

## **Participating leadership**

*Inspiring shared responsibility*

Ineke van de Braak

In this article the Participating leadership of TCI is further developed on a concrete methodological level for leaders in organizations. I will illustrate this methodological development with examples from my own experience as a team- and management coach.

### **1. Leadership underway towards collective leadership**

In many vision statements of organizations, I read about striving to foster responsibility at all levels in the organization. I find it also one of the main challenges for leaders these days to provide leadership in a way that facilitates a collaboration in which all employees participate, contribute their experiences and ideas and take a shared responsibility for the process of development. There is also more and more written in management literature about the importance of a shared or collective leadership process in which leaders and employees, together, take responsibility for the effectiveness and the development of the team and the organization (Yukl, 2002, Dijkstra & Feld, 2012, Bergman, Rentsch, Small, Davenport, and Bergman, 2012).

This literature provides no answer, however, to the question of how you can concretely promote such a process, while what I see in practice is that there is a great need for a methodological handhold or anchor. TCI offers such a handhold and Participating leadership plays a crucial role in this.

### **2. Goal and definition of Participating leadership**

The essence of Participating leadership in teams and organizations is: participating in the process, doing what is necessary for the effectiveness and development of the team, while at the same time fostering self-management and the development of opportunities for the team members. To promote shared responsibility, the participating leader strives for equality in the cooperative relationship. No unnecessary hierarchical relationship, but where necessary assuming leadership for the sake of the task, the persons involved and the cooperative process. In order to make this happen, it is important as the leader to see oneself also as part of the whole, to be aware of the fields of tension in which one finds oneself and to develop one's own leadership. I would therefore formulate the purpose and definition of Participating leadership as follows. (see also van de Braak, 2011).

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*Goal:*

Promoting:

- team effectiveness;
- the personal leadership of every employee (including the leader himself ) ;
- equality in the cooperative relationship.

*Definition of Participating leadership:*

Participating leadership is a style of leadership in which the leader takes part as a co-participant in the process as well as having his own specific responsibilities. It has to do with an integration of leading and participating, that is *leading while participating* and *participating while leading*. The Participating leader leads, at the same time, the whole process of the group as well as himself, and takes both perspectives seriously in the choices that he makes.

### **3. The characteristics of Participating leadership**

Participating leadership has four main characteristics, with different sub-features:

- 1 active participation in the process;
- 2 the right amount of leadership;
- 3 transparency;
- 4 developing ones own leadership.

#### **3.1 Active participation in the process**

What is most characteristic of this leadership style is that you as leader actively participate in the process. This has to do with doing it together, with take part in it. You stand, as Participating leader, between the team members and not above them. This makes it possible to perceive what is going on, to make appropriate interventions and to lead by example.

##### **• Making contact with what is going on**

In order to lead well, it is important that the leader knows what is actually going on, which aspects play a role in what is currently happening, what's happening with the results of the team and the achievement of the goals that have been set, what the culture of cooperation is, how things are going with each team member, and which relevant developments in the world at large are present that might exert influence on the situation at hand. By actively participating and making real contact with the people who play a role in as well as outside the team, you can hear, perceive, experience and feel, as leader, how things are going. "Leading is not possible without participation" (Hintner, Middelkoop & Wolf Hollander, 2009).

There are no set rules for how a leader should give shape tot this active participation.

However he does this has to do with many factors and each leader can determine for himself what participation can look like in his situation: which tasks he participates in, which meetings he wants to attend, how many individual conversations he has with his employees and which network contacts he maintains himself. This will be dependent, for example, on his specific job description, available time and the nature of the work. What is important is that he reflects upon his participation and makes conscious choices about it. The essence is that he is actively involved and knows what is going on.

