meanings. These perspectives are confusing, when considered together, and we can only come to understand them by getting to grips with the detail of the people involved, how they interact, how they relate to us, and to each other, and so on, in the moment, as we do it.

And this is, of course, a very subjective process. We experience ourselves in relation to other people. From this we sense differences and similarities. Some of these may be obvious, others less so, only becoming apparent later on.

We return to Pete:

I remember telling stories about my past experiences of being given freedom to “get on with it”, and how this had worked on other projects I had worked on.

A little later, I introduced a very simple way to manage the project. This was a single sheet of paper, showing the key milestones of the project, and who was responsible for each.

I carefully printed copies of the chart, and shared them around the management team. We sat and looked at them together, in one of our first management meetings. I had no idea what was going to happen – whether there would be some ‘push back’, or not.

As we went around the room, asking each department head where they were with their part of the project, it became obvious that each was responsible for their own milestones.

The Project Director (PD) was not going to tell people what to do. He was going to let everyone take responsibility, right from the start. The signal was that there would be little top-down control. I felt very relieved.

Here, we get a sense of people getting to share expectations of what was required to get along with each other in a purposeful way. We sense some of DeCerteau's 'ordinariness', in the jockeying to develop a shared understanding. We see Pete sharing his previous experiences, and trying to anticipate how both the Project Director and others in the team would interpret and make sense of what they were all doing together.

Purpose is emerging, and as it does, Pete and everyone else are shifting their ways of being. From these shifts, some traditions were maintained. While at the same time newness and change emerged.

In ordinary conversations, we occasionally stumble into glass walls, both as listener and speaker. For example, we might notice:

- the slight discomfort, in both parties, when an assumption is spoken out loud, and then corrected;
- assumptions we make about words that we have in common – only to find they have slightly, but importantly, different meanings to each of us;
- how our pre-judgements can be challenged when we meet people face-to-face;
- similarities, and differences, in expressions, gestures and in underlying values all feeding in.

Habits and values are especially hard to notice. We may notice them only when we engage in conversation with others. But from these bumps and misunderstandings, sometimes we create new and helpful meaning, both for ourselves, and for those we are communicating with. Either immediately, or when we reflect.

To illustrate this Pete makes the point:

I remember a difficult conversation about the word 'finished'. Two of the team leaders sat with the PD and me. One said they had finished a piece of software. The person who was to use it said it wasn't in a usable state. The first insisted it was finished.

It got quite heated. And it took half an hour to gently tease out the different ways that each person defined 'finished'.

'Finished' seems to be a simple word. But here we can see that it is not. Each person had their own assumptions about what they understand, assumptions that probably seemed so obvious that they did not require thought or discussion.

And, in the realisation of different meanings, we sense that this misunderstanding would not be repeated. Similarly, the purpose of the project – at this point, to finish a particular task, in a particular way – is being forged in the process of misunderstanding, of social friction (Rob Warwick, McCray, & Board, 2017).

Could the misunderstanding have been anticipated and clarified? Perhaps. But to do that every time, for every contingency, would be time consuming, and inward-looking. And, we believe, unlikely to really 'dislodge' those deeply-held, invisible assumptions. It is usually when pushed up against the wall of our own beliefs, through conflict, that we start to question them.

At this point, we would like to bring in the issue of context by looking at the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914), a US philosopher of the pragmatist school. Peirce used the terms 'semiosis' and 'abduction':

- Semiosis is how we come to know something, from the various signs and meaning we may pick up or communicate (Fann, K, 2012; Lorino, 2014).
- Abduction refers to how we garner enough provisional knowledge, and make sense of a situation, before we get into the realm of deductive or inductive reasoning. Before we can 'put our finger on it'.

Starting with semiosis, let us take, for example, an army officer giving an order to a soldier. At one level, there are the words: "Stay alert!". And there is also the tone, and the body language, with which they are delivered.

But, in Peirce's terms, this 'brute' action has no *interpretive mediation*. All we see is the unthinking instruction, which may or may not be followed.

