

Investing in the production of leadership

Posted on [October 7, 2014](#) by [Charles J. Palus](#), [John B. McGuire](#), [Chris Ernst](#)

Our colleagues in Denmark have been working with the idea of leadership as a collective process for producing shared direction, alignment, and commitment. Anders Trillingsgaard ([UKON Human Results](#)) and Karen Poder ([University of Copenhagen](#)) share their recent experiences and insights below (thank you!):

“ Two characteristics of contemporary organizations have changed how we think about leadership development. Organizations are adapting at increasing speeds, and, employees are becoming increasingly reliable, competent and expensive. These characteristics fundamentally change the tasks of managers, from merely making decisions, to clarifying goals and strategies, building cross-organisational relationships, and inciting high energy.



The [leadership ontology](#) “[direction, alignment and commitment](#)” by the Center for Creative Leadership has proved very [useful](#) in understanding this change. In essence it says that leadership is something produced collectively by a group of people. Formal

managers are particularly responsible for making it happen. In some places, a dictatorial management style will be the best way to produce leadership. In other situations, involvement, political alliances, rewards, or seduction will be more effective in establishing shared direction, alignment, and commitment.

The University of Copenhagen is one such organisation in which complexity is increasing and employees are particularly well-educated and autonomous. Historically at U of C, employees have been skeptical of strategy and formal leadership, even among managers. Therefore, we started a leadership development programme where each of the 60 leadership teams at the university received three facilitated workshops. During the workshops they worked on clarifying their shared tasks and strategies, training meeting skills and communication, and building commitment to each other and their department. This working on how to improve the shared direction, alignment, and commitment – proved to be meaningful and effective leadership development that overcame the resentment of command and control.

In a large industrial organization a division had successfully transferred all functions to those parts of the world where they were best located. If the division were to retain the wins gained by the restructuring exercise, the core task of the leadership team was to secure both shared direction, alignment and commitment between sales and research, between head office and production, etc. By virtue of coming from seven localities in six different countries with a variety of leadership cultures it proved more educating than any class on leadership or culture could have been, to seriously discuss how to attain shared direction, alignment, and commitment under these conditions.

A department in a large hospital had a number of frustrated physicians who, despite being managers by name, no longer

had staff reporting directly to them. Had they effectively been dismissed from leadership? By working with the role of leadership as the production of shared direction, alignment, and commitment, it became possible to play a meaningful part in leadership and, through numerous daily activities and participation in other groupings and committees, they became important players in the department's leadership activities without necessarily having any direct reports.

By understanding contemporary organizations and seeing leadership as the production of shared direction, alignment and commitment, leadership development is freed from being an individualized project to be tackled outside the organisation. In this way, leadership development means building shared direction, alignment, and commitment within the organisation. This opens a wealth of more interesting and effective possibilities for leadership development than mere schooling of individual executives. To be most effective, leadership development must be done with ones' leadership colleagues while working – with increasing skill – on the shared, most challenging tasks.



Anders Trillingsgaard, Ph.D., licensed industrial psychologist, Head of research at [UKON Human Results](#), Denmark. Contact: at@u-k.dk



Karen Poder, MA Communication Studies, Manager of Competence and Leadership Development, University of Copenhagen. Contact: kpp@adm.ku.dk



About Charles J. Palus, John B. McGuire, Chris Ernst

Charles J. (Chuck) Palus Ph.D. is a senior faculty member in Research, Innovation & Product Development at the Center for Creative Leadership. John B. McGuire is Senior Fellow and transformation practice leader at the Center for Creative Leadership, specializing in leadership for an interdependent world. Chris Ernst is the Organizational Effectiveness Thought Leader at Juniper Networks. [View all posts by Charles J. Palus, John B. McGuire, Chris Ernst →](#)

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