

# Leadership And Meaning In Collective Action

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## ABSTRACT

This case study of a community activist group explores leadership and collective meaning-making in a data-rich environment of people joined by mutual engagement in a collective enterprise. Using data from e-mails, interviews and public documents, the study applies a framework of leadership styles, leadership tasks, and the collective negotiation of meaning to a group without formal leaders and whose members demonstrated widely distributed contributions to the group's goals.

Leadership as meaning-making appeared in the case study in several distinct ways: (a) engagement in the group's pursuit of its primary tasks, (b) engagement in the pursuit of leadership tasks, and (c) attributions of leadership by and to group members. Within the group under study, a wider or narrower distribution of the negotiation of collective meaning appeared related to the distinction between primary and leadership tasks. That leadership behaviors were hard to identify in the study suggests that models of leadership based upon the expression of individual goals may not be readily applied in groups bound together by a collective enterprise.

The study's conclusions suggest new understandings of a meaning-making perspective of leadership: (a) in the pursuit of various categories of collective task, (b) as the negotiation of collective meaning within the context of a practice, and (c) as the pursuit of individual goals in a collective setting. Further work in these areas holds the potential to better understand circumstances under which leadership is more or less widely distributed in groups and organizations, to refine models of leadership, and to provide practical recommendations for the better leadership of community activist groups and communities of practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Changing views of leadership accompany changes in our ideas of groups and organizations, and what it is to be part of them. Structures such as virtual teams (Gould, 1997; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000) and communities of practice (Drath & Palus, 1994; Wenger, 1998) offer new notions of engagement within and across formal organizational boundaries. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers describe new forms of mutual engagement that we need as we “create communities from the cohering center of shared significance” (1998, p. 18). Where formal leaders are absent, such as in the community activist group examined in this study, to see leadership in terms of mutual engagement may help our understanding of such groups and of leadership in general.

This study explores whether the conception of leadership as collective meaning-making (Drath & Palus, 1994) is useful in describing the behaviors of members of a group that is: (a) lacking in formal, appointed leaders; and (b) joined by mutual engagement in a collective enterprise (Wenger, 1998). As a universal aspect of collective engagement (Bruner, 1990), meaning-making suggests a way to view leadership as something that everyone does, irrespective of positions or qualities of leadership. From this perspective, leadership may be a general aspect of our social behavior rather than attached to, for example, positions of formal authority or special personal attributes.

A meaning-making perspective acknowledges that leadership is shared, and regards action as coming not from authority but from “joint or reciprocal interpretation of experience, especially experiences that are readily open to multiple interpretations” (Drath, 1998, p. 415). It is suggested by Bennis’s observation that collaborative, intensely creative groups and strong leaders “create each other” (1997, p. 198). The perspective allows for diversity and pluralism, but it also admits traditional views of leadership. It does so because what we think of as traditional leadership may itself be an artifact of collective meaning and experience. For example, in a leadership regime of domination and command, people still make meaning about the world and their situation within it. Hence a meaning-making perspective may look for leadership beyond individual leaders, be they conspicuous or inconspicuous (e.g., Greenleaf, 1977; Sorenson & Hickman, 2002).

A community activist group was chosen for the case study for several reasons. First, the group under study depended upon widespread active contributions from its membership, prospered without formal leadership, and exemplified what Kanter refers to as “empowered group networks with a common purpose” (1995, p. xv). Second, the leadership literature does not yet serve community activist groups with a great deal of analysis of their concerns. Lastly, community activist groups are a promising area in the study of leadership as sensemaking (Ospina & Schall, 2001). Ospina and Schall ask, “How does the community develop a coherent view of the issues? Who in the community articulates them?” (2001, para. 14). Weick (1995, p. 172) suggests that “the overriding question in sensemaking research is, ‘how are meanings and artifacts produced and reproduced in complex nets of collective action?’” This study explores how people engaged in collective action (what Ospina and Schall call a “community”) develop coherent meaning, and how meaning-making processes relate to leadership in such a group.

## MEANING-MAKING AND LEADERSHIP

### *Meaning and Meaning-making*

Bruner (1990, p. 65) suggests that vagueness in defining meaning is no barrier to precise study. As the term is used in this study, meaning rests upon neither aspects of language (described in Dennett, 1996, pp. 401-402) nor the meaning of life that Wheatley describes as “personal coherence” (1992, p. 135). Rather, it resembles frameworks of shared meaning within which to act. Since Drath and Palus (1994) consider leadership as engagement in the process of developing such frameworks, we may expect to find leadership where the development of shared meaning is creating new possibilities for action.

