

# Engaging Thought

## *An Interview*

### EXERCISING



**Gervase Bushe (pronounced Jervis Bush) is Professor of Leadership and Organization Development at the Beedie School of Business, Simon Fraser University, in Vancouver, Canada and an award winning researcher and author in the areas of leadership, teamwork, and organizational change. He is also the president of Clear Learning Ltd. a company that designs intensive leadership development experiences and licenses people, worldwide, to deliver its courses. With over 30 years of experience as an organizational consultant, he has helped companies change their cultures, redesign their structures and processes, transform employee relations, and improve leadership effectiveness. His bestselling book, *Clear Leadership: Sustaining Real Collaboration and Partnership at Work*, came out in a newly revised edition in 2010.**

**Learning Forward Ontario:** Why are we unable to sustain collaborative organizations?

**Gervase Bushe:** I've come to believe that the problem is caused by the outmoded definitions of leadership, teamwork, and people skills we are using. Leading collaboration comes back to the micro-relationships of **partnership**. Partnership is a relationship in which all parties feel responsible for the success of whatever process or project they are engaged in. But with unequal power, followers will often feel that the leaders are responsible for success. Leading collaboratively requires treating followers as partners at the same time as the leader exercises authority. This requires new sets of leadership skills.

Many leaders who want to be collaborative start off by trying to include everyone in decision-making. The problem is that this doesn't work. It annoys followers; it takes forever to make a decision and hard decisions get avoided. After a while, in response to the complaints, the leader starts to make decisions, but now followers get upset because they weren't included. Leaders give up on being collaborative because they feel stuck between contradictory demands from followers – and they are.

At the end of the day, someone needs to make the decision and that is why hierarchy exists. In order for a decision to get made collaboratively, the leader has to be clear about how different decisions will be made and how followers get to participate in them. The problem is that most leaders don't have clear, practical tools for how to use their authority in a way that will maintain partnership: where the followers

continue to feel responsible for the success of the organization. That's what my next book will be about.

A second problem, and this is the one I focus on in *Clear Leadership*, is that there are two very different aspects to leading organizations. One deals with **leading performing** and the other with **leading learning**. Most leadership theories and training focus on leading performing and don't say much about leading learning. People trying to collaborate need to constantly learn from their experience together because things keep changing that affect the partnership. As a result, collaborative leadership requires skill in leading learning.

I think part of the problem is how most people try to learn from their collective experience. The common image is that we get together to talk about something that happened in the past to decide what we want to do the same or differently in the future. But there is a problem with this – everyone had a different experience because each of us creates our own experience. Experience is the observations, thoughts, feelings and wants you have moment to moment. Experience is not what happens to you but the reactions you create out of what happens to you. Ask five people what happened at a meeting they attended and you will get five different stories. Since everyone is having a different experience, how do we learn from our experience together?

When people get together to talk about their collective experience a subtle or not so subtle struggle ensues over who had the "right" experience. Due to hierarchy, the boss' experience takes precedence and as a result, everyone makes

## with Gervase Bushe

### ‘CLEAR LEADERSHIP’

the boss responsible for whatever comes of that “learning” process. At that point, partnership goes out the door. I believe this is the number one reason why a sense of partnership falls apart and collaborative organizations revert to command and control among leaders and followers who want to be in partnership.

Many people assume everyone has to have similar thoughts, feelings, and wants when working collaboratively. This is impossible. Everyone will always have a different experience. If the leader gets anxious when others have “unapproved” thoughts, feelings or wants, people are uncomfortable describing their experience so there is no chance of learning from experience.

Interpersonal mush is the third problem collaborative leaders face. We are sense-making beings and as such we have

to make sense of others who are important to us. When someone’s behavior doesn’t make sense to us, instead of asking them directly, especially if we are not having a good experience of them, we go to third parties and together make up a story that explains their behavior. What happens is that people make up stories about each other’s experience, stories they generally don’t check out. Future acts of sense-making have to fit with past acts of sense-making so that over time we develop an image of the other with little basis in fact, and we tend to only see those things that support that story. Since the stories we make up tend to be worse than the reality, over time interpersonal mush destroys partnerships and collaboration. People are not going to stop creating their own experience, and they are not going to stop trying to make sense of one another. The problem is that we don’t acknowledge these processes and make them visible.

