

Leadership
in evolutionary
organisations:

WHO'S LEADING ANYWAY?



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Have you ever been asked to participate in a meeting to “co-create a solution”, only to find out afterwards that the whole process was already shaped? Perhaps you have been in the lead of an initiative that needed to create buy-in through some form of involvement theatre.

In our journey of working with organisations that are aiming to become fit for the future and fit for humans, we’ve stumbled over similar behaviour time and time again that made us wonder: Isn’t there a more fulfilling way to interact with each other? If you look at the typical

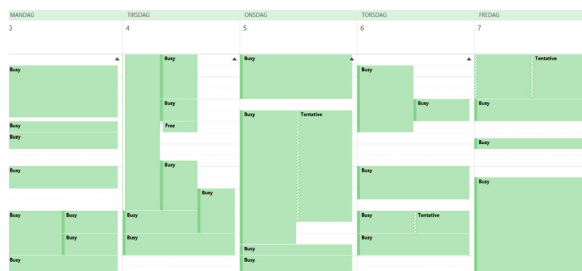
hierarchical organisation – leadership tasks are described with words like “selling in”, “creating buy-in”, “cascading information” and “alignment meetings”.

The never-ending lists of leadership models therefore showcase the best way to do this.

This is not a fun game. It’s a game that makes everyone lose a little – leaders are stuck in endless meeting marathons, feeling overwhelmed by the pressure to take decisions under the assumption that they know it all; while employees are left with little autonomy or control, unable to act upon their best judgement, which is deemed irrelevant.

We don’t think it inspires people, we don’t think it unleashes creativity, and it certainly doesn’t help us all to spend time on the problems most worth solving. **As organisations move forward, our perspective on leadership is in dire need of a revolution.**

Figure 1: Back-to-back meetings fill up the weeks for many leaders – how does your calendar look?



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During our exploration of this topic over the last few years, we've been reflecting on our experience with the organisations we support whilst reading around 200 of the most recognised leadership books and articles. It has taken us on a journey from Chester Barnard's "The Functions of the Executive", published in the late 1930s, to Jim Collins' "Level 5 of Leadership" in the 2000s to Edgar and Peter Schein's "Humble Leadership" released in 2018. All the while, we've had the following questions in the back of our minds:



1. What is changing in the environment for leadership?
2. How is leadership exercised in evolutionary organisations?

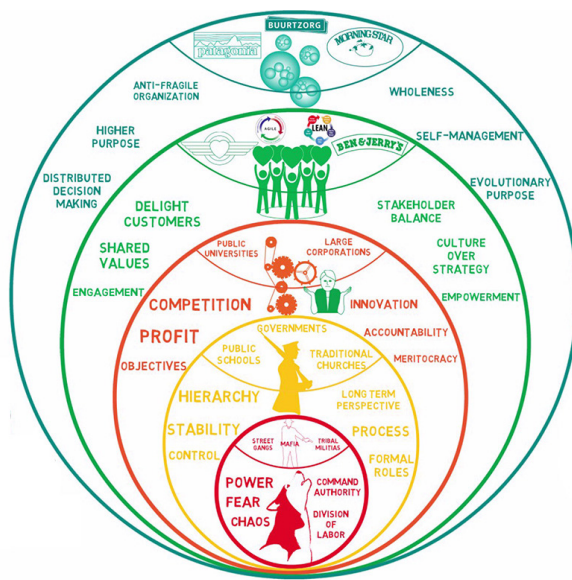
So *what* is changing in the environment for leadership? We'd argue (and we wouldn't be the only ones) – quite a lot.

a machine, teal (or self-transforming) organisations of the future exist like a living organism: "Sensing and responding" to the world around them. The direction of this movement brings the emergence of elements such as self-managed teams, decentralised decision-making and internal marketplaces.

Five years on and with more organisations leaning into new ways of operating, we are no longer "on the verge" of a paradigm shift – this paradigm shift is in motion. And along with the shift emerge new fundamental assumptions when it comes to many aspects of organisations – not least, for leadership.

Assumptions of the traditional hierarchical organisation	Assumptions of the self-transforming organisation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An organisation's purpose is to use resources as efficiently as possible in the pursuit of financial profit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations exist to help unleash our whole human potential in order to solve our most important challenges.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions are made by leaders and cascaded down. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-making is decentralised – the one(s) with the most knowledge find solutions and test them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can use formal power and the hierarchy to "make" other people do what has been decided. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You cannot depend on formal power alone.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The whole point is to make the system as efficient as possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The whole point is to find ways of tapping into our collective intelligence and finding solutions that can solve the big issues in a VUCA world.

Figure 2: An overview of Laloux's management paradigms from red to teal?



Frederic Laloux's book "Reinventing Organizations" was released in 2014, in which he makes a point that we are on the verge of a paradigm shift in the way our organisations exist and are "managed". His wording for the organisation of the future is the "teal" organisation – we like to call it the "self-transforming" organisation. Whereas "orange", hierarchical organisations of the past operate like

Leadership as we know it won't get us to where we want to be.

