



Leadership capabilities for the 21st century

Thriving in an age of disruption

The University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL)

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Contents

 Click the relevant topic
you wish to visit

Executive summary	4
Leadership capabilities for the 21st century	6
Introducing the framework	7
1. Understanding leadership: leadership that accepts responsibility for creating the conditions for collective movement towards a shared meaningful goal	8
2. Purpose and performance: leadership that drives strategic transformation and performance to realise the purpose of a better future	9
3. Place: leadership that puts place and context at the heart of sense-making and decision-taking	11
4. Connected: leadership that prioritises interconnection and interdependence in every way, from navigating complex systems to inter-personal dynamics	13
5. Collective: leadership that enables a purposeful and healthy interplay between collaboration and competition, and bridges strategically to bring about action and impact	15
6. Creative: leadership that generates the conditions for ideas and solutions to emerge, advance and fundamentally disrupt systems, building better futures	17
7. Courageous: leadership that knows what it stands for and does the hard things, rooted in active hope	19
Closing thoughts	21
Endnotes	22
Bibliography	28



Executive summary

Effective leadership in the 21st century means harnessing the current waves of ecological, geopolitical and technological disruption to drive positive transformation for societies and economies. In an increasingly interconnected yet polarised world, leaders must navigate cascading crises, eroding trust and shifting foundations for collective working, while leveraging human resilience and ingenuity. Rather than resisting change, the most impactful leaders establish purpose, vision and hope, and ride the waves of turbulence to build thriving, inclusive futures where people and the planet prosper.

This report updates the *Leadership Capabilities for the 21st Century Framework*, published in 2023 by the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL). It both incorporates feedback on its application in practice since publishing and explores the challenges and opportunities of leadership in the current context defined by disruption. The report summarises seven reflections on and updates to the original thinking and provides a revised relevant and practical framework and capabilities to influence leadership development and impact.

Leadership is not confined to a few individuals in positions of power but is about accepting responsibility to create the conditions for collective movement towards a shared meaningful goal. *Purpose* remains central, but must be activated through strategic *performance*, while *place* is more important than ever in navigating polarisation and power, and energising change.

Connected leadership is vital for navigating complexity, but also to show the connection with everyday concerns, while *collective* leadership recognises the need for a healthy dynamic between collaboration and competition, bridging strategically to realise impact. *Creative* leadership generates the conditions that lead not only to imagination but also to radical innovation and transformation, while *courageous* leadership takes many forms in a complex world.

The report draws on extensive research and feedback from global practitioners, aiming to close the gap between aspirational ideals and lived realities. Collectively as part of teams, organisations and movements, we believe that this kind of leadership will go a long way towards creating the conditions for critical earth systems and the economies, societies and organisations that rely on them to genuinely prosper and thrive at this time of disruption.





Executive summary

The *Leadership Capabilities for the 21st Century Framework (2025)* (Figure 1) has been revised to embrace the capabilities required in a turbulent age, where effective leadership uses the energy and opportunity of disruption to create more thriving economies, societies and futures. It provides a relevant and practical framework and capabilities to influence leadership development and impact.



Figure 1: The Leadership Capabilities Framework (2025)

Purpose and performance

Leadership that drives strategic transformation and **performance** to realise the **purpose** of a better future.

Principles

The core characteristics of leadership showing most potential for thriving in an age of disruption.



Connected

Leadership that prioritises interconnection and interdependence in every way, from navigating complex systems to inter-personal dynamics.



Collective

Leadership that enables a purposeful and healthy interplay between collaboration and competition, and bridges strategically to bring about action and impact.



Creative

Leadership that generates the conditions for ideas and solutions to emerge, advance and fundamentally disrupt systems, building better futures.



Courageous

Leadership that knows what it stands for and does the hard things, rooted in active hope.

Place

Leadership that puts **place** and context at the heart of sense-making and decision-taking.



Leadership capabilities for the 21st century

Thriving in an age of disruption

In a turbulent age, effective leadership uses the energy and opportunity of disruption to create more thriving economies, societies and futures.

The world is more interconnected than ever, and increasingly vulnerable to cascading shocks and crises.¹ At the same time, societies are increasingly fragmented – economically, geopolitically and ideologically² – with rising trends in socio-political polarisation, a breakdown in trust and cohesion,³ and growing conflict and violence.⁴ Many of the foundations underpinning social order and collective working in the 20th century are dramatically shifting, and there are huge debates about how economies should be organised in the future.⁵ Against this backdrop, there will be even greater disruption from either consequences of climate and nature degradation,⁶ or from the actions that societies take to respond to them,⁷ at the same time as artificial intelligence, machine learning and other technological breakthroughs are accelerating profound transformations that will disrupt and create new norms.⁸



“Responsible, effective leadership is never easy. But the challenges facing today’s leaders are of a different order than generations past. Crises no longer present themselves in isolation, but as part of an interconnected and hugely complex web.”

Effective leadership for the 21st century is the ability to thrive in this disruption to accelerate positive progress for citizens and economies. The fundamental instinct to survive and flourish is deeply embedded in the human condition.⁹ Humanity has shown a striking ability over millennia to adapt to diverse environments, recover from trauma and demonstrate astonishing resilience. Times of extreme disruption can be opportunities for transformation, and there are already reasons for active hope and optimism in the continued fall in child mortality, exponential growth in clean energy, and technological breakthroughs that can radically enhance human health and wellbeing.¹⁰

While the challenges are considerable, and many who have intentionally pursued a more just and resilient world over the last decades are feeling demoralised, leadership is more critical than ever. It is key to harnessing the very best of human ingenuity to ensure that technological, geopolitical, social, economic and ecological disruption is used for good rather than entrenching harms. Many will instinctively crave stability in a turbulent age – hunkering down, protecting, and resisting change. We argue however that effective leadership for

the 21st century proactively rides the waves of disruption, using the momentum to build organisations, communities, nations and economies where people and all of life genuinely prosper and thrive, now and for future generations.

In 2023, we published *Leadership Capabilities for the 21st Century: Creating a Thriving Future for All*, which set out a framework for developing the mindsets and practices for a sustainable future – one that protects and restores the natural and social systems on which wellbeing for everyone is based.



Since publishing, we have stress-tested the ideas with and gathered extensive feedback from several hundred business, government and finance professionals from around the world.¹¹ We have also revisited the ideas in light of recent societal, economic and political shifts, evaluating what still holds and what needs to change to reflect current contexts.

The feedback we received most often was that while many of the foundational ideas deeply resonated and can be seen in practice in some areas, the framework left people wondering what to do with the gap between the ideal and their everyday lived experience. For example, the reality of colleagues or associates who do not share the same values or vision; systems that consistently prioritise short-term gains over long-term value creation; lack of senior leadership ambition in a challenging political climate; increasingly divided societies and an inability to live well together.

As authors, we want to better support individuals and organisations to navigate current realities and challenges, be prepared for action, and develop their leadership wisdom and decision-making in a contested and complex space. In short, we want robust leadership principles and supporting capabilities that can be applied in real operating contexts.

In doing this, we have identified seven updates in our thinking about the leadership needed for an age of disruption. Some of these updates represent shifts to the original ideas; others reconfirm and strengthen our original approach. These updates have informed a revised framework, key definitions and set of capabilities, as summarised in Figure 2.