**Interpersonal Mush:** Stories we’ve made up about each other (that tend to be more unfavourable than reality) that haven’t been checked out directly with the other person. Interpersonal mush is at the core of so much organizational dysfunction.

In order to lead collaboration successfully, individuals must get to a certain stage of psychological development. We’ve grown up learning ‘people skills’ that are about avoiding uncomfortable situations by taking care of the other person’s experience. Many people don’t recognize that actually creates more problems than it solves. We don’t check out our stories about each other because we think it will just make things worse. My research suggests that around 80% of the conflicts people have at work exist because of the mush. It’s because people don’t talk about what’s in their head that relationships get worse. But this is not about being “open and honest” – it’s about being skillfully transparent, something quite different.

To sustain collaborative organizations, we need to obtain a whole new set of people skills. This includes the ability to get things in the open and clear out the stories. Not for the purpose of persuading but to allow for voices to be heard so that we understand each others’ experience. In a partnership, everyone’s experience is valid and so allowing people to describe their different experiences supports partnership. The leader still needs to clarify how decisions will get made and what is required of an individual or the group. We need clarity on who has what role and sometimes agreement on processes the team is going to follow. When diversity is allowed and expressed, it leads to collective awareness, greater range of thoughts, greater range of the sense of the environment, and more points of view.

Ways of managing anxiety get in the way of leaders doing this. Avoidance of anxiety producing conversations is what creates the mush in the first place. When leaders get reactive, defensive, closed down or absent because of their anxiety, the mush gets deeper and more noxious. We take our wants, thoughts and feelings somewhere else – usually the water cooler or parking lot.



**Learning Forward Ontario:** What are some strategies for building partnerships and fostering improvement in relationships, teams, and organizations?

**Gervase Bushe:** There are lots of ways. Here, I will address a few.

Fundamentally, you need a leader who is a learner. The question is: "Is the leader willing to accept disconfirming information publicly?" The capacity of the system to be able to learn from collective experience depends on a leader's willingness to be seen learning publicly; their ability to describe their experience without expecting anyone else to be having the same experience, and their ability to be curious about other people's experience without getting defensive.

You also need a leader who operates out of an "appreciate mindset". In this mindset the leader assumes that people are the heroes of their own stories, and that they are operating out of positive intent no matter how negative their impact might be. There are a lot of techniques for bringing together large groups to learn together collectively and to imagine alternative solutions but it is easier for people to be real with each other if they are not trying to figure out who's to blame.

In addition, you need a leader who sees and fosters the potential of others. I believe there is an "archetype" of leadership. An archetype is a collection of urges and motivations that are hard wired into all human beings. Archetypes transcend culture and show up in myths, stories, legends, art, science, culture, and people's dreams. If you look at the stories of all cultures on the planet, you will find very consistent stories about 'good' kings/queens/leaders and 'bad' kings/queens/leaders. Good sovereigns praise you and bless you and see positive potentials in you that you might not even see in yourself. When in the presence of a good sovereign you feel more able to function. They see strengths, and possibilities, in both people and systems. By contrast, the bad sovereign or 'shadow' sovereign demands praise and blessing for himself. He or she needs to see his/her own wonderfulness and in their presence it's your job to praise and bless them. Another difference is that the good sovereign's vision of greatness is focused outside himself – the great team or organization or society. The shadow sovereign holds a vision of his/her own greatness. They are concerned with their own grandiosity. When you have leaders operating out of the perspective of the good sovereign, people naturally want to follow them and they naturally collaborate. When leaders operate like the shadow sovereign, the realm breaks down and the "knights" fight among

### **Interpersonal Clarity:**

Interpersonal clarity describes an interaction in which people know what their own experience is, what another person's experience is, and the difference between the two.

themselves. People who experience what I call "Appreciative Leadership" experience a leader who sees the best in them – in their presence they feel more able, more energized, more courageous, and more generous – all things that support collaboration.

