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# Leadership and Negative Capability

Peter Simpson, Robert French and Charles Harvey

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## Abstract

Our aim in this article is to explore and explain the concept of 'negative capability', in the context of the current resurgence of interest in organizational leadership. We suggest that negative capability can create an intermediate space that enables one to continue to think in difficult situations. Where positive capability supports 'decisive action', negative capability supports 'reflective inaction', that is, the ability to resist dispersing into defensive routines when leading at the limits of one's knowledge, resources and trust. The development of negative capability is discussed but it is suggested that its status is problematic in the context of a societal and organizational culture dominated by control and performativity. The practice of negative capability is illustrated throughout the paper, using a case study of the leadership of an international joint venture.

**Key words:** leadership; negative capability; containment; dispersal; learning

## Introduction

John Keats conceived the idea of 'negative capability' in 1817. In a letter to his brothers, he described it as a state in which a person

*'is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.* (Keats, 1970: 43.)

Keats was trying to capture in words the state of mind that underpins the creative genius of high achieving individuals, especially in literature. This was the culmination of a sequence of attempts to describe the 'prime essential' of a poet (Muir, 1958: 107), which included such phrases as 'scepticism', 'pessimism', 'disinterestedness', and 'humility and the capability of submission' (Bate, 1964, chapter x; Caldwell, 1972: 5).

In this article, we draw on Keats' work and on his commentators. However, the concept of negative capability has had a rich life of its own beyond the study of poetic creativity. It has, for instance, been applied to religious experience, to the practice of teaching and,

especially, to psychoanalytic method, where Milner, for example, comments that she first became aware of the term in the 1930s (1973: 260)<sup>1</sup>.

Most recently, negative capability has also entered the language of organization and leadership studies (Bennis, 1998; 2000; Handy, 1989). However, its meaning and implications in this field have not been analyzed in detail. The task we have set ourselves, therefore, is to bring Keats' original insight, and its subsequent development, to bear on the ongoing debate over leadership.

In this paper, we translate the idea of negative capability into the language of leadership and organization from other fields of human relations, especially psychoanalysis and the creative arts. Our motivation for adding to the plethora of words on leadership is the belief that, in the midst of the noise of ideas, the relatedness of the leader's negative and positive capabilities has been lost.

### **Negative capability in the context of leadership**

Leadership tends to be thought of in terms of positive capabilities, those attributes and abilities that allow the individual to promote *decisive action* even in the face of uncertainty. In this paper, we argue that alongside such positive capabilities there is a need to consider the contribution of negative capability, that is, the capacity to sustain *reflective inaction*<sup>2</sup>. This is described as 'negative' because it involves the ability *not* to do something, to resist the tendency to disperse into actions that are defensive rather than relevant for the task.

Leaders may require negative capability in order to contain those aspects of a situation that are themselves 'negative', such as not knowing what to do, not having adequate resources, and not trusting or being trusted. In situations of this kind, a resolution can, at times, be achieved through the exercise of positive capabilities, such as the application of knowledge from previous experience, the ability to transfer resources from elsewhere, or the ability to influence others to trust. At other times, however, there is a need to wait until the insights come, resources become available, or relationships develop. This requires a capability, which manifests in behaviours such as waiting, observing and listening, that are not negative *per se* but are, as it were, at the opposite pole to action as intervention.

In this context, therefore, positive and negative do not imply any moral judgement. They are connected rather than self-contradictory or mutually exclusive. Thus, they have a metaphorical sense similar to that of positive and negative polarities in an electrical or magnetic field. This was also the explicit basis for the idea from which Keats appears to have derived his own concept, namely Coleridge's concept of 'negative belief' (Bridgewater, 1999, xv; Holmes, 1998: 130).

In 'negative' circumstances, which are characterised by *lack*, the pressures to act can be great, especially upon those in leadership positions. Expectations of self and others – the image of the leader as the one who knows – can increase the desire to act decisively and to give a strong lead. What leaders may need instead, however, is to wait a while before acting, and to resist the temptation to act from tried and tested positive capabilities. Negative capability is not the 'solution' to these dilemmas. However, its emphasis on patient waiting and on containing the pressures evoked by uncertainty can help to create a mental and emotional space, in which a new thought may emerge that can itself become the basis for decisive action.

