



A Guide to Regenerative Leadership in Practice

By Giles Hutchins & Katherine Long

The Context We Find Ourselves Leading In

Since the military acronym VUCA was first coined in the late 1980's, leaders and organisations have been waking up to a growing appreciation of the unpredictability and complexity of highly interconnected problems as the 'new norm'. Yet whilst this is creating a growing appreciation of the nature of 'wicked' problems, and contexts of change that are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, our observation is that the levels of thinking and behaviours required to address them has remained fairly unchanged. The dominant narratives shaping change management, human resources, business transformation, leadership development, process improvement, cultural change and organisational development are still largely rooted in a 18th/19th/20th century mechanistic logic. This logic is no longer suitable for dealing with the turbulent and complex challenges 21st century leaders and organisations now face.

The requirement to embrace complexity is shaped by numerous inter-dependent factors. Henley Business School's 2017 research identified key drivers requiring a shift in leadership and organisational development as:

- a. the increasing rate of change
- b. the technological and digital revolution
- c. the hollowing out of organisations and the growing complexity of the stakeholder world
- d. globalisation
- e. climate change
- f. the need to learn and adapt faster

However in 2018, when Deloitte surveyed over 14,000 CEOs across 23 industries, they found a clear *complexity gap* in leadership consciousness, with leaders lacking the necessary cognitions and skills to deal with rising complexity. To engage effectively with the multiple change-factors our organisations now face, and to bridge the complexity gap in our leadership consciousness, there is a clear need to face the future with a new logic fundamentally different from the mechanistic logic that created our systemic problems in the first place. In Peter Drucker's words, *'In times of turmoil, the danger lies not in the turmoil itself, but in facing it with yesterday's logic'*.

There is emerging evidence that a new set of logics is already starting to emerge from a range of thought leaders. In 2018 the world’s largest strategy consultancy McKinsey & Co launched a report, *The 5 Trademarks of Agile Organizations*, which stressed the importance of moving away from the mindset of ‘organisations as machines’ and towards organisations as living systems. In *Reinventing Organizations*, former McKinsey consultant Frederick Laloux identified specific examples of next-stage *living organisations* as operating to the principles of self-organisation, authenticity, and actively engaged in living out evolutionary purpose. MIT professor Otto Scharmer and the Presencing Institute’s awareness-based systemic change framework Theory U emphasises a shift from ego-driven change to ecosystem sensing into emergent possibilities of the living field. Business philosopher Nassim Talib’s *Anti-Fragile* is another important contribution that explores the need to embrace the interdependent and emergent logic of living systems. And the recent work of Giles Hutchins and Laura Storm on *Regenerative Leadership* articulates and applies this living-systems logic to leadership and organisational development. These are just some way-markers on the unfolding journey from machine-mentality towards living-systems approaches enlivening the organisation as a complex adaptive and emergent system in ongoing relationship with its environment. This living organisation is not only agile enough to cope with the systemic challenges but is life-affirming in its culture and purpose.

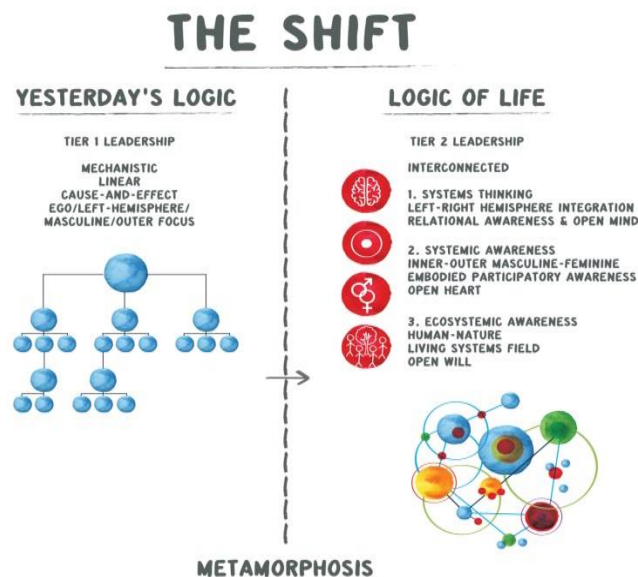
To summarise this shift in logic is a shift from ‘mechanistic’ to ‘living systems’, and can be contrasted as follows:

Mechanistic Logic	Living Systems Logic
LINEAR & PREDICTABLE	CIRCULAR, INTERDEPENDENT & EMERGENT
EXCLUSIVE & EXTRACTIVE	INCLUSIVE & REGENERATIVE
CONTROLLING	DEVELOPMENTAL & SELF-ORGANISING
POWER OVER	POWER WITH
TRADE-OFFS	SYNERGIES
SHORT-TERMISM	INTER-GENERATIONAL
SEPARATE	INTERCONNECTED
RATIONAL-ANALYTIC THINKING	EMBODIED BEING-AND-KNOWING

It is worth emphasising here that the organisation has always been ‘living’ rather than ‘machine-like’ in the sense that it has always been made up of unpredictable, interdependent, emergent human relationships. The organisation has always been a complex, dynamic and evolutionary ‘living’ system, in this regard. By shifting our leadership consciousness, we are merely starting to sense into the organisation as it really is.

