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ASSOCIATES
Creating Liberating Structures

The Future of Leadership for Sustainability

Part Two

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A world of 9 billion by mid-century will demand fundamental changes in our mindsets, behaviors, cultures and overarching paradigm.

~ John Elkington

Introduction¹

I recently met with the Chief Operating Officer from one of the largest environmental NGOs in the world. Their latest global strategy drives transformative change in landscapes, river networks, seascapes, and policy across 30+ countries. Achieving it would mean significant steps toward global sustainability. He noted that the biggest limiting factor to executing the strategy is leader development. What kind of leaders do they need? The executive described their ideal leader as being a highly strategic thinker able to focus on big problems and opportunities, a superb communicator with excellent people skills, an inspiring fundraiser, risk-oriented, and deeply collaborative. We then discussed how the new science of *vertical learning* can help their leaders unlock powerful mental and relational capacities that will significantly improve leadership in all those areas. This article summarizes our dialogue and describes sustainability leaders who have already cultivated these advanced capacities of mind and heart. These individuals represent the future of leadership for sustainability, and their profound abilities are latent in everyone.

What is vertical learning? As described in Part One of this article, it is the transformation of *how* one thinks, feels, and makes sense of the world. Vertical learning is a shift in mindset from a simpler to a more complex worldview. It is contrasted with horizontal learning which focuses on *what* one knows. While horizontal learning enables us to know more, vertical learning broadens our view and permanently heightens our awareness. This significantly improves how we interpret what is happening around us and strengthens the way we relate to others.¹

¹This is a slightly expanded version of an article published in the Spring | Summer 2013 issue of *Kosmos Journal*. See www.kosmosjournal.org.

Decades of research in developmental psychology have mapped out the major transformations of mindset possible for adults.ⁱⁱ Yet 90%+ of US adults haven't yet grown into the most complex mindsets.ⁱⁱⁱ This is not an issue of potential; shifts in mindset are possible for everyone with healthy brain functioning. A quality vertical learning environment enables us to *triple* or even *quintuple* the speed at which our mindset develops.^{iv} Numerous studies show that leaders with more complex mindsets are assessed as better leaders. Leaders who make these mindset shifts tend to be more strategic and collaborative, better at seeing patterns and understanding others, more adept at conflict management, and stronger at developing people.^v The bottom line is that vertical learning can enable us to become wiser, more compassionate, and more effective *three to five times faster* than normal development.

To handle large-scale sustainability challenges, leaders need the advanced mental and relational capacities available at more complex mindsets (see Part One). Many leaders aren't sufficiently prepared lead complex initiatives. Studies done, for example, at the National Security Agency (NSA) in the US show that most leaders' mental complexity doesn't match the complexity of the tasks required for their work.^{vi} Mainstream and academic writers from Stanford to Harvard have highlighted this issue in books like *Mindset*, *Five Minds for the Future*, *Opposable Mind* and *In Over Our Heads*. They identify vertical learning as essential to empower our leaders. Their common argument is that many leaders' operating system or mindset isn't up to the challenge of navigating our toughest problems. Nevertheless, leaders can upgrade their operating system with vertical learning that triggers transformation into a more complex mindset.

In sum, to achieve global sustainability and create a thriving future, we need wiser, more compassionate, and more effective leaders capable of making better and more timely decisions. For the first time in history, the science of vertical learning clearly maps this path of leadership transformation and empowers us to consciously walk it.

