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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Compassionate noticing and stopping the action: Bringing intentionally emergent teaching into leadership education

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Abstract

Emergent-based practices of leadership development (such as intentional emergence (IE), case-in-point, or group relations) rely a great deal on stopping the action in order to publicly notice group behaviors and patterns and connect what is happening authentically to conscious actions and ideas (such as course content, readings, theories, etc.). However, when a facilitator or participant practices *stopping the action* and calling out these behaviors, there is a danger that they will go beyond productive tension into a level that causes casualties. This article explores the foundational need for compassion and purpose when using the common tools of heat and noticing in intentionally emergent spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and developing leaders is a complex process that balances challenge with support for optimal transformation. Truly transformational leadership development also requires "in the moment" interventions to bring subconscious, default behaviors, to the level of consciousness so that they can be examined or changed. In the intentional emergence (IE) model, one of the most common tools associated with the method is stopping the action to name, consider, or analyze unconscious group behaviors. However, one of the dangers associated with calling things out as they arise, which is common to most emergent-based leadership development models, is that this kind of public noticing can cause too much stress for the participants to handle. As Heifetz et al. (2009) wrote, "Your goal should be to keep the temperature within what we call the productive zone of disequilibrium … enough heat generated by your intervention to gain attention, engagement, and forward motion, but not so much that the organization (or your part of it) explodes" (p. 29).

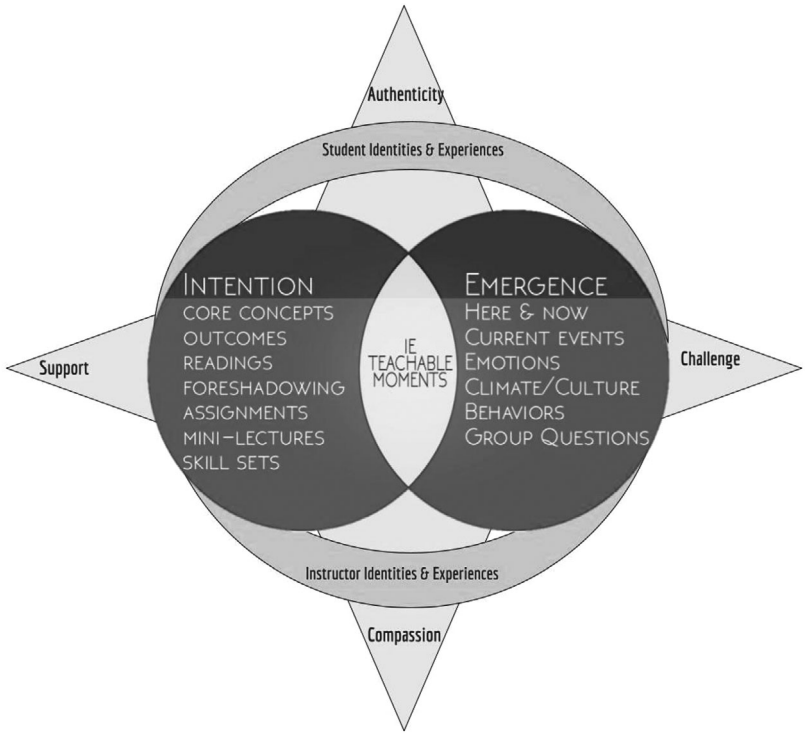

FIGURE 1 Intentional emergence model. © 2022 Linnette Werner, reprinted with permission.

This article will explore how the most commonly used tools within an intentionally emergent space (stopping the action and noticing) can be used in compassionate and authentic ways to help facilitators stay within the productive zone of disequilibrium and to optimally support transformation.

OVERVIEW OF THE IE MODEL

In a similar way that doctors have residencies, teachers student teach, and lawyers have mock trials, the purpose of IE teaching is to bridge the gap between theory and practice and was developed to help emerging leaders understand their own default behaviors and to apply leadership learning more readily into their practice (Werner et al., 2016). Inherent in the IE approach is the idea that instructors/facilitators try to wean students' dependency on authority and create a living laboratory of leadership wherein students can run their own leadership experiments in real-time (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021).

As Figure 1 demonstrates, much like traditional approaches to leadership development, the IE model starts with the instructor's intentions, such as outcomes for the experience, readings, activities, assignments, among others. However, unlike traditional teaching/facilitation, the IE instructor purposefully plans for spaces of co-creation that encourage leadership as practice. In addition, the instructor/facilitator is aware of the roles social identities (their own and their students') and their intersections play in the leadership development space and is able to navigate their own relationships with the concepts of power and privilege in such spaces. Finally, within an IE classroom, an instructor grounds their interventions within compassion, authenticity, and a balance of challenge and support that is specific to each student.

