



*"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."*

# ETHOS WORKSHOP

## REPORT



ETHICAL HOLDING OF ORGANIZATIONAL SPACE  
**Building Ethical Leadership Practices**

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ETHOS WORKSHOP REPORT  
Workshop held in Moshi, Tanzania  
25-28 May 2009

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*EASUN creates spaces within which individuals, groups, organizations and communities creatively learn to build a better history and new ways of thinking about and taking ethical action to improve lives and livelihoods.*



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# BUILDING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

## ETHOS WORKSHOP REPORT

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

### 0.1. A NEW LEADERSHIP STRATEGIC FOCUS

All indications in Africa today are showing that *leadership* might be the remaining unexplored avenue for transforming institutions and renewing hope for change and development on the continent. How is leadership held—how does a leader carry, or walk with what he or she is carrying; in the spaces where human beings live and work toward common purpose?

To what extent is the way in which a leader “carries”, “walks” or “holds space” creating harmony or advancing the common purpose?

Those are glaring questions for leadership in Africa today. The ability to see or ask such questions, however, is often hindered by over-intellectualization and rationalization of the concepts of leadership and management.

EASUN considers leadership to be a critical capacity area for democratizing organizations, institutions and governance. This has led it to focus its training and coaching interventions on developing transformative leadership skills in East African civil society. This is a particular new direction for its next strategic block (2010-2013).

EASUN is driven by the desire to promote reflective processes as a way of advancing an alternative discourse on development. Transformed situations bring about equal development in specific areas such as language, education, learning situations, religion, gender, leadership, decision-making, income and other opportunities for individual, organizational and community advancement.

To that end, EASUN endeavours to *create spaces within which individuals, groups, organizations and communities creatively learn to build a better history and new ways of thinking about and taking ethical action to improve lives and livelihoods.*

### 0.2. THE WORKSHOP ITSELF

#### 0.2.1. What was it all about?

The workshop on Ethical Holding of Organizational Space (ETHOS) was organized by EASUN, in collaboration with Reflective Learning –UK (RL-UK). It was held in Moshi-Tanzania, from 24<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

The workshop explored the concept of *ethos* as an essential quality in assessing leadership practices, particularly based on the understanding that ethical leadership is possible when we are able to interrogate our value systems.

All structures and methodologies for programme implementation carry value-systems. How conscious are we of what values are permeating our practices of leadership and processes of decision-making in organizational settings?

Ethical leadership results in increased effectiveness of organizations, as well as ethical outcomes in social development. At its simplest expression, an ethical leader listens, is respectful, non-judgemental and acts with integrity. This will be found in all stories of ethical leaders who had to make difficult choices under difficult circumstances.

*Ethical holding of organizational space* is a proposition; suggesting that there are particular values that underlie what governments, business and, particularly, civil society organizations claim to characterize their purpose in development work. In practice, the ethical content of such a claim is to be assessed around specific qualities such as: 1) Appreciative processes and relationships in carrying the organizational vision, mission and values; 2) Distribution of leadership and responsibility-taking in the workplace; 3) Shared learning practices and systems for team/organizational development; 4) Team based task-performance and accountability; 5) Working for change outcomes that empower organizational members and communities served.

### **0.2.2. Methodology**

The workshop was particularly designed for maximum use of alternative language channels (ALC), as a means of generating creativity, equitable relations, commitment and responsibility-taking in the learning processes.

From a participant engagement point of view, the methodology itself formed much of the content. Some of the initial activities of the workshop were allowed to grow out of the idea of walking and watching. This helped to locate the activities around *lived experiences* of the participants. After some fundamental focusing through collaborative and confidence building activities, participants did some local walks (in the grounds) in order to get the group 'noticing.' These observations also fed some of the more substantive activities such as working with metaphor and role play.

In the spirit of Participatory, Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR), the workshop was largely driven by the participants themselves. This can be seen in the format of the programme, particularly the deliberate creation of 'spaces' therein. Facilitators were open to improvisation, which meant "not knowing" what would emerge from the learning process. While this was often edgy and a bit scary for the facilitators, it was always exciting and creative! The concept of ETHOS itself, and its relatedness to leadership came to life in-the-moment and through interaction. The meeting points, i.e., reflections at the end of each day also became places for surfacing direct experiences of ethical leadership questions from each day's journey, particularly around the themes such as "pride and joy", "exploration and choice-making".

ALC was particularly chosen and valued as an instrument for transforming leadership in organisations. The experiential learning processes particularly reflected the overall theme of the workshop: "**We make the road by walking**". Participants were invited to engage in various practical activities. Some of the work was physical and very messy, requiring participants to be able to move freely.

### **0.2.3. The workshop learning processes**

The workshop was structured as a space for demonstrating leadership in action, i.e., an open but challenging opportunity to learn and take responsibility together. Relevant workshop processes included exercises in physical trust activities, role plays of different kinds, reflective styles of movement and writing reflectively. It is in this, and in the emphasis upon visions and values, distribution of leadership, sharing learning practices, equity around gender, team work and accountability that made the workshop particularly intriguing and challenging, as well as being relevant for building transformational leadership qualities.

The programme structure allowed for a great deal of creativity and spontaneity within a secure framework. To assist coherence and a clear focus on the themes and issues around 'ETHOS', the four pillars of PAAR (participation, appreciation, empowerment and ethics) were used at the end of each day's work. This underpinned the reflective learning processes of the whole workshop.

