Leadership for Sustainability: Generative Engagement for Change

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Abstract

Countless people are leading the charge toward sustainability thinking and action, and it's not enough. Given the increasing urgency of human-caused climate change and its inevitable destruction, an expanded view of leadership—as generative engagement for change—is more essential than ever before. This article outlines twelve keys for generative engagement which begin with each individual challenging assumptions and beliefs about where humans stand in the complex, interdependent processes of life-as-it's-happening among millions of species within our shared ecosphere. Anyone who cares is called to embrace the role of "leader" and practice engaging—generatively—with others and our shared dilemmas.

My grandson, Sam, was 11 years old when I published my first article outlining the need for an expanded view of leadership for sustainability (Ferdig, 2007). I described sustainability leadership as "an emerging consciousness among people who are choosing to live their lives and lead their organizations in ways that account for their impact on the earth, society, and the health of local and global economies."

Sam is now 24, working as a civil engineer for a major construction company in Chicago, Illinois. I ask myself, what has changed in the 12 years since I wrote about an emerging consciousness among people who care? I was concerned in 2007 about Sam's future as well as millions of children around the world. I'm no less concerned today as he and other once-children join the "order of grownups" who are presumably doing something to reduce the existential threats to human life on this planet.

"Our leaders are behaving like children!" Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenager, said to world leaders at the United Nations Climate Change Summit in December 2018 (Holter, 2018). Her words were notable for those of us in the United States who are concerned as we watched our president announce the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement while eroding environmental protection policies in the United States. It seems we have not yet begun to recognize our interdependence as members of the human species, much less our interdependence among millions of species within our shared ecosphere.

The Past 12 Years

Much has changed in the past 12 years, as things do in complex processes of life happening in and around us moment-to-moment. People grow old as children grow up and economies ebb and flow. National leadership shifts with new elections and changing politics. The drug epidemic reaches crises proportions while scientists continue to conduct knowledge-expanding research, making remarkable advances in the fields of genetics, medicine, technology and neurology to lengthen and enhance the quality human life.

Climate scientists are urgently telling us that human-accelerated climate change is worse than they first thought. CO_2 levels are well beyond acceptable limits for life as we know it on this earth, glaciers are melting and water levels are rising more rapidly than previously estimated. Fresh water supplies continue to dwindle even as desalination research becomes more promising. Destructive storms, flooding and uncontrollable fires are becoming more frequent and intense costing too many human lives and billions of dollars. While the causes of changing climate patterns are many, the burning of fossil fuels and animal agriculture are two of the biggest contributors, along with deforestation according to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), (2018).

Scientists further estimate that we are now losing species at 1000–10,000 times the natural rate, severely compromising the biodiversity benefits required for healthy ecosystems (Chivian and Bernstein, 2008). Human-accelerated climate change, deforestation, habitat loss, unsustainable agriculture, pollution and pesticides are contributors to rapid extinction (Earth Day Network, 2018). Kolbert describes the sixth mass extinction that is unfolding before our eyes. "There have been five comparable crises in the history of life on Earth," she writes, "but this one is different: It's being caused by us" (Kinzig, 2014).

Equally dramatic has been the growing trend toward nationalism around the world, an apparently increasing need to distinguish between "them" and "us", the people or nations we trust and those we can't, don't or won't. People fleeing oppression and violence in search of refuge are increasingly met with resistance wherever they go. Though we haven't yet begun to experience the massive migration to occur as communities along coastlines lose landmass to seawaters (Wallace-Wells, 2019).

Ideological polarities, such as, progressivism vs. conservatism and socialism vs. capitalism appear to be solidifying in the minds of neighbors, acquaintances, and family members who once shared similar enough views they could have thoughtful conversations about differing perspectives. Religious intolerance, growing disparity between the wealthy and poor, institutionalized injustices toward women and people of color, are examples of the complex variables that contribute to the steady hum of dissonance that too often erupts in random displays of hatred and violence.

While much good has happened in the last 12 years; overall, it's hard to say things have gotten better. It's as if the complex, unprecedented challenges of our day have prompted responses within society that are pushing us farther away from understanding ourselves and each other as part of the interrelated and interdependent web of life on earth.

Sam, I welcome you to the ranks of grownups who not only care about people, the natural environment, and finding solutions to the dilemmas we have created for ourselves, but are also willing to explore what it means to be a sustainability leader.

What Does It Mean to Be a Leader for Sustainability?