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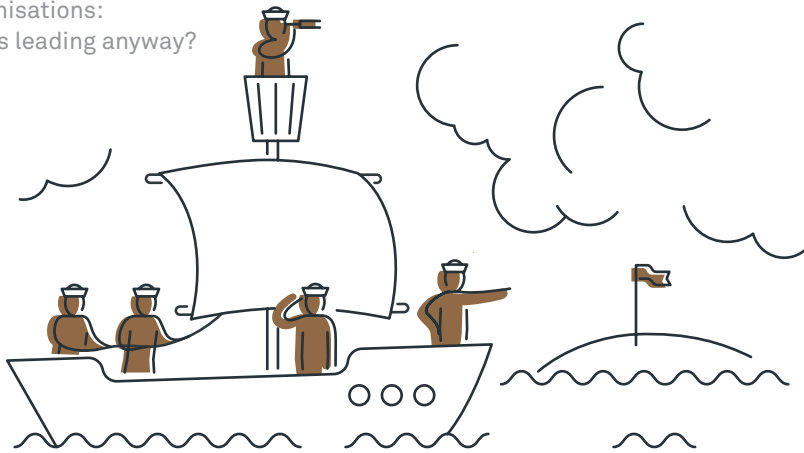


Figure 3: Leadership is about channelling energy in the direction of our toughest challenges

Leadership is the name that we have given to our interactions with others that result in some type of movement, most often with the intention of moving us towards a better future (together). As the world gets more complex, we are going to need to leverage the collective intelligence of the people in our organisation – so we need leadership to help us get better at solving the big problems in the world. This brings us to our first fundamental assumption of leadership in evolutionary organisations: **The purpose of leadership is to multiply the capacity of others.**

It's about guiding and framing: Figuring out what can be done to share and synthesise the experience and knowledge of each individual in the crowd, explore critical challenges and search for solutions together. We need leadership to sense and respond, not to command and control. And finally, we are certainly not limited by the number of challenges we could tackle – so the more leadership, the better.

It therefore begs the question: Who gets to be the leader? We believe evolutionary organisations create the space for everyone to lead. In fact, let's ditch the word leader all together and just talk about leadership as something we do rather than something we are. This conclusion leads us straight to our second fundamental assumption: **Leadership is an activity – not a rank or a role.**

To us, this means the following. It means that we acknowledge that every individual has strengths, ideas and perspectives to bring to the table. And it means that whether it's your first day at work or ten-thousandth day at work, you have something you can contribute. What can

you contribute with? This leads us to the third fundamental assumption: **The leadership that is needed is based on the context.**

At every moment, each person is adjusting their behaviour according to what is needed. It could be as simple as entering a hot meeting room and opening the window to let some air in for the good of the energy in the room. Or witnessing groupthink, then daring to speak up and challenge the status quo. Or noticing that a colleague has taken the lead on facilitating a discussion, then deciding to "step back" and be led by them. **For every individual, it requires a few things: Self-awareness, situational awareness, taking ownership and being courageous.**

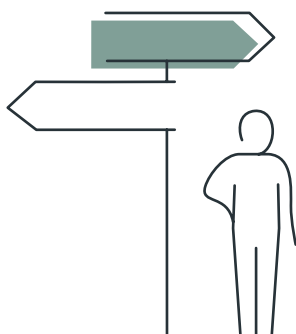
Going back to all the hundreds of leadership perspectives that have been shared throughout history. Are they all redundant? Maybe some of them but probably not all of them. We would just recommend you to **revisit old perspectives with a new lens** made up of these updated assumptions:

- The purpose of leadership is to multiply the capacity of others.
- Leadership is an activity – not a rank or a role.
- The leadership that is needed is based on the context.

If you buy into these three fundamental assumptions, what to do now? We don't think that it's possible to "flip a switch" from the now to the future. We also don't think it's an either-or. But we are certain that leadership of the future needs to fundamentally shift in the percentage of activities and tasks we engage in that create energy, unleash creativity and innovation and engage others to play on the same playing field. Here are four initial areas to get started in building this new "muscle".

1. Figure out what your purpose and values are: Transforming from one paradigm of leadership to another

Figure 4: Sense and respond – figure out what to contribute based on the situation



will require you to become acquainted with your inner compass. For some considerable time (maybe even our entire careers), we are going to have to hold the tension between new and old – a delicate and deliberate balancing act. When things are getting rough, feeling that your work (and existence) is purposeful will keep you going. Knowing and working through your values will help you to stay centred when you may not be getting validation from the outside.

The Barrett Values Centre offers a free tool to start becoming acquainted with your values. Take the test, select three of the most important values and reflect on how well you are living those values at the moment.

Get started on your purpose by reflecting on these questions:

- What am I passionate about?
- What am I good at?
- What can I give to the world (that others can't)?
- In which situations do I get the most energy?

