



LCLI project on "generative leadership" Notes extracted from LCLI Briefing #7

Various LCLI Fellows feel that contemporary understandings of “leadership”—across various contexts and fields—are too instrumental or insufficiently attentive to the complexity of the “living humans systems.” Given the way things are unfolding in many societies it is more than clear the nature of “leadership” is no trivial matter, not by a long shot. Several of us have discussed this issue and begun to unpack what it might mean to speak of “generative leadership,”¹ and others surely share this concern. Here are preliminary notes from our discussion as we go forward on this important theme.

What is generative, “already alive” in those communities, that can be worked with, enhanced, aligned by trust, and how do we scale this up? What kind of leadership is necessary that does not require a supervised, curriculum based “heroic leadership” model?

- A particular concern is *how one shifts institutions* (or people who have *positional power* in institutions) into a different framework of leadership (including “*un-leading*”). Outcomes matter, but the way to define them is not through mechanical, instrumental, technological solutions but through setting loose the energies and dynamics that power living human systems—both among those one is there to serve and among those who seek to serve. Training/educating/informing people is simply not enough
- Leadership as learning: a key question to ask is, “how do you form yourself dynamically?” How does one become a “*learning organization*” that prizes “*visible, disciplined thinking*,” aware that the ability of those who intervene from above is extremely limited, project-ized, and self-limiting (besides limiting what is already there in communities)?
- Critical is *releasing the energies that are already there*, and in *taking learning itself as an adaptive form of organization and self-organization*.
- What kind of leadership enables this? The current generalized tide of frustration with the status quo, partly generational, is a force of change that is suspicious of conventional forms of leadership but hasn’t found anything else that works yet.
- A three-fold approach (Kirsten in Chicago) – 1) relational, convinced that “*relationships help create change*”; 2) forming “*nurturing leaders*” by building conversations about and new ways of thinking and acting; 3) convening across a movement – based on *moral imagination; spirit-power* as opposed to money-power/people-power; *love*, as a real thing; and holding on to the dialectic of *hurt-and-hope*.
- “*Who has control?*” is a key question.
- Trust is crucial, and it has to be *won* and *held*.
- Data-sharing that is honest and not misleading or manipulative can also help a great deal.
- The more we train “*heroes*,” the more we will be suppressing what actually takes place in complex living human systems.
- Where then does leadership exist, what does it look like, how does it work, in complex living human systems? Think of the “*aunties and uncles*” of development who have no formal status, are not overtly the public leaders, but are in fact the gatekeepers in communities, a key node in anything that happens.
- Leadership must be seen as a *process* rather than an individual characteristic (or merely a set of skills).
- It is affected by the choices that are available within any one place, space and time, but the actual, in this sense, is not determining: “*possibility is greater than actuality*” and disclosing possibilities that are present is a crucial leadership practice.

¹ Tentative because we mean something different from an existing Institute for Generative Leadership, which still emphasizes “skills and strategies” and leadership as an “observable, executable, learnable and improvable through practice”—see <http://generateleadership.com/>.

- This includes paying attention to how “reality” (actuality) and “ideals” (possibility) clash, who defends what in the process and why, and what can be achieved by opening up one’s imagination.
- Leadership is then also not just about delegation.
- The *issue of scale* is also critical; it’s about a *movement* across sectors rather than merely training small groups of people, easy to grasp if we understand what life systems are. Self-interest, in my view, is one central issue that keeps it from going to scale, an issue we need to confront imaginatively.
- This may well mean moving more explicitly away from a “program” or “project-based” trajectory (generates initial energy, but this often drops dramatically of boredom, leadership change, burnout, historical trauma and internal conflict), *toward more fundamental generative dynamics*; away from from “predictable cause-effect” models and mechanical replicability to *connecting the energies of people* that normally don’t see or link to each other.
- Or asking how one shapes an organization so that it becomes a *generative space for those who are in it?* – modelling in one’s organization what one looks for elsewhere.
- Other experiences speak to the importance of non-instrumental criteria for leadership: of the “*human factor*,” of creating “*spaces of innovative boundary-crossing encounter*,” of an emphasis on “*spirit*” or the immaterial, nonsensible dimension of human action, of networks of *solidarity and exposure* to other contexts, and of “*spaces of hope*” that are able to confront the hurt that is present.
- Some also value the idea of “*leadership as hosting*”: process oriented, inviting, pollinating, not about a task but about a way of coming together; a philosophy rather than a methodology.
- The Shormer *Unlearning/Relearning cycle* is part of this—slowing down rather than speeding up, respecting the force of awareness/focusing, getting out of the way, in a deep sense just part of the flow.
- We aren’t talking about an individual journey in a positional role, but a way of helping a living system achieve the deepest accountability of which it is capable; *artfully signalling that others are free to express their own presence*, against those “normal” signals that paralyze the process.
- It is wildly inappropriate to think that one can lead a living system. We need some new language to enable us to talk more clearly, accurately about the larger field we are engaging with, to see the interactions in any one place or living system; there is a different mind in “leading” something or being a “generative agent.”
- Rather than a “culture of skills”—which tends to dominate the desire to act and to act quickly with visible outcomes in defined time-periods—a “culture of will” is thus vital to generative leadership. To recall a Teilhard de Chardin quote: *We are not so much human beings seeking spirituality but spiritual beings becoming human.*

What, then, if we did not use the word “leader” or “leadership”? What if we spoke instead of ‘generative agents’ and ‘generative nodes’? *The one thing that binds everything we are talking about is ‘Spirit’ and we can’t just have workshops or seminars about that -- how we address that is pretty profound*