

Natural Leadership

Introduction

When you imagine a leader, what comes to mind? For many, the image of a conventional leader is a strong, lone hero with dependent devoted followers waiting to be told what to do next. The leader is the only one with all the answers, the only one who knows the way, the keeper of knowledge and plans, the one who must make the important decisions, the patriarch, and the one in power.

Business shaped by conventional thinking is based on conventional leaders sitting in key posts within top-down organizational structures. The conventional leader carefully controls the flow of knowledge, information and resources to those below. The conventional leader holds the knowledge, creates the plans, makes the decisions and tells his/her followers what to do, when and how to do it, and measures their performance based on pre-determined numeric indicators.

Conventional leadership models have their benefits and their place; however, they are becoming less effective and even inhibitory during this “Decade of Transformation”. Firms of the future need to be agile and adaptive, fluid and flexible, responsive and resilient. New leadership models are needed that leverage the full capacity and diversity of their workforce and extended value network through times of rapid and unpredictable change.

Natural leadership looks to nature for models, strategies and solutions to problems that are similar to their own. Leadership inspired by nature draws upon the myriad leadership models in nature that have been refined over 3.8 billion years of evolution that survive and thrive within a complex and continuously changing context. Firms of the future will thrive with limited resources and sudden big shocks in the same way that nature does. In this paper we will show that leadership inspired by nature develops from conventional thinking on leadership. There are already good examples and we will include case studies that illustrate successful approaches.

Historical leadership models

Over past millennia, society believed that great leaders have inherent characteristics of leadership, i.e. “leaders are born and not made” and that attention should be given to selecting leaders rather than training people for leadership roles. This view had little evidence to support it. Other approaches have focused on the functions of leadership – what leaders actually do. This has generated many different lists of leadership functions.

There are now over 50,000 books on business management and leadership each with their own nuances, perspectives and glimpses of truth. Most texts focus on leadership within organizations and businesses that are hierarchical in structure where the leader is recognized and legitimized with positional power and focused on simple quantitative measures of success – i.e. profit, productivity etc.

There is a close relationship between leadership and management but they are not synonymous. McKinsey’s “7-S framework” (1) identifies seven organizational elements and categorises them as either “soft” leadership elements or “hard” management elements. Managers keep an eye on the bottom line whereas leaders nurture the big picture, core beliefs and collective presence.

Attention then moved to leadership behaviour, particularly highlighting the idea of leadership style. It develops the idea that leaders cannot rely solely on their positional power, they need to behave in a variety of styles in different contexts along a continuum between authoritarian and democratic. This approach, called contingency theory, focused research on different styles of leadership and which style is most appropriate for a given situation.

More recently, focus has shifted to a transformational leadership approach with greater emphasis on the needs of people and maximizing their potential. Transformational leadership aims high. It focuses on higher values, ethics and goals, on developing and challenging people to achieve their greatest potential, on trusting and enabling them to use their own insights and intuition to adapt their own behaviour to meet the shared goals of the organization.

Changing business context

The context of business leadership is changing rapidly as we enter a decade of transformation. Some changes are predictable such as climate change; limitations of water, food, oil, raw materials and waste disposal; the world’s population reaching seven billion; globalization of business; digitization of information; shifting markets; and the end of an economy based on limitless growth. The globalized business context is a near infinitely complex interconnected system – constant flux, highly unpredictable, small changes producing huge effects, self-organizing, positive and negative feedbacks spanning multiple scales in time and space. Other changes are less predictable such as political upheaval, sudden environmental disasters, the power of emerging social networks, unforeseen economic and political crises and the disruptive new technologies. The business context is changing to a world where probability and impact of risks cannot be meaningfully assessed. There is more and more volatility and uncertainty.

Leadership models of the future

Successful leadership models of the future will be flexible and fluid, agile and adaptable, responsive and resilient. A business that puts people first, values at the core, and adopts a transformational leadership style is well placed to adapt to become a business inspired by nature. Future leaders will need to nurture leadership at all levels, distributed across multiple organizations and directed not just downwards but in all directions. The style and intensity of leadership will need to be continuously dynamic requiring not just change but transformation in people's thinking.

Leading the emergence of new sustainable business and transitioning away from conventional unlimited-growth based business in this unpredictable environment will require mutual engagement within a new values-based culture and a strong sense of purpose. This will require new thinking about the role of leadership and the interplay between systems, relationships and people. Success in the future will be judged not just by the simple measures of processes and outputs but by the stories and narratives of the parties involved.

To be successful they will have to build on traditional thinking about leadership, assess which elements remain fit-for-purpose in the new context and yet be open to new leadership models and approaches to transform their thinking and behaviour. Tomorrow's leaders will need to have a new relationship with nature: from taking from nature to learning from nature to being part of nature.