### Example

*A team leader in a technical manufacturing company has regular contact with both the people working in the development department, who are on top of the newest technical developments, and the account managers, who have a lot of contact with customers. In this way she is well-informed about both the needs of the customers and the technical possibilities. In the contacts that she has, she checks whether the people in these departments seek each other out and whether they share this important information with each other, if they collaborate with each other about new products that can be sold and if they exercise their own leadership. Where necessary, she stimulates them to do these things.*

#### • Utilizing personal experiences to arrive at appropriate interventions

By participating actively in the daily work of the team, you can use your own experiences and perceptions as leader to understand what is happening, to assess what is necessary for the further development of the team and to arrive at appropriate interventions. Interventions that are aimed at both the quality of the work and the functioning and well-being of the employees. One moment the leader will choose to have a supportive talk with an employee, while at another moment he will choose to intervene at the level of the organizational structure and propose a new division of tasks and powers.

### Example

*A department head of the crisis center in a psychiatric clinic makes sure that he makes time for the nurses in the department, to get a good picture of how they deal with the crisis situations. Are they successful in carrying out the treatment procedures as prescribed? What impact do the crisis situations have on them personally? How is their coping capacity? Is there sufficient manpower to handle crisis situations? During a very hectic period, he works on the floor alongside the staff for a number of evenings in a row. Out of these concrete experiences, he decides to make a change in staffing and to offer one of the younger nurses coaching for the level of stress he has noticed by her firsthand.*

#### • Setting a good example

Active participation makes it also possible for the leader, in all kinds of everyday actions, to set a good example for what he expects of the employees.

For example:

- to put into practice the mission and vision of the organization and team himself and to work toward the cooperatively formulated goals.
- to act according to the agreed upon procedures;
- to invest in constructive cooperative relationships with team members, with colleagues from other departments within the organization or with senior management;
- to look for possibilities for cooperation beyond the boundaries of the team;
- to take responsibility in difficult situations and use creativity in working toward possible solutions.

A leader who also does what he asks of his staff, promotes equal and inspirational cooperative relationships.

Example

*A team coordinator of the administrative department of an insurance company sets an example for her team. After a hefty reorganization, as part of the new vision, a choice is made for flexible workplaces. There are workplaces meant for general administrative work and maintaining customer contact via telephone. Other places are more suitable for work requiring silence and concentration, and then there are places especially equipped for collegial consultation. She knows that a number of employees from her department have difficulty with these changes and would rather sit at the same workplace every day. She also liked having her own workplace, but is convinced of the value of the new concept. She tries to be consistent in following this new way of working herself, also as a way of providing a good example.*

### **3.2 De right amount of leadership**

Participating leadership also means taking responsibility for your own role in the whole as well as giving real leadership. It is the art of continually giving staff the leadership that they need from you in order to achieve their task and to develop themselves further, but also no more than that. An important condition to be able to find the right amount of leadership, is good observation of whether or not employees take on responsibility, and what they need to be able to do this.

Offering what is needed means beginning to facilitate employees in being able to live up to their responsibility. This requires making sure that they have the necessary framework, resources, information and training opportunities.

When the framework is clear, it is important to do everything possible to stimulate maximum input from and initiative-taking by employees, as well as to show appreciation for these things. Employees must be given enough room to be able to take their own responsibility, to experiment, to make mistakes and to learn from these experiences.

A Participating leader is happy with people who take on responsibility and who make suggestions. This doesn't mean that the leader must go along with every suggestion. He will relate to it from out of his own specific responsibility. The leader who truly values peoples' initiative-taking and, at the same time, takes the responsibility to lay out both the possibilities and the limits, offers a safe framework within which employees can think creatively, experiment and broaden their own boundaries.

Often, however, there are all sorts of barriers for employees to really make use of the room and chances that they are given, and to work them out concretely in a responsible way. Thus, it may be that an employee feels inadequately skilled and, as a result, feels insecure in respect to a particular task. All sorts of personal attributes can play a role in this as well. For someone who has trouble concentrating, it can be more difficult to focus fully on a particular task or work towards a specific deadline. Someone who is, by nature, not very socially oriented will not easily take steps to invest himself in the collaborative processes and culture of the team. And for employees where there is not a good balance between the demands of work and those of their family life, it can also be difficult to fully meet the responsibilities of their job.