This study considers shared meaning from the perspective of a process by which it arises, rather than from a static definition of meaning itself. First, meaning-making takes place in the context of collective action in pursuit of a shared purpose. Second, meaning-making entails the interpretation of some aspect of the group or its environment. Third, meaning-making as interpretation leads to changes internal to the group. Fourth, changes in the group associated with meaning-making in turn lead to changes to the group’s collective action and/or its shared purpose. In this study, collective action and a shared purpose are together referred to as a collective enterprise. In summary, collective meaning-making interprets experience such that a group’s pursuit of its collective enterprise is in some way changed.

Over time, we attribute causal power to aspects of meaning. Whether or not something that holds meaning for us has an independent or concrete existence, we come to think of it as a thing. Eisenberg and Riley write that “social typifications...become reified, or taken for granted, as if they were beyond social construction and in the realm of the material world” (1988, p. 143). Weick describes how interpretations become reified as follows:

“When people take their interpretations seriously and act on them, the material world may cohere in a different way than it did before. If it does change, others may notice these changes, interpret them in ways that are at least equivalent to those of the original actor, and then act on these new interpretations in ways that verify the original interpretation. Over time, interpretations become objectified, diffused, and widely internalized into what comes to be called a consensus on what is ‘out there.’” (1995, p. 79)

The term “meaning-making” is used interchangeably with “sensemaking.” Though they differ in the literature (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Weick, 1995), for the purposes of this study they do so no more than various authors’ definitions of either single term.

### *Coherence*

The making of shared meaning, which enables and informs action toward a collective purpose, need not provide an accurate or consistent representation of the world. Bourdieu (1980/1990) argues that the basis for collective action lies not in objective truth or knowledge, but in incomplete knowledge or equivocal understandings. He admits a “logic which is not that of a logician” (p. 86), and suggests that, under conditions of ambiguity, this practical logic sacrifices formal conceptual coherence. The ritual practices that Bourdieu describes (p. 264) are, from the viewpoint of this study, coherent to those who engage in them despite any apparent internal inconsistencies. An example of city planning in Denmark (Flyvbjerg, 1998) suggests that rational consistency may underlie rather little of the action that we find in the world.

### *Collective Action*

Collective action entails a common history, progress in a collective enterprise, individual engagement with the group, and group engagement with the world. These are common concerns in the literature on practice (Bourdieu, 1972/1977, 1980/1990; MacIntyre, 1984; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001; Spinosa, Flores, & Dreyfus, 1997) and communities of practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Drath & Palus, 1994; Wenger, 1998).

In the context of a practice, collective action is the action of a group of people engaged together in “socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly” (Barnes, 2001, p. 19). In the context of a practice, Wenger writes (1998, p. 47), “It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do.” Collective action is the source and carrier of meaning (Schatzki, 2001). A view of leadership as meaning-making involves the construction of frameworks for action (Drath & Palus, 1994). Action outside such frameworks lacks purpose and meaning—as an example, Barnes writes “not every well-intentioned prod with a needle is acupuncture” (2001, p. 25).

### *Decision-making*

Decision-making entails the resolution of a problem into alternative courses of action, and the subsequent choice of one alternative in preference to the others. Such choices may be made according to criteria of straightforward utility, or with respect to what has worked in the past (Gilboa & Schmeidler, 2001). From a sensemaking perspective, post hoc interpretation offers reasons for a decision that has already been made (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2; Weick, 1995, p. 11). In distinguishing between collective meaning and group decisions, Dixon (1999, p. 58) points out that meaning-making sets the terms in which a group perceives whether or not a decision needs to be made. For decisions made in organizations and groups, collective meaning encompasses the problems to be solved, the “alternatives that come to mind” (Simon, 1997, p. 94), the criteria by which they are compared, and subsequent interpretations of choices made. A meaning-making perspective, then, emphasizes the creation (or negotiation) of collective meaning rather than the making of decisions within the context of that meaning.

## *Leadership*

### *Influence*

This study adopts a view that leadership entails the exertion of some form of influence: that an effect upon others, such that the environment is to some degree changed, must be necessary (if not sufficient) for leadership. Drath and Palus suggest that influence arises when people participate in a community, and is “a beneficial outcome” (1994, p. 14) of leadership as collective meaning-making, rather than a characteristic of formal authority. Without explicitly mentioning leadership, Wenger describes influence as “attempts to shape the future” (1998, p. 91). He connects influence with dual aspects of the negotiation of meaning: (a) influence through engagement in relationships with other people in the group, and (b) influence through the production or promotion of artifacts that affect others.