We listeners, however, would probably expect the instruction to be acted upon. That expectation is based upon a third factor: context. Our context, in this case, includes our knowledge of how an army operates; from this we expect that the instruction will be taken seriously, and followed promptly and efficiently.

Peirce is referring to the mediating process (he called this 'thirdness'). In this case, this is the process of being in an army, its culture, and so on. For the soldiers, this is something they have to be expert in, to survive and get on.

We all know the 'rules' at many levels. Pete continues:

Not everyone liked me, or what I was doing. I remember trying to coach one individual, who clearly didn't think they needed any coaching. They were resistant, I think, because, firstly, I wasn't a journalist, and secondly, they were already a very competent manager.

But the PD had suggested it, and I went along with it. I was gently but firmly ejected from the relationship. By pushing back, the individual was taking a risk, but he knew the rules.

And even though it wasn't nice at the time, I quickly justified it – after all, it signalled high levels of self-responsibility – something which, as far as I was concerned, was pivotal. And it didn't seem to harm my relationship with the PD.

Looking from Peirce's slightly different angle of context, we might notice a shared understanding, but with different meanings and values. For example, whilst there is a bridge of understanding between the PD and Pete, no such link is available between Pete and the journalist. There is little common ground on which to establish a relationship.

There are contextual 'rules', but they are understood differently by all three parties, and the context is treated differently too. For example, the journalist was prepared to take a risk, by breaking them. Pete justifies the outcome to himself. The PD seemed unaffected.

In the same way, working with purpose means moving beyond common vocabulary, and language, and exploring our own contexts, and those of other people too.

Time is another important part of the context, and something else that Peirce draws our attention to. Take the example of cutting wood into logs on a summer's day. There is no fire today, nor will there be, until the winter. To make such physical effort worthwhile, winter, the hearth, the fire and the warmth, must all exist in one's imagination. The act also requires knowledge and appreciation of the movement of the seasons. Without this knowledge, if we give you an instruction to chop wood, it can only be a direct instruction, and one that does not allow for learning and interpretation. The meaning of any sign emerges with respect to other signs within a social system; these include the passing of seasons, a warm home, our place in it, and other factors that interrelate, all forming a rich pattern.

The meanings we make today are also built upon our interpretation of previous signs. On our hopes, dreams and expectations for the future. On our intentions. And how we respond, in terms of action, is not, in our view, 'determined'. It is contingent on the situation, and how it continues to emerge.

To return to Pete's example above, a relationship of mutual engagement towards the future exists. That is, there is a shared sense of purpose – all parties are working towards the same end on the project. But this does not tell us what will actually happen because each individual can choose to break the rules. What happens is neither random, nor deterministic. It is plural, and contingent, and in a state of flux.

This brings us onto Peirce's second relevant contribution: 'abduction'. Peirce was interested in the steps that precede the thinking processes of induction and deduction (Fann, K, 2012; Lorino, 2014). That is, what goes on as we experience and make sense, in shaping up an idea with sufficient clarity to test it more thoroughly, before we are able to really address it rationally.

This includes issues such as: intuition; the metaphors that we use to understand the world; the narratives that run in our minds; and questions of aesthetics. For Peirce, all form a rich seam of growing and evolving understanding.

Peirce was keen to point out that in abduction we create, and weave, threads of experience into plausible narratives that might fit with some long-term goal. For example, understanding might start with a surprising experience, or a jolt. This might enable us to see the world differently. And it might lead to the creation of an internal narrative, which further leads towards the creation of some hypothesis. This can then be tested and worked upon.

This 'creative unsettlement' is important. These formative experiences, and how we set about processing them into concrete knowledge, establish foundations. Pete explains:

Right from the off, the Project Director and I spent time in conversation. At what was, essentially, my interview for the role, I remember speaking about other similar projects I had been involved in. The PD listened inscrutably.

But it didn't feel right until we were about to take our leave. We were walking down some stairs. On one bend, the PD cracked a joke, I said something, and I knew, intuitively, that this was going to be OK.