The workshop specifically explored three kinds of ethic: an ethic-of-participation, an ethic-of-appreciation and an ethic-of-empowerment. In various ways, at the end of each day of learning activities, participants themselves sought to link what had emerged for them with conceptions of ethical leadership. This was a challenging experience to all, both emotionally and mentally.

### **0.2.4. Collaborative effort**

The two facilitators from RL – U.K., Professor Tony Ghaye and Dr. Phillip Chambers, brought to the workshop a wealth of experience and expertise around the themes of ALC, Participative and Appreciative Action Research and Reflection (PAAR) and in the whole concept of democratizing reflective practices. EASUN, on the other hand, provided the context and the strategic framework related to the workshop theme of ETHOS, based on its track record of training East African civil society leaders in facilitating transformative processes in organizational situations through the practice of organization development (OD).



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# I. ETHOS WORKSHOP EXPERIENTIAL FRAMEWORK

## “We make the road by walking”

May 25-28, 2009, Moshi, Tanzania

	Points of departure					Meeting Points
Mon	DOING and FEELING	Recovery break	⇒	Lunch	⇒	<i>Performance:</i> Making spaces and changing places
Tues	EXPERIENTIAL (photo) MAPPING		⇒		⇒	<i>Exhibition:</i> Reflections on the exploration of spaces, space making, taking and shaping
Weds	KNOTS & CONNECTIONS		⇒		FOOTPRINTS, PATHS & PATTERNS	<i>Performance:</i> Spaces of domination and resistance
Thurs	REFLECTED ‘BEST-SELF’ POTRAITS  (When I am at my best I am ....)		⇒		⇒	<i>Group performance:</i>  “Learning at the Crossroads”

## 2. MAKING SPACES

### 2.1. Hold with care, carry with interest

The first day of the workshop started with people working in colour groups. The groups were matched to four clusters of balloons, i.e., Yellow, green, blue and red. The balloons, filled with water, were precious things. They needed to be held with care, carried with interest and caring, in order to move gracefully through the space that was created outside the Umoja meeting hall, at Uhuru Hostel, in Moshi.

Participants were invited to come together and form groups by choosing balloon colour clusters. The exercises and reflection in that first part of the morning were mostly about choosing, lifting, carrying, matching and placing, while moving gracefully to occupy the space in different ways.

### 2.2. Occupying space

A room is a space that can be occupied in different ways. Different kinds of movements were exercised, reflecting the theme and spirit of the workshop, “We make the road by walking”:

- Walking in straight lines, changing direction suddenly, as you meet others;
- Walking through circular movements/shapes, turning gracefully around others coming from the opposite direction;
- Holding stillness, walking, jumping and turning.

That much walking in a crowded room challenged individuals to make two kinds of *movement decisions*: 1) quick, jerky, busy; 2) flowing, graceful.

Turning and jumping was introduced as a good way to punctuate walking. How do you turn, how do you jump? Who is around you? How have you managed to come back to stillness?

Two more exercises in that first morning session were particularly demanding of trust.

Exercise 1: Two individuals leaned on each another and strive to reach a point where each individual's weight was carried jointly through letting go of control and truly sharing the leaning space.

Exercise 2: One individual holding the hand of the other and taking them on a walk through shared space, with their eyes closed.

Feelings shared about the trust exercises	
Feelings of the leader	Feeling of the person being led
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of being in control</li> <li>• Tension as the led individual held back</li> <li>• Responsibility</li> <li>• Caring for another</li> <li>• Confidence about role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Sense of vulnerability</li> <li>• Being at risk</li> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Lack of trust</li> </ul>

### 2.3. Feeling in and believing in the journey

Change movements as slowly as possible, for instance, from clasped hands to folded arms. In pairs, A goes first, then B, then together. This is repeated several times, to allow comfort with the discipline of moving consciously and deliberately. The metaphor of journey was again used here, i.e., the slow movement, i.e., mapping each stage of the journey with gesture should enable the individual to feel “being in it”, “believe in it”.

- What is the journey feeling like?
- What is the journey making you think?
- What is the journey making you want to do?

### 2.4. The first footprints

A brief reflective space at mid-day allowed a sharing of feelings about the first few activities of the workshop. A number of things had particularly stood out for the participants:

- Movement as a way of communicating something was experienced differently by different individuals;
- Slow movement, “being in it”, a dance reflecting or generating belief,
- A touch on the shoulder, stimulating change of focus or awareness;
- Appreciation, feelings and sharing were enhanced in the moment the road unwinds or the story evolves.

The discussion in the reflection space also highlighted peoples’ different approaches to learning. Some people seemed uncomfortable with direct extended activities, such as movement, dance, role-play in the learning process. The importance of patience in a learning situation was underlined. A number of

observations were shared with regard to the “learning question”. It was noted, for instance, that “learning” can take years—sometimes people never learn.

Mostly, however, participants were able to recognize the metaphors for different aspects of organizations that were mirrored in the “language of movement” activities of the first morning session. Regarding the journey metaphor, one participant noted: “I was not alone in the activities. I was always accompanied—many of my questions will be answered at some point.” Another participant who was touched by the idea of “the touch” observed: How should I turn, when a colleague gently taps me on the shoulder? As a leader, or team member, how should I turn? Sharp jerk or gentle turn of the head?

Others were able to relate the movement activities with managing space in organizational situations. In further elaboration, it was observed that there are different kinds of space. How we name them or bring them to life is the big question.

Within the space there is action. The rules within the space determine what action can be taken. The metaphoric significance of movement was seen in creating space, shaping space, utilizing space. With regard to this, the significance of space to leadership and organizations was clearly beginning to emerge.