### *The Distribution of Leadership*

In contrast with the view that leadership creates meaning, Drath and Palus (1994) suggest that meaning-making constitutes leadership (1994, p. 10). Wenger suggests that we all constantly negotiate meaning as we engage with others (1998, pp. 51-52). As we act collectively, then, we all partake to some extent in leadership construed as meaning-making. This is not to suggest that either meaning-making or leadership is only collaborative, but rather that they may be accessible not solely to those in positions of authority (which Drath and Palus define as “conferred power to perform a service,” 1994, p. 6).

Leadership in groups can appear as concentrated or broadly distributed (Ospina & Schall, 2001, para. 10). Lipman-Bluman and Leavitt (1999) point out the “dispersion of leadership” (p. 80) in some successful groups, in which “special people who play leadership roles” (p. 80) may be identified by the work they do rather than by their leadership status. The literature on leadership in teams (e.g., Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Parker, 1996) suggests that leadership is distributed among team members. For example, Barry (1991) identifies self-managed teams as settings for leadership that: (a) emerges from the group, (b) consists of a collection of roles exchanged over time among group members, and (c) cannot be ascribed to a single individual. While Lipnack and Stamps (2000) believe that virtual teams can only succeed if leadership is distributed over the group, Cohen and Prusak (2001) write that successful virtual collaboration seems to require charismatic leadership. Bennis (1997) writes that intensely creative groups, despite their collaborative nature, have strong leaders. That “it is the exceptional case...when a team creates a purpose entirely on its own” (Katzenbach & Smith 1993, p. 112) suggests that at least some aspects of leadership may not be distributed among team members.

### *The Attribution of Leadership*

If leadership itself is a construct of meaning-making, as Hunt (1984) and Drath (2001) suggest, the shared meaning we make may include attributions of leadership roles and qualities. Dominance, influence and alignment are views of leadership in general that have made sense in the past—and continue, under conducive circumstances, to do so (Gergen, 2003). In an organization or group, consent that a particular individual has a leadership position may be an act of meaning-making, no matter how such an act may be constrained by power or influence.

Lipman-Blumen (1996, pp. 32-41) suggests a variety of explanations for the attribution of a leadership role to certain individuals. She emphasizes the need to counter “existential uncertainty and anxiety” (p. 36). For most of us, according to Lipman-Blumen, this entails seeking protection from a world over which we have no control (p. 37). Leaders, on the other hand, seem to counter their anxieties through their eminence in the group (pp. 41-42). Despite this appearance of a fundamental difference between leaders and followers, perhaps meaning as the basis for leadership need not imply that the leader and the led are different orders of person.

## BASIS OF THE STUDY

To explore leadership among “people participating in a shared process” (Drath & Palus, 1994, p. 14) in the light of a meaning-making perspective, this qualitative study employs constructs from the literature of leadership and meaning-making: (a) models of leadership tasks (Drath, 2001), (b) leadership behaviors (Lipman-Blumen, 1996), and (c) the negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998). Applying these constructs to the case under study provides insights regarding their usefulness in understanding leadership under conditions of mutual engagement in informal groups.

### *Leadership Tasks*

Drath (2001) represents the tasks of leadership as threefold: (a) setting direction, (b) creating and maintaining commitment, and (c) facing adaptive challenge. First, leadership sets direction for the group or organization, establishing orientation toward a common vision and purpose. This may take place, according to Drath, in distinct ways: (a) through the authority of a single leader, in one-way traffic of meaning from the leader to the led; (b) through negotiation and persuasion, in which the leader adopts the orientation that prevails in the group; or (c) in a manner of more collective leadership, which enfolds ambiguity and multiple meanings. Secondly, leadership engenders trust, collaboration, and engagement of the group’s members in the service of its purpose. This may occur through allegiance to the leader, commitment to the results of a process of negotiation following from engagement in the process itself, or the “shared creation of an unknown future” (Drath, 2001, p. 25). Lastly, leadership fosters a response to challenges which the group lacks the resources to handle (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). This entails negotiation of new meaning, with some degree of tolerance for ambiguity.

To Drath’s three categories of leadership task is added a fourth: primary tasks, which directly pursue the group’s primary purpose. This is based upon the hypothesis that an individual can exert leadership by directly advancing the group’s purpose, as well as by addressing characteristics of the group such as process, vision or change. Zaleznik (1989) calls this the “real work” of the executive, but it applies also to non-executives. The category of primary tasks had been introduced to the study, before any data were available for analysis, with the possibility of occasions such as this in mind: that what could be considered leadership, in terms of its effect on the group and its collective enterprise, might arise from members’ pursuit of the primary task.