Transitioning from conventional to natural leadership

Transition from conventional to natural leadership will require understanding the differences between the two. Businesses and organizations can be viewed as operating in a dynamic framework of five components: Reality, Reality Check, Real Goals, People, and Action. We can use this framework to compare what nature-inspired leadership might look like versus conventional leadership.

Reality

Reality represents the environment, the conditions, and the parameters in and with which an organization operates. It covers all things external to the organization including technological developments, socio-economic-political trends, resource availability, and nature.

Leaders shaped by conventional thinking make limiting assumptions, ignoring the complexities, interconnectivity, and changes that are occurring around them. They have an incomplete or inaccurate view of reality which leaves them vulnerable to disruption and unable to leverage emerging opportunities.

Leaders inspired by nature seek to constantly understand, sense, respond, and align with the realities of human and natural systems. Natural leadership recognises that systems are complex and can be difficult to understand; however, they also know that nature provides myriad successful models for understanding and leveraging the complex and dynamic systems in which your business operates.

Reality Check

Organisms in nature survive by constantly checking where they are and how they are doing relative to the constantly changing reality around them. Based on this reality check, they respond by constantly moving towards positive outcomes. Recognizing and aligning with the reality with which and within which you operate is not only needed for survival, it also creates innovative resilient dynamic business organizations.

Leadership shaped by conventional thinking often has only one reality check – profit. They measure everything in terms of money, value what they measure, and ignore the rest, calling them “externalities”.

Leadership inspired by nature measures what they value and are constantly checking how well they are performing in and aligning with the realities in which they operate by embedding feedback loops. This reality check allows them to respond and adapt to change, rapidly recover from unpredictable disruptions, and leverage emerging opportunities.

Real Goals

Goals are what an organization chooses to be and chooses to do. Real goals reflect a more complete understanding of reality as well as the unique values of the organization. Real goals address risks and leverage opportunities created by dynamic reality.

Leaders shaped by conventional thinking set goals based on an incomplete understanding of reality and what they think they can achieve given the problems and challenges they believe they will face. Their main goal – sometimes their sole goal – is to maximize profit, especially in the short term. Their goal setting is a closed top-down process. This approach will not – cannot – lead to sustainable resilient innovative business.

Leadership inspired by nature sets goals openly and collectively based on a complete understanding of dynamic reality, what is fit for purpose and what is really possible. Real goals are based on a pure vision, uncontaminated by perceived limitations to what is currently considered possible. Real goals are based on striving to optimize abundance for the business, the business ecosystem, the community, and natural ecosystems. Leaders inspired by nature don't dwell on analysing and solving perceived problems and challenges but rather focus on knowing what really good looks like and choosing how best to move towards positive outcomes.

People

People are at the core of every business. People internal to the organization (employees) and people external to the organization, including shareholders and stakeholders, the breadth and depth of the supply chain, consumers, the communities in which each business operates, and all the people it impacts.

For leaders shaped by conventional thinking, it's about filling the organisational chart, squeezing the most out of people via management and leadership techniques, and retaining good people through status and pay structures. People are only the human resources their job description says they are. Mistakes and failures are punished. On the outside, it's about working the supply chain, making deals to maximize revenue,

minimize cost, and expanding market share. All relationships – including those with customer and shareholders – are competitive and at best are win-win. People are to be led, controlled, and managed. Leaders think of themselves as lecturers, loners, and heroes.

Natural leadership fosters and leverages diversity, redundancy, feedback loops, and free energy. It fits form to function, self-organizes, and optimizes rather than maximizes. Natural leadership creates conditions to optimize the unique capacities of each person, fostering and leveraging diversity, redundancy and feedback loops within the collective workforce. Innovation is rewarded. Natural leadership is fluid and dynamic, allowing self-organization that fits form to function. Relationships with employees, customers, shareholders, stakeholders and the extended business ecosystem are based on synergies designed for creating abundance and resilience. Leaders are hosts, nurturers, facilitators, catalysts, and listeners.

Action

Actions are the realization of goals. Actions include a business's processes and products as well as its interaction with, and impact on, the human and natural systems – the reality – within and with which it operates.

The actions of leadership shaped by conventional thinking are power-driven, profit-driven and risk-based and thus are limited in their innovation and unsustainable.

Leaders inspired by nature recognize the myriad ways it interacts with human and natural systems and take action to align with, support and leverage both. Their actions are forward-looking, always moving toward individual and collective positive outcomes. The actions are simultaneously self-serving and supportive of the people and systems in which they operate.

Leaders as “Positive Deviants”

Sara Parkin in her excellent book “The Positive Deviant - sustainability leadership in a perverse world” [(2010) Earthscan Ltd, London] refers to “sustainability-literate leaders” and says they should be positive deviants. She defines positive deviants as people who do the right thing for sustainability despite being surrounded by the wrong institutional structures, the wrong processes and stubbornly uncooperative people. She goes on to say that sustainability-literate leaders should develop four habits of new thinking - resilience, relationships, reflection and reverence for the power of nature.