The first morning of the workshop had started with “feeling” experiences. What we feel influences what we think and do. How are we likely to feel, in spaces *created*, *shaped* and *utilized* in differently specific ways?

The main purpose of movement with balloons exercise was an attempt to demonstrate conscious making and shaping of space for democratic participation and , particularly, surfacing the “ethic of care” in the process. The movements were clearly characterized by;

- Ceremony and meditative or reflective postures;
- Lifting for visibility
- Carrying with openness
- Walking with focused attention on one’s steps and footprints.

## **2.5. A space for questions**

The doing and feeling exercise of the morning, in colour groups, had been used to generate significant questions. As noted above, important questions were raised, about learning situations, significance of movement as language for conscious management of learning and relationships, role/place of feelings in organizations.

This afternoon session was offered as an opportunity for participants to experience being in a space where asking questions is ok.

### Exercise

Individually, think about “what you did, appreciated, or listened to” that particularly stood out and raised a question for you. Ask yourself: “what has really been significant for me”, and frame it as a question. Share the individual questions in the colour groups. Each group should then agree on one significant question to share in plenary, including highlights of the things that were significant in the questions shared.

### Questions shared

COLOUR GROUP	SIGNIFICANT QUESTION
RED GROUP	What is the connection between space and leadership?
YELLOW	What is space?
PINK	How do we use self-consciousness/awareness to facilitate the transformation of others
GREEN	How do we relate the experiences of (today's activities) to organizational work?
BLUE	How can we connect these activities to the concept of space in leadership practices in our organizations?

## 2.6. Making spaces as an intentional act

From the previous sessions, participants had experienced “making spaces” through the language of movement. Now there was need to experience “changing places” within the spaces that we experience. To what extent has changing places got to do with power, roles, or leadership?

Each group created and presented a performance based on “making spaces and changing places”. The groups had the ethical responsibility to communicate something meaningful to people who were in the same space as them. It was noted that “making spaces” was to be seen as a spring board for shaping spaces.

Five presentations were made by the colour groups. They were all made aware that in order to undertake their performance, they were each coming into an empty physical place that they needed to transform.

It was further noted that space-making affects people who inhabit organizational places in very specific ways. People in leadership roles can use their power to:

- create accommodative space;
- Distort space;
- Limit space.

Space is something we construct. It is not an empty vessel that you pull things into. In the previous previous short performances involving space making, participants had clearly been intentional about space-taking and space-shaping. That experience should inform our understanding of the concept of space, particularly in political and cultural set-ups, including organizations.

## **2.7. Ethical space and transformational leadership**

Transforming space demands, in us, the ability to manage ritual and ceremony. The implicit assumption is that we transform space into something better, with more opportunities to do things in ways that are ethical. We therefore need to know the signs and signals that would make us sure that leadership is being ethical, and therefore transformational, i.e., making and holding spaces that increase chances for all to do things in ways that empower people.

### 3. MAKING IT BETTER

The glaring story line of Monday morning was “choose, lift, carry, match and place. This involved working with balloons and enabled the identification of colour groups that became key learning spaces throughout the workshop.

Tuesday morning started with looking back on Monday through the story line: “make it better”. Participants worked in their colour groups, with the freedom to identify any entry point related to how they had experienced previous day, with the undertaking to *making it better*.

As it turned out, the different colour groups demonstrated some comfort with the notion of play as a creative way of learning. As they carried and walked with balloons, each group made visible effort to improve on their movement language skills, showing increased awareness of space, how to take, make and shape it. They were also particularly focused on the notions of choosing, lifting, carrying, matching and placing. Some went beyond their own groups and experimented matching their balloons across colour lines, which might be equivalent to opening boundaries or networking for maximum value creation.

The notion of *carrying* particularly brought about important insights. More people were seen to practice holding their balloons with more extended arms, while walking in ways that characterized caring and sharing.

All in all, the groups demonstrated increased awareness of the language of movement, particularly leaning more toward gestures of “lifting” to make visible, “carrying” with extended arms and moving slowly to experience meaning in the postures they were taking as they walked.

## 4. ETHICAL LEARNING PROCESSES

### 4.1. Marking our footprints

In OD, leaving a footprint is used to mean making the process of learning visible, and thereby making learning transparent and therefore knowable. In a journey, we experience different things, for instance:

- It is not always flat ground,
- It is sometimes an uphill struggle;

At the mountain top, we experience a panoramic view—we can see what is around us. In a valley we cannot see very far—our vision is limited.

Quite often in OD, we want to help organizations have a clear view of things—how the landscape looks like. In addition, how did we get to this point and, what is our responsibility in making the landscape the way it is at this particular moment.

### 4.2. The creativity imperative

In our different roles in community or workplaces, what binds us together is the notion of *lived experience*. As we worked in the outside space with balloons, participants had been invited to experience the joy and feeling of listening to and sharing with one another in a playful way. Playfulness is an important way of developing our creative potential. It is difficult to be creative and innovative through routine alone.

How do we create different things? In order to play and be creative, we need to be aware of different kinds of space: physical space in which we joyfully work and play, thinking space for generating ideas and emotional space that supports productive relationships. In a curious manner, play has a way of presenting us with the unvarnished expression of our current reality, which makes it an important avenue for responsibility-taking toward the upholding of ethical spaces.

With those introductory remarks, the four-day workshop outline was introduced. The program was deliberately presented not as a detailed set of activities, but as *signposts* that were likely to take the learning process in different directions, based on what would emerge from the learning process itself.

