

LE

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FEATURE

Arno VAN DAM

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Talking with radical conspiracy theory believers, using 'LEAP' as a conversational technique

Since the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen a rise of anti-system/anti-government sentiments and belief in conspiracy theories. This growing distrust in governments may in some people lead to violent extremism or participation in violent protests. That is why it is important to talk to people with these ideas.

**Some of these people appear to suffer from psychological complaints or social problems and are therefore in contact with professional care providers. So here is an opportunity for professionals to start a conversation about their beliefs and willingness to use violence.**

However, conducting such conversations can be complicated. Talking about the content of such ideas usually accomplishes nothing more than reinforcing disagreements. In recent years, however, experiments have been carried out with conversation techniques that have been developed in the care of people with severe psychiatric disorders. These techniques also seem to be useful in conversations with conspiracy theorists, although they usually do not have a serious psychiatric disorder. A conversational technique that has been applied in the 'preventing' or 'countering violent extremism' (PVE/CVE) field is 'LEAP'.

LEAP is an evidence-based communication programme developed by Dr. Xavier Amador, an internationally renowned clinical psychologist. The communication programme has been designed to help you create relationships with people who are unable to understand they are ill, with the goal of helping them accept treatment. When you Listen–Empathise–Agree–Partner (LEAP), you stop trying to convince the other person that they're wrong, or simply misguided. Instead, you listen in a new way that conveys respect for the person's point of view and a complete lack of judgment. The core elements are:

**Listen:**

Listen to try to understand what the person is telling you about their ideas. Reflect back what you have heard, without your opinions and ideas.

**Empathise:**

Empathise with how the person feels about their ideas and beliefs (without necessarily agreeing with his view of reality; e.g. "That sounds scary. Are you angry? Do you feel frightened?").

Underlying themes related to radicalisation, such as social exclusion, distrust, perceived injustice, perceived threats to one's own values and way of life, can play a role in the attraction to radical ideas or conspiracy thinking. It is important to acknowledge and understand these underlying emotions.

**Agree:**

Find areas of agreement, for example on concerns about social problems, insecurity, the credibility of information, social inequality or injustice.

**Partner:**

Collaborate to work toward agreed upon goals. For example, figuring out how to determine whether information is reliable or how to deal with discrimination or injustice.

**In the following example LEAP is demonstrated:**

John is a 52-year-old man who has been reported for threatening politicians on social media. He is convinced that there is a plot by the government to limit the freedom of the people and to have the country taken over by an elite. He is active on QAnon-inspired internet forums with like-minded people who, like him, believe that they must fight to save the country from 'the elite'. John is angry and feels socially marginalised and threatened by an elite who threatens his way of life. He thinks it's good that there are people like him who realise it and take up the fight.

John's childhood is marked by abuse from a stepfather and emotional neglect from his mother. He therefore has had the idea all his life that he cannot trust anyone. Partly because of this distrust, he easily comes into conflict with others. In recent years he has become depressed because he became unemployed due to chronic pain. He feels bitter because he feels he doesn't count in society. He reacts in traffic, in shops and at home with intense irritation when he feels that he is being treated unjustly.

Making contact with John was initially difficult. He is suspicious and hostile towards mental health care institutions. The LEAP conversation method also proved to be effective for John in building a working relationship.

**Listen:**

To the underlying emotions. In this case: anger, bitterness and fear.

**Empathise:**

It must be very scary if you feel that you cannot trust the authorities.

**Agree:**

Nobody knows what and who to believe these days.

**Partner:**

Shall we try to find out how we can check whether information is reliable? Can I help you with your financial problems and how to deal with the social consequences of unemployment?

Paying attention to the underlying life questions and frustrations offers more room for solutions, and does more justice to the real problems people experience, than talking about the content of the conspiracy theories. For John, it was mainly about his feeling that he has not been seen by others all his life and cannot trust anyone. In this way, it became clear to John that his distrust of the government fits into a pattern of disappointment and anger at people who influenced his life in a negative way.

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