We learned a long time ago that meaning is in people, not words (Korzybski, 1958). When working with others I've found that tying down concepts according to textbook meanings tends to hamper the thinking processes underneath what it takes to bring a term such as "sustainability" to life in each situation. Though we can ground our thinking about sustainability in the Brundtland and United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987)—essentially, living today without compromising the resources needed for others to live in the future.

Numerous writers have adapted the concept of sustainability to fit business (Elkington, 1998) and community planning (Steward and Kuska, 2011) as well as other applications and contexts. Collectively, they tend to feature concern for the natural environment in concert with interrelated concerns for people, profitability, economic and socio-cultural realities, technologies and public policies.

Though whatever the application, for me, sustainability thinking and action becomes meaningful when people begin to consciously shift how they see themselves in relation to one another and the complex processes of life that are occurring in and around them every day (Ferdig and Ludema, 2004).

A "leader," as we use the term at the Sustainability Leadership Institute (SLI), is anyone—regardless of background, social standing, expertise or positional power—who takes responsibility for understanding and generating workable solutions WITH others for the ordinary and overwhelming challenges we encounter day-to-day.

Leadership, in SLI's view, is about the capacity to engage generatively with others to resolve problems, make decisions, and participate in meaningful action. It requires a conscious shift in how we see ourselves in relation to others and how we consciously or unconsciously assume the role of leader in today's society. It means letting go of the idea of leader as the one who knows, who is a visionary, strategist, expert, or the one who provides direction for a pathway forward. It also means letting go of self-certainty and ego that smart, often passionate, people who may think of themselves as leaders, tend to carry along with themselves as they offer their solutions and presume to guide others toward their suggested solutions for success.

There are innumerable books, models and theories of leadership that have direct relevance for sustainability leaders ranging from transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), to transactional leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994), democratic leadership (Lewin et al., 1939), self-organizing leadership (Knowles, 2002), distributed leadership (Vygotsky, 1978; Spillane et al., 2004), participative leadership (House et al., 2004), resilient leadership (Duggan, 2009; Everly Jr. et al., 2009), regenerative leadership (Hardman, 2011), and collaborative leadership (Chrislip and Larson, 1994). Though none I've studied so far focus specifically on the perspective and practice of generative engagement as highlighted in this chapter, and which, I assert, is a fundamental component of leadership for sustainability.

The human heart longs for the health, safety and well-being for ourselves, our families, colleagues, neighbors, and by extension, people in our communities around the world. We long for a healthy earth, healthy democracies, healthy places to live and work with colleagues, friends and our families that sustain us. This longing surely transcends national identity, political party, economic standing, ethnic origin, and differences in our education.

Sustainability leaders recognize and tap into human longings in themselves and others. They recognize the dissonant undercurrent that appears to be growing stronger, louder, and more menacing each day. They work at becoming informed and aware, inspiring themselves, friends, family and neighbors to participate in meaningful change.

No doubt our ranks are growing. More and more businesspeople, social entrepreneurs, community activists, natural and social scientists, foundation administrators, and everyday neighbors are waking up and talking about the threats we are facing. Universities are embracing interdisciplinary sustainability-related curricula and forming consortiums with other universities for sustainability-minded activity (Hardman, 2011). Even a few politicians are speaking up about the threats of climate change (Hirji, 2019).

However, if we're serious about leading sustainability thinking and action, we must learn what it means to engage generatively, beginning within ourselves and working outwardly to engage with others and our circumstances locally and globally. Below are some keys for getting started (Table 1).

Table 1 Twelve keys to generative engagement as leadership for sustainability.

1. Discerning the Generative Engagement Difference
2. Understanding Human Engagement through the Lens of Science
3. Dancing with Rhythms of Change
4. Appreciating Institutions as Verbs
5. Recognizing Unique Lifeviews and Embedded Cultural Paradigms
6. Practicing Conscious Awareness
7. Pausing, Reflecting, Meditating
8. Being Ourselves with Others
9. Managing Ourselves
10. Embracing Conflict Fearlessly
11. Watching our Language
12. Learning as a Way of Life

Twelve Keys for Understanding and Practicing Generative Engagement as Leadership for Sustainability

Over a lifetime of observations, experiences and study, I've learned that challenges are best resolved among those who are most immediately impacted by them, and who chose to engage in authentic interaction—whether in workplaces, boardrooms, city council meetings or living rooms. Further, I've learned that the processes for finding workable solutions are significantly enhanced by relational qualities of freedom, inclusion, inquiry, spontaneity and a shared belief in what's possible (Ferdig and Ludema, 2004).

