

## Review of Jan DeVisch's Book Leadership: Mind(s) Creating Value(s)



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As shown at [http://interdevelopmentals.org/publications-Jan\\_de\\_Visch.php](http://interdevelopmentals.org/publications-Jan_de_Visch.php), Jan DeVisch continues to plow the depth of dialectical thinking to restructure and refine corporate conversations. This writer is excellently prepared for the task, since his professional career has long focused him on issue of global concern both for and about large organizations. As in his previous book of 2010, called *The Vertical Dimension*, Jan wants to open up for organizations as well as for society new possibilities of functioning for the benefit of all, organizational customers included.

In the new book Jan more emphatically focuses on the thinking itself that he observes and witnessing in the organizations he works with in Belgium and

beyond. He focuses leadership issues on issues of value creation and tries to endow this topic with greater than financial depth. Two issues are foremost on his mind, first, complexity, and second, possibilities.

By “complexity” primarily thinks of how managers think, but also of the complexity in the social world itself. This term is, of course, relative; its meaning depends on how big a picture a person can hold of the world s(he) constructs for herself. Jan is concerned that many managers he has encountered don’t have the tools to think complexly, nor the tools to even notice complexity. This is so since many managers exercise not so much thinking, but “downloading” predefined models of the world, and it is here that Jan becomes truly passionate about showing them that there are better ways of doing their work.

Jan do so by introducing managers, executives, and board members to Laske’s Dialectical Thought Form Framework (DTF) within the broader picture of the development of human consciousness (thus delving into philosophical issues). However general Jan becomes in doing so, he always points to very concrete issues, like “growth” and “sustainability”, for instance. This is exactly what a dialectical thinker does: always linking concrete issues to abstract universals in order to arrive at the integration of the two.

Jan is one of the few writers about business who is deeply influenced by the theories of adult development, especially cognitive

development, he has absorbed through studies at IDM. This has two results: first, Jan practically begins his work at the level of thinking managers are at (according to his observation), and teaches them, in their own language, how they can further develop their thinking, making it clear to them that their thinking is “under development” over their entire lifetime. It is due to this perspective that Jan speaks of “possibilities”, not only possibilities for making a better quarterly return of investment. Therefore he says, e.g. (p. 23):

Vertical development refers to maturation and increased awareness as well as the integration of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and/or reflective elements of wisdom. ... it is the quality of how an individual connects with the world.

Much of what Jan has to say about vertical development is said by him in the conviction that the period of capitalism in which constant growth can be taken for granted has passed. This raises for him issues of sustainability not only in the organizational but also the ecological sense of the word. It is this predicament of doing business what leads Jan to want to deal with ways “to think about thinking while continuing to think”. This turn of phrase is very close to what Hegel did in his Logic of 1812: to unravel the concepts he was using, in this case philosophical concepts, by a phenomenological analysis of where the concepts lead the thinker as s(he) thinks.

This is also what is taught at the Interdevelopmental Institute, and not only in courses about adult cognition.

While at IDM we focus on cognitive interviewing for learning to **listen** dialectically, and on cognitive text analysis (of quadrants and thought forms) for **thinking** dialectically, mostly focused on coaching, this focus could easily be changed to focus on corporate, community, and global conversations people lead. As far as Jan is concerned, he is convinced that regarding corporate conversations, the time of being able to take for granted constant growth has passed, and issues of sustainability are therefore of greater concern, or ought to be. This requires a huge effort of shedding capitalistic ideology which, for managers is anything but easy.

For this reason, Jan’s book comes at the right time. He says (p. 31):

Knowledge creation has to be seen as being embedded in and pre-structured by a particular frame of reference. Due to the relatively inaccessible character of our assumptions, premises and attitudes, better understanding can be introduced only by a process of reflection and stepping out of one’s normal way of thinking.

Jan then points to IDM as the source of what he teaches about dialectical thinking, saying (p. 35):

Otto Laske was one of the first to disclose another way of helping people improve the quality of their thinking and decision making. ... Laske did this by looking at the underlying structure of the abstractions and concepts used in language, and called these structures "thought forms".

Jan rightfully compares thought forms to "fishing nets" used on an ocean of complexity far transcending human minds. He introduces the four moments of dialectical of Bhaskar's Dialectical Critical Realism in the form of Laske's four quadrants, referred to as "Context>Process>Relationship>Transformation". As one of the few if not the only writer about business today Jan uses what he learned at IDM to say that the essence of deep thinking is "switching to negative space", or absence. Jan gives stepping into negative space (which he knows very well as an accomplished water colorist) the following meaning:

This process concerns the level of looking beyond what is salient for the observer in the sense that one reflectively steps out of his/her own presuppositions when looking at a situation as a larger hole in a reflective act. It is a process of observing one's mind and becoming conscious that one's mind NATURALLY moves into absences and contradictions.

Again, he links Jan back to Hegel, 200 years after the appearance of Hegel's dialectical Logic.

Going systematically through all four quadrants of DTF, Jan then opens up the benefits of dialectical tools used in corporate conversations. He cogently sets apart "downloading" on one hand, and "deep thinking" on the other – a felicitous distinction that with equal cogency applies to all other domains of discourse.

Following this (p. 75 f) Jan tries to show in what way deep thinking makes a difference in business, particularly regarding value creation. While Jan does not examine this term itself dialectically (which remains to be done since it would make it possible to show the limited nature of the "value creation ideology of business"), he now brings to bear all the good thinking he has so far introduced in his book to show managers that their thinking becomes obvious when reading annual reports, and that by analyzing such reports, the nature of a company's thinking can be measured. (He relies in this in Bruno Frischherz's and Karin Ulmer's approach to dialectical text analysis, although in his own way.)

Jan takes the consequential step to wanting to develop leader's mind, providing "a road map to rethinking decision making of leaders at all levels" (p. 99). As nobody else, he cogently distinguished (horizontal) learning from (vertical) development, a step that in itself totally revamps all "leadership development programs".

And finally, Jan addresses the structure of corporate conversations seeing most of them as missed opportunities of creating value of a new kind, namely those attached to open rather than static and closed systems. Jan's metaphor for what's needed in organizations is CO-EVOLVING FROM THE EMERGING WHOLE, a distinctly dialectical goal that is not achievable other than by learning and practicing dialectical thinking.

As he says at the end of his book (p. 157):

A deep thinking mind is attracted to what is not clear yet, what is becoming, and what cannot be assured. It is a mind that creates possibilities. ... Reality is shaped by the interplay of ... "two minds", a mind that builds upon past experiences and one that explores what is absent and can become. ... The basic idea is that we cannot transform the behavior of systems unless we are willing to engage in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of thoughts.

I wrote this review of Jan's book to thank him for having outlined, in a most lucid form, what I have tried to teach at IDM for 13 years now. Congratulations, Jan DeVisch! May other students of IDM follow your example in fields like coaching, teaching, psychotherapy, mediation, and the discussion of urgent ecological and community issues!