This potential of negative capability to create the conditions for fresh insight is explored in particular detail in the literature of psychoanalysis. In his paper on 'psychoanalytic praxis', for example, Eisold defines negative capability as 'precisely the ability to tolerate anxiety and fear, to stay in the place of uncertainty in order to allow for the emergence of new thoughts or perceptions' (Eisold, 2000: 65).

There is, of course, no formula by which to know whether positive or negative capability is required at any particular moment. Leaders must often act or not act without knowing which is appropriate and must, at the same time, make judgements and act politically, recognising the validity and importance of the views and judgements of others. However, an awareness of the potential of negative capability does at least offer an alternative to following habitual or merely reactive responses.

### **Introducing the case material: Leadership in an international joint venture**

In this paper we present a case study that illustrates the contribution of negative capability in the early stages of a multi-billion dollar international joint venture between three nation states and a global corporation, 'Megacom'. The story is told from the perspective of Nicholas, the leader of the Megacom negotiating team, who we interviewed as a part of an ongoing research study into the practices of business leaders.

The venture initially involved Megacom, Russia and China, though for commercial purposes, Megacom also sought to involve South Korea. The complex historical and political context made it difficult to reach agreement between all parties, so that the Koreans were not invited to the negotiating table at the beginning of the project. The approach of the initial three parties was to set up a feasibility study. It was after an agreement was signed that the Koreans were allowed to become involved, but then only on terms prescribed by the Chinese and Russians. An awareness of such complexities and sensitivities was to prove an essential component in the successful development of the negotiations.

Whilst we are arguing that negative capability has a role to play in organizational leadership, this does not take away from the fact that leadership is a practice that must be grounded in experience and knowledge. Leadership involves engaging in a complex arena where a great deal of technical information will be known, extensive resources may be at risk, and relationships will often be based on long, involved histories. It will become apparent that the ‘negative’ characteristics of not knowing, not having and not trusting are all evident in this case, but it will be equally evident that all parties came to the negotiating table with very high levels of experience and expertise.

The importance of negative capability can only be understood in relation to this extensive capacity for positive capability. For example, Nicholas, the chief negotiator for Megacom, had been with the company for twenty-four years. Initially training and working as a technical specialist, his career had taken him to many places around the world, including the Middle East, Far East and South America. Following several commercial leadership roles and functions within the company he eventually came to specialise in leading the creation of new business opportunities, which required negotiating with national countries or companies. In particular, he had considerable experience of working with government agencies and local and regional governance, dealing with the whole spectrum from ministerial government to mayors of villages and towns.

Despite this background expertise, Nicholas was also aware of the moments at which his knowledge and experience were of no use to him and something else was required. His self-reflective style and unusual candour in our interview with him offer a vivid account of the interplay of positive and negative capabilities in the development of this project. It is from the description of his responses to the ‘uncertainties, mysteries and doubts’ that he faced, that we are able to illustrate the contribution of his developing negative capability to the success of the negotiations. At certain moments he knew he could no longer rely on what he knew (his own expertise and that of his team), nor what he had (the resources of a global corporation), and not even on the relationships that he believed he had developed. At these moments in the project, his account demonstrates the work of negative capability in resisting the pressure and temptation to ‘disperse’ his energies into an ‘irritable reaching after fact and reason’. When successful in this, we observe that he was able to pause, absorb some strong and difficult emotions, and mobilise those aspects of himself that were disposed to listen, to wait and, crucially, to learn through and from his own waiting.

### **The contribution of negative capability to learning leadership**

Negative capability can create an intermediate space that enables one to continue to think in difficult situations. This search for new insight through attention to the intermediate spaces of experience and relationship is exemplified in the practice of psychoanalysis. Bion, for example, suggests that, in analytic work, new insight depends on resisting the tendency to fill with knowing the ‘empty space’ created by ignorance. In order to ‘leave space for a new idea’, he exhorted his psychoanalytic colleagues to forget both what they knew and what they wanted and, instead, to wait with ‘patience’ for a pattern to evolve (Bion 1984: 124). Eigen (1993: 12) has described this patient waiting as ‘not dead or inert but intensely alive and accurate.’

The philosopher Jacob Needleman has described the breakdown of this receptive state of intense and alive waiting as ‘dispersal’. In a description reminiscent of Keats, he defines dispersal as a flight from overwhelming emotion. In particular, when the anxiety evoked

by encountering the unknown cannot be born, we tend to disperse into ‘explanations, emotional reactions or physical action’ (Needleman, 1990: 167). Dispersal is the diversion of energy away from engagement with the task into these patterns of distraction, and it is precisely when one experiences this impulse to avoid or disperse that negative capability is required.