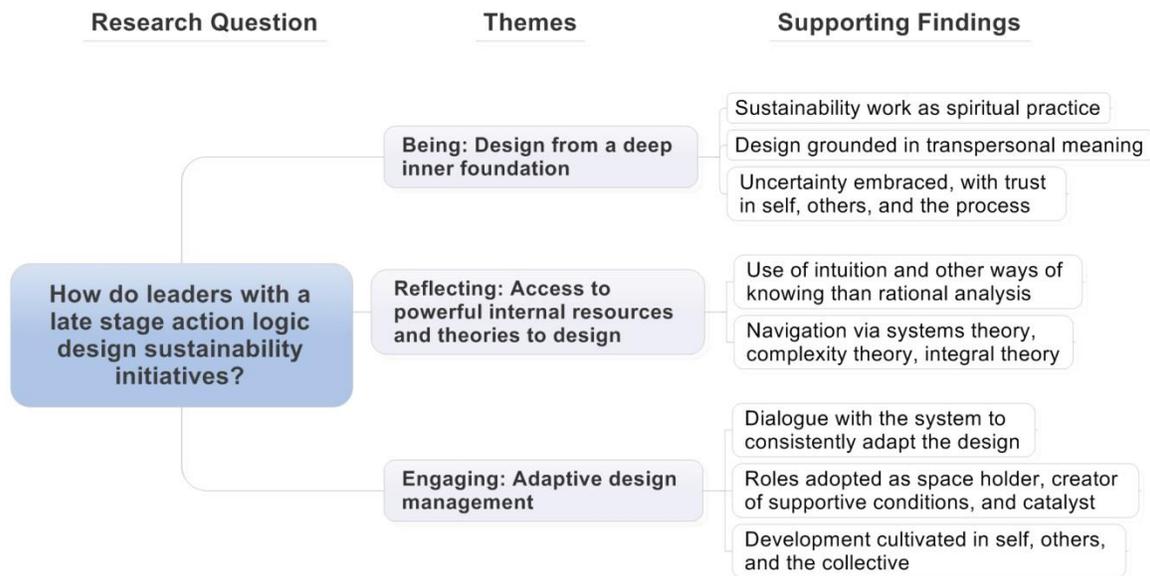


Figure 1. Key themes and findings from research on sustainability leaders with highly complex mindsets

Conscious Leadership for Sustainability

So what does a leader with these advanced capacities actually do? How do they lead change for sustainability? That was the heart of my research.^{vii} I studied sustainability leaders from multinational corporations, the United Nations, NGOs and consultancies who were assessed at the very latest mindsets – or *action logics* – that science can measure.² I looked at how these leaders design and guide sustainability change initiatives and identified their key competencies. Put simply, the following describes what happens at the intersection of complex sustainability challenges and complex mindsets.³

² Part One describes Bill Torbert’s popular and powerful map of leadership mindset development. He uses the term *action logic* to describe mindsets; each represents a different mental and emotional logic that underlies a leader’s actions. The term “later action logic” refers to one of the three most complex mindsets in Torbert’s model: the Strategist, Alchemist, or Ironist. Only 5% of the US adult population holds one of these. For more information, see Torbert’s book *Action Inquiry* and the Harvard Business Review article *Seven Transformations of Leadership*.

³ I interviewed 33 sustainability leaders from North and South America, Europe, and Oceania. All worked in

Three themes describe their leadership. They: (1) Design and lead from a deep inner foundation; (2) leverage powerful internal resources like intuition and frameworks like integral theory; and (3) adaptively manage the design. Each theme has several related findings (see Figure 1).

1. Design from a deep inner foundation with profound trust

These sustainability leaders draw upon a deep inner foundation as the fount of their inspiration, focus, and strength for sustainability work. For them, leading sustainability initiatives is an extension of their life’s calling or spiritual practice. It has a transpersonal meaning for most, enabling them to demonstrate their commitment to service and alleviate suffering. An example comes from Luz, a

sustainability for at least three years and engaged in initiatives that impacted 1000+ people. They ranged from 33 to 66 years old, with 39% women and 61% men. Each took a developmental psychology test to assess their action logic. Thirteen were assessed with the three most complex action logics that science can measure: Strategist, Alchemist, and Ironist. I studied how that group of outlier leaders designs and engages in sustainability initiatives. For the full findings, please contact the author.

