

## UNDERSTANDING THE CORRELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF RISK, LEADERSHIP AND A NEWTON'S CRADLE

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**Purpose:** In today's world many companies feel the need to move especially their leaders from traditional leadership into a more person centered approach, which is clearly defined by Social Psychology of Risk. The pioneering methodology was invented to support personhood, care for ethics and promote an appropriate culture of an organization. The following article explains the fundamentals of Social Psychology of Risk, as well as underlines its definitions about leadership. Material shows original aspects of understanding some of the most important roles humans might take upon themselves not only as leaders, but also as employees in any organization or field of work.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The paper uses the desk research method of analysis.

**Findings:** Today's leadership.

**Social implications:** Many aspire to be great leaders; however, not many are on the pathway of receiving value adding answers regarding the matter.

**Originality/value:** The article is an original approach to understand some of the most efficient ways to create a great leadership, mostly submerged in the fundamentals of Social Psychology of Risk and that all being explained while using a Newton's cradle and a "jar of time".

**Keywords:** leadership, leader, Social Psychology of Risk, SpoR, Workspace, Groupspace, Headspace, "jar of time".

**Category of the paper:** persuasive paper.

### 1. Introduction

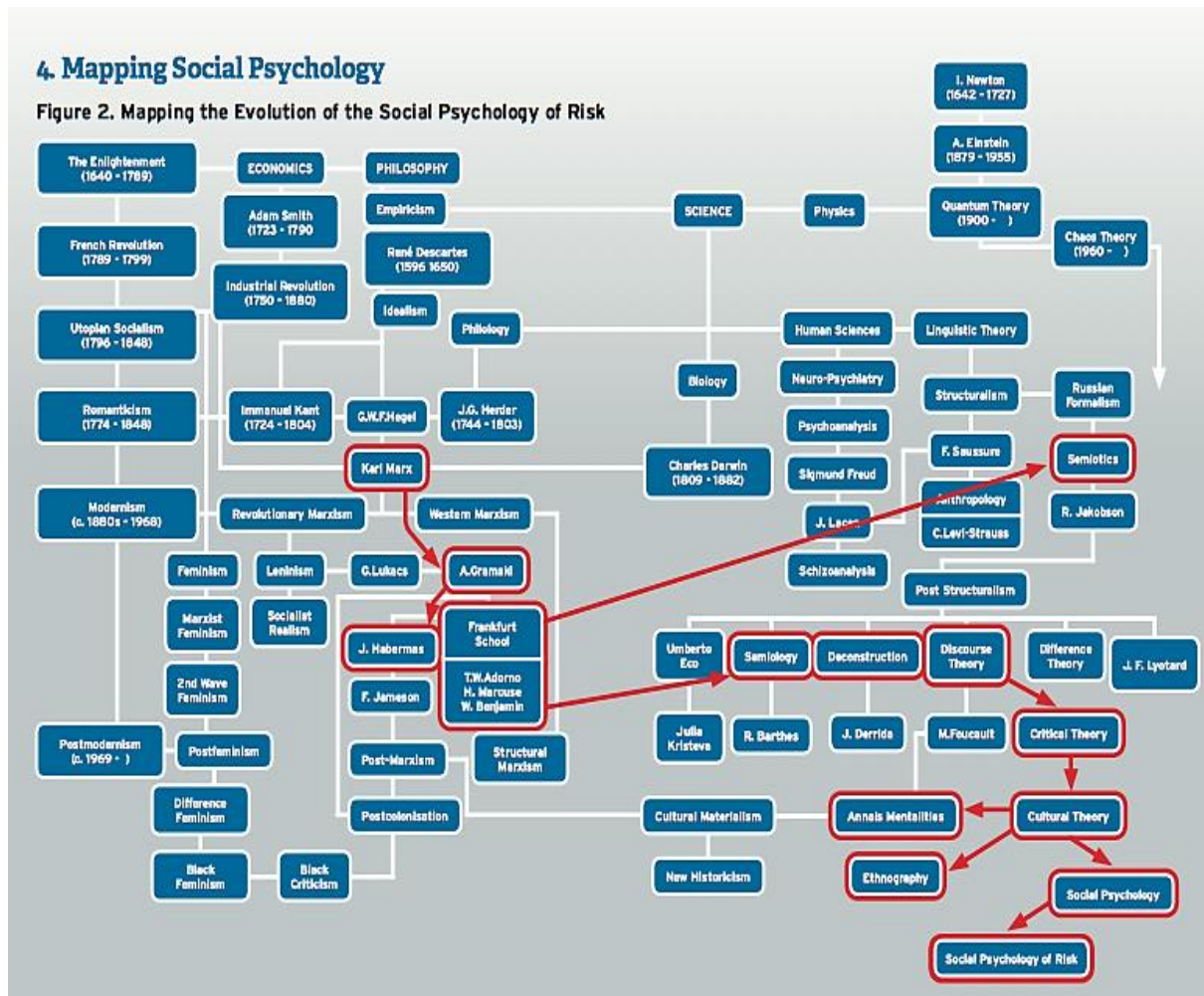
As per Harvard Business Review, "Leadership is the accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants. The person who successfully marshals his (or her) human collaborators to achieve particular ends is a leader. A great leader is one who can do so day after day, and year after year, in a wide variety of circumstances" (Prentice, 2022). However, how to accomplish all the goals and do it consistently seem to be quite frapping ideas since a simple Amazon bookstore search shows 57,136 positions "with the word 'leadership' in the title. Why are there so many leadership books?"

