

## *Developing leaders for uncertain times*

### *Bruce Nixon*

#### **A transforming world**

Suddenly, it seems, we have awakened to the twin threats of climate change and Peak Oil. It is the biggest crisis in human history. Nations will be forced to collaborate if Spaceship Earth is to survive as we have known it. The global economy, and our unsustainable lifestyles, based on abundant cheap oil, will be transformed. The process has already begun.

The world calls out for principled, courageous leadership. For nations and businesses to manage their way through this transformation will require exceptional leadership as never before. Leaders face adapting to quantum change whilst trying to ensure the survival and prosperity of their organisations in a turbulent global economy. It will mean people at every level taking responsibility, giving their leadership.

The best response for everyone is to see the crisis as an opportunity for a better, saner world (more about this in a later article). Human beings are essentially creative. Already, countless initiatives and innovations are emerging.

It is a major opportunity for HR, as facilitators or internal consultants, to help their organisations play their part and develop leadership for uncertain times. This article suggests how.

#### **Organisations, today, need servant leaders who see themselves as global citizens.**

They need to be absolutely honest with people about the situation and set and articulate a clear, consistent and inspiring strategy, determined by fully involving stakeholders and people “on the ground”. This requires skill in processes for involving people that encourage them to see possibilities and take responsibility. It means knowing how to create a culture that releases the energy and spirit of everyone in the organisation. Among the vital qualities needed in responding to this challenging, constantly shifting situation are: an open and rigorously questioning mind that welcomes contrary and diverse views; courage and integrity; humility and self-awareness; not being resistant or in denial. Modelling such behaviours for others is crucial.

Because of the degree of complexity and uncertainty, a more complex approach to leadership is needed than got us by in the past – not so much a heroic approach but a more enabling one.

*“In our experience, enormous struggles with implementation are created every time we **deliver** changes to the organisation rather figuring out how to involve people in their creation.”* **Wheatley, M and Kellner-Rogers, M**

We need to understand how organisations actually change. Organisations, like life, cannot be controlled and are not like machines. They are self-generating, living systems. As well as requiring direction, they change and adapt through informal social networks, as much as through formal structures.

There are two ways of creating the future. Change is designed in our imagination but it also emerges. So, leaders need to do **two** things exceptionally well. On the one hand, they have to **offer an appealing message** about purpose, values, vision, direction and culture. On the other, they need to **enable** the organisation – to respond, adapt, create, re-create and replace itself as a living system.

**Developing Strategic Leaders: Leadership is best learned by doing, rather than talking about it and then trying to do it afterwards — maybe!**

*“The right way to do things is not to persuade people you’re right but to challenge them to think it through for themselves.” Chomsky*

Leadership development processes need to reflect these realities and be “real time”. That means participants actually do the work of leading and learn in so doing. They plan and implement strategic change, reflect on what they have done, cope with the complexity and uncertainty of it, and develop the skills required.

In such a development experience, they experience how change emerges in a living system; that transformation can be encouraged but not controlled; that chaos, confusion and resistance are part of the process of creative change and adaptation to a new situation. They handle complexity and ambiguity and thrive on uncertainty. They get a real, living experience of all this.

The essence is to create a situation where people can learn by doing – transforming their organisation and learning at the same time. Doing is worth far more than a lot of talk. There is no problem transferring learning to their work in the organisation because they are learning, leading and transforming the organisation all at the same time. Given the appropriate understanding and support at the top and a spirit of partnership, it works brilliantly. It provides a model of how to bring about transformation and of how things can be in an organisation – a model we develop together as we learn how to do it.

The following is a simple explanation of such an approach.

### **Basic Principles**

Here are the basic principles:

**Fig 1      “Real Time” Leadership Development**

- The subject matter is your business – the opportunities and issues you face
- Transforming the organisation and learning at the same time
- **Not training but** “real time” - the two modes do not mix successfully

- The programme has a clear business purpose and a practical pay off
- Partnership — all share responsibility; all learning and making mistakes
- You are experts on your business; you are the stars
- Facilitators focus on the process for business transformation and learning; saying things that aren't being said
- They support and challenge.
- They create ownership - hand over, but stay involved
- Passion; be who you are; excellence; create a new exciting culture; learn from difference; celebrate
- Reflect, review, give and receive feedback, learn from each other
- Flexibility to respond to everyone's unique needs
- Long term strategy and support for transforming the business, fundamental shifts in culture, mind-set and habits
- Think whole system; whole person: mind, heart, energy and spirit — holistic

### **What it is and how it works - a strategic approach**

The approach has to be long term. Change cannot be brought about by one workshop, without follow-up and continuing, consistent support. Most research into change efforts reports that 75% to 85 % fail to deliver the hoped for results, partly because people are not properly involved and supported and partly because the efforts are not sustained long enough before some new magic is tried. People in organisations become increasingly cynical as a result. For it to work, there needs to be a strategy for building readiness; consulting and involving key stakeholders, including the participants; creating understanding of the approach and of the support that is needed, particularly at the top.