#### **Learning at the cross-roads**

In order to experience a meaningful outcome from the workshop, participants needed to experience the map, rather than be told about it in detail at the beginning. This meant a cumulative experience of “learning through doing”. A particularly important aspect of the program was planned for the fourth and last day of the workshop. It was dubbed “Learning at the cross-roads”, when participants would share creative performances that depict their most insightful experiences and, at the same time, making it better, i.e., scaling up the best that they had achieved in their learning journey.

### **4.3. Ethics of the workshop methodology**

The values that guided the learning activities of the ethos workshop were also made explicit, to underline the fact that how the spaces we make and how we shape them have a direct connection to the values we hold. The structure, as well as approaches used in shaping how we interacted in the Ethos workshop, therefore, were not value free.

Seven values that informed the planning of the workshop were highlighted. They particularly signified the way the facilitators held space in terms of how they perceived their roles, and the way relationships and ownership of responsibilities in the workshop learning processes were constructed:

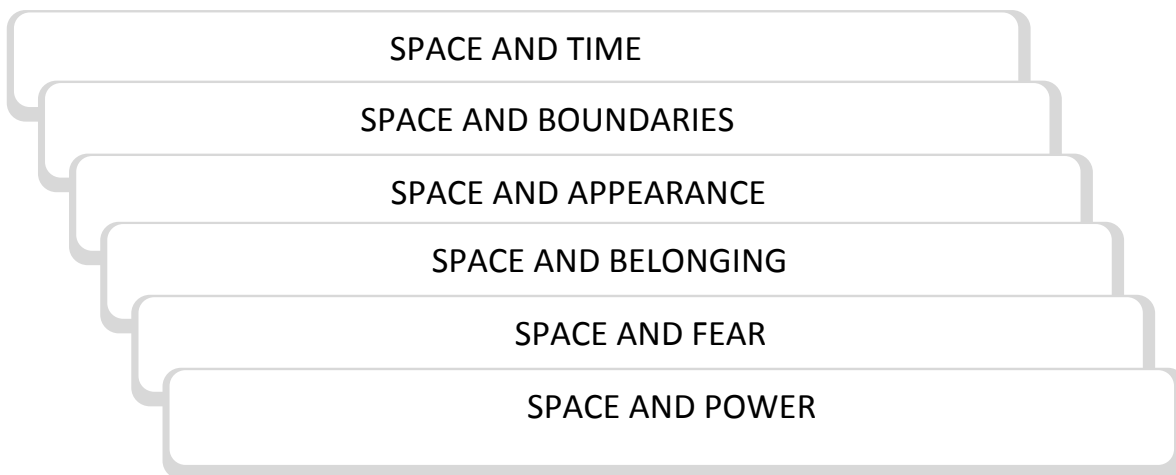
1. We appreciate that each of us has gifts and talents;
2. We stay curious about each other
3. We expect ETHOS to be messy at times;
4. We are prepared to be disturbed;
5. We expect to be disturbed;
6. We treasure curiosity more than certainty;
7. We focus on what is possible, not what is wrong.

Three reflective questions were outlined to help participants explore the deeper meaning behind those value statements:

- What kind of space do these values create?
- What kinds of participation was likely to place when those values are observed?
- In what ways do (1) and (2) connect or separate us?

## 5. UNPACKING THE CONCEPT OF SPACE

Different kinds of action happen within different kinds of space(s), such as: learning action, organizing action, thinking action and feeling action. Six ideas related to notion of space were highlighted and commented on, to help expand understanding of the whole idea.



### 5.1. Space and time

Sometimes space and time may be linked to something that is set, or unchanging. However, such a fixed approach to space and time is limiting, given that:

- Space is located in time
- Spaces change over time—go back in time and the space has changed/ your perspectives have changed;
- Time is treated in a particular way within specific workplaces (slow and rhythmic or highly paced)
- No space for the new you (not able to accommodate old rules or the existing culture not able to accommodate the changed “self”).

### 5.2. Space and boundaries

What are some of the concepts or issues related to space and boundaries—crossing the line, stepping over the line, no-go areas? Boundaries could be physical, but they can also be in our minds

- What are the edges?
- Is space infinite?

- Is space always bounded?
- What kind of boundaries do you know in spaces that you live, work and play in?

### **5.3. Space and belonging**

- The office is a particular kind of space, occupied by certain people and specific rules of the game, which enable certain kinds of participation or feelings;
- Once in a space you are able to contribute;
- Individuals or specific groups of people may feel dispossessed in spaces that they occupy.

### **5.4. Space and fear**

- A frightening space in the place we work?
- Is space neutral or are there power relations?
- Is power fixed or is it flowing, moving around?

### **5.5. Space and power**

- Possible diversity of spaces that we may create;
- What can we do in our workplaces to transform the spaces so that those invited to work there find an opportunity to occupy the spaces that were not available for them?
- Space making as a political activity;
- How do elite groups control and manage spaces for particular ends in mind, serving particular interests?

## 6. MAKING, TAKING AND SHAPING SPACE

The way space is organized determines whether the kind of participation that takes place is democratic or authoritarian. What can leadership do to make organizational spaces more accessible and inclusive?

Most of the second day of the workshop was committed to capturing and demonstrating active expressions of “ethical” holding of space. Participants were invited to walk and explore, within the grounds of the workshop venue, the notions of space-making, space-taking and space-shaping. Working in small groups, they captured and presented images of how *lived experience* is shared in nature. The different groups exhibited their findings in creative ways, using digital cameras, natural objects and other materials provided for creative work.