Introducing the framework



Figure 2: Leadership Capabilities for the 21st Century (2025)



1. Understanding leadership

Leadership that accepts responsibility for creating the conditions for collective movement towards a shared meaningful goal

THE UPDATE: It matters more than ever how we all think about and practise leadership. We are clearer that simple stories about leadership can kill our ability to see a more complex reality.¹² While it is natural to gravitate towards charisma and energy, especially in times of uncertainty, societies do not need to be dominated by a simple story of the 'hero saviour' that strips away shared accountability and agency.¹³ Indeed, there are many ways to be 'agents of leadership'. Everyone has a part to play in creating the conditions for collective movement towards a shared meaningful goal. This in fact encourages decisive and meaningful action rather than, for those who have accepted leadership responsibility, being shackled by the near-impossible expectations of the hero figure.¹⁴

THE CONTEXT:

Over history, societies have gravitated to the idea that the general public is incapable of self-governance and requires strong leaders, that there are special individuals (often men) who have innate qualities for leadership, and that the success or failure of the group is attributed primarily to the actions and decisions of this leader, rather than a collective effort.¹⁵ These ideas hold because they offer a simpler explanation of how leadership works than the complex reality of the interplay between people, events and their environment.¹⁶ They also hold because it suits the vested interests of those already in power (and the leadership industry that supports them) and because the idea of a 'saviour' figure is seductive in an overwhelming, disruptive and out-of-control world.¹⁷

There is a risk however that the more people buy into the need for the saviour human (and the temptation to do so is likely to increase with growing ecological fragility, social fragmentation and technological developments),¹⁸ the more it can undermine our capacity for collective action and accountability. The more we look to the stereotype of the strong authoritative leader, the more this shapes the reality of future leadership.¹⁹ For those contexts increasingly dominated by 'strong man' politics, especially those with autocratic tendencies, to what extent does 'following' become simply fear-based passivity or uncritical deference, accepting the narrative that there is not the need, opportunity or agency to act? Even when there are no overt autocratic tendencies, to what extent does the 'hero-isation' of those who have accepted leadership responsibility (and conversely their vilification when they 'fail') place an unattainable burden of expectation on their shoulders?²⁰



Research challenges the simple story of the 'hero leader' and confirms that there are many ways to be an 'agent of leadership':

"an individual or group who accepts responsibility for creating the conditions for collective movement towards a shared meaningful goal"²¹

'Accepting responsibility' emphasises that leadership owns and acts on the opportunity to contribute, accepts accountability for actions and decisions, and is answerable for its part in enabling collective success. 'Creating the conditions' highlights that leadership can be exercised through a wide range of activities, from motivation and inspiration, to direction and decision-taking, to sense-making and storytelling (supporting shared meaning and understanding), to coalition building and mobilisation, to shifting cultures, policies and processes to embed change. Leadership capabilities are not simply for the few who happen to be in existing positions of power. Leadership capabilities can, and need to, be developed in every context, at every level of an organisation, and in every part of society, to accept collective accountability for and build collective capacity for change.



2. Purpose and performance

Leadership that drives strategic transformation and performance to realise the purpose of a better future

THE UPDATE: Purpose remains at the heart of our framework but needs to be activated in practice and performance – bringing together the desire to contribute to a better future with the impetus to build something that works.²² This means that leadership is strategic – surfacing, identifying and making fundamental and difficult choices – in order to achieve vital, agreed goals in line with purpose. It also means working to change the rules of the game (such as market conditions, policy norms and success measures) so that strategic performance is aligned with the common good: thriving social and environmental systems on which society – and businesses – depend.



THE CONTEXT:

For several years, many leadership development programmes failed to ask the critical question: “who or what is your leadership in service of?”²³ Without this question, those in leadership are at risk of accepting norms about what ‘good’ looks like, whether profit, growth, or election wins without critical reflection on considerations of wider significance. Over the past decade, there has been a growing interest in identifying how individual leaders, organisations, businesses and indeed the economy can make a bigger meaningful contribution to wider society beyond simply self-interest.²⁴ Many of these important contributions seek to (re)orient individual and collective purpose to an ultimate ‘meta purpose’, such as long-term wellbeing for all people and planet,²⁵ sustainability,²⁶ thriving²⁷ and flourishing.²⁸ There are different cultural expressions of what a ‘better future’ entails²⁹ – an important issue we discuss in the next section – but we use the phrase here

to indicate a shared purpose of working for the common good in a way that does not undermine the foundational social and ecological systems that underpin that collective good in the future.³⁰

The central idea of purpose instinctively resonates with many in leadership. There is agreement that a strong sense of shared purpose can build community that can accelerate action towards a meaningful goal.³¹ An encouragingly high number of the boards and executive teams of major organisations that CISL engages with express that they want to be working in ways that are good for societies. Most have a deep desire to build towards something ‘better’. A vague sense of purpose however is not enough. It needs to lead to clear, agreed, vital outcomes being defined.³² Moreover, a strategy is needed that provides clarity on fundamental and difficult choices needed to achieve those vital outcomes – for example, where to position, when to act, where to focus innovation and investment.³³



Purpose and performance



Without vital goals and strategy, purpose quickly morphs into empty promises or naivety in the face of resistance and conflict.

For those for whom purpose has been little more than a marketing exercise with limited strategic commitment or resourcing, the reality of challenging markets, political resistance and negative public sentiment has been enough to prompt a retreat to 'business-as-usual'.³⁴ Where engagement with purpose has been more genuine and substantial, there is the risk that more creative energy has been poured into critiquing the current situation and imagining an ideal state, rather than developing strategies to make progress with the pragmatic work of building that future and getting things done. Of course, critical engagement and imagination are crucial but our original framework did not do enough to acknowledge and work with the human instinct to influence and then perform, especially in the context of business leadership.³⁵

In this new version, we acknowledge the complex interplay of motivations that shape human behaviour. Alongside a desire for meaning and purpose, the desire for influence highlights the importance of understanding and working with power, being aware of different sources of influence, and how therefore these might be used strategically for the common good.³⁶ The desire to perform taps effectively into the agency to act, with a focus then on (re)connecting performance with a longer-term understanding of success

and pursuit of the common good,³⁷ so that the best of human resourcefulness is used to enhance (rather than undermine) our ability to succeed in the future.

"In short, we need to design out the prevailing tension between profitability and sustainability. This can only be addressed by consistent, long-term government commitments and effective delivery plans that drive all businesses to act, creating thriving markets for climate-neutral, nature-positive and circular products, and punishing those who fail to act. Such ambition, with the policy and regulations needed, will only materialise if a critical mass of business leaders actively demand it."



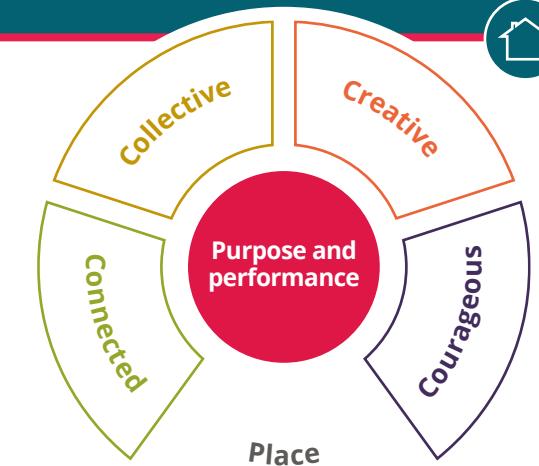
In a business context, this means better understanding how change happens in complex systems³⁸ and using every lever of power to shift the rules of the game – influencing peers, investors and policymakers to shift market conditions in favour of environmentally and socially beneficial solutions.³⁹ Such leadership is not just about any single individual's or organisation's sense of purpose, but is also about working proactively and strategically to drive market change that facilitates greater alignment between commercial performance and a 'better future'.