It is also very possible for employees to get stuck in old patterns of waiting or assume the stance of a follower. Then, at the moment that they are given the room to take on responsibility, it is not necessarily easy for them to actually do it.

## Example

*Some of the statements made by leaders, as illustration of the inalcitrant reality:*

*“I convened a meeting to give them the chance to say what they thought, but there was not much that came out of it. Few opened their mouths. I found it very disappointing!”*

*“I asked them to take responsibility for that project, but ultimately, by every new step or unexpected problem, I had to tell them what to do. It would be better to do it myself, this costs me much more time!”*

When employees don't naturally take on responsibility, this can have to do with their personal characteristics and competencies, and/or how they were brought up, but also with their experiences with leadership. Sometimes they assume unnecessarily a dependent role, because they were used to getting “assignments” from their leaders, and therefore to taking on a “wait and see” attitude.

To summarize, in finding the right amount of leadership, you can distinguish the following levels of intervention:

### *Capacity-enhancing interventions*

- by mutual agreement, *determining the framework* within which the employee/team takes on his/their task (contract, function, task, authorizations, resources);
- *facilitating* employees by providing them with whatever information, resources, training etc. is necessary for them to be able to take on their responsibility;
- *observing* and *estimating* to what extent the employee/team has independently exercised his/its responsibility.

### *Stimulating interventions*

- Where possible, *giving employees room* and *offering them opportunities* to take on responsibility themselves;
- *Encouraging* employees to take on responsibility and, by doing this, to broaden their own boundaries;
- *Coaching* employees and teams to accomplish their task and to develop competencies that are necessary to gradually take on more responsibility themselves;
- *Showing appreciation* for employees who do take on responsibility.

### *Steering interventions*

- *Structuring* and *supporting* processes in such a way that the active input from every team member is promoted along with the goal being reached;
- *Speaking* to employees and teams that do not take on their responsibility;
- *Making demands* on the functioning of employees who do not take on their responsibility.

### 3.3 Being transparent

A third characteristic of Participating leadership is to show who you are as a leader and as a person. To be transparent about what you think, find important, feel and want. What does this look like, concretely?

- *Clearly communicating your own values, vision and goals*

A leader has ultimate responsibility. This means that he also carries responsibility for the mission and vision of the team, the goals that are set and the strategies and procedures that are selected to reach those goals. It is of essential importance that he, himself, participates in this process and is clear about his own ideas about this. He takes his responsibility, himself and the other seriously by speaking out and being clear about what he finds important. By his speaking out, the employees know where they stand and it is possible for them to add their own perspective to the mix. When the leader succeeds at participating so that he is clear about what he finds important, while at the same time is really open to the views of others, a creative, vibrant collaboration among equals can arise.

- *Being clear about considerations in decision-making processes*

A leader has power. He steers processes, and must make choices and decisions. Transparency about considerations in these processes makes it possible to take on responsibility, without falling into unnecessary hierarchical relationships.

A Participating leader will strive toward democratic decision-making processes while, at the same time, taking final responsibility and determining the direction in which things must go. This he does from out of his own observations, experience, assessments and ideas about what must be done. To be able to act, he must be able to trust his own perception and judgment. At the same time, it is important that he realizes that his perception of reality is subjective and limited. Through maintaining good contact with what is going on and regular consultation with those involved his perception is broadened, but ultimately it still remains limited. However, at a certain moment, he will have to make choices based their own merit. Being transparent about the background of the choices he makes will make it possible for the team members to relate to them. They can test whether his perception of reality matches their own, or if they have yet other experiences or ideas. This stimulates their own leadership and encourages collaboration based on equality.