Action research (McNiff, 2017; Reason and Bradbury-Huang, 2001) —systematic learning while doing— coupled with grounded theory development (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) have particular application in social science research in which circumstances call for immediate action, and learning occurs in the processes of participating in the development and practice of alternative actions. My tenure at a Midwestern electric power utility, as well as consultancy in the utility industry, small businesses, government, and nonprofit organizations, not to mention my personal and family relationships, have provided innumerable opportunities for formal and informal action research and learning as well as on-the-ground theory development.

Below, I describe 12 keys for understanding and practicing what I refer to as "generative engagement" developed from my accumulated learnings. I present them as an invitation to consider and begin to experiment with generative practices. Please note the terms "communication" and "human interaction" are used interchangeably with the term "engagement"

1. Discerning the Generative Engagement Difference

   Communication—engaging with others and the world around us—is at the center of everything we do. We learned at birth it was an effective means of exercising power and control to get what we want in the form of food and warmth. As we matured we refined our ability to engage strategically: we learned stuff in school, how to have fun, make friends, get dates and ultimately engage with others in our work and personal lives to help make things happen.

   Ego and self-interest have a way of creeping into our strategic engagement. Persuading people of our ideas because we believe they will benefit the greater good can be an ego-driven trap. Deception, too, is an engagement strategy for achieving our goals; information can be distorted, withheld, or generalized rendering it misrepresentative or meaningless.

   Generative engagement doesn't resort to deception, manipulation or planned strategic advantages to achieve preconceived outcomes. Reciprocal engagement requires an awareness of our interactive and interdependent processes for generating life as it is occurring in the present moment. At the core of generative engagement are humility, a spirit of inquiry and an ethical responsibility to self and other. It means consciously bringing into existence with others what is mutually valued: for example, understanding, trust, good ideas, goodwill, forgiveness, hope, and synergistic energy for finding sustainable solutions.

   We choose to engage generatively because we know that our own well-being, and that of those we love, depend on the well-being of the interconnected, interdependent network of life of which we are an inseparable part.

2. Understanding Human Engagement through the Lens of Science

   The sciences of physics, biology, chemistry, computer technology and others have given credence to an emerging view of our reality not unlike the view that philosophers and spiritual teachers have been telling us for centuries: everything is interconnected. Not only are matter and energy—living and nonliving—interconnected and interdependent, they are continually moving and changing in response to one another and their circumstances through self-organizing interactions (Kauffman, 1995).

   Complexity is simply a term that describes life as it's happening. It reflects the continuous life-giving processes of interaction among entities—atoms, molecules, organs, humans, plants, animals, ecosystems, cities, states, planetary bodies—that create connection, movement and change through relational interdependence. Complexity processes reveal anomalies and paradoxes that appear naturally in ongoing interactions; turbulence can build on itself, sometimes creating major perturbations that result in radical shifts in the interactive patterns, structural form and physical identity (Prigogine, 1996; Lichtenstein, 2000).

Focusing on human processes of interaction from a complexity perspective has profound implications for how we choose to see the world and ourselves in it, and how we choose to think and behave with one another in everyday circumstances. Everything we do involves interaction in some form whether planting petunias, making a cup of tea or cocreating societies, governments, cities, products, services, wealth, poverty, climate change, other problems and their solutions. We are, right now—every moment—cocreating the world in which we live though our interactions within ourselves, with each other and our environments.

The frequency of interconnectivity among people and ideas, and the speed with which volumes of information can be accessed as a result of the internet, reveal valuable information in new configurations that contribute to previously unimaginable solutions. Though information exposure can also make it difficult to discern that which is valid from that which is wrong-headed, incomplete, obsolete and intentionally deceptive.

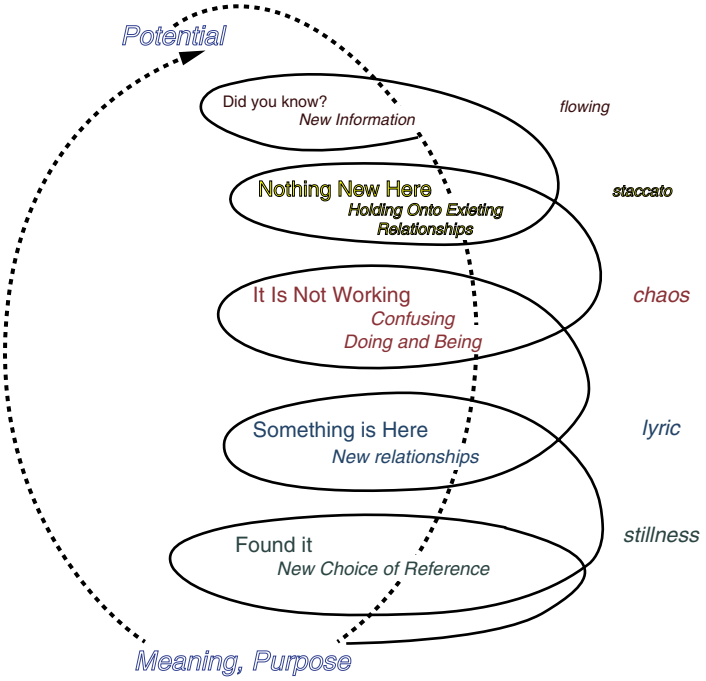
The processes by which we humans engage with one another and circumstances in our individual worlds—all seven billion six hundred million and counting of us—impact our relationships with one another and our natural world wherever we are (Louv, 2012).