I had no rational reasons to believe this to be true. We had only just met, but I knew that this was going to be a significant project for me, and a significant relationship.

We sense here, in a very ordinary way, a coming together of minds. Or, more accurately, an understanding of how two people can *imagine* working together. Nothing is explicit or concrete. But, at this point, enough work has been done to enable connections that lay possible paths for further development.

Enough work is done, but it may need to be re-done. It is difficult to fully move beyond abduction into the realms of deduction and induction. In other words, we are rarely fully 'rational'. We experience conversation as a much more unsettled, and on-going affair.

In academia, and in management consulting, we tend to put a lot of emphasis on induction and deduction, as if conversation was somehow a mostly rational process. When this way of thinking suggests that we are often in a process of abduction. For example, we can have, on the face of it, a perfectly agreeable conversation but know, at a deeper level that something is not, yet, quite right. Even though it may be hard to put these feelings into words, they can be explored. And through that exploration new meaning arises. Pete goes on:

My sense is that as we continued to talk we built trust, and shared and understood each other's values, and where there was overlap and where there wasn't.

Especially in the early days, I was pretty tentative, and concerned that I was getting things right. The Project Director was employing me, so had some positional power – it was very important to me that I did a good job for him, and for the organisation.

I couldn't predict which way this was going to go. My fear was that at any point my ways of doing things might not be right for the PD, or for the project, or for the organisation. But as time went on and we seemingly had these small successes, then I grew in confidence. Little by little, trust was established in us both.

Here we get a sense of time, as Pete tries to weave his previous experience and his intuitions into what he is now encountering. His acts are not random, but neither do they form a predictable trajectory. The issue of power is now also becoming more evident, particularly as there is now more to lose by both parties. Both are becoming more invested in each other, and, as such, trust is starting to build.

Trust and power are essential in developing a relationship in which a sense of purpose can emerge. Again, this work continues, hour-by-hour, day-by day. To take Peirce seriously, we have to engage in meaningful and sometimes challenging conversations, as Pete illustrates:

Conversation continued to be a key part of the process. The PD was one of the few people to have an enclosed, private office in what was now a large, open-plan space that had been constructed around us.

He and I would spend a lot of time chatting one-to-one. This was also his habit with the senior leaders. I would arrive to find him enclosed in his office, and in conversation. If I was 'waved' in, I would join, and invariably discover that the conversation had little to do with the project as such. More likely it would be about music, or girlfriends, or something else personal to the people involved. He and I also discussed personal matters.

We hear in Pete's voice, over all these vignettes, contradictions and tensions being played out. And, of course, the texts give only a small sense of how these were being played out by the different teams within the project, such as editorial, design, and technology, and in the broader organisational context. All individuals, and all groups, were simultaneously making a claim for their own perspectives and, at the same time, for the wider project, the wider institution, and indeed the wider world.

It is here that we would like to draw our attention to the contradictory nature of experience through the issue of paradox. As Ralph Stacey, complexity and organisational theorist, defines it, paradox is:

... a state in which two diametrically opposing forces/ideas are simultaneously present, neither of which can ever be resolved or eliminated. There is, therefore, no possibility of a choice between two opposing poles or of locating them in a different sphere. Instead, what is required is a different kind of logic, such as dialectical thinking (Stacey, 2003, p241).

We may often be tempted to seek a resolution to a paradox. To collapse awareness of paradox, and to quickly take the view of 'job done'. In practical terms, there might be pressure to do this. But paradoxes cannot be resolved, they can only be lived. People 'rub along' together, and it is through the process of interacting that understanding emerges.

For example, there might be tensions between how different groups understand their purpose. Between the purpose as stated, and how it is being enacted. There may be emotion: one stakeholder might be angry, another enthusiastic, and so on. These opposing views can be sustaining, and, ultimately, supportive of each other. We talk of purpose in one way, yet we encounter problems. We come to realise that each other's meanings are important to the other. Back to Pete:

After a while, a small team of people had formed – the people who were essentially leading the functional areas of the project. I organised an offsite meeting to discuss the project, to allow all these people to 'bond', and to agree purpose and objectives.