33 year-old NGO leader who was assessed as an Ironist, the most complex of the action logics, held by less than 0.5% of the US adult population. Ironists hold a unitive perspective on the world, they see it as a unified whole. Luz experiences herself in service *as spirit*. She anchors herself in a state of “oneness” or unity consciousness, and from that place engages in sustainability work. This is a profoundly different mindset than most sustainability leaders, and results in a comprehensive and highly-nuanced approach to leading sustainability change. Here is how she describes it:

Luz: What I do [to design a sustainability initiative] is follow the evolutionary arc. This might sound really weird but it helps me to anchor [in the One], first and foremost. And then from there, ask, “Okay, what exactly is arising here? Where am I? Where is this community [in their developmental process]? Where is this situation?” What this mainly is as a design process is attuning to the fabric of consciousness as it’s evolving itself and going, “Okay, so where are we here?”... At the deepest essence, it feels like a quality of yoga, of seeing the One in whatever Many that’s arising and attuning to that. And then if there is suffering or pain, work to alleviate it. If there is a limitation of perspective, invite more perspectives to be taken. But as much as I can, anchoring from that One, that seems to be the essence.

Not all these leaders are grounded in a unity perspective, but each designs sustainability initiatives from a deep inner foundation. For example, Roger, a multinational executive, uses his sustainability work to bring “humanity to the world of business,” help others appreciate the moment, and feel like they are integral to it.

The second finding relates to how these leaders handle uncertainty and ambiguity. They are extremely open to not knowing, and comfortable with the uncertainties of design and leadership.

They profoundly trust themselves, other actors, and the process they’ve created to navigate through any ambiguity. This helps them design and manage complex initiatives amidst unforeseen changes and influences. An example comes from Edward, a 66 year-old senior United Nations leader who was assessed as a Strategist. He believes that in the face of ambiguity, the group has the wisdom needed for any given situation, and the process to uncover it simply needs to be trusted.

Edward: When I’m facilitating with a group, my deep belief...is that the answer is present in the room. I treat people with that respect...they are pregnant with solutions, answers, wisdom, understanding, and strategy. And I do believe that, that people can realize their greatest mind and intention. They may need a good question to provoke it or they may need a good story to shake it loose. They may need to be invited to meditate or to engage in a cultural dance to bring their body/mind to another state. ...I design the initiative...based on the assumption that the people involved are the right people [and have] the power, knowledge, insight, wisdom, and the capacity [to do this]. ...Fundamentally, the future is present...these are the right people, this is the right place, time, and process. You have to trust the process and not panic.

In sum, these sustainability leaders ground themselves in transpersonal – even spiritual – meaning when they do their work. They face the uncertainty and ambiguity of their projects with deep trust in themselves, their colleagues, and the process. In today’s constantly changing, volatile, and uncertain environments, this capacity to be comfortable during intense ambiguity and have a profound meaning underlying one’s work is a significant leadership advantage.

2. Leverage powerful internal resources and advanced frameworks

The second theme relates to how these leaders go beyond rational analysis to understand a situation

and also use powerful theoretical frameworks to make sense of it. First of all, they frequently use intuition and other non-rational ways to get insights. While they all use rational thinking to design and lead, they also strongly leverage intuitive, non-conceptual approaches. The impact and advantage of using intuition, they claim, is that their sustainability initiatives deliver better results, their designs are easier to build, and that the process itself creates an inspired, integrated design capacity. For example, Giselle – a 62 year-old social change consultant assessed as an Alchemist – consciously engages with a “field of knowing” to design her sustainability initiatives. She claims a superior outcome as a result.

Giselle: The design designs me. It's a shift from believing I'm in control and the originator of the design, to experiencing that the design comes through me and that I am its mind, heart, voice, eyes, ears, hands, and feet, embodying it. ...The outcome is so much more than I could produce if I simply believed that I was producing the design. It's a paradoxical process whereby releasing to the process, therefore giving up control, one gains a much superior emergence. ... I think it's coming from a field of knowing that I have learned how to access. ...When I was younger, [I was] a very good project manager. ...As I've matured, I've realized that I don't need to design to the ultimate end. I can create the field, the capacity, the space, and what wants to happen will happen, which is very different from what I want to happen will happen. ...And that is a recurrent experience for me; that shift point with delight and surprise and deep certainty, that "Yes, that's exactly it!" That's emergence.