3. Dancing With the Rhythms of Change

Learning to understand, accept, and navigate the complexity around us flies in the face of everything we think we know. It asks us to detach ourselves from desired outcomes, to let go of certainty, control and predictability in favor of emerging possibilities. It invites us to rethink the experience of changing.

Moore (2002) drafted a sketch to conceptualize the rhythms of change from a complexity perspective (Table 2).

Table 2 The rhythms of change.



Potential represents infinite possibilities, mostly unimagined; it is complex, unbounded, unquantifiable, unqualifiable.

Flowing is the first rhythm of change as we think conceptually. When energy and information are flowing and we are moving with the flow, our own energy is in sync with what is unfolding. We move along without disruption. Things are as we expect them to be.

Flowing is interrupted by the sensation of *Staccato*, a feeling of being abruptly disconnected. Some complexity writers might call this a perturbation, a subtle indication that something is changing. We may feel startled, surprised, jarred or blocked in some way.

When information continues to be so disconfirming that we literally feel things are breaking apart, we are in the abyss of *Chaos*. Our mental models for making sense of things no longer hold up. We try to control, hang on, leave, dispel our anxiety by doing something . . . anything. Nothing seems to work.

When we are learning, we lean into our anxiety. We see that our resistance can teach us about what is important to us and why it is worth saving, or not. In *Lyric*, which is light and graceful, we slow down so we can attend to what has emerged. Our energy is paced, we are able to rest and think more clearly.

When we move into *Stillness*, we see ourselves differently. Our choices of reference—how we refer to ourselves in the new scheme of things—develop and expand. We begin to identify with a larger whole—something outside of ourselves that has value for us. We have a greater sense of relatedness and connection which quiets and replenishes us.

(Moore, 2002)

While Moore's drawing implies a linear progression through change, we know from experience that changing is anything but linear and orderly. Most of us have likely experienced a crisis in some form and found that we did, indeed, know how to recover and adapt to the new situation.

4. Appreciating Human Systems as Verbs

We tend to think of human systems as nouns, a reasonably stable entity with a boundary and identity to which we attribute objective, solid, human-like characteristics. Doing so lets us get away with assuming, when a problem arises, that it's a "systems problem." This way of thinking, speaking and behaving tends to reinforce a belief that "the problem is out of my hands," and, instead, is lurking somewhere in a dark corner of a system (Stacey, 2000a,b). As a result, nothing much changes, if at all.

Similarly, we tend to anthropomorphize a system's workings as if it's a human being. An organization is said to have a vision, mission and human-like values. Systems are often accused of not communicating with one another. The US Supreme Court even passed a ruling that says corporations possess personhood distinct from the individual human beings that comprise them, that is, their owners or stockholders, members of their boards of directors, managers and employees.

Complexity-process thinking reminds us that corporations, institutions, organizations, and other so-called systems comprised of human beings are, in fact, not nouns. They are processes of movement and change among people who are in continuous interaction with one another and their circumstances in relatively close proximity (electronically or physically) within more or less permeable boundaries.

Social theorists (Stacey, 2000a,b; Mead, 1934; Elias, 1989) suggest that an organization, or a collective of individuals, and the respective individuals participating in interactions related to the collective are two aspects of the same moving, changing, self-organizing and evolving processes, each forming and being formed by the other through continuous interaction in relationship as depicted by the Möbius strip below (Fig. 1).

Interdependence among elements of a moving, changing phenomenon suggests each is both enabled and constrained by the other in fluid self-organizing processes of interaction. The phenomenon of enabling constraints within the self-organizing processes of interaction represent a naturally-occurring means of control that inhibits the possibility of "spinning out of control" as more traditional thinkers might worry about.

