Sharing Leadership and Leadership Styles: A Journey towards BOTH-AND and away from EITHER-OR (Supported by the Tao)

By Charles Schnarr
When we work for the common good, we experience each other in new ways. We don’t worry about differences, or status, or traditional power relationships. We worry about whether we’ll succeed in accomplishing what needs to be done. We focus on the work, not on each other. We learn what trust is.
We learn the necessity of good communication.\textsuperscript{1}

Three stories/experiences to mention from recent history:

- A colleague of mine who works with youth in the Tucson community witnessed and second-handly experienced Anti-Semitic remarks towards teachers at a local high school.

- During a Playback Theatre performance for the Arizona State University’s LGBTQ Coalition’s\textsuperscript{2}, National Day of Silence action, I conducted two stories. One came from a volunteer staff member of the event. They learned that day about an assault against a young lesbian woman who was in silent protest. The other teller had learned about a suicide of a young gay man in Washington, DC just days before the national event. These instances were current history; the stories came from that very day. These were individuals targeted, abused, or lost because they were discriminated against for their individual characteristics or beliefs.

- My own experience as a naturalized citizen of the United States, originally Canadian. There is an ever-growing distance between freedom and accountability in this country. This is partly related to choices made by the US government in both its National Security Policy and its detached bullying tactics in International Affairs and the War in Iraq. Particularly in some of the transparent complacent attitude towards abuses committed by our own citizens in the US military prisons found in Iraq. The truth is coming out more rapidly about the trouble the current administration has put this country into. With new movies out during this hot time of an election year, it is becoming clearer that

\textsuperscript{1} Wheatley, Margaret J. \textit{Turning to One Another}, p.126, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco. 2002

\textsuperscript{2} “The LGBTQ Coalition was formed to promote and support diversity at Arizona State University. The coalition consists of several different groups that cater to the needs of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning and ally communities on campus.” www.asu.edu/clubs/lgbtq/
there is an unwelcoming feeling about this country. People around the world, even citizens here, are rethinking how associated they want to be with the United States. Something needs to change.

It is disturbing and disappointing to hear some of these stories, and it seems insurmountable to activate change immediately on a global scale. However, I have the great opportunity to look within my own Playback Company as a microcosm of society. I have an opportunity to look at my own participation and growth within the company, as a member and leader. To look at what we are doing as a group to exercise positive growth in how we lead ourselves and how we celebrate our diversity. This is then a place to activate and support growth in society. The work that I do to improve and reflect upon my own leadership process, along with the growth that our group experiences collectively, will activate a community of positive change. This will then influence our groups’ service to the community.

The culture of this country is supposed to be founded on a positive sense of individuality, empowerment, and identity. However in an ever-isolating culture of material gain, power hunger, and bullying, the message that is being conveyed is an us-them or either-or mentality. This disturbing time we are in is calling me to explore ways in which I may contribute to an increase of sharing in community. As a growing leader in schools, community, and Playback Theatre, I choose to look at ways in which we can celebrate diversity and difference, and still be heard as individuals. The ways in which we carry ourselves, collectively lead ourselves, and share ourselves with the greater community will influence change in society. That is why it is important for us to take a “no Playbacker left behind” attitude towards our group growth and evolution. Staying inclusive rather than exclusive.

This essay will look at the positive power of leadership diversity and collective leadership in a group and within a Playback Company. I will explore ideas about diversity in leadership suggested by Taoist influences on leadership approaches. I will follow how a pursuit of Both-And philosophy
from Taoism offers both inspirations for and challenges to an environment of shared leadership. Throughout the essay I will share personal experiences related to my own leadership journey.

In each section, I will explore a certain idea related to diversity in Leadership. I will then share a related experience in the group life of Tucson Playback Theatre: changes, growth, challenges, and experiences. I will conclude each section with my own experience as a growing leader/member in a Playback Theatre company.