2. Become aware of your “self”: When we are trying to shift our mindset, our egos are often holding us back. Shifting from the old to the new leadership paradigm will require letting go of our ego – operating for our own self-esteem to seeing the bigger picture. Some call this shifting from the ego-system to the eco-system view.

Start getting to know your ego and what triggers it: Become more self-aware – of when you are acting to feed your ego and when you are acting out of a state of care for others. Some examples of feeding the ego:

- Wanting to prove to someone that I am right (and they are wrong).
- Defending myself.
- Trying to show that I am better / smarter / more important than someone else for any reason.

- Putting on a front to make someone believe something about me.
- Seeking the spotlight.
- Wanting to control everything.

Reflect on the last week and make a list of the ways that you feed your ego. Then specify one thing that you'd love to do less of in the upcoming week. Make the same list a week later and assess how you did. This process is not about immediate results! By setting the intention to become more aware as well as prioritising time to reflect, you are already on your way to becoming more self-aware.

3. Strengthen your contextual awareness:

Contextual awareness comes into play when trying to figure out whether to step forward and lead or step back and be led by others. Working on your self-awareness will give you a good start, and the next skill to focus your attention on is deep listening. Otto Scharmer has outlined four levels of listening:

- Listening by downloading:
You listen to what you already know. The result is that you reconfirm what you already know (you reconfirm your opinions and judgements).
- Factual listening:
You notice differences between our own opinions and others' opinions. The outcome is that we notice disconfirming data and use that information to re-shape your own opinion.
- Empathic listening:
You listen with all your focus on the other person in order to experience as if you were standing in their shoes. The result is emotionally connecting with the other person and genuinely feeling where they are coming from.
- Generative listening:
Requires us to be able to let go of our own opinions and listen from a place that is genuinely explorative. The result is the opportunity to sense emerging possibilities.



Watch the video to hear the full explanation.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLFXpRkVZal

Which mode of listening do you most often find yourself in? Are there situations where you could benefit from using another mode of listening?

Reflect on a typical day at work, list out the types of conversations that you have, then identify which mode of listening you usually use, and then identify which mode would be most effective in that conversation. Ask for feedback from a colleague on one of the most important conversations that recur in your typical week.

4. Give yourself a break: Holding the tension of old and new will take a lot of courage – and this fourth point could have been about courage but as Brené Brown's research shows, being courageous is about being vulnerable. Therefore, we are going to assume that you are a courageous person and that you dare try your best in shifting our world towards the new leadership paradigm – and while you do that, please cut yourself some slack. There will be times when it's hard and frustrating and tiring – and that's ok. This journey is not going to take days or weeks, it'll take years and decades – so take care of yourself: Eat well, exercise well, rest well – then you'll be setting yourself up for the long run.

We're inspired by the Full Engagement model (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003):

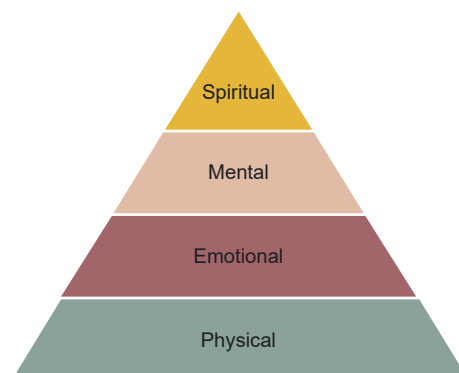


Figure 5: Full Engagement is about tuning into your energy at each level

- Spiritual wellness: This links back to the first bullet point of living true to your purpose and values.
- Mental wellness: Feeding your ability to focus your mind.
- Emotional wellness: Being aware of your emotions and your needs for relational connection are being met.
- Physical wellness: Feeding yourself well, resting and moving your body to stay energised.

Check in with yourself on a daily basis – give yourself a score out of 4 on each level. At Implement, we use this check-in for teams as well. Share your scores at each level – the team can then ask if there is anything they can do to support you wherever you are on the scale.

As mentioned, shifting from the old leadership paradigm to the new is not going to be an overnight switch – it's going to be an ongoing balancing of what is needed in each situation for the foreseeable future. Find meaning with your purpose and values, build your self-awareness and contextual awareness, and manage your energy – and you'll be off to a flying start.

Evolving the leadership that is required in the future requires each of us individually to stop making excuses, to start changing our habits and, in turn, begin to challenge assumptions. Only when we all start living and practising these leadership behaviours that will make our organisations more human and meaningful, will we see the cultural change that we so believe is needed. So, let us all be activists in this leadership revolution – what are you waiting for?



This article was written by Katrina Marshall Dyrting and Susan Salzbrenner as a perspective on how we can navigate towards organisations that are more fit for humans and more fit for the future. Thanks to all who have contributed thoughts, conversations and critiques in the process of putting this piece together.

References and further resources:

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