- Many people feel free to offer opinions on leadership.
- Readers have many different tastes in leadership books.
- Anyone can publish a leadership book.
- The practice of leadership is constantly evolving.
- There is no limit to the way leadership can be described” (Iarocci, 2020).

Many people are a pure personification of all mentioned above aspects. As vivid readers, writers, published creators of material regarding leadership and experienced leaders many do not want to only manage, or as it was mentioned in the first paragraph of portrayed work “achieve goals,” but build a lasting impression of bettering at least something, if not someone. How to do that? The group head of safety and health at Mondi Group (which is one of the biggest multinational paper and packaging companies) Brain Darlington, created a phrase: “Leadership is time and a simple cup of coffee” (Darlington, 2022). Of course, the coffee does not have to be constant in this equation, as it can be a glass of water or juice; however, something that is non-negotiable is time. While keeping in mind the irreplaceability of mentioned above, more leaders should also understand the pricelessness of relationships. As even though, especially the front-runners do not have to be reminded how precious time can be, sometimes it should be recapped that even the pricelessness of time means nothing, if there are no people to appreciate it enough to be the eternal recipients of proposed leadership. So, what happens when leaders in order to reach a particular goal, give the time for a cup of coffee? One of the simplest answers is: relationships would be built, which is exactly what is at the core of influential leadership, the kind of guidance that really matters and makes the biggest impact.

## **2. Social Psychology of Risk (SPoR)**

That “impact” is what makes up for a base of Social Psychology of Risk (SPoR), which “approaches the realities of fallibility, randomness, entropy and evolution from a foundation of social reality and dialectic. It is through an honesty with social reality that we can best tackle risk” (Long, 2021). Dr Robert Long, the founder of SPoR also defines it as “how decisions are influenced by the presence or perceived presence of others” (Darlington, Long, 2021). An “environment” could be also added to the definition, as people act differently next to their supervisor, when they only think that he or she might be present, or among a group of coworkers who might (and usually have) a valid influence on the individual. When it comes to the evolution of Social Psychology of Risk as an academic discipline, it is graphically illustrated below (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The Evolution of Social Psychology of Risk.

Source: Long, Thorne, 2023.

Proposed above, “graphic maps the territory concerning the development of the Social Psychology of Risk from its roots in The Frankfurt School and the birth of cultural theory. The representative map provides links showing an evolution from post-Marxist thinking through to Semiotics, Critical Theory, Cultural Theory, Ethnography and Social Psychology. In this way the tradition and discipline of Social Psychology can be explained in relation to its roots and in contradistinction to associated human sciences and positivist science. This semiotic map also shows related disciplines and theorists that SPoR anchors to, such as: Soren Kierkegaard, Erich Fromm, Jacques Ellul and Carl Jung who are not named on the map but have roots through existentialist thinking, theology, critical theory, cultural theory, sociology and psychology” (Long, Thorne, 2023).

According to many layers of Social Psychology of Risk a true leadership happens only when people suspend their agenda, bias and authority. Which all happens when they understand that there is a lot that they still do not know and can learn one from another. As follows it all comes down also to understanding the fundamental elements of SPoR, verifying what can and cannot be controlled, being able to understand the various layers of psychological sphere of a human being and being able to notice a culture of a particular group.