At the session we discussed strategy, focusing on 'principles', rather than fixed actions. The PD trusted me to design and run the sessions and introduce this approach which was very different from how many people in the team understood strategy – more as an activity of predicting the future and trying to control it.

This ability to trust me, and be quite hands-off, sent a signal to me – and to the others. Generally, he spoke little, and intervened little in meetings, unless necessary. And I think this approach to strategy – which is very emergent – also sent a signal, that he wanted people to stay flexible and agile. To use their experience and trust themselves, and stay focused on the present, rather than trying to predict and control the future.

Here we have an indication of several contradictory, but enlivening processes going on: to trust or not to trust; flexible or agile; emergence or control etc. These relate mainly to the 'how', not the 'why' - but it is likely the same processes are affecting how purpose is understood.

And next we hear Pete discussing the nature of the purpose that the first Director General of the BBC, Lord Reith, articulated:

The PD and I, and the various teams rarely spoke explicitly about the project purpose, or even more rarely about the deeper 'why' underpinning it. In one or two formal workshops we did have conversations around the BBC's broader purpose – to "educate, entertain and inform". I guess there was a general agreement that this was a 'good thing' – everyone there was broadly buying into this aim.

The underlying 'why' of that aim – national and social cohesion, for example – perhaps came up in conversation only once or twice in over a year, and then only in the pub, as an aside.

But even though the purpose of the project was not something we discussed overtly, it was clearly there every day, in some sense. We all knew that 'launching' was a key step. Likewise we had few formal conversations about values – but they were there every day, in every conversation. Many people worked hard for long periods, people went to great lengths to do good work, and we talked about what was good and what not so good. So my sense is that there must have been a good understanding of purpose, and values.

It is interesting to note, in this example, how the wider purpose of the organisation, and even that of the project was not on the tips of people's tongues. That said, we have heard all the way through how it did also enable a sense of direction in the team, particularly through the various stages of forming and development of both the team and of the project itself.

Purpose 'sat behind' all these activities – a ghostly, but important, presence. As Audergon and Audergon write, describing the work of the psychologist Mindell:

One way to bring awareness into a field of interactions is to locate 'roles'. Roles occur within all levels of a system – intra-psycho (two roles within oneself), in relationship, within an organisation, or collectively. The purpose of representing roles is to bring awareness to interactions, rather than only being swept into polarized roles or positions (Audergon & Audergon, 2008).

Similarly, purpose can be an 'expectation'. And the people holding these expectations do not need to be in the room, or even alive, to exert an influence on what we think, and on what we do. There can be 'ghost roles' – the 'ghost' of Lord Reith is influencing the way people get their sense of purpose, even though he is long gone from our world. Purpose was out of sight, yet also integral to progress, as people came to understand their roles with others, the developing context, and how this related to their goals – the what, and the how and the why. We see purpose supporting an ongoing process, where the friction between these factors created a grounded understanding for participants.

Implications

We do not want to leave this at a theoretical level, having just pointed out how it is the lived and experiential process that interests us, and that we believe others should pay more attention to. So, what can people do about all this? This, we believe, is a challenge of leadership, but, as before, we firstly require a new understanding of that word. We mean the verb – leading. Not the position or state of being a leader. Leading, therefore, is something we all do, some of the time.

We all lead when we make every effort to notice these processes as they go on in and around us. Leading means encouraging the process of reflexivity within the group, and individual. Reflexivity is a process of thought and action combined, where one includes the other at the time of occurrence (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Cunliffe, 2009). This is difficult, as we, and Bourdieu, have pointed out.

Leading also means learning to work in groups, and to make clear the value of purposefully entering into social friction. Social friction, provided we can 'hold' the emotion that it generates, gives us the possibility of experiencing the world in new ways.

'Naming' - from each of our own individual viewpoints - what we see and hear happening is also important, particularly when we learn to do this in ways that are more likely to be heard. There is, of course, lots to become aware of here; group dynamics, and issues of metaphor and framing are important.