The contrasting dynamics of containment and dispersal, identified each in their own context by Keats, Needleman and Bion, are central to a leader’s capacity to learn from experience. So often learning is naively portrayed as straightforwardly desirable and positive, but the pressures to disperse can be great when faced by one’s ignorance and sense of incompetence. At such moments, under the pressure to act, dispersal can not only seem politically expedient but can also be emotionally hard to resist. In the context of a leadership role the ‘negative’ work of waiting, listening and not acting impulsively is difficult and dangerous because it can bring one face to face with the very uncertainties and doubts that magnify the risks involved in either action or inaction.

Nicholas describes such an experience very early in the project, identifying it as a “defining event” in learning a new approach to the negotiations. This situation involved a respected Chinese Professor who was leading their technical team, each member a recognised expert in their field.

“At one particular meeting the Professor said, ‘We must have this technical specification...’ to a level of detail that we were just not into at that stage in the meeting. I suggested that this was not a reasonable request. Detailed discussions followed with the team. Eventually I was told, ‘Yes, we understand. We agree with you on what the technical specification needs to be, but the Professor wants this in here because he said any other wording does not explain what we need in terms of what the Russians must provide.’”

Nicholas was caught between his respect for the technical competence of the Chinese team and what appeared to him to be an obviously inappropriate technical specification. He was forced to think again: “I knew that I must have been missing the point.” He went to talk to the Russians and outlined the Chinese specification for the project and raised his own objection. The Russian replied, “Yes, but that will be resolved later on”.

“When we came back to the meeting the Professor spoke and then the senior Russian negotiator spoke, and then an interesting dynamic developed. The Russian exclaimed, ‘Oh Professor, why are you doing this to me? You are such a learned man, what are you doing? Don’t you understand that you are ruining my life’, and the Professor just smiled, and said, ‘You’re a wise man Mikhail, you understand what we mean here, so why don’t we send our teams away to come up with the right wording’. And they went away and came up with the right wording. That was the first time that I realised I didn’t understand, that we at Megacom just didn’t understand the dynamic between the Russians and the Chinese. They knew how to get the meaning across.”

The defining moment is a shift in Nicholas’s mind, a shift from the familiar paradigm of technical control to a paradigm of the management of meaning. Wisdom, for the Chinese Professor, was an awareness of this dynamic, and the requirement to play the game to a complex and historically determined pattern. Nicholas’s negative capability was mobilised, unintentionally it seems, in the negative space of confusion about Chinese competence and incompetence. In this situation, in which Nicholas knew that he did not understand and was therefore missing the point, he was forced to listen carefully, to wait for the pattern to evolve, and so to learn.

However, this description of events does not fully capture the emotional texture of his experience. Later in our interview with him, he described some ‘dark moments’ during the negotiation. In this account, he captures graphically his uncertainty and doubt, and his gradually emerging recognition that he had to live with them rather than to react. In this, he demonstrates the capacity for negative capability rather than dispersal, especially as he could not be fully convinced at any particular moment of achieving the desired outcome.

The disagreement over technical specifications was merely one particular episode during the early stages of the negotiation in which Nicholas experienced a significant challenge to his own sense of personal and professional competence. This crystallised in the realisation that “I was not being listened to”, which he experienced as “outrageous”. Whilst practically difficult, and demanding patience and restraint on Nicholas’s part, he was able to mobilise a rational explanation in terms of his relative youthfulness (early 40s) in contrast to the Chinese respect for age (grey hair) and status (position or title,



especially ‘Professor’). However, underlying problems in the deeper relational dynamics were exposed for him by the shocking discovery that his *de facto* ‘exclusion’ from the negotiations could not be attributed only to aspects of Chinese culture such as these. A little later, he reports,

“the Russian negotiator was being particularly stubborn and I said, ‘Mikhail this is ridiculous’. He looked at me and said, ‘What do you know?’ [Interviewer: ‘Ouch!’] Yes, Ouch! ‘What do you know? You know nothing. You don’t know me, and you don’t know these people. Me and the Chinese. I do.’ And he was right. I suddenly realised, ‘I don’t know you, obviously, and I don’t know the Chinese, obviously.’ Because he had years of experience, he had even been out there with them on aid programmes, as had the translator it turned out. But there was an anger in him there, it showed in his eyes, a real anger, and I thought I had really blown that one. So I stopped my tirade with him at that point and just backed off, and left it.”