### *Leadership Behaviors*

Lipman-Blumen's categories of leadership behavior (1996) have to do with the way that people pursue goals. They are strategies for individual achievement in a social world. They appeared relevant to a study of meaning-making as a fundamental aspect of collective action for several reasons: (a) the concern for meaning—albeit, in Lipman-Blumen's view, more individual and existential than collective and constructive; (b) the need for leadership throughout groups and organizations, not just “at the top”; (c) the inclusion of “traditional” as well as collaborative behaviors; and (d) the origin of leadership behaviors in strategies for accomplishing goals beyond the scope of leadership itself (Lipman-Blumen, 1996, p. 115).

The study uses Lipman-Blumen's model (1996) in two unconventional ways. First, it examines actual behaviors for examples of behavioral style, as distinct from identifying the behavioral preferences of individuals and applying this knowledge to an understanding of how they engage with groups. In other words, the study takes a “bottom-up” approach from observed behaviors rather than a “top-down” approach from behavioral styles. Second, because nine categories of behavior might provide too little information in each category and adversely affect the reliability of distinguishing between nine categories of behavioral style, the study uses three behavioral categories: (a) direct, (b) relational, and (c) instrumental (Lipman-Blumen, 1996). Each behavioral set incorporates three behavioral styles, and each style appears in only one set.

### *Negotiation of Meaning*

Within the context of collective action, Wenger (1998) suggests that meaning arises through a process of negotiation (see also Bruner, 1990, p. 19). In this sense, negotiation of meaning is more than the arrival at an agreement by contending parties. It may occur between: (a) prior meanings, (b) experience based upon those meanings, and (c) the meanings that individuals and groups seek to contribute to the whole. If individual meanings are not in contention but there is a challenge to be met, negotiation may take on the sense of “negotiating a sharp curve” (Wenger, 1998, p. 53). Where leadership is closely associated with authority, it may be that some negotiation takes place in one direction only: from the leader to the led.

This study examines collective meaning-making from the perspective of two aspects of the negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998): (a) active participation with others; and (b) giving of form to our experience, or reification. Wenger offers the following example:

“The reification of a Constitution is just a form: it is not equivalent to a citizenry. Yet it is empty without the participation of the citizens involved. Conversely, the production of such a reification is crucial to the kind of negotiation that is necessary for them to act as citizens and to bring together the multiple perspectives, interests, and interpretations that participation entails.” (1998, p. 62)

## THE CASE STUDY

### *Conduct of the Study*

The group under study was chosen according to criteria which indicated that it would richly manifest characteristics of collective action. These included: (a) a membership bound to the group primarily by a common enterprise; (b) group members in apparent positions of leadership having attained those positions by authority deriving from within the group; (c) no responsibility outside the group for its creation, sustenance, or leadership; and (d) demonstrable progress in the group's collective enterprise over a lengthy period of time. There was evidence that: (a) a variety of individuals had contributed to the group's progress, and (b) the group had encountered experiences that affected its goals, actions and governance. The group was virtual, in that it relied upon communications technology for communication and for producing artifacts, and a considerable part of its activities took place without members meeting in person. The group was prepared collectively to agree to the case study using data from individuals who agreed to participate. Of 43 current and former group members contacted, 26 agreed to participate. The data for the study consisted of: (a) 12 megabytes of archived e-mail communications, which soundly represented the history of communications within the group; (b) semi-structured interviews of five study participants, and (c) group artifacts and public documents.

The group chosen for the case study was bound by a common enterprise of engaging with local planning and economic development, largely in opposition to established political governance in the community. During the period under study, the group achieved several successes in local interventions, and both the group and its collective enterprise underwent considerable changes in response both to changing conditions and to the group's experience. The study starts at the group's creation, when no leaders were formally appointed and no lines of authority existed. The study ends 13 months later, with a commitment to a major issue of local concern and a degree of formalization anticipated by nobody at the outset.

Data-intensive episodes in the group's development were identified, and each described in terms of elements of a process of the making of shared meaning: (a) the nature of the collective enterprise, (b) the interpretation of experience, (c) changes within the group, and (d) changes to the collective enterprise. Within each episode, collective tasks were identified and analyzed in terms of group members' involvement in the pursuit of those tasks. Since all the tasks so identified fell into the primary category, the researcher specifically sought tasks corresponding to the three categories of leadership task (Drath, 2001) on the basis of familiarity with the data built up over several phases of data refinement, reduction and description.

### *Leadership in the Group under Study*

#### *The Collective Enterprise*

The study examined four data-intensive episodes: (a) participation in public meetings, early in the group's existence, regarding government grants and their administration by the local political establishment; (b) the sudden emergence of a proposal for a hazardous waste recycling plant in the town, and the group's research and rapid realization of the nature of the proposal; (c)

combating the marginalization of the group by sections of the public and press who supported a heavy manufacturing plant proposed for the town, and (d) managing conflict within the group during its the development into a more formal organization. These episodes reflect aspects of the group's collective enterprise as the group's experiences developed and the environment changed.