### 3. Critical differences between Social Psychology of Risk approach and any other methodology of leadership

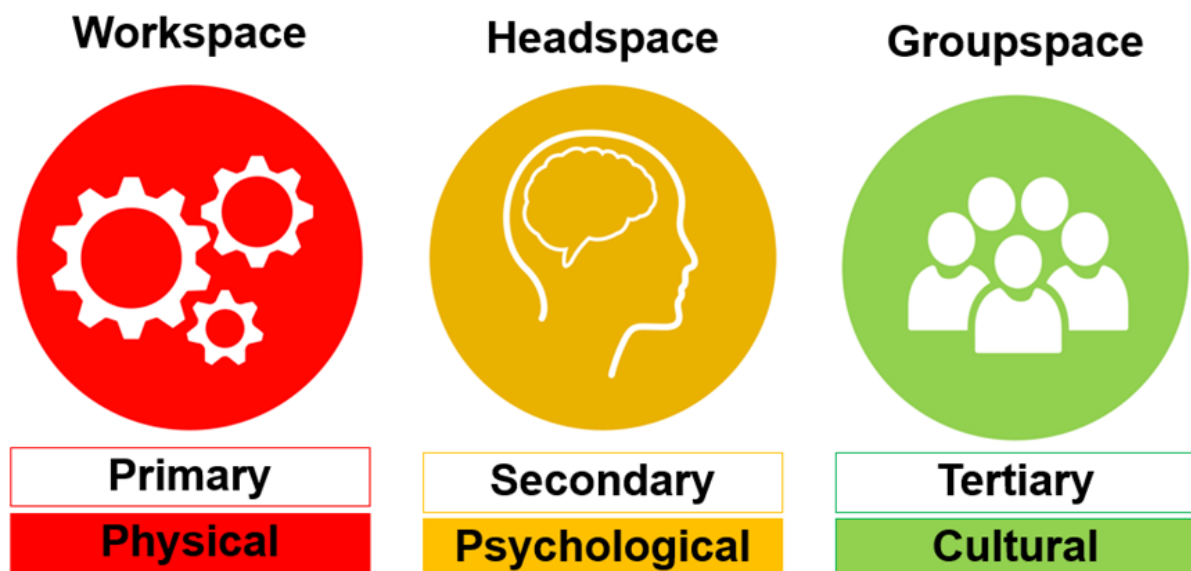
What differs SPoR from other approaches to leadership? There are three critical changes which seem to be incredibly significant, these are: personhood and ethics, socialite and semiotics.

- **Personhood and Ethics:** The starting point for all conversations and methods in tackling any (especially a difficult situation) is, the centrality of persons and making Ethics central to practice. As a matter of fact, it is pointless to say one cares for the safety of others then brutalise them in the process of tackling difficulties. As follows, it is meaningless to say one seeks understanding and then not enact care through helping, but adopting an approach of telling, dominating and oppressing others. This is why the semiotics and language of numbers should be the anathema to humanising leadership. Intolerance is not the social context for listening, helping and learning the right approach towards leadership. The fixation on only numeric and metrics rather than persons is the foundation for dehumanising the workplace. The only idea to humanise the way we tackle the right version of leadership in work is through centralising personhood and ethics, and at least trying to suspend one's agenda and bias.
- **Socialite:** As explained by Dr Thomas Fuchs, in his article titled "Intercorporeality and Interaffectivity" from 2017, "since the rise of cognitive psychology in the early 1970s, 'social cognition' has become the dominant concept in social psychology and cognitive neuroscience to denote the processes of social understanding and empathy. It is commonly based on a representationalist point of view: Internal cognitive mechanisms such as a 'theory of mind' enable observer to 'mentalise' or 'mind-read,' i.e. to infer others' hidden states of mind" (Fuchs, 2017). Later on, in the same article, he mentioned "to begin with, we should abandon the idea that emotions are only 'mental' phenomena, and the world is bare of any affective qualities. The introjection of feelings into an inner 'psyche' is a heritage of Platonic and, later on, Cartesian dualism. In fact, we do not live in a merely physical world; the experienced space around us is always charged with affective qualities. (...) In a sense, emotions are ways of perceiving, namely attending to salient features of a situation, giving them a significance and weight they would not have without emotion" (Fuchs, 2017). How does it all align with SPoR? The central question to SPoR is - how do social arrangements affect human judgment and decision making? SPoR acknowledges the importance of subjectivity in tackling leadership and that most of the leadership is conditioned by context. There is no neutrality or objectivity in how humans as persons understand leadership. SPoR does not understand leadership through systems or humans as factors in systems, but rather takes an ecological view of persons acting in a social manner at work. The idea that one can arrange leadership by making endless lists and checklists of hazards is meaningless. SPoR is focused on subjects, not objects.