Exploring the Shift to Living Systems Logic

In their book *Regenerative Leadership* (2019) Hutchins and Storm explore a three stage shift from yesterday's machine logic to what they refer to as the *Logic of Life*:



Yesterday's logic is represented as essentially mechanistic, born out of a militarised mind, rising patriarchy, an ego-explosion, and the rise of rational-analytic logic. It came to dominate the Western worldview especially during the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. This logic has a narrowing-down, reductive tendency that focuses in on the parts. The world is reduced to discrete objects separate from their inter-relational context. This narrowing-down abstracting tendency comes hand-in-hand with a de-emphasising of the relational, interdependent and emergent nature of reality. In seeking to understand the world, we reduce it into bits that are assumed to interact like clockwork, and whose simple cause-effect patterns can be measured, monitored, controlled and predicted. This has a powerful allure and gives a sense of control over life. It also helps us manipulate the living system resources of the world around us for human betterment.

It's important to note that this mechanistic tendency (which underpins the Scientific Method and Scientific Management Theory) is a useful tool within our human repertoire, and has brought great strides in many areas such as medicine, transportation, digitisation and organisational efficiency. There is nothing at all wrong with this narrowing-down mechanistic focus. The problem only comes when this focus dominates to such an extent that other ways of perceiving, knowing and embodying life are suppressed and undermined, creating an imbalanced, skewed logic that is unable to deal with the complex problems unwittingly created by mechanistic approaches.

In summary, yesterday's logic can be characterised as being:

- **Overly left-brained hemispheric:** A prioritisation of focusing-in and separating systems into parts that can be analysed in isolation. Hand-in-hand with a suppression of the right-brain hemisphere's relational awareness which perceives the context within which the content – the parts – are embedded.
- **Overly masculine quality of attentiveness:** A goal-orientated, competitive, assertive, and analytical quality of attention. Hand-in-hand with a suppression of the feminine quality of attention – process orientated, flowing, empathic, intuitive and emergent.
- **Overly objectifying life:** Prioritising outer physical tangible form and explicit quantifiable measures, hand-in-hand with a suppression of the inner intangible, implicit and unquantifiable aspects of life.
- **Overly anthropocentric and Neo-Darwinist:** Viewing life through a separating mechanistic lens perceives life as innately competitive and selfish; a dog-eat-dog world of separate species struggling for survival. Nature is perceived as a set of resources valued in terms of the material betterment these resources provide humanity. This also comes with a suppression of our deep biophilic connection and deeper sense of place and purpose as participating within the rich tapestry of life.

The shift from mechanistic to living-systems is a re-alignment to 'both-and' thinking; to a left and right brain hemispheric way of attending, masculine and feminine qualities of attentiveness, inner and outer dimensions of life, and the deepening of human-nature connection. This realignment is a liberating integration towards wholeness within ourselves and our ways of attending to life, which can be characterised in three key ways:

1. Systems Thinking (Open Mind): At the cognitive, analytic level, we allow for realignment of the left and right brain hemispheres, like two hands on the piano playing different notes yet integrating together in harmony. We integrate the understanding of the parts with an understanding of their contextual relationality. This is the land of systems-thinking, and relates to what Otto Scharmer refers to as *Open Mind*, where we ease the left brain hemisphere's grasp on isolating the parts, and also pay attention to the relation between the parts: the team, organisation and business ecosystem of stakeholders. Giga Mapping tools and approaches are useful here in highlighting the systems-wide interconnections of informational, material and technological flows of intra and inter-organisational processes. This is also where Circular Economics and Closed-loop design principles and practices are applied to attend to change at a system-wide level.