**Sharing the Load**

In a dynamic, evolving Playback Theatre company, tuning into change and the need for change is essential. The evolution will continue to unfold before us in a group. As a leader and member, I need to be sensitive to so many little nuances in company life. Tuning my awareness with certain skills, as Dreher suggests below, will allow a collective growth to take place. Awareness, sensitivity, and willingness in a company life, open the door to a sharing environment.

Dynamic as the Tao itself, the new leadership requires us to stay in touch with the energies of the people around us. Today’s problems are too complex for any one person to solve alone. Now more than ever, we need strong interpersonal skills, the ability to communicate effectively with a diverse group of people.  

Last night I watched the film, *What the Bleep do we know?*  This is a real left-brain film in the mainstream theater. I was shocked to have to put on my ‘thinking cap’ as it began. It is part documentary, part docudrama. Called a ‘Quantum Fable,” the film explores the many diverse aspects of Quantum Physics and how that science shapes or therefore breaks down our concepts of reality. It was quite a journey to be taken on, and was affirming in asking the

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question of how separate or how united we are in our existence on this planet. It asks the audience to take a look at how connected we are in our relationships, how we view the world around us, and especially how we view ourselves. It is time to wake up to the people and happenings around us.

This film is similar to the influence of Taoist thought on questioning our approach to leadership. I have similarly been stirred by Taoist influences on Leadership approaches as a resource for looking at how important it is for a group to be aware of its diversity in leadership styles. It is important today that the leadership growth of a group support the individuality of each leadership style. Dreher suggests above the importance of fostering the energy among us, and the need to work together. I agree. For the energy and growth of a Playback Company to be progressive and vitalizing, sharing the load is essential.

This gives me an image of a group standing in a circle shoulder to shoulder. As the call comes for an increase of leadership and service to the community, the circle begins spreading out into a larger circle, all hands connected, allowing for the power of this group to be manifest inside the circle. This then allows for more space, more growth and more service.

This season for Tucson Playback Theatre has been a crossroads of sorts. Every company has a sense of growth among it. The combination of individual life changes, group life, change within a company, and our work in the community, contributed to an ever-evolving group dynamic. Of the six seasons of Tucson Playback Theatre, this has been an especially dynamic one.¹

We have been called on as a group to increase our work in the community, to shift our leadership emphasis and to support the growth of leadership diversity as essential to our well being as a Company.

¹ I have been a member of Tucson Playback Theatre for 4 Years.
The need arose this season for our director to re-evaluate her workload as a leader, to take a step back for personal and medical reasons, and to play more as a company member. This called on our group to immediately look at our variety in leadership, and the need for shared responsibility of tasks. We were stepping into a new growth pattern for shared leadership and diversity in conducting.

Fostering and supporting the diversity within our group, is not always clean and easy. To do this work, as most of us know, is to always be changing, to be spontaneous and to be willing to work as part of a group.

In, *Acts of Service*, Jonathan Fox speaks about when a change in leadership occurs within a group. When the founding director takes or initiates a leadership shift within the group, there is a call to change. “The ongoing nature of NST companies argues that there must be a mechanism for change of leaders just as for performers.”⁵ Looking back over the year, this call to change has been both smooth and challenging.

Our director took some time away on two instances. As she shifted her participation, and as we needed to shift our leadership to a shared, diverse approach this called us all to change. Throughout the season, our roles, responsibilities, and service workload increased. This was asking us to step up as a group.

Again in our history together, a new growth spurt was upon us. We shared leadership during rehearsals and our community workshops. We worked on spreading out the responsibilities of the group and we were in a changing time.

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The commitment in our group shines, and therefore as our dynamics shifted we were able to show up and try something new, or be present for someone’s new leadership style. This called myself and others to increase the amount of facilitation and conducting we were responsible for.

This process was a growing edge for all of us. As we tried new things, and were in unfamiliar territory, it was difficult at times. It is funny how, for a group of improvisational artists, routine is such a safe and comfortable place.

