The OBREAU Tripod: A Tool for Finding Gold among the Rubble

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Abstract

This will be a highly interactive session in which participants gain experience in applying three practices - Working from Observation, Attributing Reasonableness, and Speaking with Authenticity (OBREAU) - to support conversations for change on tough issues. We will begin with discussion of a scenario applicable to leadership educators and use the scenario to introduce and illustrate the practices of the OBREAU Tripod. Then, participants will apply the practices to personal leadership-related challenges they face and discuss the results in small groups. Large group discussion will explore implications, opportunities and challenges for leadership action. Participants will gain through exposure to a framework they can utilize for more mindful, creative and deep-reaching engagement with others on virtually any tough issue.

Introduction

While there is some intuitive appeal to leaders that are candid and transparent with their opinions, conversations surrounding a variety of topics seem more polarizing than ever before. Many are advised to avoid topics of religion and politics, because the effort is perceived as pointless or counterproductive. However, if we are to engage in the practice of "prospecting for leadership," as highlighted in the ALE conference theme, we cannot afford to avoid topics of discussion simply because they are controversial. What we need is a tool or technique that helps us create and maintain the holding environment that Heifetz and colleagues (2009) describe as a "pressure cooker." If the temperature and pressure are set just right, there is a valuable outcome; but too high of temperature and pressure results in a hot mess. Creating, strengthening, and maintaining a holding environment where people can safely discuss diverse perspectives and ideas is an essential component of prospecting for leadership, allowing us to find gold among the rubble.

This workshop introduces the OBREAU Tripod as a structure for helping work through challenging conversations, particularly those involving contentious, prickly issues, where technical solutions are insufficient. Upon completion of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Recognize default patterns of interaction that can derail efforts toward shared leadership and productive conversations on tough issues;
- Be able to identify and describe the three practices associated with the OBREAU Tripod: Working from Observation, Attributing Reasonableness, and Speaking with Authenticity;
- Highlight opportunities for application of the OBREAU Tripod in leadership education; and
- Apply the OBREAU Tripod in connection with a personal leadership challenge.

Review of Related Scholarship

While societal and cultural norms often frame leadership success and failure as the result of an individual leader, modern approaches to leadership recognize that "leadership is a process that goes on between all people and that all people can be involved in leadership, almost in spite of their formal position" (Jackson & Parry, 2011, p. 95). With this perspective in mind, Western (2013) has identified an emerging eco-leader discourse, which promotes a systems approach that is adaptive to change. Accordingly, leadership is framed as involving processes of building shared meaning to enable change with tough issues (Dunoon & Langer, 2011). When stakeholders see issues differently, there is a degree of contention involved, and there is no single pathway to resolution. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) promote an adaptive leadership approach that involves orchestrating conflict as a discipline. Specifically, they recommend a seven-step approach:

1. Prepare.
2. Establish ground rules.
3. Get each view on the table.
4. Orchestrate the conflict.
5. Encourage accepting and managing losses.
6. Generate and commit to experiments.
7. Institute peer leadership consulting.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) distinguish between leadership work, associated with adaptive challenges "typically grounded in the complexity of values, beliefs and loyalties," and technical approaches to dealing with issues (p. 70). In a similar manner, Nick Petrie of the Center for Creative Leadership draws a distinction between "vertical" and "horizontal" approaches to leadership development. Horizontal development refers to gaining additional competencies and is akin to the development of technical proficiency. Vertical development, on the other hand, is a matter of individuals expanding their capacity to deal with complexity, to think more systemically, and to appreciate nuance and context (Petrie, 2014).

In the spirit of adaptive leadership and the need to create a holding environment with regulated heat, the OBREAU Tripod is a structure for helping groups and individuals work through challenging conversations, particularly concerning leadership-related issues as distinct from technical problems. "OBREAU" is a composite of the first two letters of three guiding words: Observation, Reasonableness, and Authenticity. According to Dunoon (2014), the tripod is an aid for engaging in conversations with a broad range and depth of intelligence on an issue; it discourages default patterns of reactive thinking, negative judgment, and passive engagement. The first leg of the tripod, Working from Observation, is intended as a counterpoint to the common default behavior of reacting to new information or experience. When we work from what we observe or hear directly, we keep ourselves open to different meanings - as well as minimize the threat associated with talking about difficult issues. The second leg of the tripod, Attributing Reasonableness, requires imagining what the issue might look like from another person's perspective. We all bring our mindsets to conversations, and having some awareness of these helps achieve a more rounded, holistic appreciation of an issue. The third leg of the tripod, Speaking with Authenticity, means that what we say is true for us also connects with our observations (the first tripod leg) and reflects the assumption that others involved are capable of

reasonableness (the second tripod leg). This third tripod leg helps to overcome a common default behavior of "dancing around": speaking in euphemisms, avoiding or sugar-coating the difficult topics, and holding back on what we would like to say (Dunoon, 2014).