- Semiotics: Semiotics and Semiosis (the making of meaning and purpose) are foundational to the practice of SPoR. This means that signs, symbols, gestures, rituals, images, graphics, icons, myths (which are symbols), metaphor and any visual language is put into consideration in SPoR. If one wants to understand unconscious decision-making processes, then the study of semiotics is essential. If one wants to communicate to the human unconscious and collective unconscious then, understanding the semiosphere (the symbolic world) is absolutely essential.

#### 4. Finding the Balance

To find the balance with traditionally understood leadership as well as the SPoR, three elements must be explained: Workspace, Headspace and Groupspace (Figure2).



**Figure 2.** The three fundamentals of Social Psychology of Risk.

Source: Darlington, Long, 2021.

- Workspace - elements are the physical controls of the working environment, so much of what happens in leadership management takes its focus on Workspace. It is called the physical or “primary” dimension of leadership. This is easy to administer and regulate, because what is required is visible, measurable and accountable through checklists and metrics matched to regulations. For example, walking around and observing what is physically out of place is relatively easy. Unfortunately, every time people undertake observations, they seem to concentrate on the same things they found the last time. Without ownership, nothing changes and leaders need to make sure that their work does not seem like the “repetition cycle” which does not bring any sensible resolutions.

- Headspace - describes the psychological aspects of every human being regardless of the working position, considers the dynamics of the individuals conscious as well as unconscious driven behaviour. As follows, it concerns all things that happen psychologically that cannot be seen nor measured, but are critical for human well-being and wholeness. All the things like trust, learning, hope, faith, care and understanding required to tackle any kind of work-related situation make up the definition of a Headspace.
- Groupspace - is all that happens between people. All relationships, exchange, interaction, communication, social enactment and culture are lived in Groupspace. Humans are social beings and how they all impact each other consciously and unconsciously and as a collective unconscious matters and impacts the culture of all their environments. Groupspace is represented by cultural aspects of any organization or simply speaking a group of individuals. As follows, it considers the effects of the group conscious as well as unconscious decisions making process.

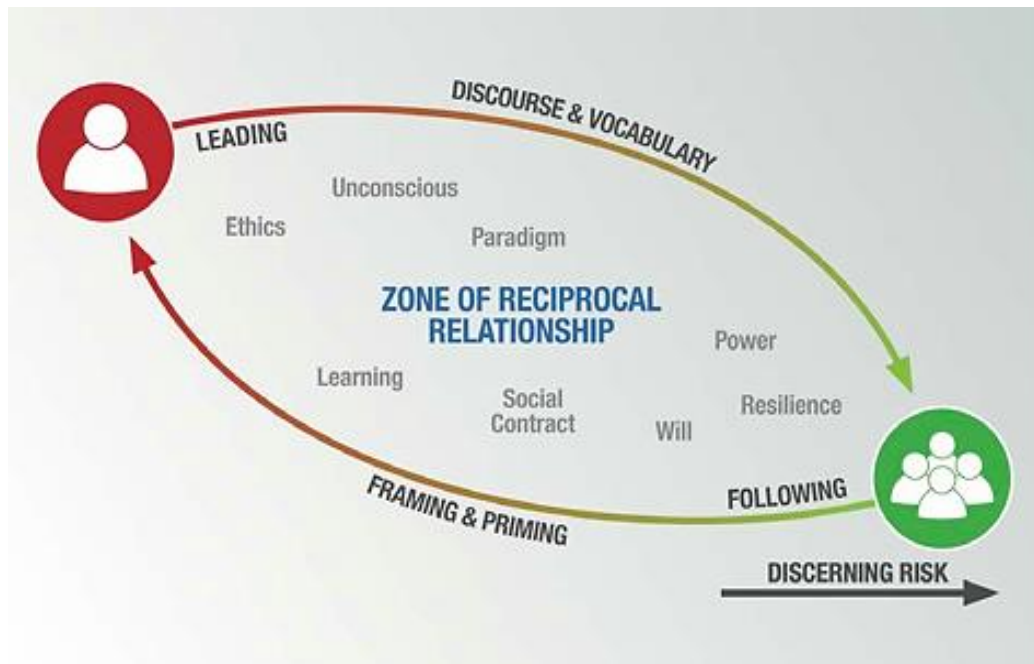
The last aspect of the definition of the groupspace mentions conscious and unconscious behaviours. Some might ask, why is there a need to focus on both? Simply because “there is an increasing body of evidence that only a minuscule proportion of the sensory data processed by the unconscious mind (capable of processing approximately 11 million bits per second) is referred to the conscious mind (capable of processing approximately 50 bits per second)” (Wiliam, 2006), as portrayed in the illustration below (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** A visual comparison of conscious and unconscious minds processing information abilities, proposed by Dr Robert Long.