These leaders also use three powerful theoretical frameworks to design their sustainability initiatives and guide their approach. They are: (a) *Integral theory*, (b) *Complexity theory*, and (c) *Systems theory*. These theories help them make sense of challenging situations and navigate complexity.

Integral theory is the most commonly used, and they employ it to do deep scanning and assessment of situations, design programs, support their own and others' development, and tailor communications to different mindsets. Edward, for example, noted that he and colleagues built large-scale, multi-country development programs for the UN based upon the integral framework. I have used these three theoretical frameworks for advanced sustainability leader development programs in the Netherlands, Brazil, and the US, and I see them increasingly used worldwide. They are essential tools for any change agent.



3. Use adaptive design management

The third theme is that these leaders use *adaptive design management* to steer sustainability initiatives. This means that they consistently adapt the design as the context shifts, take on different change leadership roles, and develop themselves and others along the way. First of all, whether working to build a global sustainability strategy for a multinational, vitalize an NGO sector in West Africa, or make the Olympics greener, these leaders face ever-shifting contexts and they quickly adjust their projects appropriately. To do this, they “dialogue” with the system they are working with through experimentation and by trying different approaches, and then observe the response. After altering the design from this feedback, they repeat the process, creating a cycle of dynamic steering.

The second element of adaptive design management is that these leaders adopt different change leadership roles as needed. Sometimes they

assertively drive change. They identify important leverage points and then prod the system and stakeholders to change. Other times they take a softer approach and set up the conditions for a system or organization to healthily develop. Examples include bringing together key stakeholders to create a joint vision, building a better economic model for smallholder producers, or even holding the energetic space for an initiative to make progress. Like a farmer, they ensure that the ground is fertile for the seeds of change to take root and then allow nature to “do her part.” By creating the right conditions for change, they enable systems and organizations to organically shift on their own time, in their own way.

The third piece of adaptive design management is that these leaders regularly develop themselves and others. They contend that to succeed in a complex sustainability initiative usually requires everyone – including themselves – to develop somehow. For example, they might identify how to stop sabotaging their own work, teach others about the carbon market, or strengthen trust amongst the group. They focus on three types of self-development: Self-understanding, such as meditation; understanding others, such as studying stakeholder positions; and understanding the world, such as studying the financial system. To help others to develop, they often use perspective-taking practices, such as reframing a situation or bringing in a challenging guest speaker with a significantly different philosophy. By exposing people to new concepts, debating “sacred cow” truths, and even inviting people to drop their mental models, they create conditions for change.

Roger’s case exemplifies this. He was a 39-year old senior sustainability leader within a large multinational, assessed as a Strategist. At the time, he was developing the company’s global sustainability strategy. Roger went through extensive measures (involving almost 200 decision makers and influencers worldwide) to engage broad perspectives and educate about the strategic content and how to do large-scale design.

Roger: What I wanted was to get as many outside views into our business as possible so that our leaders heard from people that they would never be exposed to internally. ...This was the first time we, as an organization, had done a cross-geography, cross-seniority, and cross-functional series of workshops around such a broad aim [with many external voices being heard]. So we involved directly...over 150 people in [our company]. And then we involved 40 external people as well. So we got Greenpeace in the room, others who were advocating deep ecology, and health campaigners. And we got the [company] people to hear and to be part of the dialogue.

Roger eventually built a global sustainability strategy that had widespread acceptance across the organization; not easy given their 200,000+ employees. His advanced mental and relational capacities that come from holding a Strategist action logic were instrumental because he could take so many perspectives, easily see the big picture, and deeply relate to each position and person in the initiative.

In sum, by dynamically steering the design as context shifts, by taking on different change leadership roles when needed, and by developing themselves and those around them, these sustainability leaders use adaptive design management to guide their initiatives. This is a powerful change leadership approach made possible by the advanced capacities of complex mindsets.