The OBREAU structure is also supportive of vertical leadership development. As we gain capability in being able to differentiate what we observe from inferences and interpretations we make, we begin to be able to "step back" and see our interpretations as one set among other possibilities. As we imagine the perspectives of others (the Reasonableness leg), we stand to gain an enlarged sense of the various viewpoints on an issue, rather than objectifying our own. Further, as we think about what is true for us while making connections with observation and keeping open reasonableness (the Authenticity leg), we potentially advance our ability to engage with the complexities of an issue.

Lesson Plan Description

The workshop begins with a brief review of the proposition that enacting inclusive leadership implies actions to help build shared meaning to enable change with tough issues. Building shared meaning for change entails conversation. Yet ensuring all voices are heard and valued implies that some common dynamics need to be anticipated and accounted for. The OBREAU Tripod is designed to offset the negative effects of such dynamics, by grounding consideration of a topic in observable data, by maintaining a stance that all stakeholders are reasonable and have something to contribute, and by encouraging participants to speak to what matters to them with an issue, without compromising the first two Tripod legs.

The application of the Tripod structure will be illustrated with a large-group scenario that centers on a controversy of interest to leadership educators. For example, we may highlight the recent incident at Yale University where a faculty member in one of the residential colleges faced a backlash from students for encouraging the community to consider the censoring of Halloween costumes through a dissenting intellectual lens. Some students initially complained about Yale administrators offering heavy-handed advice on what costumes to avoid, and the faculty member responded with challenges to some recent social norms. However, a large number of students protested in response, making national headlines (Stack, 2015). One student said, "it is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students," and seems to believe this perspective is at odds with creating an intellectual space (Friedersdorf, 2015). The OBREAU Tripod is a useful tool for holding the space and structure necessary for leadership educators to dialogue about this conflict.

After experiencing the large-group scenario with the Tripod, workshop participants will have an opportunity to apply the structure with a personal leadership challenge. We will invite participants to act, in effect, as "coaches" to one another, helping to frame their personal challenges within the structure of the OBREAU Tripod and identify what others might say in related conversations. This dialogue will be supported through use of a worksheet that reinforces each leg of the Tripod: Observation, Reasonableness, and Authenticity (Appendix A).

Approximate time lengths of the workshop components are as follows:
- Opening remarks and overview – 15 minutes
- Introduction to scenario – 10 minutes

- Working from Observation discussions – 10 minutes
- Attributing Reasonableness discussions – 10 minutes
- Speaking with Authenticity discussions – 10 minutes
- Small group discussions on personal challenges - 15 minutes
- Review and concluding discussion - 20 minutes

Discussion of Outcomes/Results

The authors of this proposal have successfully applied the OBREAU Tripod in a variety of settings, including academic seminars that are characterized by weekly, small group, student-led discussions. The seminars are affiliated with an honors residential community, and the Tripod has been offered as a tool for students to use when they serve as discussion leader and are responsible for guiding conversation for an hour-long meeting. Students have appreciated the empowerment that occurs with the approach. One student wrote, "This has been the best experience I have had with an honors dorm-related class since the beginning of the HRC, and I think a big part of that is how the class was organized." The OBREAU Tripod appears to be a useful tool for engaging in eco-leadership and a natural fit for structuring student-led conversations within the honors residential community seminars. Benefits include:
- introducing a level of structure to help sort through the messiness of virtually any thorny issue,
- bringing a degree of clarity to what otherwise can seem an intractable problem,
- promoting creativity by enabling new ways to frame an issue,
- reducing the risks and threat of speaking up, and
- strengthening the capacity of users to build shared understandings with others (http://dondunoon.com/the-obreau-tripod).

Workshop Implications

Participants will leave the workshop with everything they need to apply the OBREAU Tripod in both personal and professional settings, including an outline of how the OBREAU Tripod can be applied with student-led seminars (Appendix B).