Source: Long, Thorne, 2023.

When it comes to great leadership it is submerged (but not limited to) in the unconscious, ethics, learning, paradigm, social contract, power, will, resilience and is conveyed by the language and discourse used as presented in the illustration portrayed below (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Dialectical Leadership proposed by Dr Robert Long.

Source: Long, Thorne, 2023.

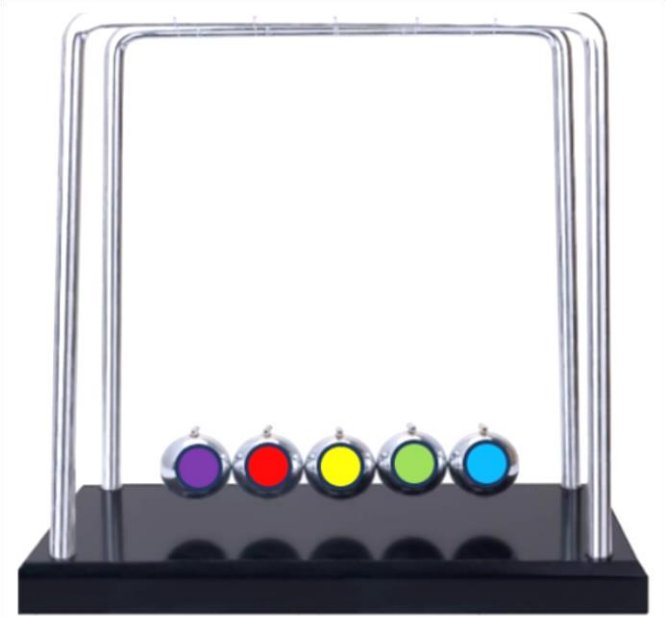
## 5. Newton's cradle and SPoR?

When it comes to the fundamentals of Social Psychology of Risk the three elements: the workspace, groupspace and headspace need to work simultaneously and removing any of them would create a chaos. The whole process is best explained using a Newton's cradle which works in the following way, it "is usually a system of five balls attached to a structure by two strings on either side. A ball on one end is lifted, and when it is released, strikes the other four balls. This collision creates a force through the other four balls and causes the ball on the other end to be pushed upward" (Newton's..., 2020). The item is often described as a "desk toy", that "demonstrates the laws of conservation of energy and momentum" (Patel, 2023). The illustrations below, although using the laws of physics, acquired a different role in presented work, as the following page portrays the outcome of a powerful leadership, based on the fundamentals of Social Psychology of Risk.

On the picture below, the inner elements represent the three fundamentals of SPoR, for the demonstration purposes colours were used to represent different aspects of the spaces:

- workspace – red,
- headspace – yellow,
- groupspace – green.
- additionally, the first element of the cradle is purple, symbolizes the leader,  
- the last element is blue and characterizes the employee.





**Figure 5.** Newton's cradle, with marked fundamentals of Social Psychology of Risk in the state of stasis.

The illustration below portrays that the more effort is put into the cradle by the leader, the more outcome is noticeable on the employees' side, meaning the outcome is much better, more vigorous. Of course, the Newton's cradle works the other way as well, meaning the more effort the employees put into their work the more force is felt on the leadership. Therefore, one can be lead into a conclusion that great leaders encourage great employees and the other way around.



**Figure 6.** Newton's cradle, with marked fundamentals of Social Psychology of Risk in motion.



When it comes to Social Psychology of Risk, in its core practice is a study which emphasises keeping the balance between all three (inner parts of the cradle). With the same energy and effort all three aspects of mentioned above spheres should be included in any organization which is seriously thinking about implementing SPoR into its organizational culture. In reality (it was not presented as an illustration, as it would be incredibly difficult to capture) the portrayed model can also present what happens when one of the fundamentals is removed. During the practice test, regardless of which sphere was removed, workspace, group space or the headspace, the Newton's cradle did not work. As follows, when the employee or the leader were removed from the test, the cradle also did not work as it should. Additionally, whenever there would be a barrier such as a sticker or a small amount of paint placed between the elements of the cradle, the whole system stopped working, which can be understood as a personification of the idea, that all three elements workspace, group space and headspace must work simultaneously without any barriers between them, as that jeopardizes the whole structure.