This ‘backing off’ and just living with the experience of the Russian negotiator’s anger and dismissal of him as worthless – “You know nothing” – created a negative space in which the emotions could abate and change could happen. Such learning was painful, because it challenged Nicholas’s personal and professional identity as a strong, decisive leader, highly valued within Megacom’s western culture. However, he was again caught between two opposing forces: the desire to defend his sense of personal integrity and the requirement to sustain a working relationship with the negotiating parties. The weight of the emotional work he experienced may be observed in the finality of his belief that he had ‘blown it’, not just at that moment but perhaps irrevocably: “Every time he [the Russian negotiator] looked at us, it felt like he was thinking, “You two enemies in the camp.” I thought we had just broken something here, completely.”

As things transpired, it became clear that in relation to *content*, Nicholas had been ‘technically’ right. The Russian later changed his position and conceded that Nicholas had been correct. However, he was aware that he had been mistaken about the level of trust he had achieved with Mikhail, and so the learning for Nicholas was at a deeper, relational level. In this context, he was beginning to understand the importance of waiting, backing off and saying nothing. Even when the Russian conceded the point in

dispute, Nicholas clearly recalled thinking, “Okay, say nothing, say nothing.” It was a clear outcome of his learning from this period of the negotiations:

“The ability to say nothing is very non-Western, but very powerful.” [Interviewer: “Just wait.”] “Just to wait, to sit there and do nothing and say nothing. To sit there and see what happens. Very powerful.”

More than a technique, however, this practice of waiting, of attending to the deeper patterns of relationship and meaning seemed to make an essential contribution to the development of an effective personal and working relationship with both the Chinese and the Russians. A precise understanding of the nature of this development is elusive. With the Chinese, Nicholas merely noticed that in the third year of negotiations they began to tell him information that had previously been withheld. Similarly, his relationship with Mikhail, the Russian negotiator, went through an equally mystifying transformation:

“I don’t know where along the line that it happened. He [the Russian negotiator] had a birthday dinner one night in Beijing. I got there late and when I arrived he had saved a place for me at the table next to him. All the heads of the delegations were at his birthday dinner, and he stood up and just gave this toast, ‘And Nicholas, he’s my best friend. I know that whenever there’s a fight he’s going to be standing right there behind me. That’s what I know’.”

A related example of learning that was formative in his practice as the leader of this project, arose from the basic problems of understanding posed by issues of language.

“The whole concept of language was also critical. [...] It was only when we began to listen very carefully, to be rigorous in our listening, that we began to understand. They [the Chinese, Russians and Koreans] knew what the meanings were but they didn’t know how to overcome it themselves. The Chinese said those words genuinely believing that that was what it meant to them. And the Koreans genuinely heard what they heard, and so did the Russians and we heard something else. That was probably the most powerful part of all of this. Trying to really understand that these guys weren’t trying to hoodwink each other. They weren’t lying or cheating or trying to score points.”

In a situation such as this, involving several different nationalities, it would not be hard to predict the need for close attention to linguistic issues. The presence of translators for the different languages indicates that care had indeed been given to this aspect of the work. However, the specific learning reported by Nicholas was that to be effective in taking up

their role in the negotiations, he and his colleagues had to be rigorous in their listening and, as a result, learned to take up their role in an entirely new way. This was based on a heightened quality of listening to and working with the language used, and a parallel ability to construct forms of words that captured the meanings which all parties were prepared to agree to.

Negative capability can be thought of as underlying this capacity to hear the meanings that are often obscured as much as revealed by words, and then to convey them to others. Howard Stein could have been describing Nicholas's learning in relation to his leadership of the Megacom team, when he wrote, 'The organizational consultant's most valuable skill – like the poet's and the psychoanalyst's alike – is cultivating this "negative capability," one which listens for the hidden story to emerge, and fosters its appearance into the sight of consciousness.' (Stein, 1994: 339.) In Scott's words: 'what is deepest in the human mystery gives way only before a *negative capability*' (Scott, 1969: xii-xiii).

