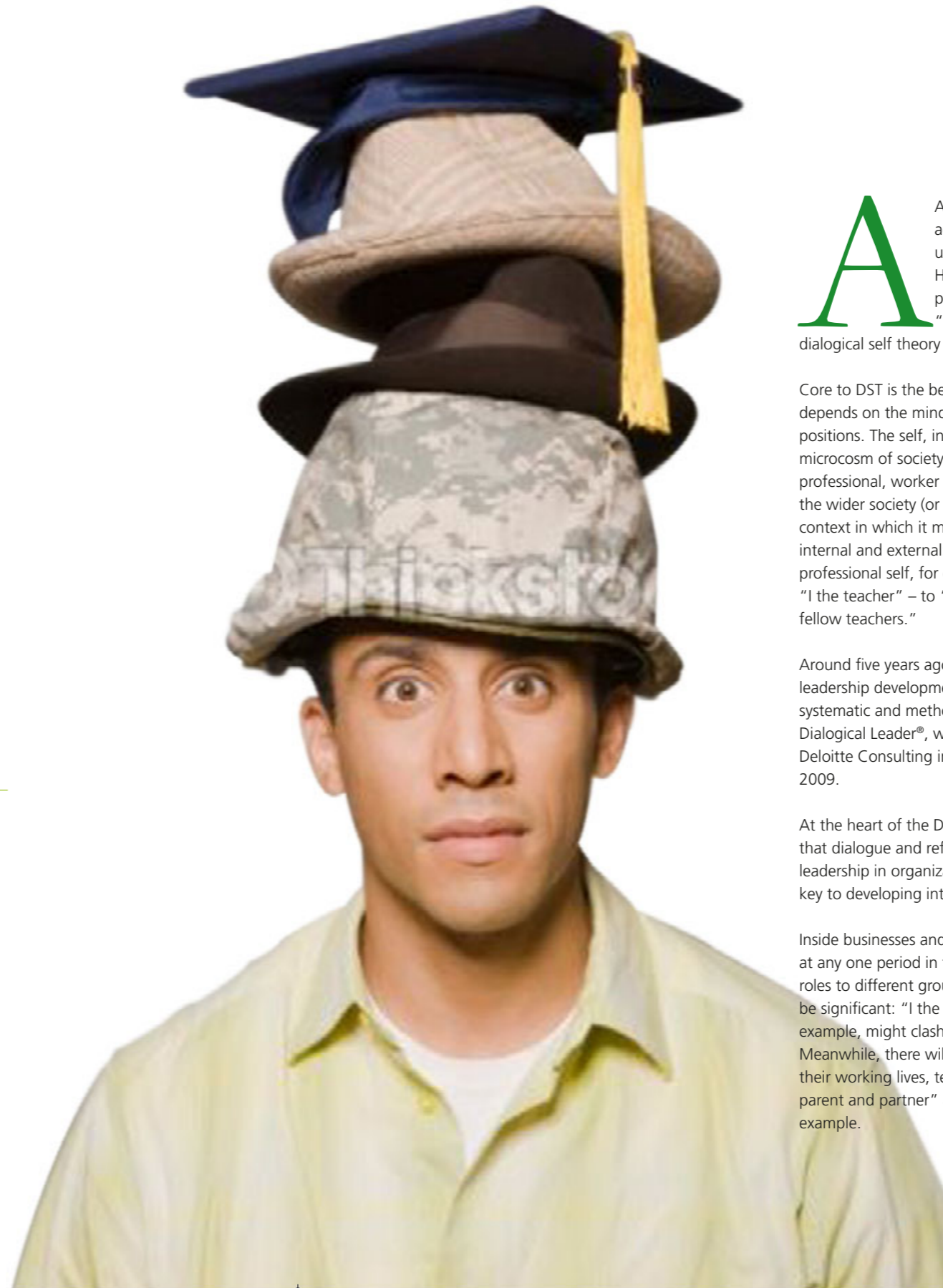


# I link therefore I am

“Our hypothesis is that leaders that act from wholeness have more followers and better results.” In a specially commissioned article, Rens van Loon of Deloitte Consulting in the Netherlands explains the thinking behind his development and coaching concept the Dialogical Leader®



**A**s a PhD student, more than 20 years ago, I was lucky enough to work under psychologist Dr Hubert Hermans. Famous for narrative psychology and self-confrontation “therapies,” Dr Hermans developed dialogical self theory (DST) in the early 1990s.

Core to DST is the belief that personal effectiveness depends on the mind’s ability to reconcile various I positions. The self, in DST, can be described as a microcosm of society – child, parent, partner, professional, worker – that has to relate successfully to the wider society (or macrocosm) of others, to the context in which it must function. If positions are both internal and external: a teacher’s sense of their professional self, for example, extends from “my role” – “I the teacher” – to “my pupils,” “my school” and “my fellow teachers.”