She proposes some principles of good practice:

- You use these principles of practice to increase the effectiveness of your own leadership for sustainability, as well as to help others to do likewise.
- You live in a way that recognises the interdependence of people and the environment.
- You know how to do the right things despite unfavourable circumstances and you can do them in a way that removes barriers and brings others along with you.
- You are able to analyse human problems and design strategies, projects and solutions in the context of the whole system – all life on earth.
- You know where you want to end up and can produce a well enough considered and structured strategy for getting there.
- You understand scientific thinking and methods and are able to ask the right questions
- You are able to imagine a believable future and with others co-evolve ways of getting there.
- You use sustainability outcomes to judge progress and measure success.
- You know about good ways to learn.
- You are able to ... help other people take a longer-term perspective and ... help close the gap between the way human economies and biogeochemical ones work.
- You understand enough about ways of measuring progress toward sustainability to support your objectives and strategy.

Becoming a leader inspired by nature

Metaphors from nature

How does a leader become inspired by nature? A powerful way of connecting with nature is through the use of metaphor which provides ways of understanding one thing in terms of another – for example, understanding leadership in terms of nature.

Metaphors used by conventional business leaders tend to be mechanical. “The organisation runs like a well-oiled machine”, “There is a spanner in the works”, “Let's get to the nuts and bolts of the problem”, “People are just cogs in the wheel”, “Process re-engineering”, “Human Resources” - the list goes on and on. The very day-to-day language of business continually reinforces this machine metaphor.

Leaders can change this; their words and actions are constantly scrutinised and interpreted by the people they work with and this in turn affects those people's thinking and behaviour. So leaders could change the culture by changing their day-to-day language. They can use new nature-associated metaphors to transfer thinking away from the machine metaphor to a nature-inspired way of thinking. For example, a leader might use a metaphor from nature to help a colleague cope with the stress of major structural change:

“Imagine seaweed. It lives in a rocky place. The tide ebbs and flows daily. The seawater swirls around itself and the surrounding rocks. It is battered by winds and waves, tides and currents. Sometimes it is above water, sometimes below - twice a day! But it survives and thrives. How does it do this? It does this by swirling with the currents, going with the flows (which represent the demands of the organization coming in from all directions) but it is always attached to a rock (which represents your values).”

Connecting with nature

Becoming a leader inspired by nature is greatly enhanced by connecting with nature. The best way of connecting with nature for inspiration is of course to get out there and be part of it. Get out of the office; be at one with and part of nature. Clear your mind, focus on your senses and your wider environment. Focus on what you can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. Think about the problems around you that nature has solved. Look for patterns, possibilities, connections. See yourself as part of nature.

Think about ways that the people you work with could also connect with nature. Try a planning meeting walking in nature rather than sitting in a meeting room. Approach your business issues or opportunities in a different way by imagining how nature would frame the scenario. Simplify your business issue, translate it into a natural context and let inspiration emerge. Emulate natural leadership by:

- Using social networks to their full potential to connect with your ecosystem
- Creating space to think – for you and your colleagues
- Encouraging and participating in the right conversations in your business
- Challenging assumptions, considering new perspectives
- Setting value visions not goal visions
- Inspiring not managing

Leadership models from nature

Nature demonstrates an infinite variety of leadership models ranging from no leader at all to a clear single leader, each optimally suited for its particular context. What they have in common is deep local attunement, perfect synchronicity with the larger environment, and the intention to lead to the most effective collective actions. Let's examine some examples:



www.mundsky.com

Leaf-cutting ants in Texas form amazing social structures of up to 7 million workers per nest where sophisticated communication systems based on chemicals enable an optimal balance between group behaviour versus self-interest and shared goals/values. Nobody is in charge. The Queen, despite her lofty title wields no authority, her sole function being to lay eggs not to give commands. There is no time or place for inefficient leadership or management structures; each ant constantly touches its antennae with other ants to ensure each are on the same

page, working as one. Depending on the challenge or opportunity, the colony as a whole calculates quickly and precisely, adjusting resources accordingly.

This type of leadership, which is also well demonstrated by flocks, herds, schools and colonies, is known as Organisational Intelligence. Dr Karl Albrecht defines this as “the capacity of an enterprise to mobilise all of its brainpower, and to focus that brainpower on accomplishing its mission. By that definition, the role of OI is simple: to make the enterprise more successful in its environment”

(http://www.aim.com.au/resources/article_kalbrecht.html). In effect, the culture and values of the organisation act as a central nervous system with each individual in tune with, and acutely aware of, its immediate neighbours and how they are responding to environmental factors.