### **Implications for taking up leadership roles: 'chameleon' leaders**

Keats' capacity for identification with the other illustrates a further dimension of this receptivity and empathic listening: 'His own personality seemed to him to matter hardly more than the strings of the lyre; without which, indeed, there would be no music audible, but which changed no single note of the music already existing in an expectant silence' (Symons, 1901: 1626-7). Clearly the *form* of a poet's intervention is very different to that of an organizational leader. However, their effectiveness may be based on a remarkable similarity of intention and desire: 'to be a voice, a vision; to pass on a message, translating it, flawlessly, into another, more easily apprehended tongue' (ibid.). Through the exercise of negative capability the leader becomes, like the strings of a lyre, an instrument – not for music or poetry, but for organizational inquiry, learning, creativity and action.

One of the tensions between positive capability and negative capability is that the practice of the latter requires a certain degree of humility. As Nicholas's experience

illustrates, negative capability indicates a capacity for empathy and even a certain flexibility of character, the ability ‘to tolerate a loss of self and a loss of rationality by trusting in the capacity to recreate oneself in another character or another environment’ (Hutter, 1982: 305). Bridgwater focuses explicitly on this openness and capacity for identification with the ‘other’:

By ‘negative capability’ Keats meant the lack of personal identity, of preconceived certainty, which he believed to mark all great poets. It was necessary, Keats believed, for the poet to be, above all, open to impressions, sensations or whatever, which means that the ‘camelion’ (chameleon) poet is forever changing his/her ideas. (1999: xv.)

At a relatively early stage in Nicholas’s story, he described a change in attitude and behaviour that reflects just such a chameleon-like adaptation; as he put it, “we became what was needed in the situation”:

“Initially we were negotiating in our normal way, as a major player in the negotiation, saying ‘Here’s the agreement, you need to sign it’. We became frustrated as the other parties blocked every proposal, for one apparently spurious reason after another. We would react, ‘Don’t be ridiculous, that’s totally outrageous’ or ‘You’re being totally unreasonable’. But whatever we did it seemed to make no difference until we began to realise that if we listened carefully, and watched the dynamics we could have an influence. We didn’t know this straight away but this evolved as we went along. We realised that the project just wasn’t going to succeed if we didn’t help everyone in the room. Without a conscious decision on our part, our role changed from negotiators, an equal party, to become an honest broker – attempting to help reach an agreement between the other parties.

“We didn’t try to be impartial – although we had to be. We were just trying to focus on what could happen if this could succeed. So we weren’t pro-Chinese, pro-Russian or pro-Korean. We needed these three parties to make it work. And *we became what was needed in the situation*. My lawyer *became the guy who* could write a sentence or a paragraph that would be offered up to everybody as ‘This is what we’ve just heard in the room, what do you think?’ We found that this would focus everybody on that piece of wording and then *we would allow them to tear it up. We didn’t take offence at any of these kinds of behaviours*. We just said, ‘Yes, that’s good, we’ll work at it some more’. In doing this we tried to introduce a cooperative dynamic to the room. What was remarkable was that it was very powerful, very powerful to us, it was a very motivating thing to do, but *very different to what we’ve all been taught to do.*” (Italics added.)

At first sight, it may seem ridiculous to think that an organization might require its

members to be ‘chameleons’, lacking personal identity and forever changing their ideas. Received wisdom in the literature on leadership, for instance, stresses the opposite. Far from ‘forever changing’, the leader should embody the organization’s vision proactively, creating environments not just responding to them. However, as with many organizational paradoxes, ‘the truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes’ (Charles Simeon, 1892 - reference unknown). At one extreme, the articulation and constant re-presentation of the vision – giving a lead and sticking to it – may indeed be a key element of leadership. At the other extreme, however, effective leadership involves seeing day by day, even moment by moment, what is *actually going on*, in contrast with what was planned or hoped for, intended or expected. In order to assess the impact of events in this way, and to adapt, shift and adjust as necessary, ‘chameleon’ leaders must indeed put them-*selves* to one side, in order to allow their minds to be changed.

### **Developing negative capability**

We do not agree with Handy’s assertion that ‘Negative capability ... is not given to everyone’ (1989: 56). On the contrary, like the capacity for language, it appears to be an in-born aspect of human potential, a ‘gift’ (Raine, 1986: 322), a ‘native virtue of mind’ (Caldwell, 1972: 7), ‘an intrapsychic inheritance’ (Leavy, 1970: 187) – although some, such as Keats, for example – may be born with a particular natural talent for, or disposition towards, the negative.

Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a range of general approaches and specific activities that may encourage the development of negative capability at different levels. Individual and group psychotherapy, for instance, can help individuals to understand their own habitual patterns of dispersal. At the level of person-in-role, experiential learning approaches such as group relations training conferences or organizational role analysis can have a similar developmental outcome (Chattopahyay, 1999; Miller, 1990; Ramsay, 1999; Triest, 1999). In addition, a wide range of potential approaches may be identified in other traditions. From ancient philosophy, for example, there is the tradition of spiritual

exercises (Hadot, 1995; Sorabji, 2000), often quite practical and down-to-earth, such as the *hypomnēmata* of the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius – ‘personal notes taken on a day-to-day basis’ (Hadot, 1998: 31-2), rather like the modern technique of journaling. At an equally everyday level, such activities as talking to friends or engaging in art or music can develop or sustain one’s negative capability, as can hobbies and ‘re-creations’ of all kinds, including pursuits like meditation that are more obviously ‘negative’ in the sense we have used the word here. Even such ordinary techniques, as ‘counting to ten’ before speaking or reacting, can help one to see the advantages to be gained from a pause, a ‘negative’ moment. The wisdom in such thinking may be reflected in certain common sayings, such as, ‘more haste, less speed’ or ‘look before you leap’.

What are the relevant developmental issues in organizational contexts? What it is that will help someone learn to stick to the task when that task is painful and not knowing, not having or not trusting may make it seem impossible?

In the example of the ‘defining moment’, above, it seems that Nicholas had negative capability ‘thrust upon him’. He does, however, indicate that part of his learning from this series of chance events was that he needed to give specific attention to the new aspects of his experience:

“Even after that incident had been resolved, I had a different dynamic with him [the Russian negotiator]. I thought, ‘This guy still doesn’t really respect me. I still have to achieve something else and do more about...’ So I was more conscious of that afterwards and my development was working on that, making sure I was more aware and more attuned to concerns and trying to work in that system. That was a new thing for me to manage and take care of.”

As we have seen, this ‘new thing’ involved emotional work, but it was also pragmatic. For example, if his own learning was to be taken into the system of his negotiating team Nicholas saw that the team would have to be radically restructured. His motivation was to have a team that was able to combine technical expertise with the key capacity to wait patiently that he had discovered in himself. One member of the original team was removed, because “no matter how much coaching the rest of us gave him, he couldn’t get to the point of listening, of trying to understand.” Despite his considerable financial

competence, this man was unable to see beyond the story told by the figures. When faced by apparent intransigence or what he saw as ‘game playing’, he would say to his colleagues, “You all know I’m right!” Their response was, “Yes, we never said you weren’t right. But this isn’t helping us to get there. You know you’re right, you know the numbers are right, but we’ve got to understand what it takes to get everyone to agree that these are the right things to do.” However important it may be to have the right understanding, ‘being right’ is often simply a manifestation of dispersal that can involve all three of Needleman’s elements: explanations, emotional reactions and physical action.

By contrast, the representative of the commercial side took pleasure in the experience of identification across cultural boundaries: “He loved living in Beijing. He had done a great job learning the language himself. He didn’t have to for business purposes, but he was very comfortable speaking it.” The lawyer Nicholas brought in “was already one of those guys”: “somehow he was in tune with the right meaning. The great thing was that he never, ever, showed offence at anything that they said contradictory to his work, or tearing it up as happened a couple of times, or even re-writing exactly what he had said again, the same way.”

In this way, the three members of the final team (reduced from an original group of seven) exhibited individually different facets of negative capability that the situation demanded. In addition, they learned as a group to take what one might call a negative stance. In Nicholas’s words, “we always put ourselves well back”: “we always would move ourselves to the end of the table so we never sat opposite any of the parties, we always put ourselves at the end.” In a graphic and unexpected phrase, Nicholas says of these learned behaviours, “I think that was part of subjugating ourselves.” It returns us to Keats’ notions of ‘humility and the capability of submission’ and of the chameleon poet who becomes nothing, in order to identify with, and thereby understand, the other.

### **The language of the negative in context: the problem of status**

Underlying this article is the view that the changing conditions of organizational life increasingly demand a capacity to remain ‘content with half knowledge’ (Keats, 1970: 43). This capacity to tolerate ambiguity and paradox may enable one to explore new ways of working in conditions of uncertainty.