### *Primary Tasks and the Distribution of Leadership*

Primary tasks were not explicit to group members, but emerged in the course of analyzing the study data. Early in its existence, the group worked towards primary tasks such as opposing the manner in which the town administered government grant applications. Some tasks, such as planning for and participating in public meetings (such as council meetings, and distinct from meetings of group members), persisted over more than one episode. Over time, new primary tasks emerged. For example, as the group became a force in local affairs, it began to oppose efforts to marginalize its efforts and its membership.

An illustration from the study shows the pursuit of a primary task leading to significant changes in the group. One evening, having learned in a public meeting of the recycling plant proposal, Jennie spent an hour researching information on the Internet. This brief incident had the effect of transforming the group's interpretations of: (a) its purpose regarding the proposal, and (b) the capabilities of the Internet. The group's resulting opposition to the proposal represented a change to the collective enterprise, gave rise to new primary tasks related to research, and left the group capable of rising to the much larger challenge of the manufacturing plant a few months later.

Of the 26 study participants, 18 were actively engaged in the primary tasks identified in the study. Distributed leadership appeared as many forms of influence, exerted in the pursuit of primary tasks. Many members took part in, for example, writing and review of individual and group letters to the press and to government agencies, in outreach, and in research.

Each of the most active members exerted a distinguishable influence upon the group. Dee was primarily concerned with grant administration and building conservation, and by the time of the manufacturing plant had moved on to issues outside the group. Mark's work towards changing the administration of government grants in the town had inspired Jennie to create the e-mail forum that was the group's genesis, but Mark left in disagreement with the group's challenge to the manufacturing plant. Ella arrived at the time of the manufacturing plant, chaired a subcommittee during the group's formalization, and redirected efforts to another organization on becoming discouraged by conflict related to the group's structure. Enzo was active in arranging social gatherings for the group, and initiated early opposition to the manufacturing plant through another organization while continuing to subscribe to the group's policy of delaying overt opposition.

The following study participants were explicitly identified as leaders, even in the absence of leadership roles and formal authority. Celia joined at the time of the manufacturing plant proposal, spent a great deal of effort in outreach, research, and acquiring membership and funds, and throughout the period under study exerted a sympathetic presence amidst conflicts. Jennie initiated the e-mail forum that formed much of the group's communication, and (in part by virtue of a high degree of personal commitment to making changes in the town) became the most conspicuous leader of the group. Jim combined long experience of the town's public affairs with

activism for the arts and for underserved residents. Gary contributed a reputation for attending many public meetings and working for change in the town. Dana exerted acknowledged influence in expanding the group's horizons beyond its home town to the regional and the global.

### *Leadership Tasks*

Examination of the data for tasks of setting direction, creating and maintaining commitment, and facing adaptive challenge showed these concerns emerging over time. Only primary tasks were apparent when the group was originally formed as an online communication forum for town residents with common concerns regarding local government. Leadership tasks included broadening the group's horizons (in which Dana played a significant part), re-orienting the group towards its primary tasks, and sustaining a sense of the size of the challenge represented by the manufacturing plant.

It was clear to Jennie that the urgency of the adaptive change brought by the manufacturing plant called for considerable changes in the group. As the enactment of these changes (particularly in structure) threatened to distract the group, Jennie called upon the group as a whole to focus on its primary tasks. While the group continued to share the work of the primary tasks, much of the work of dealing with adaptive change fell to Celia, Jennie and Jim, who eventually became the group's first board members.

### *Negotiation of Meaning and Decision-making*

Though the group's tactics and primary tasks were constantly under negotiation, the study showed no evidence of a formal decision-making or problem-solving method. Both meaning-making dimensions of participation and reification (Wenger, 1998) were apparent in day-to-day activities related to tactics in pursuit of the group's primary tasks. Further, in such activities both participation and reification were widely distributed among group members. Some group members, especially Jennie, contributed more instances of reification than others.

Some decisions took place in informal face-to-face meetings, open to all group members. A notable example was the decision to request that the town manager publicly commit to bringing a representative of the recycling plant to a public forum. That this public forum took place, and its subsequent role in defeating the Recycling Plant, proved essential to the group's development in response to the proposal for a Manufacturing Plant. The possibility of this outcome was not apparent when Jennie and Jim arrived at the decision; rather, they were discussing tactical plans for an upcoming meeting of the town council. The context of the decision included a perception among group members that the town manager was following a long-standing pattern of implementing decisions without public consultation. The success of the public forum changed collective meaning in that group members felt capable of dealing with the larger challenge of the manufacturing plant when it arose.