Partnership and personal responsibility is a key part of a successful long-term intervention – a partnership between everyone involved: consultant, stakeholders, making full use of the skills, knowledge and understanding each has.

Here is the structure.

#### **Fig 2                    A Strategic Approach**

##### **Build a partnership within the Organization**

- Build a partnership with the Chief Executive (whoever is the ultimate “client”)
- Create values, purpose and vision
- Identify the key issues of the organization
- Develop strategy together
- Clarify your respective roles and contributions

##### **Building Readiness and Planning**

- Contracting and planning with CE and his team: diagnosis; the business purpose; support they need to give; involving stakeholders

- Consultations with participants - identify their needs and how they want to use the programme – and other stakeholders about the organisation and what needs to change; validate the diagnosis, purpose, objectives and design; build a team of facilitators

**Workshop 1**

- first workshop to develop vision, purpose and strategy

**Implementation**

- initial period of implementation; networking and meeting in support groups

**Workshop 2**

- a second workshop to review progress, learn from what has happened, work on key issues, plan and propose how the change strategy should evolve

**Building critical mass and sustaining change**

- further, consistent, long term support – determination to see it through.
- participants and other stakeholders plan an emerging strategy to continue and sustain transformation

**The Strategic Leadership Model**

Here is the model that provides the underlying process of the programme. Participants work through this model during the first workshop and throughout the programme.

**Fig 3 STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP MODEL©**

*Getting Sustainability it into the Lifeblood of the Organisation*

(1)

**Global Forces**

What is going on in the world and affecting us?  
Key challenges. What the world requires of us.  
Big issues and **opportunities.**

2)

**Current State**

Rigorous review: how well are we responding; sustainability; good & harm we do; organisational health, culture; key issues;  
**opportunities.**



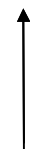
(3)

**Purpose & Values**

(8)