15 Advanced Leadership Competencies

My findings lead to 15 sustainability leadership competencies (see Table 1). I believe that development of these can help leaders accelerate their growth into later action logics and will result in significant leadership advantages.

Table 1
15 competencies of sustainability leaders with advanced action logics

Sustainability Leadership Competency		Description and Notes
Deeply Connect	Ground sustainability practice in deep meaning	Honor the work of sustainability as a spiritual practice, as a sacred expression. See sustainability work as a vehicle for transformation of self, others, and the world. Act in service of others and on behalf of a greater Other (e.g., universe; spirit; consciousness; God; collective intelligence; emptiness; Nature).
	Intuitive decision-making and harvesting	Use ways of knowing other than rational analysis to harvest profound insights and make rapid decisions. Be able to easily access this type of information alone or collectively, and facilitate individuals and groups to do so.
	Embrace uncertainty with profound trust	Willingness to not know, to wonder into the mystery of what will emerge next. Able to humbly and comfortably rest in the face of the unknown, ambiguity, and unpredictable change, and not need to “push” for an immediate answer or resolution. Deeply trust oneself, co-designers, and the process to navigate through uncertainty.
Know Oneself	Scan and engage the internal environment	Able to quickly become aware of and aptly respond to psychological dynamics in oneself so that they do not inappropriately influence or sabotage one’s sustainability work. Deep attunement to emotional, shadow, and personality-driven forces; able to “get out of the way” and be “energetically clean” when engaging with others.
	Inhabit multiple perspectives	Able to intellectually and emotionally hold many different perspectives related to a sustainability issue, without being overly attached to any of them. Able to argue the position of and communicate directly from different viewpoints. Be open, curious, and inviting of new perspectives, especially those that challenge or counter one’s own.
Adaptively Manage	Dialogue with the system	Able to repeatedly sense into what is needed to help a system develop (e.g., make it more sustainable), try different interventions (e.g., prototype; experiment; seed ideas), observe the system response, and adapt accordingly. Able to look <i>at</i> the system, <i>through</i> the system, and <i>as</i> the system as part of the dialogue.
	Go with the energy	Able to identify and take advantage of openings and opportunities for system changes that are well received by members of the system, thereby building on momentum and moving around obstacles. Also, able to identify blockages or tensions (in individuals, groups, or systems) that hinder progress, and inquire into them.

Cultivate Transformation	Self-transformation	Able to consistently develop oneself or create the environment for self-development in the intrapersonal, relational, cognitive, and physical domains, as well as other areas. Base this work upon deep self-knowledge, including a awareness of personality dynamics and shadow issues. Able to create communities and engage mentors that consistently invite/challenge a deeper self to come forth.
	Create developmental conditions	Able to create the initial conditions (e.g., environment) that support and/or challenge development of individuals, groups, cultures, and systems. Able to sense what the next developmental step might be for others or a system, and create fertile ground or an intervention that increases the likelihood of development or the emergence of novelty. Supported by a general understanding of how individuals, groups, and systems develop.
	Hold space	Able to effectively create the appropriate (e.g., safe; challenging) space to help a group progress (e.g., work through an inquiry; build trust; self-reflect), holding the tension of the important questions, bigger picture, and developmental potential. Able to hold the energetic container of what is needed in the space, and/or what is needed for development of the individuals and collectives involved. By doing so, create the conditions for the emergence of answers/outcomes and developmental movement.
	Shadow mentoring	Able to support others to see and appropriately respond to their own psychological shadow issues that are sabotaging them, and to their “programming” (e.g., assumptions; limiting beliefs; projections; stories). This is not psychotherapy work, but the use of basic “maintenance” tools like the 3-2-1 process from <i>Integral Life Practice</i> to address shadow issues on a regular basis.
Navigate with Sophisticated Theories, Frameworks	Systems theory and systems thinking	Understand the fundamental concepts and language of systems theory. Capable of holistically seeing and mapping the core parts of a system, the primary relationships and dynamics between them, cycles of cause and effect, and the various wholes that those parts are elements of. Able to apply systems thinking to better understand sustainability issues and support the development of systems.
	Complexity theory and complexity thinking	Understand the fundamental concepts and language of complexity theory, especially as it relates to leadership. Capable of scanning complex adaptive systems to see emergent behaviors, the impact of small fluctuations, and patterns. Able to create developmental conditions, cultivate experiments, foster networks, and inject disequilibrium when needed. Able to apply complexity thinking to better understand sustainability issues and support the development of complex adaptive systems.
	Integral theory and integral reflection	Understand the fundamental concepts and language of integral theory. Capable of using integral theory to: organize critical information; assess or diagnose a sustainability issue and design an intervention; tailor communications to different worldviews; and support the development of oneself, others, groups, cultures, and systems.
	Polarity management	Ability to recognize and map the key polarities in any situation that are being well managed, poorly managed or unattended to. Able to use a polarity map so to see what skillful action to take. Able to explain these dynamics to a client in simple terms through mapping the polarity system, including up-sides and down-sides, action steps and early warnings. Supported by an understanding of polarity theory.