STOPPING THE ACTION

Using the IE model "significantly addresses the theory to practice bridge that is often missing in the leadership classroom" (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021, p. 1). I (Tara) often tell students they can not learn to ride a bike by reading a book about it, and the same can be said for leadership. We must try to *practice* leadership. What this looks like can vary from context to context; an introduction class will look very different from a capstone experience, and each instructor may embrace it differently. No matter how different IE looks from instructor to instructor, it will always include the concept of stopping the action.

To practice IE, we must start with intention setting. One of my mantras as a leadership educator is to develop "intentional and reflective" leaders. When I teach my capstone class, it includes a semester-long group project to effect positive adaptive change on campus… a tall order. I encourage them to set leadership intentions every time they come into the classroom, and therefore I model it as the instructor. Setting our intentions as instructors is extremely important because, "When we avoid the work of creating positive and meaningful intentions, what manifests feels random and often not what we wanted for ourselves or our students" (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021, p. 29). One example of an intention may be embracing tension (once you have built the container of course); often our most significant learning comes from operating at our "growth edge," and that can be uncomfortable for students as well as the facilitator. Alternatively, if we can reach what Heifetz calls the "productive range of disequilibrium" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 29), we can best support the long-term growth we seek.

Once you have set your intention, the next step is to allow and notice things that authentically emerge in your classroom. When this happens, you will need to stop the action and draw attention to it. When we notice what is emerging, if it is relevant to the community we can stop the action, acknowledge, and name what has just happened, and invite the community to examine and interrogate what might be behind it (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021, p. 28). We stop the action because often what is happening/emerging can be a more powerful teaching moment than any lesson we may have planned. Ganz and Lin (2012) said, "We can teach leadership by practicing leadership, aligning the content of what we teach with the way in which we teach it" (p. 353), which is what we strive to do when we stop the action.

What does stopping the action look like? First, typically you have already introduced the concept of stopping the action to your students. They know you will be stopping the action throughout the class, and they are invited to do the same. Second, there is a discernment process in choosing which teachable/emergent moments to engage. There is probably no end to teachable moments in a leadership class; however, when you set your intention for the class, the moments you engage are typically an extension of those decisions.

There are some common types of emerging moments to notice—like when tension/emotion is high, big assumptions and sweeping statements are made, the energy in the room shifts significantly, the things you talk about after class, as examples (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021). The important thing is to notice them *as they emerge* and stop the action. There are some ways to practice your noticing of emerging moments—replay the class in your head, record your class, ask others to observe, observe others, or talk through your class with an objective person (Werner &Hellstrom, 2021). It is important to acknowledge how instructors' identities significantly impact what they notice and when they choose to intervene (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021). Finally, once a constructive teachable moment emerges, you can intervene using compassionate noticing (a concept which will be discussed in more detail later in this article).

Stopping the action example

The main IE class I (Tara) have been teaching is the capstone to our leadership studies program, which includes a project where students attempt to address an adaptive challenge on campus. This creates a vehicle for creating a leadership case study in the classroom; one where the students can take adaptive leadership from theory to practice, as well as study the group dynamics. One group was working on a project that centered around what they viewed as a divide between the domestic and international students on campus. This project was one the students were passionate about because of the 18 students in the class, 6 students were international. The domestic students in the class were using a lot of "us versus them" language and I had fallen into that trap as well. When the time was right, I raised the issue by saying "I find we are using a lot of us versus them language, which I find interesting because six of 'us' are 'them.' I have noticed I have fallen into this trap as well [intentionally including myself]. I wonder if this could be a starting point for our work?" This was followed by silence until one of the international students spoke up that they were feeling like a part of the outgroup in the room. This allowed for a very productive discussion around how our classroom was a microcosm of the university, and how do we start the "work" with ourselves? This worked because we had already built the "container" for this class. According to Werner and Hellstrom (2021), "A container is the energetic space we create together that allows us to take risks while challenging and supporting one another" (p. 35). Having worked hard to create the holding environment, and including myself in the learning, allowed me to stop the action using compassion.