To foster improvement in relationships, teams and organizations, it is most important to clear up the interpersonal mush. In an environment of interpersonal mush, we aren't clear what others are experiencing, the reasons for what they are doing or saying. Meetings and discussion are much less productive. Leaders can't see the consequences of their actions (because people aren't telling them). Plans and decisions that people appear to agree to don't get implemented very well because they don't voice their disagreements in the meetings – they talk about them outside the meetings to a few trusted others. We can't learn from our collective experience because people aren't describing what their experience really is. One solution that helps to improve collaborative work relationships is to increase interpersonal clarity through organizational learning conversations. These are highly formalized conversations that allow people to cut through the mush and really understand each other. I have hundreds of anecdotes of people who have used learning conversations with colleagues they had very difficult relationships with and discovered that the difficulties were due to the stories they had made up about each other; they were able to build much more effective partnerships from that point forward.

**Learning Forward Ontario:** In your book, *Clear Leadership*, you discuss the importance of revealing our mental maps to others and describe the 'cardwork' technique that can be used to uncover and describe our theories of action. Would you mind sharing more about that with our readers?

**Gervase Bushe:** Clear leadership is a set of skills that enable people to discuss the different experiences they are having in ways that build partnership and lead to continuous improvement in relationships, teams and organizations. One skill clear leaders possess is that they know what their theories of action are (their beliefs about how to accomplish something) and can explain them in simple, direct ways to the people they work with. Cardwork is a technique that helps uncover and describe these mental maps to other

people in a simple and understandable way. Cardwork is about making your theories of action explicit so that they can be described, discussed and tested. It's also a way of getting clear about other people's maps. I call it Cardwork because I use 4x3 cards to draw a diagram for each mental map.

## CARDWORK

Well constructed cards have the following characteristics:

- five or six parts
- a theory of action cards with a title, a subtitle, and three or four phrases (never more than four) connected by a spinning, propeller-like image

Complete in itself:

- the title describes what this theory of action is about
- the subtitle captures the outcome of successful action
- the phrases compose a complete theory of how to reach that outcome

Spinning in all directions:

- the phrases each capture a critical facet of how to accomplish the goal, task or action, but they do not have to be in a step-by-step sequence
- each phrase can 'spin' and have more than one relevant meaning

Poetry rules:

- the title, subtitle and phrases are constructed to evoke as many useful associations as possible
- use wet, sticky, metaphorical language as opposed to dry, precise, intellectual language – a great card reads like a poem

I'll use the 'Sustaining Partnership' card from the book as an example. This card says that the outcome of successfully sustaining partnership is that both you and I stay happily committed (to what ever project or process we are engaged in) and describes the things that I think have to happen in order to do so.

One of the findings of research on mental maps is that novice theories of action tend to be long lists of things with little coherence while expert maps tend to have a few, integrative elements. Cardwork forces people to think like an expert.

If you are going to use this technique with a group of people to develop a common map of what you are trying to



do together, I suggest you begin with a common title – for example, 'Student Learning'. Next, have individuals suggest subtitles that describe the outcome of effective action. In this case, what would happen if students were learning? (Note: People will come up with a variety – for example, good grades or the ability to generalize learning.) You can gauge how cohesive or fragmented groups are by examining the variety of things people come up with. How similar or different are their subtitles? At this point the group has to collectively determine what is the outcome of effective action. Until you have that, you do not have shared goals.

After the group has determined the outcome or subtitle, people individually complete their cards by listing the three to four key things that make it happen. Individuals usually start by making a longer list and then combine and whittle those ideas down to three or four which are then represented on the spokes on the card. At that point, I have people verbally take turns reciting their cards. Then they put each of the three to four elements of their card on separate post-it notes and those all go up on a wall. The group then collectively organizes those post-its into four categories and gives each a title. Those become the spokes of a collective card that represents their shared theory of action. This process usually takes about one hour. Make sure that you pick a theory of action that is mission critical – something that people care about – that affects their ability to collaborate.

You can find out more about Cardwork and other techniques for clear leadership in Dr. Bushe's book, Clear Leadership: Sustaining Real Collaboration and Partnership at Work, revised edition, 2010, Davis-Black, Boston, MA and at his company's website: [www.clearlearning.ca](http://www.clearlearning.ca). ■