In the business context, globalisation and digitisation have eroded traditional barriers between actions and interactions, between a business’s internal and external environment. Traditional top-down hierarchical leadership cannot be effective if boundaries are blurred or porous and even bottom-up leadership is too stove-piped. The Firm of the Future will require networked leadership to be truly successful in the interconnected age with real awareness, common values and emergent approaches based on feedback loops.



www.dehornberger.aimsites.org

The next example involves migrating geese which fly in a “V” formation. There is no single leader; instead geese take turns leading the formation for legs of the journey before falling back and allowing a new leader to emerge. It is believed that only a subset of the flock possess knowledge about the migration route - and these members may only individually know part of the route - which means that leadership must rotate dynamically to

the most able member at any given time to perform the leadership function whilst they possess unique skills then merging seamlessly back into the flock. Interestingly, it is believed that the geese following the leader honk to encourage the leader to maintain pace and therefore demonstrate an element of networked leadership within the same example.

Contrast this with business where there are usually organisational barriers between leaders and followers that prevent mobility and cross-fertilisation of information. Moreover, business leaders remain in situ according to fixed contract terms rather than needs-based tenure. An optimal strategy would be to develop multi-directional mobility within a business to allow leaders to emerge temporarily whilst they have unique skills and, when leadership requirements change, to provide seamless pathways from that position into other optimal roles for the individual.



www.roadtickle.com

The example of wolves is slightly more “corporate” in nature as wolf packs operate with established hierarchies and have a defined leadership role. The Alpha Wolf’s role is to make decisions for the pack and he maintains his position through performance not aggression; he will be replaced if he does not do a good job. The entire pack’s shared value is group unity and all behaviour – including choice of leader – is determined optimally to deliver this outcome. “Lone wolves” who do not share the pack’s values leave the group. Wolves present such a compelling model of dynamic leadership within the context of shared group values that German sociologists are pioneering

the use of wolves when teaching leadership skills

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8600382.stm>.

The learning points for business are that leadership (in any form) should be challenged constantly to test that it remains fit-for-purpose and capable of delivering group – rather than individual – good. The example also provides a reminder that a leader cannot rely upon status alone and must respect and be respected by members of the group to maximise overall performance.

Case Studies of Natural Leadership

Another powerful way of getting inspiration from nature is through stories and case studies of businesses and organizations that have pioneered nature-inspired leadership.



www.gamezextra.co.uk

A decade or so after its creation, Google still manages to retain its start-up feel and innovative intent by employing a Chief Culture Officer, a Chief Internet Evangelist and a Distinguished Entrepreneur (<http://www.benmorrow.info/research/leadership-culture-at-google-inc/>). Judy Gilbert, Director of Talent

Management at Google describes the company’s leadership philosophy as “let’s hire fantastic people, bring them in, and set them free” with an emphasis on peer feedback, two or three-day leadership programs, and self-directed career planning (<http://www.dailyhrtips.com/2010/12/03/hr-blog-leadership-development-at-google/>). Google’s overall vision is set by the leadership trio of Brin, Page and Schmidt who make all decisions together to benefit from shared judgment and extra energy. The cultural ethos they set is to “target the impossible” and teams of engineers are empowered to operate autonomously within this remit. In effect the three leaders are hosting a space that enables others to perform and they are themselves integrated within this space via feedback loops which operate to short 90-day cycles. As external conditions change the leaders encourage the internal network to flex synergistically via performance management and values-based communication. Mark McKergow’s paper on “Leader as Host, Host as Leader” describes this leadership concept in more detail.



InterfaceFLOR is the world’s largest manufacturer of carpet tiles and is targeting full sustainability by 2020. Despite operating in a petro-intensive sector, InterfaceFLOR has demonstrated enormous capacity for change since the owner, Ray Anderson’s environmental awakening back in the 1970’s. Since then the man and the company have become synonymous with “new thinking” by permitting – and rewarding - employees to think laterally (inspired by biomimetic principles) and reach previously unthinkable conclusions. Ray Anderson created a corporate culture where employees, partners, suppliers, customers, investors and communities came together with shared environmental and social goals and also set about educating the rest of industry that the philosophy could provide an effective and viable way to do business.

John Lewis

John Lewis is a worker-owned partnership that demonstrates aspects of Nature’s networked leadership model described previously. Every partner has an equal stake and an equal influence on decision-making via democratic channels. Corporate leadership could not be more locally attuned as it has 70,000 interfaces (via partners) with the external environment which creates a culture of wishing to do the right thing even if this is sometimes not the best outcome commercially. The business also favours leadership instead of management at all levels to encourage inspirational behaviour.

Starting the journey

Nature has the answers – its 4 billion year track record is proof. Leadership inspired by nature will help your organisation navigate successfully through the challenges ahead. To find out more about how nature can inspire the right leadership within your organisation please contact Biomimicry for Creative Innovation (BCI).

<http://biomimicry-bci.squarespace.com>

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