2. Systemic Awareness (Open Heart): At the embodied psychological level, we allow for realignment of the inner-outer and masculine-feminine qualities of attention. We open up empathically and psychologically into the system, to sense the stuckness, flows, traumas, nodes and acupuncture points within the organisation-as-living-system and its wider stakeholder ecosystem. This is the land of Systemic Awareness, and relates to what Scharmer refers to as

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Open Heart, where we listen to and participate in the system empathically and generatively. Here, tools like Systemic Coaching, Systemic Constellations, Social Presencing Theatre, Dialogue and Art of Hosting are useful. We are no longer just system mapping 'out there', we are sensing into the system and becoming conscious of the stuckness and aliveness of the system dynamics at play.

3. Ecosystemic Awareness (Open Will): At the existential 'being' level, we allow for a realignment of the human-nature connection inherent within us at a soul level. It relates to what Scharmer calls *Open Will*, where our small ego-will opens up and begins to permeate more readily with the interconnectedness of life. This is the tap-root that feeds the other two levels of Systems Thinking and Systemic Awareness. It ensures a fundamental shift in adult developmental consciousness from separateness to interconnectedness. It relates to what adult developmental psychologist Clare Graves refers to as the momentous shift from Tier 1 to Tier 2. It's here that we open up more deeply to life, and tools such as leadership nature immersions, energetic bodymind and field work, and quantum intelligence and SQ methods are useful.

Applying living systems thinking to Leadership and Organisation Development

Having explored some of the background theory regarding the necessary shift in leadership consciousness from machine to living, we now turn to practical applications in leadership and organisational development, drawing on what we – Giles Hutchins and Katherine Long as co-facilitators of change - have been observing in our work.

Here we will be referring to *regenerative leadership* as an embodied expression of living systems principles in action. Regenerative leadership has been emerging as a concept over the last decade or so, not to be confused with leading for sustainability, although some of the practices may overlap. According to John Hardman's seminal research in 2009, at the time of his inquiry, notions of sustainability in leadership had largely focused on how leaders dealt with specific issues relating to their organisations, as opposed to what is now becoming a paradigmatic shift regarding leadership and organisational development.

Since then, as already highlighted in this article, much more literature and research around an essentially regenerative and living systems discourse has emerged, or been re-discovered, providing concepts and approaches to support organisations and leaders in their own developmental transitions. Yet for those who facilitate or lead change, the task can seem daunting, especially for those embedded in traditional, hierarchical organisations. Too often when we talk with leaders and change practitioners, there is a sense of wistful resignation, the sense that the dream is too far away and out of reach.

Equally, those actively engaged in enabling living systems approaches in their contexts may feel that they are not really doing things 'properly' when compared to oft-touted exemplars of regenerative leadership (the Buurtzorgs, the Sundrops and Patagonias), especially when they need to juggle the different needs of individuals and groups at very different stages of

development. In contrast to idealised theory - which philosopher and industrial consultant Donald Schön refers to as the 'hard high ground' - the real world of the practitioner or the 'swampy lowlands' is messy, compromised, and rarely seems to conform to neat models.

So perhaps change practitioners and leaders can take heart from the fact that living systems principles in action are rarely neat and tidy, and that swampy lowland might just be where transformation needs to take place. We need to address the hang-over from machine-model thinking which perpetuates an emphasis on objectives, goals and destinations, as opposed to valuing the journey and the intrinsic learning of emergent, experimental and evolutionary approaches. Life is always busy sensing its own way forward. Hence the need to let-go of predefined outcomes while accepting that regenerative leadership development may look very different in different contexts (whilst exhibiting similar traits). There is a real danger that we revert to formulaic or idealised thinking which seeks to extrapolate a formula for change, as opposed to being committed to finding out what might work in real life where cultures, microclimates, team dynamics, habitats and developmental contexts inevitably change.

Building the bridge

So within a context of swampy lowlands, change practitioners may often find themselves acting as bridge-builders to the new. At the risk of mixing metaphors, they are laying stepping-stones, placing breadcrumbs along the pathway, joining the dots. The following is a non-exhaustive list of some of the key strategies and approaches which we have observed over the years in clients on their own regenerative leadership journeys:

- **Start with yourself, but don't travel alone**

Gandhi said, *'If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. ... We need not wait to see what others do.'* There is a vast difference between simply telling people about the need for change, and being the change that needs to happen in the world ourselves. For people and organisations to feel safe enough and challenged enough to go on a journey into regeneration they need more than abstract concepts and or even case studies. Living systems principles need to be embodied in our approaches, and we need to develop courage to apply them in an ongoing way. Leandro Herrero's *Viral Change* highlights that as social creatures, we collectively mimic each other's behaviours, for good or ill. Whilst the inner journey is essential to regenerative practices, it's when people can see different things happening that, like learning a new dance step, they can start to follow.