Not all decisions were taken jointly. For example, Jennie decided to start a membership-based group during a vacation spent away from contact with the group. The context in which Jennie took this decision included widespread concern among group members that e-mail messages should not be visible to those who opposed the group's goals. Added to this was Jennie's sense, by no means commonly held, that the challenge of the Manufacturing Plant would call for fundraising and for a sustained effort that only a more formal organization could support.

Changes in collective meaning following this decision included widespread efforts towards acquiring members and funding, and the emergence of shared tasks concerned with the establishment of an organizational structure.

Changes in the group's shared meaning structures over the period under study were attributable to: (a) the effect of experience and changes in the environment, and (b) the specific influence of group members who held meanings not shared by the rest of the group. The development of meaning in the group, which could be construed as collective learning, incorporated an observable process of negotiation. The group perceived problems and took decisions within the space of possibility allowed by the meaning shared by its members. Where individuals or small groups effected decisions based upon meaning not widely held among the group, observed results included: (a) actual change in the group, (b) continued active membership amidst some lack of coherence with the group as a whole, and (c) leaving the group.

*Leadership as Meaning-making*

Figure 1 summarizes the findings of the study as they apply to leadership tasks, leadership behaviors and the negotiation of meaning.

Dimension of the Analytical Framework	Categories	Source	Fit	Remarks
Primary Tasks	Primary	This study	Yes	Primary tasks were very easily found in the data, and manifested widely distributed negotiation of meaning.
Leadership Tasks	Direction Commitment Adaptive change	Drath (2001)	Yes	All categories of leadership task were evident in the data. Negotiation of meaning for these tasks was not widely distributed among group members.
Leadership Behaviors	Direct Relational Instrumental	Lipman-Blumen (1996)	Limited	These behaviors were hard to identify, perhaps because of the close relationship between individual and collective goals. In leadership tasks, a concentration of the negotiation of meaning in the group may render these behaviors easier to identify.
Negotiation of meaning	Participation Reification	Wenger (1998)	Yes	Both categories were found in all aspects of the study, except for the attribution of leadership, in which participation predominated.

*Figure 1.* Summary of findings regarding the analytical framework of the study © Pisapia, 2005.

Drath's three categories of leadership task (2001), as well as the new category of primary tasks, proved helpful in understanding and clarifying what was going on in the group under study. Because goals and actions appeared as collective attributes of the group as a whole, it was difficult to identify individual goals. Lipman-Blumen's dimensions of leadership behaviors (1996), which depend upon goals held by the individual, contribute to the study's findings only inasmuch as they did not readily appear in the analysis. The group manifested two aspects of

Wenger's model of communities of practice (1998): (a) participation and reification (categories of the negotiation of meaning); and (b) a "medley of activities, relations and objects" (p. 82), given coherence by the collective enterprise, which Wenger refers to as a shared repertoire.

The category of primary tasks is a major finding of this study. Primary tasks are directly related to the group's pursuit of its primary purpose. Though the study sought no conclusions as to the correctness of the categories of direction, commitment and adaptive change, all four categories of task (primary, direction, commitment, and adaptive change) appeared in the data. The dimensions of collective meaning-making (Wenger, 1998) appeared in the pursuit of tasks in each category.

Primary and leadership tasks differed in that the broad involvement of group members in primary tasks did not appear in the leadership tasks. By no means did all group members pursue and negotiate the group's primary goals to the same extent, but members' engagement in pursuit of the collective enterprise was widespread throughout the group. As the group's structure became more formal, leadership tasks emerged. Involvement in leadership tasks became concentrated, while that in the primary tasks remained broadly distributed. While formalization implies the ascription of explicit leadership roles to some individuals, the evidence in the study did not suggest that the group's formalization was the sole cause of concentration of leadership. On the contrary, the group's need for formalization appeared incidental to the emergence of leadership tasks, and those tasks were associated with many issues other than formalization.

Group members were sharing the work of primary tasks, yet the group as a whole did not share the work of the leadership tasks. In consequence, these tasks were pursued by a small core of members, who became associated with more conspicuous aspects of leadership. In general, group members' alignment with the leadership tasks was related to attributions of leadership to the individual who most visibly undertook the leadership tasks. In terms of Drath's categories of relational leadership as meaning-making in a community of practice: (2001, p. 153), those least aligned with leadership tasks tended to interpret the most conspicuous leader's actions as personal dominance, while those most closely aligned tended instead toward personal influence or relational dialogue.