Fig. 1 A Möbius strip while it appears to have two sides has a surface with only one side and only one boundary. It has the mathematical property of being unorientable. As such, it serves as a metaphor for the inseparable relationship between the individual and the collective, each forming and being formed by the other.

5. Recognizing Contrasting Lifeviews and Embedded Cultural Paradigms

Each of us processes information through our unique lifeview filters. No two lifeviews are identical any more than our finger prints are identical. Our lifeviews are the result of our unique genetic makeup coupled with our accumulated experiences and influences since birth. Our lifeview filters tend to dictate how we see, interpret and understand what is going on around us, which in turn, inform our communicating actions. Included in our lifeviews are embedded cultural paradigms—worldviews—of which we are mostly unaware (Bois, 1978).

Most of us are familiar with Kuhn's (1997) idea of a "scientific paradigm" as an accepted theoretical framework in any particular discipline; and a "paradigm shift" as a revolutionary phase when discontinuities and anomalies in a particular discipline begin to erode long-held assumptions that prompt conceptual breakthroughs to new ways of understanding the natural world. The transition from Newtonian mechanics to quantum physics is an example.

One can trace elements of a still dominant cultural paradigm—worldview—in Western society today at least to the mid-17th century when empirical positivistic science methods, relying on reductionism, proofs of linear causality, measurement and objective determinations of truth or falsity prevailed.

Discoveries in positivistic science, in turn, fueled an industrial revolution that flourished about a hundred years later in the mid-to late 18th century. As manufacturing became the new driver or progress, scientific management (Taylor, 1911) and organizational structures (Weber, 1983) that featured hierarchy, control, standardization and measurement for organizing people and their work became commonplace in factories, workplaces, the military complex and ultimately educational and public governance institutions. Economic systems favored competition, profitability and accumulated wealth. Exploitation of natural and human resources contributed to the engine of a prospering society.

Generative engagement invites us to examine our ingrained lifeviews and cultural worldviews—assumptions and beliefs to which we've been enculturated and likely can't see them as anything other than "the way things are." Complexity-thinking

in science is contributing to emerging conceptual views about how the world works and where humans stand in relation to the processes of life occurring in and around us. On one hand, we know about and espouse these new conceptual views as we go about our business. On the other, if we look closely at ourselves and others in the context of our everyday interactions, we can begin to notice the extent to which we're still mostly stuck in traditional ways of thinking and behaving.

Table 3 illustrates a distinction in embedded worldviews. By now I'm sure you've noticed the inherent flaw in the table as it appears. Presenting information as an either/or dichotomy is itself a reflection of a traditional point of view. While doing so may be a useful device for explaining variations of thinking, it entirely misrepresents the both/and features of our paradoxical reality.

Table 3 Traditional worldview of reality and expanding worldview of reality.

Traditional worldview of our reality	*Expanding worldview of our reality*
Characterized by proven claims of what is so grounded in positivistic, reductionist, empirical observation implying objectivity, certainty and predictability.	Characterized by provisional claims of what is so which acknowledges the *paradoxical nature* of continually moving, changing, self-organizing processes of life emerging and, therefore, presumes objectivity and subjectivity, certainty and uncertainty, predictability and unpredictability occurring at the same time.
People observe reality from a position outside of the phenomena they observe and, therefore, can make objective claims about the truth or falsity of characteristics of said reality.	People are an inseparable part of the reality they observe; therefore, their observations, interpretations and claims about the truth or falsity of characteristics of said reality are inherently and paradoxically both subjective and objective and cannot be otherwise.
Knowledge is an accumulation of proven truths in the form of aggregated empirical data derived from controlled experiments and studies.	Knowledge is an accumulation of provisional truths in the form of patterns, themes and successive approximations derived from documented participant-observations occurring in a particular situation.
Change occurs in primarily linear and logical pathways forward in time and space leading from cause(s) to effect(s) and, therefore, are presumed to be reasonably predictable. If *this* happens, then we can expect *that* result.	Change emerges in linear and nonlinear, logical and nonlogical, pathways in the context of complex, self-moving self-organizing interactions and, therefore, a presumed to be predictably unpredictable and unpredictably predictable.
People can effectively control, manage, and influence outcomes by way of the power (in its various forms) they hold in relation to others.	People have limited ability to control, manage, and influence emerging outcomes given the dynamic power relationships inherent in the complex interactive processes of life happening.
Power can be attained and held by individuals and groups through various means (e.g., knowledge, information, position, physical force, and psychological manipulation) often unequal in relation to others.	Power is relational process that continually moves and changes in the context of complex interactions among individuals and groups in relation to their moving and changing circumstances. The relational and unequal power dynamics create natural tension that both *enables* and *constrains* emerging self-organizing outcomes within limits of control.
Disagreement and conflict are the result of two or more individuals, and/or the organizations with which they identify, drawing inaccurate conclusions about an objective reality.	Disagreement and conflict are natural processes among individuals, and/or the organizations with which they identify, as they seek understanding of one another's unique perspective of a moving and changing reality.
A paradox is contradictory information creating confusion, misunderstanding and, therefore, is a problem to be solved.	Paradox is a common feature of complex interactive movement and change creating dissonance that contributes to emerging novelty and change.
Human engagement represents strategic human interaction for accomplishing desired outcomes, i.e., achieving agreement, developing a relationship, managing a work group, or expanding knowledge and understanding needed to fulfill individual, organizational or community objectives.	Human engagement represents complex processes of human interaction occurring between and among interrelated, interdependent people engaging in a self-organizing phenomena of life perpetuating itself