To find your own ways of applying living systems principles to yourself and your context, you also need to travel with others. This is not a solo journey, but a collective one, through the cross-pollination which naturally occurs amongst communities of practice both within and across organisations and sectors. Simultaneously, you will find that the best learning comes when you transcend artificial divisions (e.g. between leadership and coaching, coaching and OD, OD and D&I, D&I and organisational strategy). Go beyond your own silos and recognise

that the apparent categories of difference matter far less than learning to move together with awareness.

- **Start anywhere, be generous**

Don't wait for the conditions to be perfect in order to start. Regenerative Leadership is a way of showing up in the world; a way of sensing and responding to life. In the words of the biologist Janine Benyus, *'Life creates conditions conducive to life'*, and that can begin anywhere. Think of yourself as a 'guerrilla gardener' seeding new opportunities for regenerative thinking and practice even in small micro-environments. Learn the craft of regenerative leadership wherever the opportunity presents itself, at home, societally as well as at work. Don't feel you have to wait for some great 'heroic' endeavour to present itself. Regenerative leadership is inherently generous – the more you give away the more you will have to give, because as you engage in regenerative practices for yourself (body, mind and spirit), you will continue to replenish your own true nature in a way which becomes self-sustaining. This goes against the grain of traditional thinking, where the ego seeks to put its mark on and claim ownership of whatever it touches ('that was *my* idea!').

The difference when entering the space of a regenerative leader is tangible. Regenerative leaders create a culture around them that is full of life. Rich Sheridan of Menlo Innovation tells a powerful story of what happened when he decided to found an organisation (but it could equally have been a team or a department) on the principles of joy. Taking an ethnographic, observational approach, he studied what made his staff deeply engage, laugh, bring their full selves to work, and then gradually incorporated these elements into the everyday artifacts of their organisation's culture, e.g. allowing staff to bring their pets and babies to work, rotating pairs of workers so everyone had opportunities to learn from each other, empowering anyone to call an all-company meeting whenever needed. They knew they had achieved something powerful and significant when their clients wanted to be a part of their culture too.

- **Take a creative, inquiry-led, rather than narrowly outcome driven approach to change**

Once you start seeing organisations as living systems, it becomes self-evident that trying to force compliance to a narrow set of outcomes will most certainly go against what you are trying to achieve. We see this unproductive pattern far too often in education and health-care, where fearfulness related to achieving targets inevitably drives narrow, unimaginative compliance driven behaviours, where the craft and creativity of the health provider or educator is largely lost.

So part of the shift to living systems approaches is to reframe outcome-driven approaches to inquiry-led ones, asking 'What could be possible here?' 'What is really needed?'. A recent example comes from Naveed Idrees, recently awarded TES Head Teacher of the Year 2019, who with his team managed to turn around Feversham, a failing primary school in Bradford, to become one of the top 10% high performing schools in England. According to Idrees, *'What we discovered is that children need to be engaged not just at the level of the mind and body, but*

also the level of the soul.' So in response to that insight, they created a completely music-based curriculum, investing the money that would normally have gone into a deputy head salary to help pay for part-time music teachers, which also allowed core teaching staff, if they wished, to stop work at Friday lunchtime in order to care for their own families, and with the senior leadership team, in the absence of a deputy head, being entrusted to each share in the leadership of the school, and apply a coaching culture to support learning for staff at all levels.

- **Develop eco-systemic awareness and action**

Living systems principles invite us to look beyond narrow boundaries and definitions and into the contexts in which we live and work. Polymath Gregory Bateson identified the 'unit of survival' as the '*organism-in-its-environment*', constantly in flow with and inter-dependent on many variables. This inner-outer awareness invites a new type of leadership, which requires an ability to sense into the emergent field of possibilities within and without, joining with what's already happening, as well as setting new intentions and creating new inquiries. Shobi Lalawata, of *United in Diversity* in Indonesia is a great example of eco-systemic leadership, having engaged in long-term cross-sector leadership development with multiple stakeholders across the archipelago of Indonesia, and now engaged more directly in convening business, education and government leaders in addressing environmental issues together. In spite of the highs and lows of a sixteen-year commitment to change in her country, she knows that '*this is what I was born for*', bringing a personal inner mission in harmony with external change across a wide number of variables. In Otto Scharmer's words '*ecosystems do not have an address or a bank account*', and this work invites us to place our trust in the future change that needs to happen, rather than tether our identities (and income streams) too narrowly to one organisational source. Regenerative eco-systemic leadership can be somewhat invisible at times, reliant on many different nodes and networks (just like mycorrhizal networks in forests), popping up and becoming more visible when the time is right.