However, dominant societal conditions militate against restraint and inaction on the part of leaders, however reflective in intent. Fundamental pressure is imposed on organizations and their leaders by the principle of *performativity*, which pervades our culture at all levels, and which Fournier and Grey have characterised as serving ‘to subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency’ (2000: 17). More immediately, leaders must meet the demands of key stakeholders, especially shareholders, management boards and politicians. Indeed, changing political and economic pressures mean that what might once have been demanded exclusively of business enterprises is now required too of public sector and even voluntary organizations. Although the language used in the different sectors varies, the imperative is similar.

In this action- and performance-oriented context, the active and the technical dominate over the passive and the humane. Thus, leaders or theorists may argue strongly the case for ‘putting people first’, or for raising the status of training and development, introducing teamwork and encouraging a culture of openness, collaboration and involvement. However, when the pressure is on, the ‘default’ position proves to be control. Where performativity rules – that is, ‘efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio’ (Lyotard, 1984: 88) – share value or league tables become the primary measure of the relative success of organizations. As a result, capacities such as negative capability, which are intrinsically un-measurable, will tend to be ignored or to atrophy, by being excluded from dominant organizational discourses.

These pressures were evident within Megacom and upon the project team. For example, at one point, the chief negotiator described the corporate reaction to the slow progress of negotiations with the Chinese and Russians in this way:



“Some were saying, ‘Oh you’ve given in, you’ve rolled over’; others suggested that we had ‘missed the boat’. This was particularly difficult when we were going through rough patches – and we had plenty of those. It was suggested that we should lay it on the line to the Chinese and Russians: ‘Without us there would be no bloody money in this project, so you just better get on with it: stop faffing around! We’ve wasted 3 months doing this’. That’s the model that Megacom always wants to go to, the big stick. The 700lb gorilla with a big cheque book and a big club, and the message, ‘you guys can’t do without us’.”

In such an environment, it is no surprise that emotions *per se* tend to be regarded as a ‘disturbance’, undermining effective organizational functioning, rather than as a source of potentially crucial information (Armstrong, 2000; Fineman, 1993).

Thus, language itself proves to be a pivotal factor in relation to negative capability. Within the dominant discourse of organizations – and indeed of society generally – how is one to attribute positive value to those aspects of behaviour on which negative capability may depend? This is a problem both of status and of practice. It is a challenge to leaders to shun conventional, politically safe wisdom and to strive to continue to think in moments of dangerous or threatening uncertainty. In some circumstances, it may then make sense for them to take up their roles in the low status behaviours of waiting, observing, withdrawing, listening, adapting, patience and passivity. While these behaviours may seem to have less intrinsic value than intervening or decision-making, for example, they can make a real and valuable contribution to the leadership of the task at hand.

### **Concluding thoughts**

The complex interaction between positive and negative capabilities highlighted in this article has many implications for the theory and practice of leadership. There is, for example, a pressing need for research into the ways in which leaders learn to lead. If negative capability is recognised as an important leadership capacity, then how is it acquired and developed – and then accessed in the moment – alongside other necessary attributes, skills, competencies and abilities, personal and professional, human and technical?

There remains, therefore, a need to explore the implications of negative capability in specific fields of application. As well as being relevant to how leaders *respond to* change, it might also contribute to an understanding of those situations when they deliberately seek it. Engaging with risk is an obvious example. Because risk-taking involves raising the threshold of uncertainty, it sets up precisely the conditions in which negative capability may be demanded. Avoiding the problems of escalation or, worse still, the possibility of cataclysmic error, certainly requires more than improvements to the technologies of risk assessment, important though these are. Effective approaches to risk, also demand the capacity to slow down rather than to be rushed – at precisely the moment when quick decisions and decisive actions are called for – and to remain open and reflective, rather than reaching a fixed and perhaps premature judgement.

We have focussed here on negative capability and leadership, because the capacity for reflective inaction seems particularly necessary for leaders in the uncertain conditions of organizational life today. However, we present these ideas in the hope that others will also test them in their own work settings, in order to develop context-specific approaches and applications of their own.

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<sup>1</sup> In relation to religious experience, see Ryan, 1976; Scott, 1969; Toynbee, 1973; for the experience of teaching and learning, see Nurick, 1989-90. References within the literature of psychoanalysis are legion, with the work of Wilfred Bion being of particular significance and influence. See, for instance, Bion, 1978; Eisold, 2000; Emanuel, 2001; Faimberg, 2000; Green, 1973; Rosen, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to the reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper for the phrase 'reflective inaction'.