Leadership for purpose and performance also has a strong commitment to impact, using a wide range of data sources to evaluate if sufficient progress is being made and if not, adapting strategies in order to achieve vital outcomes.⁴⁰

Leadership that drives strategic transformation and performance to realise the purpose of a better future.

Purpose and performance capabilities

- Turn the desire for a meaningful 'reason to exist' into a pragmatic commitment to building and shaping the future through strategic action.
- Use existing power to influence the rules of the game, so that strategic performance is more closely aligned with environmentally and socially beneficial outcomes.
- Accept responsibility for impact, adapting strategies when needed based on a wide range of robust evidence.





3. Place

Leadership that puts place and context at the heart of sense-making and decision-taking

THE UPDATE: We have become more convinced than ever that understanding and working with the 'place' of leadership is crucial for effective leadership in the 21st century. When leadership loses connection with place, legitimacy and trust quickly erode. Paying attention to place means really seeing and grasping what 'is' in particular contexts and understanding the backstories that sit behind this, in order to better understand and navigate issues of social polarisation. It also means tapping into the collective hope and energy for change that exists in particular places. Place-based leadership moves from high-level commentary and abstract ideals, to driving real-world impact at local and regional levels.



THE CONTEXT:

While there are common core foundations to human flourishing,⁴¹ it is also the case that there are strongly polarised views on what it means to thrive and prosper – especially around who is included in the sphere of care and concern.⁴² Many people find the visions of a thriving world being advocated by others to be dystopian, because they emerge from a very different 'place'. More than that though, many of the 'noble lies' of our time⁴³ – deliberate myths to create social stability and harmony such as meritocracy, equality of opportunity, universal human rights, the benevolent state and trickle-down economics – are simply not available to everyone because of their 'place' in the world – geographic, social, economic, technological and/or cultural.⁴⁴ What is deemed to be 'good' often represents the interests of the powerful who make decisions and conceive of policies at a distance with little regard for local experience and community realities.



The result is a sense of alienation, growing populism and outrage, and undermined delivery of national objectives, particularly among the 'places that don't matter' to those in power.⁴⁵

The reason for this backlash however is that place *does* matter to those who live there.⁴⁶ In fact, place is crucial in how people make sense of the world. It provides a sense of shared meaning, identity and attachment,⁴⁷ as well as a sense of pride,⁴⁸ which if effectively mobilised, can lead to ambition, action and 'getting involved'.⁴⁹ Re-engaging with place through devolved, accountable and often citizen-led governance and decision-making can begin to rebuild a sense of connection, engagement and movement.⁵⁰

Place-based leadership capabilities begin with listening,⁵¹ tuning in beyond the echo chambers (often reinforced by social media) to the realities of different places and perspectives.



Place



This might involve techniques to 'walk in the shoes of others' in order to stretch understanding of different perspectives and experiences.⁵² Understanding the 'backstories' – the past injustices, the current situation, and fears for the future that are particular to different contexts – is a critical skill in navigating what has become termed an 'age of outrage',⁵³ and goes some way to rebuilding trust in institutions and leadership. When we do not take history into account, we risk reinforcing historic power imbalances and injustices.⁵⁴

Place-based leadership also values local insights and knowledge, builds capacity for co-creation and co-governance, and provides insights into how to reconnect with public purpose.⁵⁵ This might mean

harnessing community knowledge to complement big data and satellite imagery, for example in flood management,⁵⁶ or incorporating the multiple ways in which communities 'value' non-human nature into policy and decision-making.⁵⁷ It may involve building trust and a sense of belonging in specific urban settings, gathering local communities to bond with each other and with local natural systems through nature-based solutions.⁵⁸ In short, place offers a meaningful lens through which people can make sense of the idea of systemic change,⁵⁹ and can lead to practices that deal more effectively at local levels with thorny issues such as social justice, climate change, nature regeneration, alternative energy and economic inequality, in ways that are contextually appropriate.⁶⁰



Leadership that puts place and context at the heart of sense-making and decision-taking.

Place capabilities

- Tune in to what 'is' in different contexts and places, and work with that reality as its starting point.
- Bring the 'human' back into leadership strategies, seeking to understand past injustices, current realities, fears for the future and the desire to belong.
- Move from abstract ideals to harnessing people's sense of identity, knowledge and collective energy for change in specific places and sectors.

With purpose, performance and place front of mind, we now turn to the four principles in the original framework that reflect the characteristics of leadership most likely to work for a sustainable future: connected, collective, creative and courageous.

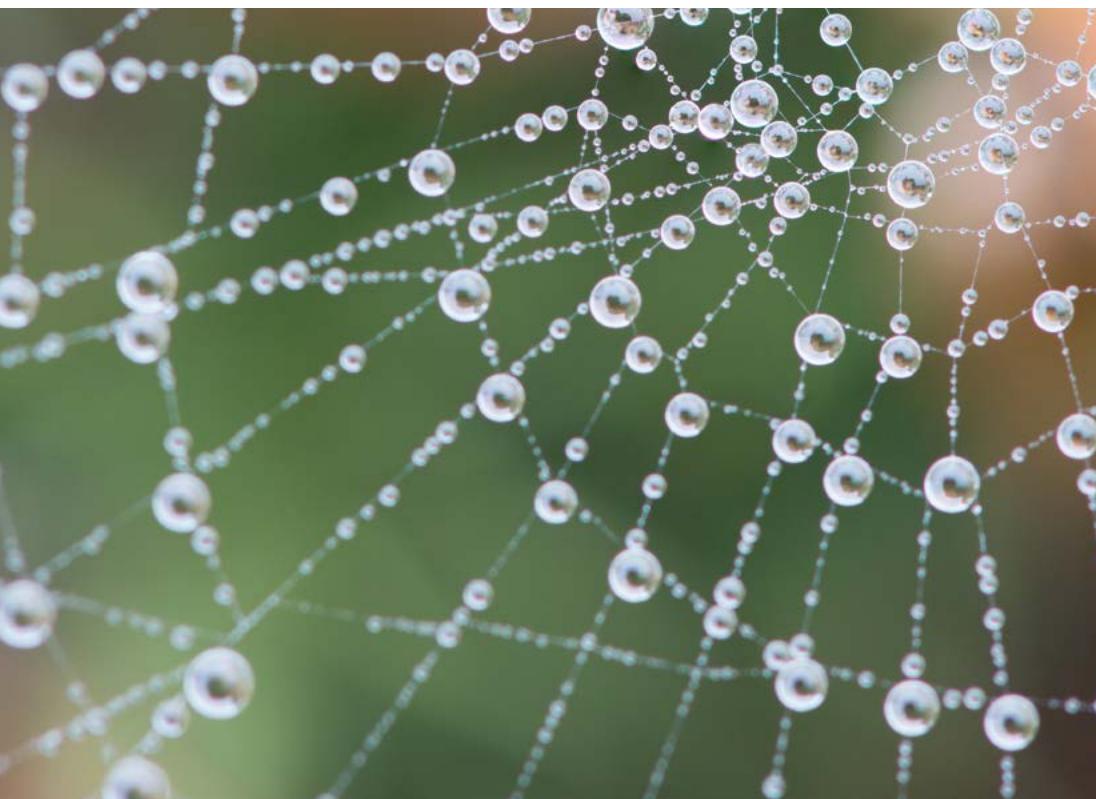
Much of our original thinking has proved enduring, but feedback has prompted us to consider how these characteristics might inform the process of leadership decision-making, as leadership is usually exercised through difficult choices and consideration of trade-offs in complex conditions.