Generative engagement may be best understood from an expanded postpositivistic, complexity point of view; however, there are times when more direct, controlled and predictive thinking and action may be called for. The value of starting from an expanded perspective is that the choice to operate from a traditionalist point of view in a particular set of circumstances involves conscious, self-monitored interaction intended to contribute to the overall generative dynamics for cocreating workable outcomes for a particular challenge.

6. Practicing Conscious Awareness

We all presume to be conscious when were not in bed, asleep or anesthetized on an operating table. And certainly we're aware of what's going on around us just to make it through a day. So what's the big deal about conscious awareness?

From a generative engagement point of view, conscious awareness is an art to be developed and continually practiced. It mostly means intentionally paying attention to what's less visible in and around the things that grab our attention. It means being sensitive to human energies and values in the present—our own and others—rather than blindly forging ahead doing what we choose to do without considering the impact of our interactions with others (Scharmer, 2009).

Conscious awareness is a meta activity, something for which humans have a distinct advantage over most other life forms (Bois, 1978). For example, we are able to think about our thinking—which is a form of engaging with ourselves. In so doing, we might choose to challenge our long-held assumptions about a belief that may no longer hold water.

Conscious awareness—intentionally noticing—provides information from which we can evaluate and adjust our real-time interactions with an intention of cocreating space for generating understanding and mutually advantageous outcomes with another. Below are areas on which to focus one's awareness.

Being Aware of Oneself—The better you know yourself and the more comfortable you are in your own skin, the easier it is to be your authentic self with others. In addition to observing yourself in action and making real-time adjustments to strengthen a generative dynamic, you might also journal your thoughts before or after the fact. That act of writing can increase your clarity.

Being Aware of Others—This is the time to practice empathy, no matter how far you are from relating to another individual. Acknowledge the whole person: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. What are they experiencing? thinking? feeling? What might have influenced their lifeview? Listen genuinely. Open yourself to learning. Check out your understanding of what you are hearing and seeing with them.

Being Aware of Immediate Dynamics and the Larger Context—Pay attention to nonverbal communication, that is, tone, expressions, posture, attitudes of people involved. Notice the feeling in the air, the invisible energy in the room. Do your homework to scan the larger environment of things that might affect the immediate circumstances and interactions as well as multiple perspectives related to the challenge at hand.

7. Pausing, Reflecting or Meditating

   Stop! Let your practices for enhancing your awareness catch up with you. Find a dark sky and look up at the stars. Or a closet. Breath slowly and deeply while you're there.

   There are no rules for pausing, reflecting or meditating. Though doing so often requires deliberate action in our crazy, busy, high-pressure realities. The benefits, according to testimony by many who have learned to make this a daily practice, are many.

   An NYU study of 20 meditators (Buddhist monks and nuns) detected numerous neurological benefits from meditating: (1) cultivates attentional skills, (2) points to an ability of the brain to change and optimize itself, (3) reduces the psychological wall between meditator and his environment, and (4) facilitates naturally-occurring self-reflection (Danzico, 2011).

   There are as many ways to pause and meditate as there are people who do so: guided meditation, meditation with music, with others, lying down, standing up, seated a certain way, walking, or enthroned on a mountaintop.

   Try closing your eyes and breathing deeply: in 1-2-3-4; hold 1-2-3-4, out 1-2-3-4, hold 1-2-3-4 and repeat for 2 min, then 10 min, working up to longer. Empty your mind of thoughts; when a thought appears, gently push it away. Be patient with yourself. It gets easier with practice.

8. Being Ourselves with Others

   To be oneself with others is yet another paradox. We instinctively try to fit in with the crowd, put on our professional selves with clients, or put on our attractive, clever selves when going out on a promising date. We also know the feeling of being our "shoes off" selves when we're at home with trusted friends and family members.