### THE INVITATION

#### **Walk, mark, reflect**

Walk about the grounds – observe things and relationships that may reflect space-making, space-taking and space-shaping. Discuss as you observe. Express your understanding of those three processes of organizing space. Interpret “making”, “taking” and “shaping” of space in any way that makes good sense to you.

Extend the learning journey by “walking” beyond this immediate environment. See what ideas are behind these activities. As you discuss in your group, be particularly conscious of the your ethos, particularly:

- How different people make different contributions;
- How responsibilities are shared.

### 6.1. Images of ethical holding of space

The different groups shared the following images and interpretations related to the quality of participation resulting from the way space was perceived to be held in the objects and relationships observed in the garden.

*Red Group:* Presented a picture narrative based on a tree surrounded by other plants, a building, sky, electric wires and the ground/soil. The strength of the tree and the physical space it occupied were quite prominent. At the same time, the life forms it supported e.g. ants, climber plants and flowers around its roots depicted a harmonious co-existence. The rough and cavacious trunk of the tree held

soil and moisture that allowed other plants to grow and spin around the tree in search of light. The tree branches and leaves, together with the building next to it and some electric wires appeared to share a deep and boundless sky, drawing differently shaped lines in the abundance of space around them.

*Pink group:* Reproduced the environment around Uhuru Hotel on a flip chart, with a focus on a new building being in construction and a playground for children. The picture particularly branded the sustained human activity and innovation in the space they had illustrated.

*Yellow group:* Reconstructed a bamboo forest and portrayed various relationships in the immediate surroundings of the forest. The group shared a rhyme and dance performance that expressed voices of varied lived experiences by different species in and around the space that seemed to be predominantly occupied by the bamboo forest.

*I started all alone  
All around me shoots grow  
Then am in a forest*

*I claim my space  
With a beautiful canopy I grow  
Under my shadow*

*To extend my shoots  
As I expand my forest*

---

*Bamboo I planted you  
Your growth and expansion has occupied more space  
Your canopy has created darkness  
I pruned some of your stems to re-claim space  
I installed light for visibility*

---

*Yes, we are short bushes not as tall as you are  
We also need space and light to grow  
We appreciate the space you have provided us  
To grow and be part of this forest*

---

*We termites are very grateful to all of you  
For giving us space to build our leaves  
The food that keeps us alive  
Now our house is expanding and claiming part of the forest*

---

*I am the soil  
From which all you feed  
Stand and grow*

---

*I am the space  
That you all claim  
To make, take and shape*

---

*Green group*: presented a picture slide narrative that carried the imagination of participants through the lush gardens, noting particularly the beautiful grounds that give Uhuru its unique character as a home, the buildings that reflect a growing dynamism of Uhuru as a meeting place and the spectacular scenery, including the Kilimanjaro backdrop that makes Uhuru what it really is.

## **6.2. Reflection on participants' experience with organizing space**

The variety and range of creative approaches adopted by the different groups was testimony to creative possibilities. Most of the group exhibitions reflected narratives and values of cooperation and appreciation, which were visible in making room for interdependent shaping of space.

The following words and themes were mentioned by the different groups to reflect how they had experienced and learnt from the exercise:

*Personification* – human beings embody experiences of things in nature;

*Confusion*: sometimes we need to positively embrace the feeling of being confused. It is what we do with that situation that matters;

*Paradox*: In the exercise, two conditions that seat side by side in creative tension became apparent: if uncertainty means confusion—then curiosity within that situation will lead to innovation and creativity;

It was noted further that sensitivity and openness of other team members enhanced the learning and contributions of the rest of the team. When we avail creative space, we allow room and opportunity for people to both do different things and do things differently, to improve or do things better. Trust building is a fundamental building block for freeing people to learn, be creative and innovate in organizational situations.

The possibility for *making space* intended for democratic participation is an action guarded by our beliefs. Values driven organizations are those that have made their values explicit. Values determine what you do in the spaces that you make or spaces that you shape.

## 7. WALKING IN THE DIRECTION OF “BEST SELF”

Being a leader is a value-laden process. It is not simply about being extraordinary, or being in a position of honour or glory, or even being successful in other people’s eyes. The essence of ethical leadership is being *true-to-self*.

The *best self* is always about acting with integrity and care. Knowing and acting in this way is not always easy. It requires at least the *discovery* of what ‘the best’ means to those involved and the *determination* to avoid self-sabotage by only addressing what’s not working.

### 7.1. What am I doing when I am at my best?

Getting better in our work is not simply about focusing exclusively on ‘the positives’ (positive feelings, positive actions, positive leadership etc) and so, by implication, ignoring ‘the negatives’ (negative feelings, conflict, confusion etc). Doing good work is understanding the relationships between these forces. To do this we need to develop the capacity for reflection. This requires space, time and often support. It can be inhibited by impulsive desires and/or pressures to take action. It can be enhanced by the practices of deliberately viewing things from a different perspective.

‘*What am I doing when I am at my best?*’ is a question that we may not normally ask ourselves. Responding to it requires at least the *discovery* of what ‘the best’ means to yourself and to others around you. The *ability* to listen to and to learn from others, who may hold a different view from yours. And the *determination* to avoid self-sabotage by only addressing what’s not working and thinking that the sting of criticism is the only way to do better work.