We were called to shift the rituals and routines of our group. Were we able to grow with the change? We were taking the leaps as we expanded? We were getting used to and fostering the diversity that exists there, within that expanding circle. This wasn’t easy, and is still evolving. I particularly have noticed that this shared process is a great challenge. It causes tensions, asks us to commit even more, and questions everything we ever thought was set in stone about our group life.

As our rituals within our group shifted it caused us to look at our familiarity with each other and our willingness to, or resistance to, change.

I, as a younger leader in the group, stepped in as the primary new conductor. It felt natural for me to step in, as I was continuing my own work with youth in Playback and my journey towards leadership training. I noticed in this process of embracing leadership, I was challenged by the hunger to lead and sometimes the excitement to ‘take over.’ Realizing that I have a different style of leading in our group, this proved to be challenging. I noticed many times that passion within myself to do great work as a leader and how sometimes that causes imbalance in the group and myself. Dreher, who blends Taoist thought with leadership, wrote about this. “The Tao challenges us to balance individualism with community, developing our own abilities to the fullest while
looking to the larger patterns."\textsuperscript{6} The times I would forget about the greater group needs, was when I found resistance to my leadership in the group.

The Tao, each and every step of the way, was challenging me. As I would lead a rehearsal, I would be planning a certain structure for the evening and at times, would be met with some friction about my style of leadership. Whether or not I was being forceful rather than gentle, or I was a male rather than a female, or just a different conductor, it was different. My leadership, at times, was met with resistance.

One time, I asked a fellow group member to stand in a certain part of the room during our 'check-in' process as a group. We were using fluid sculptures for this exercise. I asked her to move from one spot to another, and she refused. The way in which I approached a fellow company member was met with resistance, making it difficult for us to do work. I wasn’t in tune with how to approach my own members and therefore lost effectiveness as a leader.

I was experiencing my own leadership growth process, while others were experiencing a new leadership style in the group. This called on us to step into a new attitude about our group life and how we approach each other.

This required more communication, more reflection, and more flexibility from all parties. I needed to notice where I was being too controlling and let go. I also needed to be strong and direct as a leader, in the way that works for me. We all needed to welcome a diversity of styles in the group, and be willing to respond from our own place of truth. John Gardner says, “The healthy community encourages individual involvement in the pursuit of shared purposes.”\textsuperscript{7} Each member of a Company needs to step in as a member of a group and contribute to the greater growth. This healthiness comes only when the whole group is made up of every member in the group contributing their part.

\textsuperscript{6} Dreher, p. 158
Today, we are still learning how to have enough time to share, and communicate and reflect with each other. The balance of duties, responsibilities, and roles is something we will always be refining. Allowing for everyone’s strengths to shine, as well as being willing to grow along side each other with a variety of leadership is important to group life.

Fostering and developing that ‘healthy community’ that Gardner speaks of isn’t that easy. It is easy, however, to get stuck in a western way of thinking that we will never evolve when things are difficult. Eastern thinking is much more about being here now. Asking us, in our Playback groups, to truly be part of a collective. Asking us to be in a place where sharing takes place, a place where leadership diversity is honored and celebrated. This is a place where all of us are working towards being powerful, contributing leaders from our best connection to the Tao within ourselves. Fox shares with us a vision of this evolved leadership. He shows here, this evolved state of a leader who is willing to be conscious.

In daily practice, however, a good leader will let go of and reassume authority constantly, as the dynamic of group creativity flows. Such an exercise takes a true willingness not to know what will come next. It is this kind of leader—genuinely humble, genuinely spontaneous, genuinely alert to the contributions of others—that assumes the highest stature and authority.

- Fox, p. 170

Letting Go

I know, for me, letting go has always been a challenge. Whether it is about control, losing something, or about loss in relationships, I find letting go a challenge. Challenges are a great thing along the path. I am always on my edge of change when letting go is called for.

Wheatley, who wrote about communication as an essential component missing in our global society today, speaks to this.

No one person or perspective can give us the answers we

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8 Fox, p. 170
need to the problems of today. Paradoxically, we can only find those answers by admitting we don't know. We have to be willing to let go of our certainty and expect ourselves to be confused for a time.