Dangers

There are some dangers to stopping the action. First, it moves the group from comfort into disequilibrium. Gauging how much discomfort a group can take is challenging for someone new to IE. In addition, some students never become comfortable with being part of the case study, and your teaching evaluations may reflect that. It is mostly a danger for teaching professors, which I am. So there needs to be a recognition of that privilege (or lack thereof). Finally, there is the chance that instructors, especially those new to the pedagogy can stop the action too often and this can leave "…students confused as to the larger point of their learning and experiences. However, it is the confluence of intention and emergence that creates the ideal teachable moments in the leadership classroom" (Werner et al., 2016, p. 209). To mitigate this risk, it is always important when planning to stop the action you ask yourself, "To what end?" or "What are you hoping to accomplish by surfacing the observation?"

Best practices for stopping the action

Some of the best practices for stopping the action include getting buy-in, scaffolding the learning, using critical reflection, and giving the work back, they are detailed below.

Create buy-in

Inviting students to come along on the journey with you creates buy-in. Using the pedagogy of IE should not be a secret or a surprise. The students should understand what it is and how it will be used, and hopefully, join in when they are comfortable.

Scaffold the learning

One way IE differs from case-in-point is that you approach it with overt compassion, and that means leading the students into the learning with both challenge and support. An important piece of knowledge from adaptive leadership is that change is about loss. "What people resist is not change per se, but loss. When change involves real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 22). Therefore, we must pace that loss: the loss of the classroom mental model, maybe a loss of their sense of competence around the practice of leadership, etc. Instructors should spend time introducing the IE model, how the leadership classroom will differ from a traditional classroom, address what the students can expect, and spend time building the container. These steps are important because, as Ganz and Lin (2012) suggested, "Learning new skills requires venturing beyond the limits of one's perceived competence—a step both exciting and frightening, and one that requires motivational, conceptual, and behavioral resources" (p. 361).

Incorporate critical reflection

Dewey (1938) wrote true learning does not occur unless reflection is present and this is especially true when using an emergent approach for developing leaders. Critical reflection can be done in several ways: through class discussions, reflection papers, questionnaires that allow you to examine group dynamics, etc. "One way we try to address [preconceived notions about leadership] is by modeling mindful learning: bringing transparency to our assumptions to free us from their constraints" (Ganz & Lin, 2012, p. 365). Questioning our own assumptions transparently or modeling an activity like the five Whys (Miller & Maellaro, 2016) to reach deep reflection helps participants to not only see the practice in action but also contributes to building a community/container strong enough to do transformative work.

Give the work back

Another stopping- the- action opportunity is when participants look to authority to do things for them that they could do for themselves. Some opportunities for giving the work back include setting the expectation that participants help set up the room, lead discussions, help build community, and take on roles (e.g., timekeeper, balcony member) (Heifetz et al., 2009). Werner and Hellstrom (2021) also suggested using an approach called Temporary Authority Skills Challenges (TASCS) to provide scaffolded practice with taking on authority. Giving the work back in such ways "…can help shift the locus of authority from the teaching staff to include oneself in the arena of authority—a key feature of the deep shift to critical-systemic consciousness" (Parks, 2005, p. 77). Once students feel comfortable taking up some additional authority in the room, they will be more likely to stop the action themselves.

COMPASSIONATE NOTICING

The typical case-in-point teaching uses noticing for the sake of noticing (e.g., I notice only the extroverts are talking today, I notice you all have no energy today, etc.), and that can at times be distracting or at worse, move out of the productive range of disequilibrium to the unproductive range. Compassionate noticing could start with the same observations as above, but it is then moved "…through our hearts, and out into the world where we can explore them together in ways that are productive" (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021, pp. 73–74). This might look like saying to the class "Typically our class is full of energy and

passion, and I am feeling like it is a bit flat today. I wonder why that is?" And after some data is introduced, "Is there a way we could change things up to make this class more dynamic?"

Compassion is the vital aspect of the equation because students have differing capacities for this work. With all the challenges our students have in their day to day lives, all the commitments, all the tensions they are managing, if we want their leadership education to be impactful, it must have compassion. "Compassion is the ingredient that helps us move from seeing the emergent moments to intervening in the moments" (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021, p. 73).

Compassionate noticing example

In the middle of the pandemic, and during the George Floyd protests, my capstone class chose racism on campus as their adaptive challenge project. The group in the classroom was racially diverse and students of all races had shared experiences they had with racism, microaggressions, systems, and issues on campus. However, it was clear that not all students were completely in favor of the topic, while the most vocal students were moving ahead. Moreover, the few students who seemed not to agree with the topic choice also seemed uncomfortable voicing their concerns. I had my suspicions that it was because the topic was racism, but I checked in with my heart and then stopped the action with compassionate noticing: "A reminder that I will intervene from time to time when I observe something that is getting in the way of us practicing leadership as effectively as we can. I love the energy you all have around addressing racism on campus, but I am also sensing that not everyone is on board. Before we get down the road to Abilene [(Harvey, 1988)—a reading the students had completed] I am wondering if we want to do a consensus test and talk about any concerns people may have?" This stopping of the action allowed students to share some of their thoughts and concerns (but I doubt all students with concerns shared them). The group eventually decided to continue the project but chose a new starting point, by doing their own self-work before trying to impact change on campus.