4. Connected

Leadership that prioritises interconnection and interdependence in every way, from navigating complex systems to inter-personal dynamics

THE UPDATE: We have further deepened our conviction about the importance of navigating complex and interdependent systems through connected leadership. It is critical for organisational survival and leadership effectiveness in a turbulent world. Such leadership accepts the reality of complexity as 'normal' rather than something to be resisted, develops capabilities for systemic analysis and foresight, and is 'systems intelligent' about synergies and trade-offs. We emphasise more strongly however that connected leadership also works hard to connect meaningfully with everyday concerns, and invests in quality relationships and interconnections at every level.



THE CONTEXT:

Many of our current leadership challenges are caused by living the 'fantasy of separation' in a world that is fundamentally interconnected.⁶¹ Critical decisions have failed to recognise the profound interdependencies that exist between people, and between society, nature and the economy, and have therefore not built these relationships into critical decision-making.⁶² Leadership has often failed to reckon with the reality of complex living systems, under-estimating the non-linear nature of systems change and its sometimes sudden and disproportionate impact,⁶³ and experiencing the frustration of unintended consequences and unpredictable 'side-effects' of siloed thinking.⁶⁴ Examples might include the removal of natural habitats like mangrove forests to make way for commercial aquaculture, resulting in greater vulnerability to storm surges, coastal erosion and flooding, and therefore huge economic

and social costs;⁶⁵ or intensive farming practices for economic gains that have undermined soil quality and the number of pollinators, compromising future yields and economic returns.⁶⁶

Since our original report, several publications on the theme of regeneration and its application to business have emerged.⁶⁷ These emphasise the need to consider 'whole system health' across environment, society and economy,⁶⁸ and also challenge false binaries between – for example – environmental protection and economic growth, through exploring how investing in ecological and social health can support economic prosperity and long-term business resilience, especially in light of multiple competing demands for finite resources.⁶⁹ Contributions from the field of complexity science provide insight into navigating complexity without seeking to artificially reduce or compartmentalise.⁷⁰



Connected

This includes awareness of how systems tend to behave, including carrying capacities, tipping points and 'points of no return'.⁷¹

Connected leadership therefore develops capabilities in systemic analysis and foresight – evaluating strategies against multiple possible futures.⁷² It engages in thoughtful, 'systems-intelligent' approaches to identifying and navigating potential trade-offs and synergies, taking into account different time frames and contexts,⁷³ and embraces rapid testing and learning.⁷⁴ For example, an organisational board embracing a nature-positive strategy would assess critical impacts and dependencies on nature across the value chain, identify potential trade-offs and synergies between ecological restoration, operational efficiency and long-term resilience over different time horizons, and use this to inform strategic decisions, being willing to adapt and learn as evidence accumulated.⁷⁵

It is increasingly apparent that these capabilities are not just 'nice to have'; they are indispensable leadership skills. Such leadership lets go of the instinct to control and instead looks for more effective strategies for navigating and thriving in complexity. One such response is to develop individuals and teams that are themselves increasingly 'sophisticated',⁷⁶ 'mature'⁷⁷ or 'complex' (in the best sense of the word)⁷⁸ – multi-faceted, diverse, broad, and inter-dependent in terms of their thinking and judgement. Just as

complexity in living systems builds resilience to external shocks,⁷⁹ so too does connected and complex leadership enhance the likelihood of making sound choices.

At the same time, connected leadership is the ability to connect with a range of people and communities in ways that resonate and are credible. Advanced systemic thinking might be a necessary leadership capability, but if it leads to confusion, paralysis and alienation from everyday realities and concern, it will remain a technical skill with limited leadership impact. Too little has been done for instance to connect trends in climate, nature and inequality with pressing concerns around national security, geopolitical stability, economic resilience, movement of people, community cohesion, organisational survival and quality of life, when in fact these interconnections are fundamental.⁸⁰

Connected leadership will therefore craft compelling narratives that draw out the strong threads between environmental, social and economic issues in ways that make sense for people.⁸¹ These are not simple stories, but they are stories that meet people where they 'are' (not where we want them to be or think they ought to be), connect with their concerns and lived experiences, and then make sense of these concerns in ways that bridge to more interconnected ways of thinking and acting. For example, this might include connecting energy independence through renewables

with national security and economic resilience,⁸² or framing retrofit programmes as a way of tackling fuel poverty,⁸³ or promoting agroecology initiatives as a way of improving the yields, income and resilience of smallholder farmers.⁸⁴

In this task of crafting narratives that connect, there remains an important place for the empathy talked about in the original report as a critical leadership capability for strengthening insight and understanding, demonstrating relevance and credibility, building confidence and trust, and ultimately

enabling shared action.⁸⁵ Indeed, in a polarised and fragmented world, where divisions over politics, values and truth seem more evident than ever, healthy relationships serve as the connective tissue that holds society together, humanising the 'other' and creating space for understanding and trust to grow.⁸⁶

Connected leadership prioritises interconnection and interdependence in every way, from navigating complex systems to inter-personal dynamics.



Connected capabilities

- Normalise complexity and engage in 'systems intelligent' approaches to analysis, foresight, surfacing and navigating trade-offs, and decision-making.
- Craft compelling narratives that join up trends around the environment, society and economy with real-life everyday concerns.
- Develop quality relationships by building empathy, trust and shared understanding.

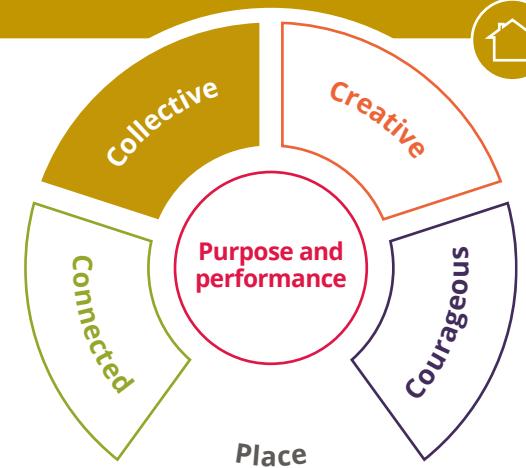




5. Collective

Leadership that enables a purposeful and healthy interplay between collaboration and competition, and bridges strategically to bring about action and impact

THE UPDATE: We have recast collaborative leadership as *collective* leadership in order to more fully reflect the different dynamics that shape collective progress. What matters – especially for business leadership – is the dynamic interplay between collaboration and competition that can energise collective effort towards a meaningful goal. Such a healthy dynamic often depends on a level of co-ordination and governance that does not over-orchestrate or concentrate power in any single individual, organisation or group, but results in distributed agency and responsibility.



THE CONTEXT:

It is hard to imagine making progress on critical global challenges or indeed being successful in a business or organisational context, without some measure of collaboration. The ability to work effectively with a range of stakeholders across functional, organisational, sectoral, geographic and/or cultural boundaries is clearly a key skill for the 21st century.⁸⁷ Collective working is not all collaborative however – markets are one key structure that can drive aligned efforts towards a common goal across a range of otherwise disconnected actors through competitive dynamics.