In the later part of the period under study, the most conspicuous leader actively concentrated the group's attention upon activities associated with its primary task. This was an means not only to apply the group to the primary task, but also to mitigate the group's distraction and dissention over some leadership tasks. To focus the group's attention on its primary task, in this case, also served the work of two leadership tasks: (a) the direction of the group, and (b) adaptive change to a challenge which the group lacked the resources to meet.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study germinated in the phrase "leadership as meaning-making in a community of practice" (Drath & Palus, 1994). Having examined a group which manifested many aspects of meaning-making in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), the study offers conclusions regarding the applicability of contemporary views of leadership in groups bound by common pursuit of a collective enterprise.

### *Primary and Leadership Tasks*

The category of primary tasks, associated with “real work” (Zaleznik, 1989) and direct pursuit of the group’s primary purpose, is a major finding of this research. Leadership as meaning-making could be seen both in primary tasks and in leadership tasks, but the differences between the two allowed the study to identify differences in the way that leadership was exerted in the group in pursuit of different kinds of task. The study found that meaning-making was more widely distributed in pursuit of primary tasks than in pursuit of leadership tasks. If leadership is construed only as the pursuit of leadership tasks, then the study does not indicate that leadership was widely distributed in the group under study. On the other hand, leadership as meaning-making was distributed broadly or narrowly according to the type of task being pursued. This can be further understood in terms of Drath’s description of dialogue as a way of understanding leadership as what “happens when people make sense together of shared work” (2001, p. 153). In a given group, different sets (subgroups of the entire group which may consist of the entire group) of people may make sense together of different categories of shared work. Though the group’s primary goal remains clear, and collective action toward that goal remains strong, the group may not easily negotiate questions of the group’s direction, commitment and adaptive change. Accordingly, different categories of task can occupy different places on the “continuum” (Ospina & Schall, 2001, para. 10) between individual and collective leadership.

#### *Leadership as the Pursuit of Goals in Groups Bound by a Collective Enterprise*

The study found that Lipman-Blumen’s model of connective leadership, despite its concern for commonalities (1996, p. 339), was not easily applied. It was not obvious from the data whether an individual was pursuing his or her own goal, serving others’ goals, or engaging others in pursuit of his or her own goal. This difficulty may have several causes. Firstly, it may be that examining evidence in a case study of group members’ behaviors, without considering each member’s behavioral preferences, is an inappropriate use of the model. Secondly, perhaps individual goals did not appear because the study did not seek data information explicitly related to leadership, let alone to participants’ leadership styles. Thirdly, since the group under study emerged as a collective entity rather than a collection of individuals, it could be that a model such as Lipman-Blumen’s, in which the individual is a distinct actor or holder of goals simply does not apply where a group is held together by common goals.

Like her model of behavior, Lipman-Blumen’s perspective on meaning (1996, pp. 325-331) rests upon the competing concerns of “self and other” (p. 329). This lies in contrast with Wenger’s view of the self in terms of modes of belonging, in contrast to (and working in tandem with) one’s capacity to engage in negotiation of meaning. According to Wenger, both self and meaning are principally collective in nature; the self is to be constituted in terms of membership of communities, and meaning is associated, not with the self, but with negotiation with others in the context of a community. A leadership model for groups bound by a collective enterprise may concentrate on the grey cell in Figure 2, which Lipman-Blumen’s model does not address.

While the study found individuals to be distinct actors, the data did not indicate that goals related to the collective enterprise were held only or primarily by individuals. Cases were seen in which

individuals continued to subscribe to the group and to further its goals while furthering contradictory goals in other groups or contexts. The group developed and prospered despite the lack of absolute formal consistency of views or goals among its members.

### *Leadership as Meaning-Making*

In the group under study—a community activist group with many characteristics of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), leadership may be usefully construed as the negotiation of meaning. Such leadership may be more or less widely distributed, according to the type of task that is being pursued. The distinction between primary and leadership tasks is helpful in understanding the capacity of a group to address the challenges to its continuing existence. That a group's membership manifests widespread negotiation of meaning and action in pursuing primary tasks need not imply that its members will engage as broadly or successfully with tasks such as direction, commitment and adaptive change.

### *Attribution of Leadership*

Consistently with Hunt (1984) and Drath (2001), the study found the attribution of leadership to be an area of the negotiation of meaning in the group. In particular, attributions of leadership varied significantly from one group member to another. The group did not depend upon every member having formally consistent views of who was leading or how.