We know that when the stakes are high, we often pay keen attention to negative feedback. So it is all too easy to get drawn into deficit-based conversations. All too easy to get stuck when the people haven’t had many conversations where they talk about achievements, successes or hopes. If we can change the question we ask ourselves (and others), we have a chance to change the conversation. Change this and we create an opportunity to change the action.

It is important to balance deficit based language with more strengths-based languages (SBL’s). This recognizes that the root causes of problems we are attempting to fix, in the moment, may be further upstream and may be related to the strengths or opportunities that we have not learnt to appreciate and work with. This will require that we balance our questioning of what is ‘not going well’, with ‘what is going well?’, ‘What are we proud of?’, and ‘What brings joy and fulfillment into our work lives?’ Developing SBL’s is a focus on making things better, while generating feelings of excitement, elevation,

love, fulfillment, energy and encouragement. In essence, SBL's are about developing a language of positive regard (LPR).

## 7.2. A language of positive regard (LPR)

An LPR requires authenticity. It is not tokenism. It is about finding the root cause of success (what helped?). By strengthening our commitment to strength based language we become committed to exploring those things that we want to try to amplify. It's a focus on trying to know, and then to play to, your strengths. SBL's are not humiliating for anyone. Through SBL's we commit to bringing some of our own humanity, warmth and tenderness into conversations with others.

Developing the posture and language of positive regard requires a commitment to reflective learning. This demands space, time and often support for conscious learning to overcome impulsive desires and/or pressures to take action. LPR can be enhanced by the practices of deliberately viewing things from a different perspective. The road is made by walking.

A short exercise provided an opportunity for people to practice expressing authentic appreciation of others.

### Practicing LPR

The space for practicing LPR is limited. Bounded, and so creating a sense of closeness. As the 'soothing' and meditative music plays, take a walk around the room. When it stops, find a chair and sit. See who sits opposite you. Observe. Engage in a conversation of positive regard. Talk about what you observe to be a quality, gift, or talent they have. With sincerity, express something positive about this person—not a token. Make sure it is not a game, not tit-for-tat.. It's not a competition about who can say the 'best' thing.

The sequence of walking, sitting, observing and conversing is repeated. It's a way of practicing LPR

After this experience, share your feelings with others, particularly how they had experienced finding something to say: 'Did you have to dig for or suppress something?' 'What was it like to hear what other's said about you?'



It became clear that it is possible to cultivate a language of positive regard through conscious exercises to strengthen our listening and other emotional intelligence qualities.

Two additional exercises gave yet another opportunity for people to practice sharing appreciative comments with colleagues. They also enabled them to appreciate what they actually do, when they are at their best, as seen through the eyes of others.

Each individual was given an envelope and a card ;

- Individuals were invited to look into the card, which was mounted with a photo of someone else, who was present in the room;
- This was followed by each person walking across the room and offering the card to the person in the picture and find something appreciative to say about them, as part of the sharing.

After the picture card exercise, individuals were asked to look around the room, identify someone they had interacted with during the week, and write a note for them on a yellow card titled: “My reflected best self portrait.” Each individual was given three cards on which to write messages to three individuals identified in the room. Each message was to complete the sentence: “When you were at your best this week, you...”

In terms of the process itself, participants were instructed to take some 30 seconds and look around to see who was in the room before writing the portraits, rather than write about individuals simply from memory. An important aspect of the exercise is the ability to notice things that are not easily visible. For instance, those who did not receive *best self portraits* from colleagues could be the ones who blend in quietly; not particularly standing out because of strong vocal cords or the habit of making verbal contributions to each discussion. They might be the ones who exercise their leadership by being quietly supportive or bringing harmony to the situation.

The writing and sharing of cards exercise was followed by individuals writing their own reflections on what others had said about them “...in their best moments”. The single sheet of paper was titled: “My reflections on my ‘best-self’ portrait.” Five minutes were given for this exercise, in which individuals were to either add their thoughts to what others had written or reflect on what was emerging for them from what had been said about them.

The language of positive regard (LPR) emphasises “being the best you can”, and not “being the best.” It challenges the view that getting better at what we do is a matter of using what physical, mental and emotional resources we have on trying fixing problems as quickly as possible and assuming that all the ‘good stuff’ can simply look after itself. Simply getting rid of things (eg. habits, ways of learning, routines,

etc) that we don't want still leaves a big gap in terms of ensuring that what we are already doing well would be sustained.

The whole activity was called, 'Developing a reflected best-self portrait'. The prefix word, 'reflected', is hugely significant as it emphasizes that the portrait is based on perceptions of how others see you. These 'others' may be family members, peers, bosses, co-workers, workshop participants and so on. The word 'best' refers to the qualities, gifts and talents that you bring to a particular situation. It's a response to the question, "*When I am at my best I .....*" The process of holding your portrait under constant review, involves envisioning yourself, at your best, and then acting on this vision. The portrait contains those things you exude when you are at your best.

### **7.3. "Best-self" and emotional intelligence**

A critical space that requires extra conscious management in order to sustain creativity is emotional space. It is not easy to construct a safe space in which the emotional dimension can express itself positively. This requires leaders to develop emotional intelligence, in order to address that fundamental part in ways that allow people to express their leadership, talents and gifts with a sense of ownership and empowerment.

Emotional intelligence is about self-awareness, self-management and having an appreciation of the impact you have on the thoughts and feelings of others. What do you regularly say to, or about, colleagues in the workplace? How often do you praise them? Are you a leader who spends time thinking about how you interact with others? As emotionally intelligent leaders we need to be "thin skinned", i.e., sensitive, empathetic, gentle, listening to people.