   Maybe there are parts of your core self you don't like and want to keep to yourself. Or maybe you think you won't measure up to who you want people to think you are, or what they expect you to be. Who is the real self in these situations? Of course they're all real. And yet, there's a core of who you are that sits at the center of your soul. That's the part that people want to know—and the part you want them to know when you're communicating generatively.

   Being ourselves with others is a practice in honesty—first with ourselves (Morgan, 1976). Remind yourself of core integrity questions: Who Am I? What do I stand for? What am I up to? What do I hope to accomplish here? now? before I die? Speak truthfully. Tell it straight. Aim for transparency. But mostly, cut yourself some slack. You are a worthy person as you are. Be that person with others.

9. Managing Ourselves

   As practices one through eight above imply, the only person over whom we have any significant control is ourselves and our own thinking and behavior (Stacey, 2000a,b). Others may choose to emulate our orientation and behaviors and, thus, relax into the rhythms and energy of participation, collaboration and co-construction of a shared reality. Or they may not.

   Multiple orders of self—A simple way to imagine your capacity to manage yourself in the present moment is to think of multiple orders of yourself occurring simultaneously, each self having slightly more insight and control over the self just below. Your ACTOR self is at the base tier of being, and just above is the OBSERVER self that may have just watched the ACTOR self say something snarky to the difficult person you are negotiating with. The THEORIZER self above OBSERVER self recognizes that the snarky comment is not at all helpful for encouraging the generative dynamic you're hoping to cocreate with this person for finding genuine solutions. The DIRECTOR self, just above the OBSERVER self realizes the ACTOR self needs to act fast, humble itself immediately, and try to say something encouraging to dampen the expressed negativity (Bois, 1978). Most of us probably do some version of managing ourselves as described, but may not consciously direct our attention to do so when we are consumed with our ACTOR self doing its own thing in the dynamic swirl.

   Assume personal responsibility—Assuming responsibility for our own thinking and actions that contribute—or not—to generative engagement may seem like a no brainer. Though in the heat of interacting with, say, belligerent or ill-informed people, assuming responsibility for generating understanding (Stacey, 2000a,b) goes a long way toward building relationships and resolving mutual challenges.

   Hold ourselves accountable—Veteran Organization Development professionals, Howard and Sue Lamb, once introduced a term—DWYSYWD—to a power plant maintenance crew with whom we were working. The acronym stood for *D*o *W*hat *Y*ou *S*ay *Y*ou *W*ill *D*o. The next day the crew plastered a big sign on the power plant wall: DWYSYWD! I've noticed people come up

with all kinds of creative tricks for holding themselves and each other accountable, once they acknowledge to themselves their responsibility for doing so.

Seek feedback—Talk to other people, your collaborators, workmates, nemeses and so on. How do they experience you and does it match how you see yourself? Sure their views will be subjective. So is yours. Work with it. It's good information.

Listen to ourselves—Trust your inner voice to give you clues, or maybe a shake down, if you're out of sync with what needs to be happening. Are you pretending you can stand outside the circumstances of which you are a part—judging, analyzing, blaming, intervening, advising or attempting to fix a problem? Or are you participating with a genuine intention to generate understanding and possibilities with people in a situation you probably helped to create?

Move with relational power dynamics—Power, too, moves through interactive processes instead of being held as a possession by some, and not others. While some people are more enabled or constrained than others at any given point thus making the relative distribution of power unequal, in time, people and circumstances inevitably shift and evolve in the dynamic interrelationship (Elias, 1989; Stacey, 2000b). It make sense to be aware of changing relational power dynamics and move with them.

10. Embracing Conflict Fearlessly, Openly and Respectfully

    Conflict is a natural phenomenon of our interactive processes and a fruitful source of learning and change that many of us haven't yet learned to appreciate and fully utilize. In fact, unless we're drawn to exacerbate conflict in what we see as a zero-sum game of COMPETITION seeking to win whatever the cost, we tend to turn ourselves inside out and upside down to ACCOMMODATE others, thereby failing to assert a potentially useful point of view, or to simply AVOID conflict altogether. We're sometimes able to get to a COMPROMISE through constructive interaction, each party giving up some to reach a workable agreement. Though, ideally, we COLLABORATE with the intention of jointly creating new ideas and better solutions than anyone could think up alone (Thomas, 1976).