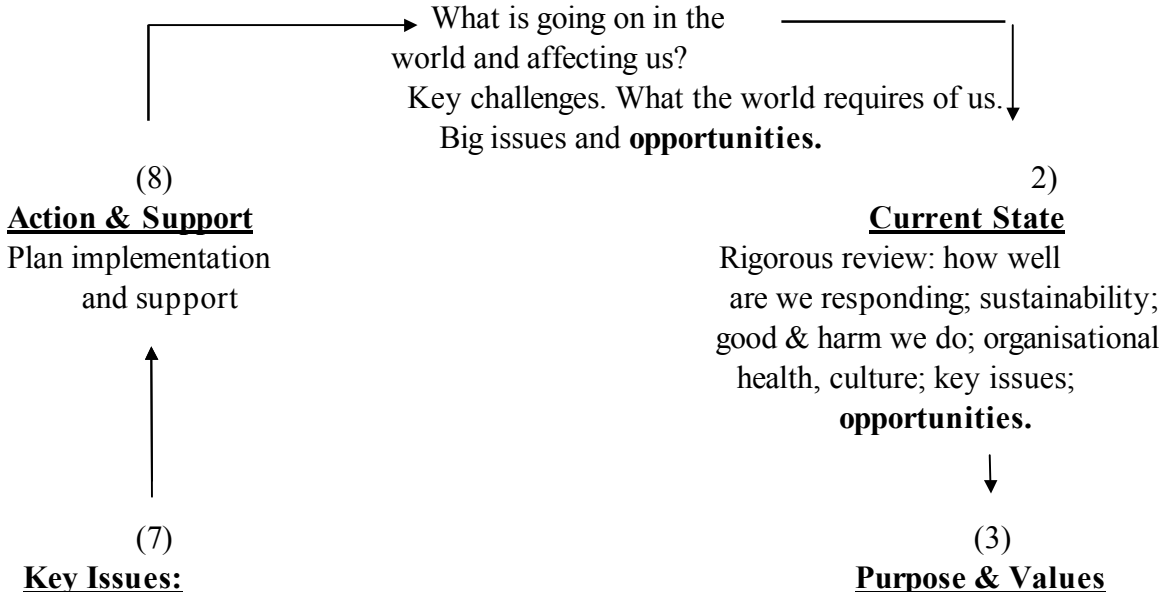
**Action & Support**

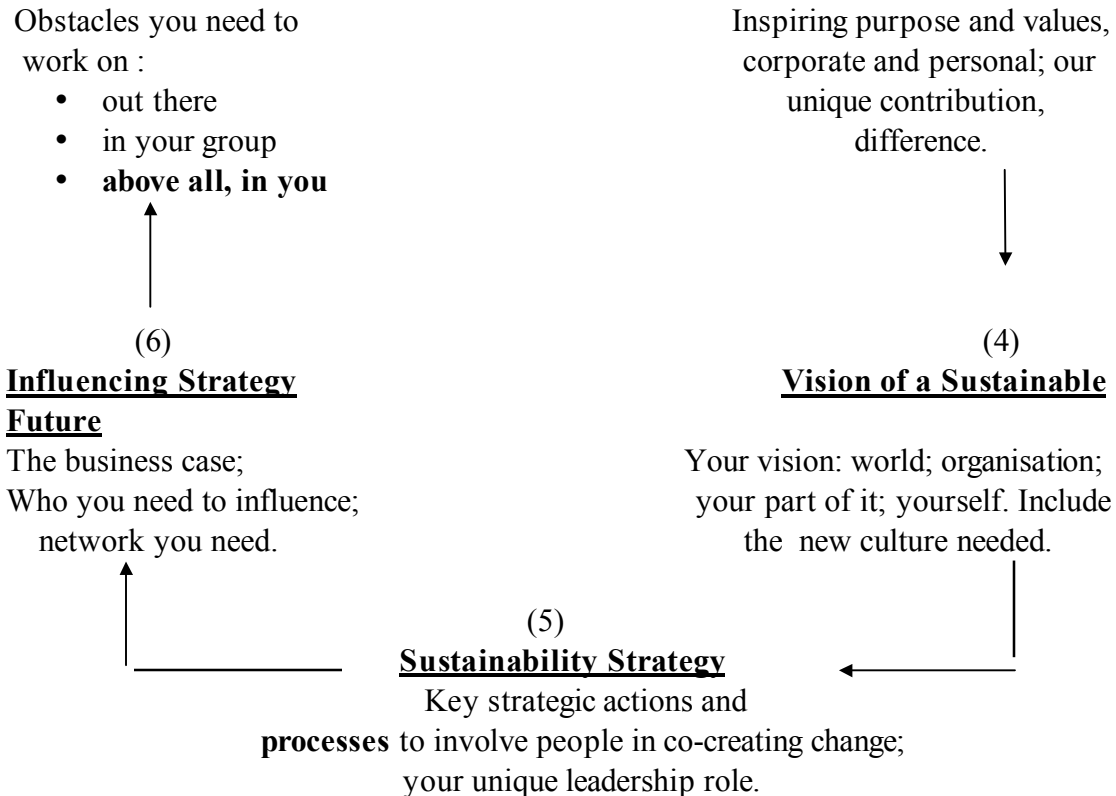
Plan implementation and support



(7)

**Key Issues:**





The really tough development issues emerge at stage 7. Our own development is the key to everything we do. This is the opportunity to face these issues honestly and work on them. We have most power to change our selves. But it is not easy. We need to build an atmosphere of trust in which it feels safe to be honest about ourselves with others.

### **The First Workshop**

The basic structure of the First Workshop, based on this model, looks like this:

**Fig 4    Workshop One - Discovering and following your passion – Using the model.**

- Together create a space and a learning community that liberates everyone’s spirit
- build together a picture of this dramatically changing world
- rigorously review the current state of your business; how well is your business responding to the challenge; identify key issues and opportunities
- define your values and purpose; your unique contribution or difference
- create your vision of a desired future for the world, your organisation and yourself
- develop your strategy and influencing strategy

- “OPEN SPACE\*”: identify and work on your key issues: obstacles and opportunities: - out there; in your group and in you
- plan actions, support; propose emerging strategy to develop critical mass and sustain the work; and review

These are the conditions that we have learned are needed for success. Their absence results in failure or partial success. The organisation spends a large amount of resources; only a few benefit and cynicism is further reinforced.