- **Review your leadership frameworks and reward structures**

It's almost too obvious to mention, but while organisations persist in having leadership frameworks and reward structures that reinforce machine model thinking, it will be difficult to support wide-scale changes. More traditional concepts of role and job title are already changing as organisations increasingly are having to adopt more agile methodologies, bringing the necessary people together regardless of which department or even organisation they are coming from, especially in the context of delivering integrated services or partnership working. Reviewing your leadership frameworks may be a starting point. Do they reinforce a heroic, siloed mentality, or do they encourage flexibility, and better still, can they recognise that leadership can and does take many different forms within the wider ecosystem of an organisation? Traditional Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) efforts have tended to focus on getting better representation of women and minority groups into senior leadership positions as a key measure of success without questioning whether the core paradigms of leadership might be anti-diverse themselves.

- **Make it easy for people to do the right thing, and socialise the changes**

Referring back to Herrero's work on Viral Change, if we take the analogy of coffee shops, we see a whole sequence of changing behaviours over time. When once people went to cafés to drink coffee at tables, it then became normalised to have a coffee 'to go', increasing the use of disposable cups, which in the early days were largely not recycled. There was then an increase in workplaces for special bins for recycling cups, until it was discovered that much of the plastic lined cups are unrecyclable anyway. We now have a situation where people are buying their own re-usable and often bio-degradable cups, and cafes sourcing fully biodegradable or recyclable cups. There always seems to be a process of trial and error (back to swampy lowlands), but ultimately, once a solution is found, making sure that it is easy to do the right thing is an important factor in socialising the change, just like the banks of a river direct the flow of water. Even a small step like choosing to represent the wider world at meetings (e.g. empty chairs representing the yet unborn, other stakeholders, nature, etc.) or introducing mindfulness practices into meetings can have catalytic effects.

- **Finally, have faith in evolution**

In *The Patterning Instinct*, Jeremy Lent creates a panoramic view of how humans have evolved since the beginning of our species, highlighting the different stages in our evolutionary journey as we have changed our thinking, behaviours and patterns of governance to adapt to new challenges. We are most certainly at a point in time when a next leap is necessary, and hopefully inevitable. Part of that shift involves integrating an ancient, non-dual, non-anthropocentric perspective with all that we have learnt and achieved over millennia. This brings to bear the full repertoire of knowledge and wisdom to the complex challenges we now face. When we stop seeing ourselves as being the centre of the universe, but as co-participants in Life with all living beings, collectively partaking in that shared responsibility, we can start to relax a little, and get in flow with the life that is wanting to be expressed through our shared humanity, in spite of all its scars and brokenness. That deeper impulse towards evolution is just under the surface, right here within this moment, waiting to break through, and as regenerative leaders one of the most important things we can do is to create the conditions for it to emerge. What a humbling yet life-affirming endeavour.

Conclusion and next steps

There are many different regenerative journeys and starting points, which are iterative, interwoven and cyclical. It might help to think of regenerative leadership as a kind of 'waggle dance', similar to the figure of eight dance that bees use to communicate to other members of their hive.

The dance involves a weaving of a number of key elements which flow continuously together, where regenerative leadership (which will be a property of the whole web of relationships and not just limited to fixed roles) must learn to tune into the patterns and flows in order to engage effectively at any stage in the cycle.

Each phase invites shared inquiry: What is the **reason for being** and coming together and how do we express our purpose in the world? What is our desired **footprint** in terms of environmental and social impact? What type of **culture** is most enabling for living our purpose, and what are the key behaviours and values that we will embody? How will that be expressed through our **formation**, both in terms of how we structure our relational dynamics, as well as how we develop and grow?



Building on a series of deep-dive living-systems based workshops we have run over the last few years, we will be inviting a number of leaders, change agents and entrepreneurs to join us in 2020 on a shared adventure into regenerative leadership in practice. It is a special and crucial time in our human history, and exploring together through real-world action and experimenting within our different contexts, these 2020 inquiries will add to the existing body of knowledge and practice relating to *regenerative leadership*. If you are interested in joining us as a way of developing your leadership and change practice for life-affirming futures, please contact us via LinkedIn or our emails below.

About the Authors



Katherine Long specialises in leadership and organisation development, and is an experienced coach, supervisor and organisation development practitioner, educator and writer. Previously running a successful Masters in Coaching programme at Warwick University, and latterly Chair for the Association of Coaching Supervisors, Katherine has held a number of senior roles within the coaching profession. Her practice is rooted in a range of living systems and regenerative approaches including Theory U, Focusing and Systemic Coaching Constellations. mail@katherinelong.co.uk



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