In natural ecosystems, there is a dynamic and healthy interplay between competition and co-operation that leads to ecological resilience and thriving.⁸⁸ In a similar way, both competition and co-operation are an integral part of how organisations, economies and societies function, and leadership will be

shaped by a dynamic and healthy interplay between the two.⁸⁹ Co-operation levels the playing field, pools resources and expertise, defines shared purpose and ambition, and shapes standards that define 'success'.⁹⁰ The original roots of the word 'competition' mean to 'strive with', rather than to work against.⁹¹ For business, a healthy interplay between co-operation and competition that 'strives with' would involve collaborating on pre-competitive issues such as policy frameworks or critical infrastructure to drive market transformation, so that companies acting on sustainability thrive in those markets at the expense of those who neglect it.⁹² For example, the remarkable growth of renewables required collective action by a broad coalition of actors working towards a shared goal, from policymakers to business, investors, researchers and communities.⁹³ It also was the result of competition to meet that goal, with winners and losers – between both private businesses and national economies.



Collective

"For businesses, knowing where to compete and where to collaborate – with peers, value chains and policymakers – will be critical. Policymakers face the same challenge: identifying where markets function well and where intervention is needed to accelerate sustainability."



Where co-operation is needed, we maintain that the ability to collaborate effectively is a critical leadership capability. This means fewer 'talking shops' which have little impact in practical terms, and more purposeful alliances that orchestrate different actors strategically to be accountable for an impact that could not be achieved individually.

In such alliances, it remains important to engage, have credibility with, and build trust with a wide range of people beyond the usual echo chamber. Collective leadership is skilled at understanding how power operates, including both how to work well within the current system and leverage existing power dynamics, and where to confront existing concentrations of power for the collective good.⁹⁴ It recognises the fragility of over-dependence on a few 'hero' individuals, organisations or nations, and looks to build collective capacity and confidence.

This involves redistributing power and agency through multiple relationships and connections, while providing sufficient co-ordination and governance to enable the collective to operate with accountability. For example, global expansion of renewable energy raises serious concerns about how the transition to a green economy might replicate historical patterns of exploitation with the extraction of critical minerals like lithium, cobalt and rare earth elements.⁹⁵ Here, future strategic alliances will likely need to have a stronger focus on ensuring

the benefits of the energy transition are equitably shared, emphasising local agency, decentralised solutions, South-South investment and innovation, and self-sufficiency rather than dependency on Global North technologies and financing.⁹⁶



Collective leadership enables a purposeful and healthy interplay between collaboration and competition, and bridges strategically to bring about action and impact.



Collective capabilities

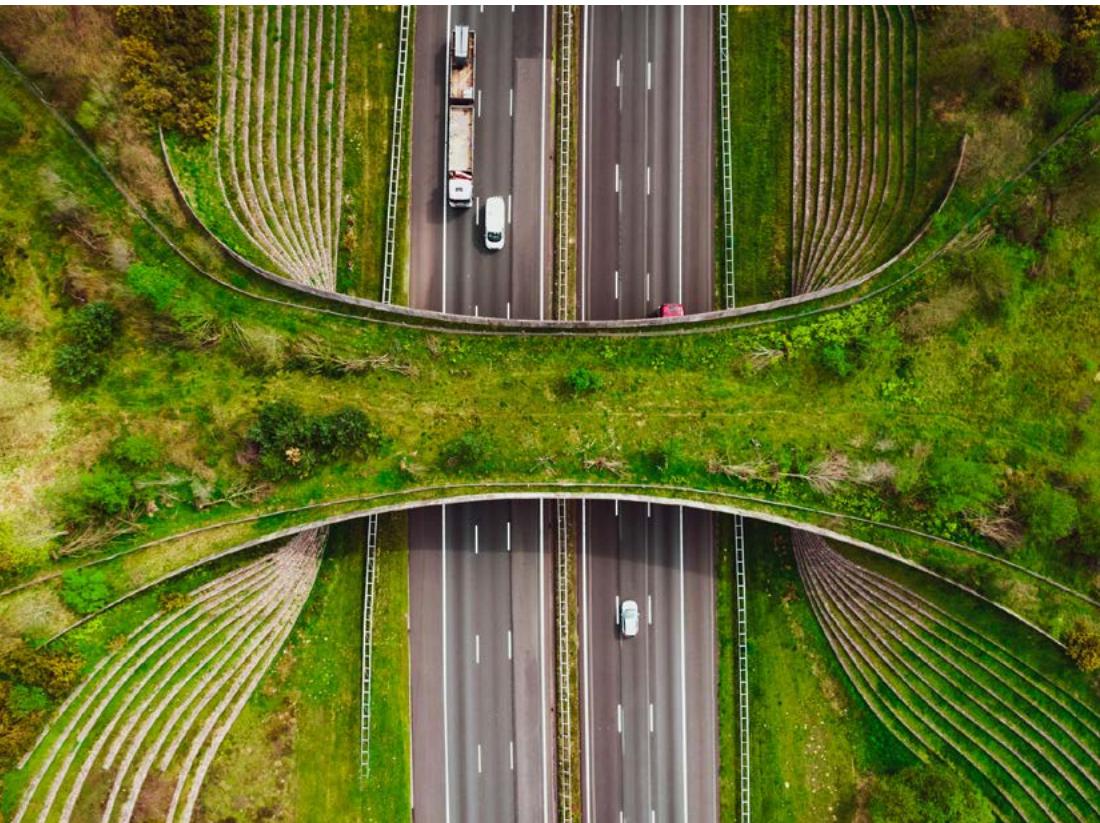
- Mobilise the capabilities required for progress by working across organisational and sector boundaries beyond the usual echo chambers, combining complementary expertise and competitive strengths.
- Build focused alliances with clear strategy, objectives, roles and accountability that accelerate progress on issues where working alone is slower or less effective.
- Strengthen the system by placing authority and responsibility where it can drive the greatest impact, creating governance that supports both co-ordinated action and healthy competitive dynamics.



6. Creative

Leadership that generates the conditions for ideas and solutions to emerge, advance and fundamentally disrupt systems, building better futures

THE UPDATE: Creative leadership requires the capability to both dream *and* build.⁹⁷ In the original report, we focused more on imagination, curiosity and the emergence of possibility, than on the conditions that enable the actual creation and manifestation of stronger, healthier, cleaner, greener and fairer industries, markets, economies and societies. We also want to recognise more clearly the scale of innovation and transformation needed to respond to current crises, and therefore the need for conditions that enable radical, 'moonshot' ideas to emerge and disrupt.



THE CONTEXT:

To create means to bring something into existence. The urge to imagine, shape, experiment and build is part of the universal human condition. Yet there are a number of forces that stifle creative energy, undermining its ability to innovate, transform and give birth to something new. Creative leadership is about generating the conditions for imagination to give rise to experimentation, innovation and ultimately powerful system-wide influence. It is a critical capability if we are to be part of the reinvention of industries, institutions, markets, economies and societies to be stronger, healthier, cleaner, greener and fairer.