Conclusions

The new science of vertical learning is rapidly spreading because it significantly transforms *how* a leader thinks, feels, and engages in the world. The future of leadership for sustainability will follow the trajectory of human development as we unlock powerful mental, emotional, social, and even physical capacities. Each mindset transformation brings forth latent wisdom and compassion needed to handle increasingly sophisticated sustainability challenges.

For me, the question is not *if* millions of leaders will undergo significant shifts in their mindsets, but *when*. History shows that our life conditions will drive these adaptations, no matter what. However, for the first time we have the unique opportunity to self-transform. We can now guide the development of our worldview and bootstrap our minds and hearts into greater insight, power, and love. How well we do this will influence how graceful our transition is through these stormy times. We have within us and around us everything required to create an unprecedented flourishing of humanity and Nature. Our charge is to take up the reins of our own mindset development, enable others to do so as well, and then bring our full selves to creating the future we want.

“In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear, and give hope to each other. That time is now!”

~ Wangari Maathai, the first female Nobel Peace laureate from Africa



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Endnotes

ⁱ For a short overview of vertical learning, which has been cited as the # 1 future trend in leader development, see Petrie, N. (2011). *Future trends in leadership development*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

ⁱⁱ Kegan, Robert. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and process in human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Kegan, Robert. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Loevinger, J. (1976). *Ego development: Conceptions and theories*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Cook-Greuter, S. R. (2004). Making the case for a developmental perspective. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 36(6/7), 275.

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^{iv} Based upon research done by MetaIntegral Associates and Pacific Integral in open enrollment leadership programs, a corporate leader development program with a health care executive team, and a graduate studies program at JFK University. Typically, it takes 5 years for a leader to shift a full action logic, or developmental stage, if they shift at all. Leaders in these programs shifted a full stage in vertical learning programs lasting 1-2 years.

^v Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Rooke, D., & Torbert, W. R. (1998). Organizational transformation as a function of CEO's developmental stage. *Organization Development Journal*, 16(1), 11-28; Torbert, W. R., Cook-Greuter, S. R., Fisher, D., Foldy, E., Gauthier, A., Keeley, J., et al. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transformational leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler; Strang, S., & Kuhnert, K. W. (2009). Personality and leadership developmental levels as predictors of leader performance. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20(3), 421; McCauley, C. D., Drath, W. H., Palus, C. J., O'Connor, P. M. G., & Baker, B. A. (2006). The use of constructive-developmental theory to advance the understanding of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 634.

^{vi} Research completed by Theo Dawson and Zachary Stein at Developmental Testing Services. www.lectica.org.

^{vii} Brown, Barrett C. (2012). Leading complex change with post-conventional consciousness. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 25(4), 560-575. Brown, Barrett C. (2012). Conscious leadership for sustainability: How leaders with late-stage action logics design and engage in sustainability initiatives. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 73(07A), UMI No. 3498378.