Around five years ago, I started to apply these ideas to leadership development and coaching programs in a systematic and methodical way. A new approach, the Dialogical Leader®, was the result. It’s been used by Deloitte Consulting in the Netherlands since I joined in 2009.

At the heart of the Dialogical Leader® is a simple idea: that dialogue and reflection are important for developing leadership in organizations and society, that they’re the key to developing integrity. This article explains why.

Inside businesses and other organizations, leaders might, at any one period in their lives, be performing different roles to different groups. The potential for conflicts can be significant: “I the entrepreneur or I the founder,” for example, might clash with “I the employer or manager.” Meanwhile, there will be competing demands outside their working lives, tensions between the positions “I the parent and partner” and “I the employer and boss,” for example.

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How do you live successfully with "a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I positions in an imaginal landscape"\*? [Footnote] How do you achieve "oneness" beneath the "multiplicity"? You start the internal and external dialogue: you explore and you tell your personal narrative, in dialogue with the wider environment and with yourself. You establish where you are now and where you want to be. And, importantly, you use your core values as your guide. A colleague recently summed up the imperatives like this: "lead and follow, based on my inner compass."

With our clients, we try to achieve reconciliation through open, honest and robust dialogue. By listening carefully to leaders' stories and by actively exploring them through dialogue, we facilitate the process of reconciling opposites and resolving dilemmas. We invite the leader to make their story explicit and "interrogate" it for underlying motives, personal and organizational values, I positions and roles. This leads to the level of self-awareness necessary to break out of destructive patterns of behavior.

Our experience suggests most people in leadership positions sense contradictions (emotional/rational) between I positions/roles they take. The basic assumption we make is that the emotional block/shock is caused by

\* Hubert J. M. Hermans, Harry J. G. Kempen and Rens J. P. van Loon "The Dialogical Self: Beyond individualism and rationalism," American Psychologist, January 1992, p. 28.

the isolation of I positions – and that dialogue can connect the differing positions and the "whole" of the self.

Leaders, in our experience, can move more comfortably between roles once they've identified the core values they must live by. To find out how they should act, they must find "true North." A simple example might help illustrate the point: "I can reconcile my roles as entrepreneur and employer by keeping the overarching mission and vision, the long-term interests of my organization and all its stakeholders, in mind."

Are there circumstances in which dialogue and reflection won't help someone do their job better? Yes. Where corporate goals, mission and vision and the values and ethics of the individual diverge, the context for effective leadership won't be right. The utility of the approach, in these kinds of cases, might lie in helping a client come to the decision to leave.

Consistency and personal integrity are, we believe, essential in leadership. Being "at one" with yourself is important for working "as one" with others. Our hypothesis is that leaders that act from wholeness have more followers and better results. Wholeness, the integrity of the self, explains why leaders are able to move successfully between different styles in the course of their careers, combining authoritative and consensual approaches – and hybrids of the two.

With integrity comes flexibility. An individual is able to adapt successfully once they're secure in their "inner" selves. Sometimes, a new or different I position can act as a bridge between two opposite or contradictory positions. Take the example of a 50-year-old leader from the manufacturing industry we've worked with. Joining a successful organization from a sales background, he wanted to contribute to the strategic development of the business and was frustrated when he wasn't offered a position on the supervisory board. Self-doubt and insecurity began to creep in. Am I really a leader outside

my own familiar club (my previous organization and my personal field)? Could I really make the leap to the level of the supervisory board? What am I showing to others that makes them see me solely as a salesman rather than a strategic leader? How am I behaving in the context of this new organization?

After dialogue and reflection, our client was able to bring more coherence to his story by developing the I position of mentor. In this role, he combines coaching with leadership skills. The way he sees himself and others, and how others see him, has changed. He has become reconciled to his new environment because he's been able to accept the time is not yet right for him to lead. His story points to the three key conditions for reconciliation and personal effectiveness: courage, self-knowledge and flexibility.

Individuals with these qualities will, we believe, make the best leaders in the future; Dialogical Leader® is designed to encourage their development.

### Leadership lessons

- The licence to lead comes from the personal integrity or personal wholeness of the leader; and this, in turn, comes from open dialogue and self-confrontation.
- Storytelling is a medium for effective leadership in all organizations. By knowing and telling their personal stories, individuals learn how to reconcile opposites and therefore resolve dilemmas.
- Listening to the corporate story – as well as the individual narratives of leaders – achieves better understanding of organizations. Groups and subgroups – the teams on which effective leadership depends – might have different collective I positions. Consultants to organizations need to combine rational analysis of survey data with intuitive listening skills.



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(See also, "The Dialogical Leader: Developing leaders for the future," reviewed in issue 2, p. 33.)