**Fig 5**                      **CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS – Lessons Learned**

- The full understanding and support of all stakeholders including the CEO and his team; preferably they become full time participants or full time facilitators.
- The programme clearly supports corporate purpose, goals and values
- Partnership: clear contract with stakeholders and participants: shared responsibility for success; learning together; up front about being “real time” approach; commitment
- Ownership: steadily hand over leadership and facilitation; facilitators let go and stay involved
- Build readiness and trust
- People feel safe to risk being themselves; authentic; visionary; free to admit mistakes and learn
- Collaboration, no competition, in the facilitating team
- Balance between being challenging and being supportive
- Acceptance that today we need a whole system approach to change involving all stakeholders. “Get the whole system into the room”
- and a whole person approach to leadership – integrating mind, body heart and spirit
- “Servant Leadership” philosophy
- Congruence – be the change you want to see - if we use old paradigm training and development, we can’t expect people to take their power and lead! You can’t mix modes and expect it to work.
- Continuing, consistent support: follow up and reviews; an emerging long term strategy to embed transformation; not just one event
- Challenging support in tackling the fundamental issues of an organisation and its people, is helped by continuity, not a succession of new initiatives.

It is in the first and the last three bullet points, particularly, that initiatives can founder. Failure to build in continuing, long term support from the start can sabotage the investment. Also, there needs to be a shared diagnosis of key organisation issues that the work will address. Dealing with personal issues requires growing trust and understanding. Resistance will almost always emerge somewhere, somehow, often where least expected. The question is when, where and how. Be open about this from the start and, if it arises, challenge people to work **with** it wisely together.

## **A holistic approach**

Our experience is that an explicitly holistic approach is needed – integrating mind, heart, spirit and body. Energy, spirit and creativity are vital for organisations. These are diminished when people are depleted and burnt out. Excessive stress is a big issue. This is one of the lessons we learned in work like this. People need balance and ways of restoring themselves. The workshops are an opportunity to create a space where people can get in touch with their heart and spirit; where they can be fully who they really are. It means facilitators taking risks and thus making it safe for others to take the risk of being fully human at work. It is important to create an inspiring and liberating atmosphere from the very start. It may help to provide such things as meditation and simple yoga exercises.

Given these conditions the results can be remarkable. People discover they are motivated by their values and passion to create a better world as well as the survival and prosperity of the business. Business isn't just about making profit stock market performance. Sustainable business is also about doing good and avoiding harm in the world. They realise that their leadership and their development are the key to bringing about transformation. They have to empower themselves and others to take leadership. They are likely to say this has been is one of the most valuable work experiences they have ever had.

**\*Footnote:** Knowing how to use Open Space process is an essential for today's leaders. A short guide is Harrison Owen's *Open Space Technology - A Users Guide*, 1998, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco.

## **Resources**

- A model sustainable leader is Ray Anderson, Chairman of Interface, <http://www.interfaceinc.com/who/founder.html>
- The Greenleaf Centre for Servant-Leadership UK - [www.greenleaf.org.uk](http://www.greenleaf.org.uk)
- The invaluable writings of Margaret Wheatley: eg *The Servant Leader- From Hero to Host – An Interview with Margaret Wheatley*, [www.margaretwheatley.com](http://www.margaretwheatley.com)
- Wheatley, M and Kellner-Rogers, M, 1998, "Bringing Life to Organisational Change" *Journal of Strategic Performance Management*, April/May 1998.
- My website [www.brucenixon.com](http://www.brucenixon.com) and books: *Making a Difference— Strategies and Tools for Transforming your Organisation*, 2001; *Living system - making sense of sustainability*, 2006, and *Global Forces — a Guide for Enlightened Leaders — what Companies and Individuals can Do*, 2000, updated 2003, all available from Management Books 2000, ask for special readers price 01285-771441/2 [www.mb2000.com](http://www.mb2000.com)

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© **Bruce Nixon** MA (Oxon), CFCIPD, author, speaker, veteran consultant in sustainability, organisation transformation and learning, mentor, shadow consultant. Berkhamsted, UK [www.bruce-nixon.com](http://www.bruce-nixon.com) tel 01442-864856 [bruce-nixon@waitrose.com](mailto:bruce-nixon@waitrose.com)

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