Dangers

The main danger to compassionate noticing is that we are not going to get it right all the time. Consequently, when we get it wrong, there can be some repair work to be done, which can also be a learning opportunity for all involved. One year, my capstone students were working on their project around mental health and one student felt it would be helpful if everyone talked about why they were passionate about the topic. As students started sharing their stories, the heat in the room was raised, but we had the container for it, and then one student asked for a stop to the action to "bring the heat down a bit." After a brief discussion around whether what was being discussed was productive, even if it was somewhat uncomfortable and therefore at people's growth edge, the group (including myself) chose to continue. After one more student story, the student chose to remove themselves from the classroom. I stopped the action, the student who had departed was checked on, and the group had a wonderful conversation about how individuals had varying levels of heat tolerance. When the student returned, I apologized to them for not stopping the action and as a group we had a valuable discussion about how we can gauge and manage varying levels of heat tolerance. This instance clearly depicts how, "Disequilibrium as a

byproduct [is] generated when you call attention to tough questions and draw people's sense of responsibility beyond current norms" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 29).

Best practices

There are several best practices when using compassionate noticing. First, especially when students are new at practicing the concepts, you are going for growth not perfection. It is remarkable when students start using the concepts, but they will not get it right all the time (and neither will you!). You need to be willing to step in and ask questions about what they are trying to accomplish, reframe if needed, and allow for grace for all involved in the process. This leads to the importance of compassion being your primary orientation, especially in the beginning when you are working to develop the holding environment.

Another best practice, as outlined by Werner and Hellstrom (2021, p. 73), is to do a compassion check after your first thought, as you move the thought through your heart. Are you making assumptions about what is really going on? Are you making an untrue generalization? Daniel Kahneman (2011) would call this *thinking slow*, as opposed to thinking fast or working from our defaults. This allows us to surface unconscious biases we may be holding and do the work that will benefit our own teaching for years to come. Always approaching the work with curiosity will aid you in always finding compassion. I had one habitually absent student who one day was designated authority in the group, but the group was not responding to his authority. I wanted to intervene around whether his absences had impacted the groups perceptions of his authority, but as I did my compassion check I noticed my own annoyance around all the classes he had missed. Therefore, when I stopped the action, I made sure to lean into my compassion and not make sweeping generalizations. I simply asked, "I have noticed that we are not taking up David's authority today, I'm curious as to why that is?"

There are a few more ways you put care and consideration into interventions. One is to frame them or use a preamble. This allows you to offer the observation in a way students can hear it. When offering your compassionate noticing to the group you can choose to frame them with a student's strengths or contributions, using a reading or concept from the class, and it is important to do so using your authentic voice. It can feel contrived to hear "I am noticing" repeatedly. For me, that could look like "Remember when we read about the concept of informal authority? We talked about how it must be given by the group, as well as taken up by the individual. Typically, we give Nathan a lot of informal authority, but today he has tried to take it up several times and the group does not seem to be responding to him. I wonder why that is?" Framing with a reading and/or pointing out a student's contributions are ways that you can craft a noticing with compassion so that the group is willing to interrogate what may be behind it.

SUMMARY

A phrase that is often used in my classroom is "Once we see, we cannot unsee. Once we know, we cannot unknow." IE is not something many students have the opportunity to experience and learn from, it is a gift. Just today we were reflecting on the semester in my class and my students were talking about how they had "tried to explain our class to their friends." One student said, "when I tell my friends about this class they typically have two reactions, 'That sounds amazing, I want to come!' and 'That sounds terrible, is it as bad as it sounds?'" And then the students all laughed. They talked about how it was scary in the

beginning, but they now know how valuable their learning was this semester. "Leadership education isn't the proverbial 'sit around a campfire and sing songs,' it's about engaging in the kind of work people often avoid" (Werner & Hellstrom, 2021, p. 37). If we are to do this challenging work, we need to do it with compassion and intentionality. Utilizing the remarkable opportunities that arise in the leadership classroom, and by leveraging our amazing students' leadership capacities. That is how we will affect positive change in our world.

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