Some specific ways in which participants could potentially apply the learnings from the workshop include:
- Preparing for and engaging in conversations on tough issues for them personally, whether at work (e.g., with coworkers or manager) or outside. Some participants in similar workshops have spoken of the benefits of applying the OBREAU structure, or aspects of it, in relationship or parenting contexts (e.g., asking children about what they observe that leads them to interpretations they offer).
- Supporting classroom dialogue – whether student- or instructor-led – on controversial topics, to enable students to practice recognizing observations as distinct from interpretation, empathizing with other perspectives, and reflecting on and sharing what is true for them. The resource at Appendix B is one aid to this work, and others will be made available in the workshop.
- Assisting students as individuals to develop their leadership capability by considering how they might engage in conversations – that they might otherwise be tempted to avoid

on tough issues to enable change.

References

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Western, S. (2013). *Leadership: A critical text* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Appendices

Appendix A: Applying the OBREAU Tripod
Appendix B: Exploring a challenging issue with the OBREAU Tripod

Applying the **OBREAU Tripod**
Enabling dialogue, engagement with others and challenging conversations
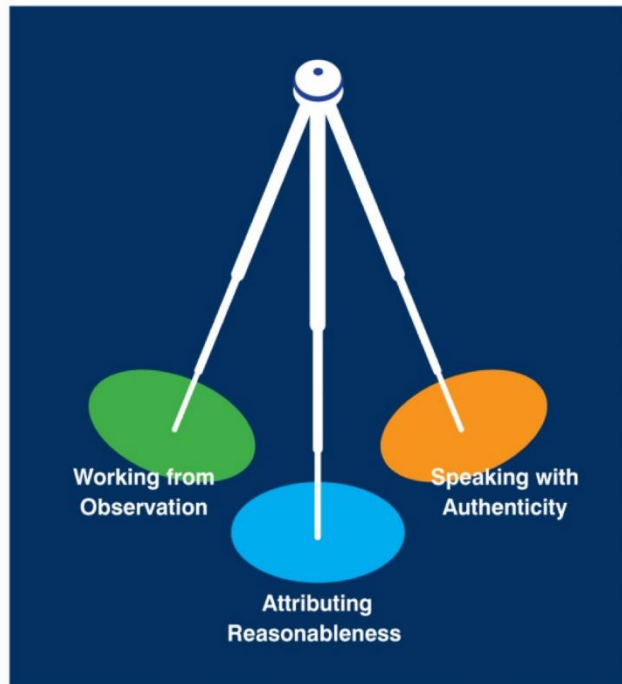
Brief outline of an interpersonal or group / inter-group communications- related issue or challenge currently being faced:

Observation	Reasonableness	Authenticity
The work here to identify, and record, a few key elements that are **directly observable**, noticeable – as distinct from inference or conclusion. We're in effect trying to "peel away" our interpretations and judgments to get to what could be seen / heard directly. We can then potentially hold some of these data out to others for response. Try thinking about what an "**invisible observer**" could conceivably notice (that might include some of your own actions!). If the issue were an iceberg, what might be "**above the waterline**"? Focus particularly on observations that seem interesting and potentially open to different interpretations.	This aspect requires you to **switch perspectives** and look at the issue from the standpoint of others, **allowing that they are reasonable** in this instance. (This is never about judging others.) Focus first on the individual/group that you most want to engage with. Ask, and make notes about, what this stakeholder, acting reasonably, might be: **Assuming** (taking as given, true) **Interested in** (valuing, wanting to advance or protect) **Feeling** (emotions they might be experiencing) Having relevant **knowledge or experience** in. Then, repeat the process for other stakeholders.	The challenge here is to find words that: are true for you, are consistent with allowing others are reasonable, and make some connection with observation. Remember, you are preparing for a conversation, not writing a script. First, to gain more insight into what is true for you, think about and make notes on **your own relevant assumptions, interests, feelings and knowledge**. Then, consider and write down what might be: A **neutral introduction** to the topic One or more **observations** you could share Some **questions** you might ask (e.g. to check or explore observations, or to test interpretations allowing reasonableness) **What else you might say** that matters to you – and that is consistent with reasonableness and connects with observations.

# Exploring a challenging issue with the Obreau Tripod

The aim is to help you create a rich and thoughtful exploration of the issue with fellow section members immediately following your seminar presentation (assuming this is up to 15 minutes in duration).

Materials: Flip chart paper and pens; sticky notes; students need pen and paper.