The study demonstrates attributions of leadership to be meaning structures negotiated within a group. They come to form part of the shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998), which itself is the vehicle for further negotiations of meaning in a community of practice. Attributions of leadership are ambiguous, in that not all group members will agree on the nature of the leadership of a fellow member. This illustrates the ambiguous and equivocal nature of coherence in meaning-making groups. Of the “ways of understanding and recognizing leadership” (Drath, 2001, p. 152) in a community of practice, many may coexist within a successful group. Group members may interpret the leadership of an individual involved in leadership tasks at several points along the spectrum of Drath's aspects of relational leadership as meaning-making in a community of practice (2001, p. 153). Some may attribute leadership in terms of dominance, some in terms of personal influence, and some in terms of relational dialogue. Not all members of a group deal with the same kinds of task, and those who are involved with leadership tasks may attribute leadership differently than those who are not. As a conjectural outcome of this study, rather than a conclusion, it may be that group members least involved in leadership tasks tend towards attributing leadership in terms of dominance, while those most involved tend towards attributing leadership in terms of relational dialogue.

To consider the attribution of leadership as a meaning-making process requires two caveats. Firstly, in a group without formal leaders, in which implicit or explicit attributions of leadership occur in the absence of formal authority, not all group members need attribute leadership to an individual in the same manner. To use Drath's three categories of leadership in a community of practice (2001, p. 153) as an example, some members of a group may attribute leadership to a given individual on the basis of relational dominance, some on the basis of relational influence, and some on the basis of relational dialogue. Secondly, the study showed an asymmetry between

participation and reification (Wenger, 1998) in the negotiation of attributions of leadership. The attribution of leadership in the group under study involved a great deal of participation (mutual interpretation of events, social engagement, membership) but little or no reification (points of focus, norms, anchoring), until the development of an organizational structure which assigned some degree of authority to leadership roles. Until the emergence of recognized leaders in some form of organizational structure, the negotiation of leadership roles may be confined to participation.

### *Implications for Groups without Formal Leaders*

This study suggests that leadership in groups held together by members' engagement with a collective enterprise differs from leadership in formal organizations. Members who find too much divergence between personal and collective goals can easily leave. The group is characterized more by the collective nature of its action than by dyadic relationships between each individual and the group. Shared meaning, which underlies the group's collective action, develops in part through changes in the environment and in part through the influence of those who exert leadership. It includes, but is not confined to, the shared sense of the group's tasks and attributions of leadership to some group members.

The distinction between primary and leadership tasks, developed in this study, opens an avenue to understanding the distribution of leadership in terms of the type of task the group is pursuing. In the group under study (though by no means in all comparable groups), a membership actively engaged with a collective enterprise exhibited the capacity to successfully act in pursuit of its primary purpose, and to respond to changes in the group's purpose over time. Though some members left when their goals differed from those of the group, others remained members despite the lack of consistency this entailed. As issues of direction, commitment, and adaptive change emerged, the group's capacity to deal with them lay with a smaller group of members. As it formalized, the group abandoned a committee-based approach to roles and responsibilities in favor of projects—assignments of limited duration—conducted by those members who demonstrated active engagement in the group's primary purpose. This strategy successfully managed distractions associated with formalization, and tacitly recognized the leadership of those who pursued the primary tasks.

## SUMMARY

This exploratory study set out to respond to the suggestion of Drath and Palus to “experiment with viewing your own understanding of leadership” (1994, p. 5) in the light of a meaning-making perspective. An understanding of leadership was brought to the study in the form of leadership as the pursuit of individual goals in a collective setting (Lipman-Blumen, 1996), categories of leadership task (Drath, 2001), and leadership as a form of meaning-making (Drath & Palus, 1994). The study’s conclusions suggest new understandings of leadership literature in these three areas, especially as it applies to community activist groups and communities of practice. In exploring leadership in such a group, the study found who the leaders were and how they behaved to be less important than three distinct collectively-oriented views of leadership, each offering a different perspective on the whole: (a) the negotiation of meaning, especially in pursuit of primary tasks; (b) the pursuit of leadership tasks; and (c) attribution by and to group members. The distinction between primary and leadership tasks suggests a way to understand circumstances under which leadership is widely distributed in groups and organizations and those under which it is not. The negotiation of collective meaning (Wenger, 1998) can be construed as leadership in the pursuit of both primary and leadership tasks, though it appears to represent distinct aspects of leadership in each case. Models of leadership based upon the expression of individual goals may not readily apply to groups bound together by a collective enterprise. Lastly, the attribution of leadership does indeed appear to be a form of the negotiation of meaning, as Drath and Palus (1994) suggest. Further work in these areas has the potential to refine models of leadership and to provide practical recommendations for the better leadership of community activist groups and communities of practice.

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