Sometimes a leader must make a decision on the spot, during a meeting with others. At such a moment, it can be very useful when he *thinks aloud* and is transparent about what he is experiencing: this is what I observe, this is my assessment of the situation, these are my considerations, what would be wise to do now? A leader who thinks aloud invites the others present to think together, and yet ensure that the process continues.

- *Being open about the processes that one observes*

By taking part in the interaction, the leader can get a sense of if the collaborative processes are progressing in a way that is both effective and constructive. He can make use of this experience in a way that group members can learn from each other. By being open about his observations and by giving feedback, he makes it possible for employees to become more aware of their own functioning or the functioning of their team. He also gives the employees the chance to reflect upon his observations and to say something if they experience things

otherwise. Talking about this at least makes it possible to learn from it together and to take a joint responsibility for the interactional processes and relationships.

- *Showing oneself as a person and as a individual who is learning*

A leader is, besides his formal role, also a human being of flesh and blood. He acts based on his own personal experience, and daily events will also have influence on him as a person. Being aware of this and – to an appropriate degree – also showing this to others, promotes cooperative relationships based on equality.

Just like every employee, a leader finds himself in situations that are difficult, in which he must overcome his fears and uncertainties, and in which he ends up falling into personal traps. When he can accept this as a reality and is willing to look at himself critically in order to learn from such situations, and is also open with his employees about this, he stands simply as a person among persons, and promotes equality in interaction with others.

- *Being authentic and selective*

Transparency has to do with authenticity. As leader, to be honest about your vision, values, experiences, opinions, thoughts, feelings, uncertainties and errors. The Participating leader strives to be authentic, to have no hidden agenda, not to twist things around or present them differently than they are. It is the art of finding the right way to do this. It does not make sense to always say everything. A leader must also be able to be selective in what he shares and to make trade-offs. He is selective in relationship to his responsibility for the progress of the process. He must consciously ask himself: What will be the effect on the other, and on the whole, if I say something here? How do I want to share this? Leading the way in these trade-offs is the goal of participating leadership: to promote the effectiveness of the team, the self-leadership of each person and equality in the cooperative relationship.

#### Example

A leader is aware that she feels insecure in certain situations. Depending on her further observation and assessment, she makes at different moments a different choice.

- *She has the sense that one of the team members also feels unsure about this situation. At the same time, she has the impression that he really looks up to her and has the idea that she always has the right solution. Therefore, he has the tendency to depend on her. She decides to share her insecurity with him, precisely in order to bring more equality into the relationship. After sharing her own feelings of uncertainty, she invites him to work together with her to look at the possibilities and take a step, even when they are not convinced that it is exactly the right solution. She shares the feeling with him: This situation brings with it feelings of insecurity, but let's not let it paralyze us. In this, she is an example of feeling uncertain and seeking to learn, while at the same time daring to act.*
- *In another situation where she feels unsure, she makes a very different assessment. She senses that the team members are so insecure about that situation that is absolutely necessary to offer them safety and stability, as well as provide a perspective on the direction in which it must go in the future. She shares her feeling of uncertainty with her*

*own supervisor and, together with him, arrives at a possibility for a further step, with which she can provide the team members with the support they need.*

### **3.4 Developing self-leadership**

A participating leader takes on the challenge to lead others as well as leading himself at the same time:

- *Seeing himself as a part of the whole*
- *Making contact with the inner- and outer world*
- *Self-reflecting*
- *Having the courage to do what is necessary for himself and for the whole*
- *Making use of free space and broadening boundaries*

In the current turbulent times, leaders are at particular risk to get stuck in the multitude of interests that play a role in an organization. Being able to lead themselves in the fields of tension is also essential to being able to remain standing in the hectic and complex reality in which they find themselves. Inner calmness and contact with themselves is crucial to being open to the world around them, to observing what is happening and to making good choices. But they can only find that calmness when they observe the fields of tension, take them seriously and explore them. Only when they are successful in having a good connection with their own inner world as well as with the outside world, will leaders be able to match their attitude and interventions to the needs of employees and teams in developing their self-leadership.

### **Literature**

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