- Wheatley, p. 36

Stepping into the great abyss of the unknown in company life is sometimes the most beautiful place to be. Acknowledging that it IS difficult, and that we CAN work on it together, is exciting.

After much change this season, and coming through our busiest spring ever as a company, we were heading into the month of May, our final show for the season, and beginning to wind down for the hot summer in Tucson. We had worked with various organizations and groups, facilitated local participatory workshop evenings, and performed our public theatre shows.

We had an opportunity to do some work with each other with an outside facilitator, in ‘Process Work,’ sometimes known as ‘World Work.’ This was an interesting time for us as a group. We had been through a lot this season as a group. We worked with each other; being challenged, standing on our growing edge as individuals, and being able to do some of our best Playback ever. This was a time for us to go within the group and work on some of our dynamics. Some issues in the group, between people, and things that we want to process and work on as a whole group.

It proved to be a new challenge for us. In the past, we had all wanted to have our full group in attendance for our training with Lane, the process work facilitator. A number of scheduling changes happened for individuals, and it turned out we needed to attend the training as a group of five instead of eight. The changes were related to work for one individual, and personal or family medical reasons for the other two.

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9 Wheatley, p. 36
Some thought we should go ahead with it and others thought we should have everyone there. The choice to meet anyway seemed to symbolize a new path for us as a group. We were willing to let go of certain things and accept others. This was an essential aspect of our new growth and as a group of collective leaders.

What followed was an inspiring workshop, tension filled and full of growth opportunity. Using group process and the Playback Theatre form in our work with Lane, we uncovered some new awareness about roles. Naming that there are certain roles that are within our group. Some examples are: ‘time-keeper,’ ‘white male,’ ‘nurturer,’ etc. We realized that the roles are shared and change hands regularly. We recognized and named some of our usage of roles and role lock in our group. This was an important naming of role theory perspective in our group.

I learned through out the workshop that I was taking on too much, as a leader, as well as I wasn’t standing up in my truth as a leader and embracing my power. We all learned that there are different roles that exist within our collective.

That following weekend, I had the opportunity to conduct a performance with the same group of five that attended the ‘Process Work’ workshop. I felt a new freedom and a new expansion in my conducting ability. It was a wonderful evening of stories and community. I was able to let go of judgment of myself and any perceived judgment from the outside. This was a great lesson in letting go. And because I was able to let go, the magic of Playback was alive within me and I was a powerful conductor. The willingness to share enlivens our work and brings us to a place where we can watch, listen, and be, simply be, with the stories.

The Tao Leader acts without attachment, Achieves, but does not take credit, Transcending ego
With great harmony.
-Tao, 77

**Working Together: A BOTH-AND approach**

Transcending ego, and becoming a great leader, is an amazing aspiration, and I believe it is an ebb and flow process. Recently, I read a little personal guidance passage about ‘Going with the Flow.’ I was awakened to the fact that it is not a static process. Leadership and being a company member, requires a willingness to change and to adapt to a more eastern approach to life on the planet.

Association leaders who acknowledge that language and culture form their thought processes can begin developing a "global mindset" that goes beyond Western "either-or" thinking and changes to Eastern "both-and" thinking. By recognizing that either-or thinking limits creativity, executives will find themselves more able to "flow" with continual change and cultivate non-action as an important management tool.

-Anonymous, 2000

In a western culture, even here in the United States, can we aspire to and apply an ancient eastern way within our Playback Company? I say, yes. Can we use this wisdom as guide for how to change within an ever changing, spontaneous environment? Yes. May we continue to shift our thinking and ask ourselves to constantly reflect on how to be a collective of healthy leaders and group members at the same time? I hope so.

One of the things I learned from experiencing that film, *What the Bleep do we know?*, was that we do have the power to activate change in our lives, our work, our relationships, and in our world. The Science of Quantum Physics takes

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10 Dreher, p. 199
us deeper and deeper down a rabbit hole of existence, until we realize that we are, in fact, all interconnected with each other and everything. Or at least, we may choose to believe.