There are various experiments available regarding the topic, but one which might deserve attention is exactly the same test as the one described above, but presented in the airtight container which portrayed very interesting results (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Illustration: A Newton's cradle tested in an airtight container (How..., 2018).

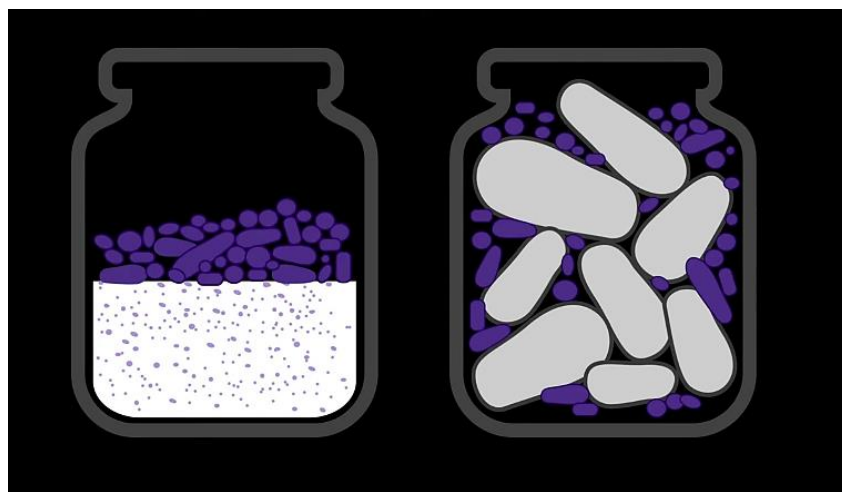
The results of the test commenced in the airtight container were exactly the same, which can lead into a conclusion that regardless of what the outside conditions might bring upon an organization, a workplace with the right balance between all elements of SPoR, impactful and receptive leaders and equally as impactful and receptive employees create an appropriate company culture. No, it is not a golden recipe, but definitely - a step in the right direction, that is given that the direction is actually the appropriate one.

## 6. How to find direction?

How to define the right pathway? Dr Peter Boyd from the “Center for Business and the Environment” at the Yale university lectures the idea how to make space for particular things in a busy schedule. The lecturer proposes so called “jars of time” filled with:

- important visions – rocks,
- pebbles – less important aspects of work,
- and sand – the least important tasks, which do not bring much meaning into an overall, grandiose vision of the organization, but must be completed in everyday routines.

The idea is presented in the illustrations below (Figure 8 and Figure 9).



**Figure 8.** The “jars of time” - one filled with sand and pebbles, the other one with stones and pebbles, as proposed by Dr Peter Boyd.

Source: Ted, 2017.



**Figure 9.** Two jars of time – both filled with sand, pebbles and rocks, different arrangement makes the pieces fit better into the available space, as proposed by Dr Peter Boyd.

Source: Ted, 2017.

As illustrations propose, if the products are placed in the right order, all of them can be fitted, which is a great reminder to focus on the bigger aspects first. According to Dr Boyd, leaders do not “waste their time on sand” (Ted, 2017), they must have a clear vision of the rocks and work together with the employees on the pebbles, as very often there is an overwhelming amount of them. Some could agree with this illustration or division of the tasks, others could argue that leaders do not have to “waste their time” on the sand only if they have the right people taking care of those aspects of a business. A great leader should also try his or her hardest to never forget about the fact that “sand” exists and sometimes needs attention from the employees. That is why in the ideal organization, people understand their “jars of time”, the principals of their attention dividing process and accept the feedback going, just like in the Newton’s cradle, both ways. Also keeping in mind, the fact that people’s decisions are affected by the conscious and unconscious mind, meaning headspace as they all use the workspace in building a better group space.

## 7. Summary

Understanding semiotics, the power of language used, respecting ethics, at least trying to suspend one’s bias and agenda leads to creation of better leaders. The kind of supervisors who understand others and even if they do not care much about the “sand” in their “jars of time”, they respect the fact that even the meaningless tasks can be someone’s meaningful responsibility; therefore, they should not be taken for granted. The Newton’s cradle is a great explanation of the hierarchy of “impact” of one on to another with the use of the fundamentals of Social Psychology of Risk. As with the quote by Mahatma Gandhi: “You must be the change you want to see in the world” (Soschner, 2024), great leaders should aspire to put so much emphasise to finding the balance between workspace, group space and headspace that the Social Psychology of Risk would become a core curriculum for well-organized culture in any organization.

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