Imagination is a core part of creativity: the ability to see and feel a different future.⁹⁸ Yet there must also be the capacity to activate these imagined possibilities through practical pathways, strategies and interventions.⁹⁹ Creative leadership is the capacity to both imagine *and* build. Insights from research are illuminating here, especially in understanding how change happens in complex systems. Innovation tends to emerge rather than being prescribed from the top down.¹⁰⁰ Systems tend to change when new technologies, infrastructure and social systems are built before the dismantling of old ones, and these different stages of transition can be supported by different policies.¹⁰¹



Creative

It is also essential to be aware of forces constraining and stifling creativity. In some contexts, this will be because the conditions for imagination have been shut down or narrowed through, for example, lack of cognitive diversity and 'group think'.¹⁰² In other contexts, fear of conflict or fear of failure can become institutionalised leading to inertia. This might be seen in a workplace culture that strongly discourages taking inter-personal risks such as challenging ideas or admitting mistakes,¹⁰³ or scant

funding available to explore disruptive ideas because of little appetite for higher risk-higher return opportunities.¹⁰⁴

In contrast, creative leadership creates the conditions for innovation and radical disruption. It is seen in its distinctive attitude towards difference, actively bringing in 'outsiders' with different backgrounds and worldviews as 'creative triggers' to challenge thinking.¹⁰⁵ It is seen in its approach to conflict and tension,

supporting radical candour in order to expand thinking and generate new approaches that move beyond polarisation and/or 'artificial harmony'.¹⁰⁶ It is seen in cultures that reward creativity and not simply compliance.¹⁰⁷ It is seen in providing the time, resource and risk-appetite for imagination and experimentation so that 'moonshot' ideas might emerge and have the potential to disrupt. It is seen in the provision of intentional structures that provide both challenge and support to

make the bridge from experimentation into transformation, supporting ongoing learning and development.¹⁰⁸



Creative leadership generates the conditions for ideas and solutions to emerge, advance and fundamentally disrupt systems, building better futures.



Creative capabilities

- Create the right conditions for people to imagine different possibilities and apply creative energy to the practical task of building these futures.
- Use challenge and disagreement constructively to stress-test assumptions, broaden creative options and strengthen solutions.
- Support purposeful experimentation, risk-taking and innovation, with an ultimate ambition of system-wide influence.



7. Courageous

Leadership that knows what it stands for and does the hard things, rooted in active hope

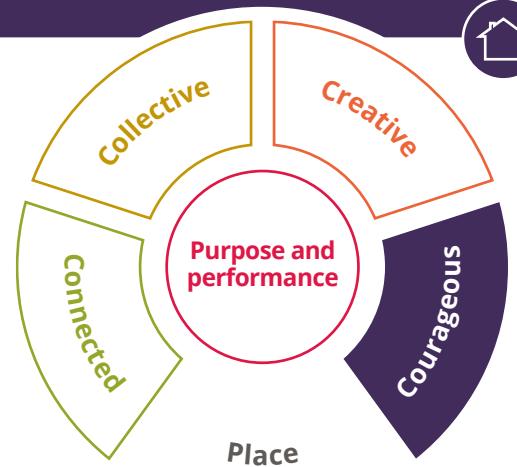
THE UPDATE: Courageous leadership takes many forms in a complex world. We see more clearly that courage can be just as evident in adaptability, confident humility and care, as in grit, perseverance and resistance. In its best form, it is other-oriented and is also closely tied to a sense of active hope. Courage is the disciplined moral commitment not to give in to despair but to work for a better future.



THE CONTEXT:

There is a strong thread of courage through the whole of this leadership framework. For example, it takes courage to work for collective responsibility in leadership rather than defaulting to simple stories about hero leaders. Courage flows from a strong sense of purpose and is necessary for making difficult strategic choices. It takes courage to listen to and acknowledge backstories that shape leadership expectations in different places. Courage is needed to move from the 'safe illusion' of control and resistance, to ride the waves of disruption and complexity. It takes courage to step out of echo chambers, connect with different 'tribes', and address disagreement constructively rather than hiding behind an artificial sense of harmony. Alongside confidence, courage sits behind the impetus to create, especially the willingness to experiment, take risks and influence change.

We remain convinced that courage is often strongly related to values and a concern for the 'other',¹⁰⁹ although in complex



systems it is not always clear what is 'right'. Courageous leadership therefore sometimes involves surfacing ethical dilemmas and owning the consequences of challenging decisions. We continue to argue that courageous leadership is characterised by grit and perseverance, but that it also involves self-awareness and a willingness to adapt if needed.

This means that courage will take different forms. While there is a type of courage that is uncompromising, doubles down in the face of opposition and refuses to flex or adapt,¹¹⁰ courageous leadership in other settings might look quite different. For instance, it might involve listening carefully to a wide range of evidence and changing direction when that evidence suggests a strategy is not working.¹¹¹ It might require sharing something challenging with a community or team that risks conflict or loss of support. It might involve acting in ways that are counter-cultural, challenging ingrained habits and norms, or caring about a group or population that tends to be overlooked, for example, future generations.



Courageous



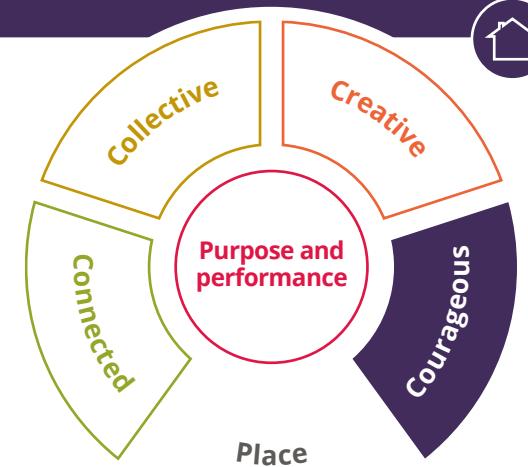
At a personal level, courageous leadership involves the daily work of difficult conversations with colleagues and neighbours to gently challenge ingrained beliefs or practices,¹¹² or the enormous courage it takes to acknowledge moral failings and limitations.

Research on character helps in understanding courageous leadership, especially insight into how different aspects of character help inform leadership judgement.¹¹³ For instance, it is possible to over-develop one dimension

of character so that it becomes a vice or a weakness. For courage to be present in its most virtuous form (tenacious, determined, resilient and confident), it must be supported by other dimensions of character such as temperance (patience, calm, self-control and prudence) when required.¹¹⁴ In that way, courage is characterised by confident humility rather than bravado, recklessness, obstinacy and/or ego.¹¹⁵

Finally, we return to the theme of hope – recently shown to be the most desired

leadership attribute across 52 countries¹¹⁶ – and argue that it takes courage to hope, especially when despair is easier. More specifically, courageous leadership has the right kind of hope – not a passive, wishful thinking that everything will turn out for the best, but an ‘active hope’ that feels responsible for, works for and drives social change.¹¹⁷ Optimism is often the radical, hard and brave choice.¹¹⁸ Societies without much hope for their future do not see a need to build for it,¹¹⁹ which can lead to passivity and resistance to change. Courageous



leadership is shaped by a hope that is open to a future outcome and progress; accepts the vulnerability of potential setbacks and failure; sees possibilities even as other options are collapsing; and moves forward in spite of fear.



Courageous leadership knows what it stands for and does the hard things, rooted in active hope.



Courageous capabilities

- Be willing to say and do what is unpopular for the sake of a greater good.
- Develop self-awareness, reflect honestly, and be open to acknowledging the need for change or help if evidence requires it.
- Withstand challenge, persevere and grow in the face of setback and opposition through a purpose and values-based confidence and active hope.



Closing thoughts

These seven updates all point towards the capabilities that we believe will support better leadership decision-making and practice in an age of disruption.

Building leadership capacity that:

- accepts responsibility for creating the conditions for collective movement towards a shared meaningful goal
- drives strategic transformation and performance to realise the purpose of a better future
- puts place and context at the heart of sense-making and decision-taking
- prioritises interconnection and interdependence in every way, from navigating complex systems to inter-personal dynamics
- enables a purposeful and healthy interplay between collaboration and competition, and bridges strategically to bring about action and impact
- generates the conditions for ideas and solutions to emerge, advance and fundamentally disrupt systems, building better futures
- knows what it stands for and does the hard things, rooted in active hope.

No single 'hero' individual or organisation will ever embody all these capabilities. Rather, collectively as part of teams, organisations and movements, we believe that this kind of leadership will go a long way to creating the conditions for critical earth systems and the economies, societies and organisations that rely on them to genuinely prosper and thrive at this time of disruption.