Method:

1. **Recording *observations* (10 minutes)**

- The aim is to ground the group's consideration of the issue in observations and available data (rather than members reacting or rushing to judgment).
- Ask each student in turn to offer one observation in connection with
- the topic – something they have read, heard, or noticed, whether from your presentation or elsewhere, and that they find interesting or surprising.
- Observations should be offered as far as possible without the student's analysis or interpretation.
- Write up each student's observation – no more than about one sentence --- on flip chart paper. Label the sheet/s 'Observations'. The aim is to just register and record the observations quickly, without discussion at this point.
- Ask the group to review the statements to ensure they are all expressed as observations – rather than students' opinions or judgments.
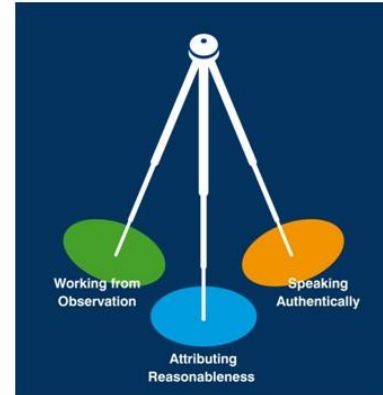
2. **Considering different views on the issue allowing that others are *reasonable* (15 minutes)**

- The aim here is to 'stretch' group members' understanding of the issue by imagining different perspectives, allowing that others are reasonable at the time.
- Think of at least two stakeholders (interested groups or individuals) who would likely see this issue differently. Choose one stakeholder to focus on first. Label a flip chart sheet to identify the stakeholder.
- Invite suggestions as to what might be real for that stakeholder, allowing that they can be reasonable. Think about what might be implicit, hidden, unspoken, 'under the waterline of the iceberg' with this issue for them. (See the image below from *In the Leadership Mode*, p. 133)
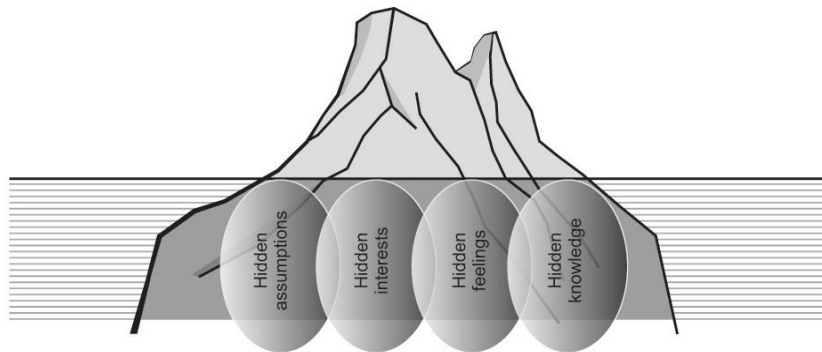
You might ask the group to identify possible:

- o **Assumptions** (what the stakeholder might take as given, true),
- o **Interests** (what the stakeholder is likely to hold as important; want to advance or protect),
- o **Feelings** (what the stakeholder is likely to be experiencing emotionally), and
- o **Knowledge** (what the stakeholder might know or have experience in that they haven't explicitly spoken to).
- Capture group members' responses on the flip chart sheet. (You might use sub---heads: 'Assumptions', 'Interests', 'Feelings', and 'Knowledge'.)
- Of course, you can't know for sure if these possible interpretations are true for the stakeholder. You're developing hypotheses that, ideally, you'd be able to test with them.
- Review each of the entries you have written up, to check they are consistent with presuming the stakeholder is reasonable. If not, modify the entries as necessary to reflect this value.
- Now, repeat the process for the second stakeholder.

3. **Speaking with Authenticity: Group members suggest questions and offer their own views (15 minutes)**

- Begin here by inviting group members to **suggest questions** they would like to put to particular stakeholders, if the opportunty arose. Ask participants to write their questions on sticky notes. You can then gather up the questions and, if time allows, read them back to the group.
- This is also an opportunity for group members to **express their own views** on the issue. There are only three requirements: What they say needs to be:
  - o True for them;
  - o In keeping with a presumption that interested others can be reasonable; and
  - o Connection with observation, whether recorded earlier or something else that's directly discernible.
- You might need to ask speakers to be brief in order to give as many as possible an opportunity to speak. (They will have further opportunity to express their views in the online component following the face-to-face meeting.)

4. **Wrap up and review   (5 minutes)**

- This is your opportunity as presenter to bring together some highlights and themes emerging from the group's exploration.
- In particular, seek to draw out any new and significant insights emerging.
- You might acknowledge any shifts in your own thinking that have occurred through this process.
- Be sure to prompt contributions to the online discussion forum.