Playback Theatre has taught me to have an open mind and heart to every story that is out there, no matter what the circumstances. It is challenging to keep true to that always, and not judge a single teller, story, or Playback enactment, but I must try to do so, in order to be a healthy leader in this form.

The same is true in the evolution of our group. As we are individuals, we all have our own style. We are ever-changing members of an ever-changing group, with an ever-changing audience and ever-changing stories. The opportunity for our continued growth and evolution as a group and in our Playback work, calls on us to embrace the diversity within our group. This allows for growth, change, and a willingness to watch our life within a group. This will foster and develop a more vibrant life of leadership in the group and will therefore allow us to continue to serve the community with our work.

Conclusion:

Sharing the Load, Letting Go, and Working together. Sounds easy! In a time this summer, when our group is faced with looking deep inside, it doesn’t seem so easy. As a Playback Company we are looking at reinventing ourselves right now. Asking ourselves to look at our intentions as a group, to name our group purpose, and to recover from some unhealthy communication and targeting that has happened recently among all of us as members. This is something that could have resulted in members leaving the group. One

individual was being targeted for the group tensions. The honesty and communication of our group was not out in the open and was causing a great deal of trouble. Reconnecting, for me, seems to be all about honesty, and bringing the open energy and truth into the Company life. Wheatley speaks of this as an archetypal energy in the world.

Most cultural traditions have a story to explain why human life is so hard, why there is so much suffering on earth. The story is always the same—at some point early in our human origin, we forgot that we were all connected. We broke apart, we separated from each other. We even fragmented inside ourselves, disconnecting heart from head from spirit. These stories always teach that healing will only be found when we remember our initial unity and reconnect the fragments.

-Wheatley, p. 114

Reconnecting comes with willingness. This willingness will help us face the challenges together as a group, rather than distancing as individuals. The realization that we are all responsible for group life, and group growth, will allow us to take accountability. Then we can own together the calling to share together, let go of differences, and work with who we are and what we have to be a better Playback Theatre Company.

Our group is strong together and highly committed. Our process of sharing will come with the awareness of the flow that we all share. Remembering the experiences when I was leading, and was met with tension, will remind us to share more. To share more what our internal process is as a member of a group. We must also take responsibility for tasks within the group. This sharing is imperative to our Playback Theatre in the community. As we share willingness, rather than a resistance, we will be opening the door to our community. Allowing for us to take the next leap with our Playback Theatre work.

A great leap can only occur when we are willing to leave the place from which we leaped. That is the letting go. Letting go of personal agenda, ego, and control, gives freedom to change. Coming out of a place of Role Lock, and into a place of sharing the roles that are alive and needing change within our company,

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12 Wheatley, p. 114
is the place we need to continue to arrive.

With this freedom comes a responsibility to work together. This can be exposing for a group, yet it is what will allow our Playback Work to really shine. Together, we can begin to share in the journey towards the places our company life will evolve to. This free approach will enable us to be more comfortable with the changes and the difficult moments that will arise.

Know the sunlight
While confronting the shadows,
Becoming a leader to all.
As a Tao leader,
You move with infinite power,
Ever drawing upon the source.
- Tao, 28

The source, the greater source for a Playback Theatre Company is the energy that exists within the circle image I spoke of earlier. All members of a group staying connected, hands together, as the circle expands. All members look into both the safe and unknown places within the circle. This will foster and develop willingness and strength within a Playback Theatre company. We are called to have willingness to change and respect each other’s growth in the process. We are called to have strength to stand in the difficult moments and present ourselves strongly. As a leader, and a member, I remember that ‘Going with the Flow,’ can be a mantra to embrace fully, and glean greater meaning from. I look forward to reentering Tucson Playback Theatre with anticipation and excitement for what is next. Staying conscious that the ‘source’ within our circle will guide our group life and leadership.

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13 Dreher, p.198
REFERENCES:


Various Web Articles, see footnotes.