Endnotes

¹ Scheffer et al. note that "the same prerequisites that allow recovery from local damage may set a system up for large-scale collapse": Marten Scheffer et al., "Anticipating Critical Transitions," *Science* 338 (2012): 345, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1225244>. See also: Michael Lawrence et al., "Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement," *Global Sustainability* 7:e6 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2024.1>; Thomas Homer-Dixon et al., "Synchronous Failure: The Emerging Causal Architecture of Global Crisis," *Ecology and Society* 20, no. 3 (2015), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26270255>; Dirk Helbing, "Globally networked risks and how to respond," *Nature* 497 (2013): 51–59, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature12047>.

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⁶ Climate tipping points are a source of growing scientific, policy and public concern: David I. Armstrong et al., "Exceeding 1.5°C global warming could trigger multiple climate tipping points," *Science* 377, no. 6611 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abn7950>; Jeff Tollefson, "Earth breaches 1.5 °C climate limit for the first time: what does it mean?" *Nature*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00010-9>; while six of nine 'planetary boundaries' are now transgressed, increasing the risk of large-scale abrupt or irreversible environmental changes: Katherine Richardson et al., "Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries," *Science Advances* 9, no. 37 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458>. In a world already characterised by high geopolitical and social instability, climate and nature trajectories are predicted to trigger further violent conflict in specific contexts as fear, insecurity, scarcity of resources, increased migration, reduced social welfare and paralysed public institutions take hold: Peter F. Nardulli et al., "Climate change and civil unrest: the impact of rapid-onset disasters," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 2 (2015): 310–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713503809>; Andrew M. Linke et al., "Drought, Local Institutional Contexts, and Support for Violence in Kenya," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (2017): 1544–1578, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002717698018>; Xiaolan Xie et al., "The impacts of climate change on violent conflict risk: a review of causal pathways," *Environmental Research Communications* 6, no. 11 (2024): 112002, <https://doi.org/10.1088/2515-7620/ad8a21>.

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¹⁵ These are key arguments set out by Haslam et al. in their paper on 'zombie leadership', a strong residual commitment to an older set of ideas about leadership which have been repeatedly debunked but which nevertheless resolutely refuse to die: S. Alexander Haslam et al., "Zombie leadership: Dead ideas that still walk among us," *The Leadership Quarterly* 35, no. 3: (2024): 101770, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lequa.2023.101770>.

¹⁶ Joseph Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (Praeger, 1991), <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Leadership-Twenty-First-Century-Joseph-Rost/dp/027594610X>.

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Endnotes

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³⁹ See the work of the Changing Markets Foundation, for instance: <https://changingmarkets.org/>.

⁴⁰ CISL's work on the Future of Boards explored how moving beyond compliance and box ticking to a more strategic use of sustainability data combined with broader sustainability insights, enables boards to develop integrated strategies that drive long-term sustainable value for stakeholders, society and the environment: University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), *The Future of Boards: The Rise and Influence of Investor Stewardship* (Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, 2025), <https://www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/news-and-resources/publications/future-boards-phase-2>.

⁴¹ The Global Flourishing Goals for instance identify five domains of human flourishing: life satisfaction, holistic health, fulfilling relationships, meaning and purpose, and contributing to the flourishing of all life forms: Brandy Keating, "The Global Flourishing Goals," in *Leadership for Flourishing*, ed. James L. Ritchie-Dunham, Katy E. Granville-Chapman, and Matthew T. Lee (Oxford Academic, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197766101.003.0024>.

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⁴⁸ Jack Shaw et al., *Townscape: Pride in Place* (Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2022), <https://bennettschool.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Pride-in-Place-Report.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Place-Introduction-Short-Introductions-Geography/dp/0470655623>.

⁵⁰ In his book *Citizens*, Alexander talks about the importance of seeing ourselves as citizens – people who actively shape the world around us, cultivate meaningful connections with their community and institutions, who can imagine a different and better life, who take responsibility and who encourage others to do the same: Jon Alexander, *Citizens: Why the Key to Fixing Everything is All of Us* (Canbury Press, 2023), <https://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1912454882?tag=siscuk-21>.

⁵¹ Kline describes listening as a 'radical act': Nancy Kline, *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind* (Cassell, 2002), <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Time-Think-Listening-Ignite-Human/dp/0706377451>.

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⁵³ Ramanna speaks of the importance of listening to the 'scripts' of others in navigating outrage and polarisation: Ramanna, *The Age of Outrage*.

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Endnotes

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⁵⁸ The CLEVER Cities Project across Europe, and now expanding to China and Latin America, has steered a radical shift in co-creative urban development strategies, fostering a novel approach to urban transformation rooted in nature-based interventions, inclusive collaboration, multi-disciplinary learning and robust exchanges: <https://clevercities.eu/>.

⁵⁹ As Andersson argues, "[a]lthough our globalised economy...has diminished our potential to be connected to place, we humans can still best experience intimacy, connection, consideration and caring for our natural surroundings from a perspective of place": Jenny Andersson, "Why Place?" LinkedIn, January 8, 2024, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-place-jenny-andersson-qxdde/>.

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⁶¹ This quote comes from Erik Fernholm, co-founder of the Inner Development Goals (<https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>), speaking at the inaugural Inner Development Goals Summit in Stockholm in 2022.

⁶² In contrast, 'regenerative' thinking is premised on the importance of interdependency, seeing the world as "built around reciprocal and co-evolutionary relationships, where humans, other living beings and ecosystems rely on one another for health, and shape (and are shaped by) their connections with one another": Josie Warden, "Regenerative Futures: From sustaining to thriving together," RSA, October 6, 2021, <https://www.thersa.org/reports/regenerative-futures-from-sustaining-to-thriving-together/>.

⁶³ In discussing the non-linear nature of change, Nobel Laureate Prigogine and Stengers observe that "most of reality, instead of being orderly, stable, and equilibrial, is seething and bubbling with change, disorder, and process": Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of chaos: Man's new dialogue with nature* (Verso Books, 2018), xv, https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/products/390-order-out-of-chaos?srsltid=AfmBOoqpB5QYx7m7p-raEdckD73pP0j-4SMAGBi1k6WITb_M5xF53w.

⁶⁴ Systems thinker Sterman argues that "[w]e frequently talk about side effects as if they were a feature of reality. Not so. In reality there are no side effects, there are just effects. Side effects are not a feature of reality but a sign that our understanding of the system is narrow and flawed": John Sterman, *Business Dynamics: Systems Thinking and Modeling for a Complex World* (Irwin Professional/McGraw-Hill, 2000), 11, <https://www.mheducation.co.uk/business-dynamics-systems-thinking-and-modeling-for-a-complex-world-intl-ed-9780071179898-emea>.

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⁶⁸ Gibbons describes the aim for "thriving living systems in which whole-system health and wellbeing increase continually": Leah V. Gibbons, "Regenerative—The New Sustainable?" *Sustainability* 12, no. 13 (2020): 5483, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12135483>.

⁶⁹ Regenerative approaches shift the focus from minimising harm to actively restoring and improving the natural systems that provide these resources. Hutchins and Storm argue that regenerative, life-affirming approaches to business result in more resilient, innovative, purposeful, agile organisations: Giles Hutchins and Laura Storm, *Regenerative Leadership: The DNA of life-affirming 21st century organizations* (Wordsworth Publishing, 2019), <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Regenerative-Leadership-life-affirming-century-organizations/dp/1783241195>.