    In the cases of compromise and collaboration, we first have to acknowledge and respectfully confront our disagreements. Why not practice openly embracing conflict? Muster your courage and confront the sense of conflict you're experiencing with another respectfully, with empathy and compassion. Talk with them and listen carefully for understanding without trying to persuade them of anything. Think of the amplified emotional dissonance you and others may be experiencing underneath a conflict as a valuable source of creative energy that needs to be tapped.

11. Watching our Language

    We construct our worlds with language and symbols. Yet, in so doing, we tend to forget that our language and symbols are *not* the things they represent, but merely tools we have to work with to generate shared meaning. Further, whatever the words or symbols we use, we can assume our intended meanings are filtered through another's unique lifeview sensory screen and will never be understood exactly as we intend, nor will we understand another's expression exactly as they intend (Bois, 1978).

    This is so even when we communicate as carefully and truthfully as we can. Never mind the way we use language and symbols to intentionally or subconsciously misrepresent reality as we know it to be.

    Nonetheless, there are practices we can use to help us make our language as accurate as possible as we seek to engage generatively with others (Korzybski, 1958; Bois, 1978).

    - Recognize what are referred to as 'over/under-defined' terms, and there are many. Take the words 'sustainability' or 'leadership' as examples. They are under-defined, given that they are abstract terms that are understood uniquely by each who hears and uses them. Yet, they are also over-defined to the extent that would-be experts and writers attempt to nail down with reasonable certainty what the terms mean, and speak of them as if the words-symbols are the things they represent. A sustainability leader practicing generative engagement participates in processes for co-constructing meanings of concepts and terms in the context of their interactions with others in each particular situation.
    - Avoid "allness" words when making a claim. For example, avoid words such as "always," "all," "never," and "absolutely" and so on. Be skeptical of others' claims that include all-inclusive words. Omitting such words helps to qualify the pretense of certainty. Rarely is anything always the case.
    - Avoid making statements that imply what may have been reasonably true yesterday or a year ago is also true today. For example, "They were resistant to the idea a year ago, though that's not necessarily the case today."
    - Avoid making generalized claims about a group of things on the basis of one or a few occurrences within the group that may appear to be the same but are not. Fearing black men wearing hoodies, suspecting police officers of corruption, or distrusting politicians are thought traps in which it's easy to get caught when we read news stories of specific incidents.
    - Adding simple qualifiers to your claims can do the trick. State what's true for you without assuming its true for anyone else. For example, "I have it be that you're entirely overreacting!" Other examples of qualifiers: "In my opinion, . . . ," "The last time I saw him . . .," "From my point of view, . . .," "This may be the case, depending on . . .," "In this particular situation, . . .," For me,. . .

12. Learning as a Way of Life

    One can't engage generatively without presuming there is more to learn in any situation. We each naturally filter whatever gets through our mental membrane just to make sense of the infinite stimuli bombarding us every moment. Therefore, we can assume information is left out, maybe really important information (Korzybski, 1958; Bois, 1978). Further, because of our complex, ever-moving and changing reality, nothing—including what we think we know for certain—stays the same from one

moment, year, decade to the next (Stacey, 2000a,b). Information begets information, learning begets learning, new insights and discoveries are generated every day just as misinformation and false truths are generated, and sometimes actively disseminated, daily.

Thinking critically—evaluating the veracity of information we take in—is a very real part of learning as a way of life. Critical thinkers are skeptics—the opposite of a 'true believer' described by Hoffer (2010). Critical thinkers question, demand multiple points of view and validation for claims they and others make. Critical thinkers know there is seldom a single right answer to resolve a complex a challenge. Instead, they engage with others to expand their understanding and points of view in the processes of generating possibilities.

Two professors at the University of Washington, USA, designed and cotaught a course entitled, "Calling Bullshit: Data Reasoning in a Digital World." Their goal is to attract students of every discipline and expose "one specific facet of bullshit" a week, thus enabling students to discern the veracity of information they hear in the news (McWilliam, 2019). This is a great example of learning as a way of life!

Action research and learning, the notion of formally and informally observing and learning while doing, as well as reflecting on what was learned after a situation, has already been mentioned as a key to understanding and practicing sustainability leadership as generative engagement.

Conclusion

My hope is that as you've been reading, you've been giving consideration to the idea of leadership for sustainability *as* generative engagement for understanding and responding to the dilemmas before us. Perhaps you'll experiment with some of the practices. Maybe you'll share an idea or two with others who care about humanity, the natural environment, and what it is we can do to begin to shift the trends of destruction, exploitation and inequity in our local and global communities. Our ability to engage generatively with ourselves, one another and our environments may be the sole means for evolving ourselves collectively toward a life-giving consciousness and future.

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