We also suggest avoiding neatly choreographed presentations, and 'town hall' style meetings, typified by their focus on rational thought, and which may encourage too rapid a move from divergent to convergent thinking (Cropley & Cropley, 2015). And leading has always meant embracing diversity – of ideas and viewpoints.

Abstract notions of purpose can also get in the way. Learning theorists Nonaka and Toyama (2003) suggest that the idea of an organisation in a 'static state...' '...at one point in time' is inadequate at dealing with the dynamic nature of knowledge, particularly how people come to understand contradictions and shifting relations between contexts.

So, rather than trying to generate a 'model' and use this to 'educate' the audience with it, we believe it is better to hold in mind a 'mobile' (rather like an Alexander Calder¹ sculpture), paying attention to both the structure and the surrounding conditions as they affect movement and interaction.

Imagine this mobile moving in the wind, or, at least, in the flow of people walking past it. Each movement, each change of perspective, informs and changes the context, the purpose and the results – a new situation emerges, from which the next stage develops. This is iterative, responsive and agile.

¹ Here are some examples of Calder's work: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/alexander-calder-848>

We also lead when we remember that meaning emerges within and between groups both formally, and informally. The formal, for example, is the strategy session – where people are invited together to discuss more abstract topics like purpose. The informal, for example, is gossip, stories shared privately, around the water cooler, or down the pub.

Storytelling is also important for leaders. It develops, sharpens, and renews our senses – but especially when it provokes, inspires and includes inquiry. We use the word inquiry to distinguish it from advocacy, speech that tends to draw people into separate camps. Inquiry is a state of being – a state of openness to new ideas and ways of being.

Leading means listening well, gaining understanding, and making meaning, whether we are talking about purpose, or many other ideas. These do not always come readily with inductive or deductive reasoning, and only intellectual logic. Usually they come from the whole person, drawing on their deep-seated tacit knowledge, and critically their emotion, all filtered through their own perceptual schema. This is abduction.

When you gaze at purpose directly, clarity diminishes. It diminishes even more when you try to look closer. So, encouraging a broader awareness of the out of the corner of the eye experience, can be helpful. There are practical ways people can work with this. Mindell, for example, describes 'hotspots' thus:

A hot spot is a moment when something sensitive or volatile is touched – it sizzles. There's a tendency to back off and lose energy, or to become agitated. At hot spots, conflicts cycle and escalate. But, noticing hot spots early, and carefully facilitating them, we discover they are doorways to resolution, transformation and creativity (Mindell, 1995).

We are leading when we give these moments our full attention. The practical action of 'opening space', as defined by Harrison Owen, means literally that – opening a space – in which people can speak (Owen, 2008). The leader's role is then reminiscent of what the poet Keats called 'negative capability'²: that is, *not* getting in the way of people's innate ability to speak to each other.

In summary, we lead when we appreciate *all* the subtleties listed above – and we allow people to develop their own nuanced understandings of purpose, while paradoxically always seeking to find some commonality of purpose too, so that we can work together in the real world.

Finally, Nonaka and Toyama (2003) considered the dialectical processes between the environment, the organisation and the individual:

We argue that the key to understanding the knowledge-creating process is dialectic thinking and acting, which transcends and synthesizes such contradictions. Synthesis is not compromise. Rather, it is the integration of opposing aspects through a dynamic process of dialogue and practice (p2)

We agree; often in conversation, in storytelling, and in inquiry, we are seeking a temporary and contingent integrating, not a final synthesis. We hope that is what we have presented here.

Conclusion

We have drawn attention to the effect that persistent formative narratives have on a person's practice; in this sense they are a form of 'purposing' that continues to shape and influence, as an emergent practice. We have done this by revisiting the earlier work of pragmatist philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce. In doing so, we have explained the implications of purpose as a verb – 'purposing' – in relation to leading.

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² For an explanation of what Keats means see: <http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/john-keats-and-negative-capability>

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