⁷⁰ Uhl-Bien et al. argue that a complexity paradigm is fitting for the 'knowledge era', in which "the rapid production of knowledge and innovation is critical to organizational survival": Mary Uhl-Bien et al., "Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era," *The Leadership Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2007): 299, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lequa.2007.04.002>.

⁷¹ Alice Kalro et al., *Executive Summary: Leading through the polycollapse: A guide to Systemic Foresight for VUCA native strategy* (arkH3, 2025), <https://www.arkh3.com/resources/leading-through-the-polycollapse-a-guide-to-systemic-foresight-for-vuca-native-strategy>.

⁷² Systemic foresight is a core part of becoming 'VUCA native', which Kalro et al. (*Leading through the polycollapse*) describe as "envisioning and anticipating possible and probable futures in reliance on a highly developed and up to date understanding of the broader planetary context and its interactions with and impacts on the economic and broader societal contexts" and then defining "proportional, systemic action".

⁷³ When exploring the nature of decision-making, critical attention needs to be given to how 'trade-offs' are identified, understood and navigated. Even within the Sustainable Development Goals, there are interactions between the goals that are potentially co-beneficial and those that might involve trade-offs, but crucially these interactions are dependent on geographical context, time horizon and institutional/governance context: Måns Nilsson et al., "Mapping interactions between the sustainable development goals: lessons learned and ways forward," *Sustainability Science* 13 (2018): 1489–1503, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0604-z>. Contributions from 'paradox theory' replace the choice with the insight that these demands are often interrelated in a persistent relationship over time (see Raphael Boemelburg et al., "How paradoxical leaders guide their followers to embrace paradox: Cognitive and behavioral mechanisms of paradox mindset development," *Long Range Planning* 56, no. 4 (2023): 102319, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2023.102319>). Various multi-criteria decision analysis tools support decision-making. In the field of sustainability assessment, Morrison-Saunders and Pope argue for early consideration of trade-offs, demarcation of acceptable from unacceptable impacts, and the possibility of offsets in place, time or kind: Angus Morrison-Saunders and Jenny Pope, "Conceptualising and managing trade-offs in sustainability assessment," *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 38 (2013): 54–63, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2012.06.003>. In current day board decision-making, Bank Jorgensen (2025) emphasises the need to translate trends into strategic choices as a way of analysing trade-offs: Helle Bank Jorgensen, "Sustainability in the boardroom: Transforming business decision-making," Thomson Reuters, July 21, 2025, <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/sustainability/transforming-business-decision-making/>.

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Endnotes

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⁷⁷ Leadership maturity is an adult development theory promoted by Julia Kukard, where higher stages of maturity embrace thinking is multi-perspectival and broad. See: "Resources," Dr Julia Kukard, accessed November 20, 2025, <https://www.jukard.com/resources>.

⁷⁸ Ryan Gottfredson and Bret Crane, "Navigating complex environments requires complex leaders," *Business Horizons* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2025.06.002>.

⁷⁹ See for example: Benjamin Scharte, 'The need for general adaptive capacity—Discussing resilience with complex adaptive systems theory,' *Risk Analysis* 45, no. 6 (2025): 1443–1452, <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.17676>.

⁸⁰ Hooper argues that "we must tell stories that root systemic change in personal connection — that make people proud of their landscapes, communities and role in protecting them": Lindsay Hooper, "Changing the future of nature: 5 principles for shifting narratives," World Economic Forum, June 16, 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/06/changing-the-future-of-nature-5-principles-for-shifting-narratives/>.

⁸¹ In an open letter to the United Nations from representatives of the cultural sector in the UK for COP30, actors, authors and public figures advocate using the emotional and intellectual power of storytelling and the arts by bringing them together with the sciences, so that people truly connect with the need for wide-ranging societal change: John Holmes, "Use storytelling to tackle 'failure of imagination' behind climate inaction, say 200 experts," University of Birmingham, November 13, 2025, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2025/use-storytelling-to-tackle-failure-of-imagination-behind-climate-inaction-say-200-experts>.

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⁹¹ Antonacopoulou et al., "Competing for Flourishing."

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Endnotes

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¹⁰³ Edmondson describes this as a lack of "psychological safety": Amy Edmondson, "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1999): 350–383, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2666999>.

¹⁰⁴ Director of the Whittle Laboratory at the University of Cambridge, Miller argues that this dynamic is holding back radical innovation in the aerospace industry: Rob Miller, "Why can't Britain's leading aerospace lab raise more money?" *The Economist*, October 6, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2025/10/06/why-cant-britains-leading-aerospace-lab-raise-more-money?>.

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¹⁰⁸ This approach to learning and the bridge from experimentation to transformation is explored in the context of the built environment by Evans et al.: James Evans et al., "How Cities Learn: From Experimentation to Transformation," *Urban Planning* 6, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v6i1.3545>.

¹⁰⁹ For Aristotle, the highest form of courage was facing the greatest fear for the most selfless reason: Matthew Beard, "Courage isn't about facing our fears, it's about facing ourselves," The Ethics Centre, August 22, 2019, <https://ethics.org.au/courage-isnt-about-facing-our-fears-its-about-facing-ourselves/>.

¹¹⁰ Certainly, there are examples throughout history where such 'unreasonableness' took remarkable courage and had powerful transformative influence, for example: "Rosa Parks," Biography.com, updated October 4, 2023, <https://www.biography.com/activists/rosa-parks>.

¹¹¹ In his book *Think Again*, Grant argues that in a rapidly changing world, the ability to question assumptions and rethink one's views based on new evidence is important for success: Adam Grant, *Think Again* (Viking, 2021), <https://adamgrant.net/book/think-again>.

¹¹² Kemp argues that "it is going to take the thankless, unglamorous work of having difficult conversations with your friends, giving up power, trusting your fellow citizen rather than a strongman leader when you're scared, going into the streets even when you are uncomfortable at home, and taking an ethical stand even if it might cost you your job." Kemp, *Goliath's Curse*, 445.

¹¹³ See for example the work of The Oxford Character Project: "A new generation of wise thinkers & good leaders," The Oxford Character Project, accessed November 20, 2025, <https://oxfordcharacter.org/>.

¹¹⁴ Brenda Nguyen and Mary Crossan, "Character-Infused Ethical Decision Making," *Journal of Business Ethics* 178 (2022): 171–191, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04790-8>.

¹¹⁵ Confident humility is a concept popularised by Grant – the ability to have confidence in your abilities while remaining open to the possibility that you might be wrong: Grant, *Think Again*.

¹¹⁶ This study by Gallup builds on decades of research into what people desire from their leaders: Gallup, *Global Leadership Report: What Followers Want* (Gallup, 2025), <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/656315/leadership-needs-of-followers.aspx>.

¹¹⁷ Macy and Johnstone describe active hope as a practice or way of engaging with the world, not a passive feeling or a belief that everything will turn out okay: Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (New World Library, 2012), <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Active-Hope-without-Going-Crazy/dp/1577319729>.

¹¹⁸ del Toro – Oscar-winning filmmaker, director and producer – argues that "the most radical and rebellious choice you can make is to be optimistic": Guillermo del Toro, "The Most Radical and Rebellious Choice You Can Make Is to Be Optimistic," Time, February 7, 2019, <https://time.com/5520554/guillermo-del-toro-radical-optimism/>.

¹¹⁹ Coyle makes this argument looking back in history to the optimism of the British Victorian era: Diane Coyle, "What's stopping Britain building?" *Financial Times*, October 29, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/0ad5d585-18b4-46f0-9b3b-9e369478c790>.



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