The emotionally intelligent leader who systematically, and with others, reflects on their best-self portrait, is usually able to demonstrate, to others, an '*ethic-of-appreciation*' which is so fundamental to learning and ethical action. Listening to your own voice and to the voices of others, with open ears and heart is central to this ethic. This means also listening with a will that is malleable and open to the subtle and powerful voices of those who often speak, work and lead quietly.

**"Hapo zamani za kale..."<sup>1</sup>**

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## 8. LEARNING AT THE CROSSROADS

### 8.1. Our stories and the *will* to seize meaning

We feel the authority of the story-tellers disembodied voice. A voice which tells a tale, simultaneously danced. It is a ceremony celebrating diversity and collectivity. As a community of learners we are transported by a sensitive presentation of concepts related to tending, caring and sharing spaces. We are drawn into a world where myth and legend work their magic. A world in which it is taken for granted that bamboo, bushes and even the usually invidious termites can teach us.

A shared lineage. A shared *will* to seize meaning through song and story, through dance and drama. Reflective, affective and thinking individuals and communities. Understanding together through our creative impulses, our needs and wants. Realizing challenges. Being ethical. Appreciating. Participating. Empowering. Creating a multi-voiced experiential text; a world of stories where the learners can engage and reflect upon the ways in which the society, and the organizations within that society, function.

Such stories hold the potential to help us to interrogate the values of the real world in that they represent the striving for an exemplary world. Such stories operate as a means of guiding and holding the community together. They reach to our roots. They are the blues. They are soul. They are gospel. They are the myths and legends which have the power to conserve potential and to disrupt our thinking. They are the roads we travel together. The crossroads where decisions are taken. They are the defined spaces and the spaces in between. The spaces where shadows fall and the spaces where light illuminates.

### 8.2. Walking the final stretch

The fourth day of the workshop was the culmination of an exciting week of seeing, listening, performing, reflecting and appreciating our questions and opportunities for ethical leadership. In the final session, participants took the responsibility to create and perform in groups; reflecting on and improving what they had learned through previous activities of the workshop. In this final performance they continued to be inspired by the key workshop ethos of “working collaboratively to make it better.”

The activity of bringing it all together was done through shared story-telling, dance and music, which captured the weeks’ learning and improved efforts in framing new insights about tending, caring and

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<sup>1</sup> Kiswahili for “Once upon a time....”

sharing spaces in ethical ways. As participants practiced those specific actions related to *holding of space*, two questions remained prominent in their minds: “what is space?” and, “what is ethos?”

An indication of some insight that was beginning to form, in response to such questions, was captured in a song performance by one of the groups:

*What is space?*

*What is space?*

*A place for caring, sharing, learning,*

*A place for laughing, walking, dancing,*

*A place for ethics, taking, making, shaping.*

Group presentations in the “learning at the cross roads” session succeeded in expressing specific aspects of *ethos* in relation to taking, making, shaping and sharing space. The balloons group demonstrated conscious ceremony in lifting and carrying for *visibility* and *care*, as well as the significance of being conscious of the footprints we leave on the road as we step and walk towards a higher purpose.

The Bamboo group performed a magnificent play of making, taking and shaping space, which reflected the values of empowerment, service and self-awareness as a starting point for ethical holding of space. The play was brought to life by a sound that boomed from deep mystical shadows. The words influenced movement and dialogue among different voices in the space around a bamboo forest.

*I am the soil,  
from which you all feed  
stand and grow.  
I started all alone,  
all around me shoots growing.  
Then I am forest*

*I take my space.  
With the beautiful canopy I grow,  
In the ground I extend my shoots  
Above, my forest to spread.*

*O, we short bushes, not as tall as you,  
providing us space  
to grow,  
and be part of this forest*

*We termites are grateful,  
You give us room to build our house,  
Your sweet leaves keep us alive.  
Our own house grows  
To differently shape the space*

*I am the space  
That you all claim  
And desire,  
To take, make and shape.*

The inspiration of the bamboo group's performance was in its full narrative—set to reflect the source, and growth, out of the source, i.e., “where things had started”. Like the story of communities and organizations, the short bushes, the termites and the bamboo itself created a pattern and story of transforming relationships, and made some history by becoming a *space* where diverse species worked and lived both independently and with collective awareness of the ethos of interdependence in their being, livelihood and sustainability.

*... A better history that reveals the value of creative excellence, showing how, as leaders, we need to listen and walk with the awareness that upholds the ethics of collaboration, participation and appreciation as essential instruments of sustainable development.*

### **8.3. Ethos**

Something moves between the daily tools, activities, structures and architecture of your organization. You don't see it, but it drives you toward linking the visible aspects of your organization with its higher goal. As a leader, the same invisible force is compelling you to be and act in ways that express society's values. If you get it, it will be visible in all you ritual and ceremony of leadership. It will be seen in the way you walk, the way you step, the choices you make, the directions you take. It sets you on the way to becoming an ethical leader. If you lose it, or fail to connect with it, your very being as a leader is in question.

Ethos shapes and forms you as a person. If you lose it, you lose your very essence, soul and mind.

**The question then, is how to hold the space—how to make it, take it, shape it and share it. What became clear is that effective holding of space as a leadership quality requires ethics, courage, learning and self-awareness—which includes the ability to see different needs and possibilities in the environment. For leadership, which includes all members of an organization or community, that question revolves around ethos.**

***-- We make the road by walking***

## 9. TELLING IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

At the end of the workshop and, being part of the evaluation process, participants were given a chance to “tell the world” how they had personally experienced the workshop. The following were shared:

1. ETHOS was a wonderful workshop where we learnt to walk, sing, dance, lift and carry. Made and shaped spaces for emotional well being, as well as personal and team growth through reflective learning activities;
2. EASUN has a great and resourceful contribution towards organizational development of civil society organizations in East Africa.
3. I recommend EASUN as a great learning place for anyone wishing to sharpen his or her way of thinking and abilities for real world problem solving. EASUN is doing a great job in capacity building of leaders and organizations in East Africa
4. ETHOS made me aware that there is a lot of space that we can utilize more effectively to do so many things collaboratively, particularly through being aware of others.
5. With the right attitude, innovation and creativity, we can build something great even with limited resources;
6. Every journey starts with one important step, and leaves footprints. Learn to appreciate others; it uplifts them and eases work for you as a leader. What is space indeed? And how do we utilize those different spaces? Such questions captivated my mind as we stepped and walked consciously in the ETHOS workshop.
7. It is my desire that all learning institutions incorporate this kind of facilitation into their learning processes then we will have a different world;
8. I loved the depth of the outcome, drawing as it did on roots music, legend, ritual and contemporary technology—the old and the new.
9. EASUN has the vision, leadership and moral courage to create ethical spaces within which to enable individuals, groups, organizations and communities to build a better history. A history where we can be the best we can. Appreciating each other’s gifts and talents. EASUN provides creative spaces and new ways of thinking about and taking action to improve lives and livelihoods.

## **Others shared in poetry**

*Narrow space did I have  
when I first entered the arena.  
Then the dance,  
glancing at my foot prints,  
more of which shaped my space.*

*Through the eyes of friends  
I saw,  
my shadow, my other friend.*

*Such hesitations I would feed on,  
to deny myself opportunity and growth.  
Glare you now at me,  
through strengths that I must own!*

*I am the space,  
take and shape me.  
A leader, bamboo forest.  
I make space for others to grow.*

## 10. WORKSHOP EVALUATION BY PARTICIPANTS

STOOD OUT	WENT WELL	NEW LEARNING	IMRPOVE	REMAINING QUESTIONS
<p>1. Awesome! Approach to facilitation was educative and inspirational. It kept people engaged throughout;</p> <p>2. Space provided by facilitators to showcase our talents.;</p> <p>3. The workshop challenged me to retrace my growth as OD facilitator, particularly what I need to <i>unlearn</i> in order to create space for the learning of others;</p> <p>4. Workshop provided superb light on ETHOS. Methodology gave ample time to reflect on issues surrounding concept of leadership;</p> <p>5. Processes enabled individuals to draw learning by themselves. This was well expressed in the daily group exercises;</p> <p>6. Workshop opened my eyes to what happens in the leadership of our organizational.</p> <p>7. "Building the road by walking", as a metaphor for leadership, particularly when this was linked to the need to be conscious of "the <i>footprints</i> we leave behind."</p>	<p>1. The design of activities was well thought out, as they reflected well the real life in our organizations;</p> <p>2. Opportunity to create, make and shape various things in the workshop;</p> <p>3. Co-facilitation and learning processes were handled well;</p> <p>4. Participants were open for learning;</p> <p>5. Facilitators were friendly and engaging;</p> <p>6. Humour of both the facilitators;</p> <p>7. Creative use of simple resources as training materials;</p> <p>8. Participants' initiatives in group work.</p> <p>9. Methodologies ensured maximum participation of everyone present;</p> <p>10. Facilitators worked in magnificent complementarity. I was enabled to see "learning" and approaches to adult learning as a question for <i>development and social transformation</i>.</p>	<p>1. Concept of space related well to relationships and our behaviour in organizations. It was amazing to learn that space creating, taking and shaping is important in organizations;</p> <p>2. Appreciating others is important for achieving results. When project activities take over, organizations may not be able to develop leadership and relational qualities for shaping of space for positive development;</p> <p>3. I was particularly struck by the strength based approach and insights on how I can use appreciative inquiry in my organization;</p> <p>4. Focusing on the positive created room for new possibilities;</p> <p>5. Sensitivity about my impact on others is a value that enables participation and will be a benchmark for developing my ethical leadership;</p> <p>6. I learnt to lead through discussion and dialogue.</p>	<p>1. Workshops of this kind should be offered not only for transforming leadership but also other aspects of organizational development;</p> <p>2. Increase number of workshop days;</p> <p>3. Introduce EASUN more elaborately for new people.</p> <p>4. Encourage participants to stay till the end of the workshop.;</p> <p>5. Communicate workshop methodology early to avoid surprises;</p> <p>6. Tie the activities with reflection on concepts and how we can be more intentional about owning our influence;</p> <p>7. Have more reflection at the end of the day;</p> <p>8. Subsidize travel costs to enable more participants to attend or extend the workshops to other East African countries to reach people who were unable to come to Tanzania.</p> <p>9. ETHOS should be regularized to facilitate wider transformation of workplaces in East Africa.</p>	<p>1. How can you relate with values?</p> <p>2. How do we keep the candle burning between the workshop facilitators and the participants?</p> <p>3. To what extend am I holding the space without affecting others?</p> <p>4. Is there a chance for follow up?</p> <p>5. Howe can I be supported to keep this growing in me and my organization, who can help?</p> <p>6. How can I work with creating space for others in a way that does not limit my own space?</p> <p>7. How can we enable more NGO leaders to access this kind of learning in the future?</p>

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