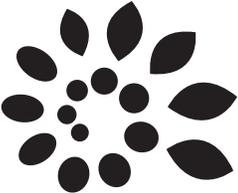


Leading
from
the **Roots**

Nature-Inspired Leadership Lessons for Today's World

Dr. Kathleen E. Allen

Foreword by Carol S. Pearson, PhD., D.Min,
author of *The Transforming Leader*



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CHAPTER ONE

Living Systems, Generous Organizations

Shifting From a Mechanistic To a Biological Worldview

During the twentieth century, we fell in love with the power of the machine. We saw how inventions like the automobile, airplane, computer, robot, and smart phone extended the reach of human beings in profound ways. Modern organizations came into being during the industrial revolution. We took the engineering designs we developed to create machines as models for organizational structures and functions. This machine-thinking even guided how we understood success, how we saw ourselves and treated others, and how we defined what leadership meant. While powerful, this view of the world has left us with enormous social and environmental damage, debts, and dismay. We need a new vision of leadership and organizations that once again extends the reach of human beings, but in very different ways and to very different ends.

Such a shift is underway. The twenty-first century is the Century of Biology (Brown, 2008). Just as the twentieth century looked to machines, the twenty-first century is looking to biology to inform how we think, organize, design, and lead our organizations. More and more, we are turning to nature as our mentor, model, and muse to inform the way we understand organizations and leadership and our aspirations for what our organizations can become. This changes everything.

With this new mindset, the emphasis on replication and uniformity is giving way to valuing and leveraging the uniqueness of culture and context. Instead of mass production, we have mass customization. Where we used to see organizations as objects and the people in them as objects or even as property of the organization, today we see organizations as living, complex, and interdependent systems just as in the natural world. Where we used to not think twice about using tremendous energy to extract value from all types of resources—natural, human and intellectual—now we are looking for ways to leverage our resources in gentler, non-toxic, self-replenishing ways.

When we realize our organizations are living systems rather than inert machines, it becomes clear why many of the traditional ways of leading and organizing don't work. Focusing on making a profit or holding onto power, sets the bar too low and ignores the reality of our interdependent world where connections and actions ripple across systems and create intentional and unintentional consequences. Our traditional way of leading and thinking about organizations has created systemic dysfunction, drama, and trauma in our workplaces. It has led to organizations that are based on consumption—consuming resources, people, and investments—giving little in return and in the long run are unsustainable.

We need a new way of leading that creates organizations that are generous and sustaining, and as such are healthier for the people who work in them, our communities and the planet. Our organizations need to evolve, and our worldview of leadership and its purpose needs to expand.

Organizations Can Evolve:

If we think of organizations as machine-like, then we probably assume we can improve them by reengineering them, but we are unlikely to believe that they evolve. But if we hold that organizations are living systems, then we can assume that organizations can and do, and even should, evolve. And that if these living systems do not evolve, if they do not progress, they may wither and die. We all have seen examples of this with organizations that have lost their purpose, have not stayed current with the marketplace, have consumed all their resources (natural, human, financial), or have been so dysfunctional that they dissolve or fall apart.

Ecosystem Attributes		
Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Emphasis on seeds: rapid growth •High energy consumption, low nutrient conservation •Few species, little symbiosis •Opportunistic consumption of plentiful resources <p>Example: weeds in a newly plowed field</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Emphasis on roots and stems: structures that can last •More balanced energy consumption and nutrient preservation •More species •More patient consumption <p>Example: perennial shrubs and woody seedlings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Emphasis on self-renewal across generations •Creates more nutrients than consumed: a “generous system” •Web-like diversity •Optimal resilience through complex, synergistic relationships <p>Example: mature forest or prairie</p>

Fortunately, we can draw inspiration and lessons for our organizations from Nature’s 3.8 billion years of evolution and thousands of diverse living systems. It has used that time to create Type I, Type II and Type III ecologies, each of which has their counterpart in human organizations.

Type I ecologies are like weeds and annuals. They consume all their nutrients from the soil and don’t contribute anything back. As a result, they are short-lived and not resilient. Organizations that are like Type I ecologies are consumptive. Startup ventures are comparable to Type I ecologies. These

organizations consume their nutrients from the venture capital investments that fund them. They take resources to live, but don't give back to the bottom line. They only continue to live if conditions are favorable. When winter comes (or money runs out), they die.

Type II ecologies are also consumptive. These ecologies are composed of perennials, small shrubs, and short-lived trees. They consume most of their nutrients from the soil and give little back, but they live longer than weeds and annuals because they start to store nutrients for their own use in their roots, tubers, and bulbs. But they still consume more than they contribute.

Organizations that are like Type II ecologies are also consumptive. I like to think of these plants as comparable to organizational silos. In these organizations, departments are separated into silos where they spend much of their energy on their own needs and compete against one another for resources. Organizations at this level of evolution create and sell products to contribute to the organizational resources. They consume more resources than they contribute back to the world. There is a lot of waste to these organizations but sometimes it is hard for us to notice as this is considered normal organizational behavior.

Type III ecologies are complex diverse ecologies such as old growth forests or mature prairies. In these systems, the diverse plant and animal life develop mutually-beneficial relationships that provide nutrients to each other and give nutrients back to the soil. The plant and animal life contribute more to the ecosystem than they use, so life thrives. They are adaptive, self-sustaining, highly resilient and based on generosity. Type III ecologies and analogous organizations are generous systems. Generous organizations are highly productive, innovative, and continually adapt to be resilient—just as in nature. Generous organizations are multi-dimensionally diverse, complex, and interdependent. They welcome the tensions that help them continually adapt and maintain a dynamic equilibrium.

Luckily, we don't have to create generous organizations out of thin air. We already have examples of these kinds of organizations in operation today. We all have experienced or know someone who works in a great organization. At conferences, we hear people say, I love my job or I love my organization. These people know what a generous organization feels like—open, affirming,

innovative— and how it motivates them to engage and contribute at their highest levels of excellence.

*How do we transform our consumptive organizations
to become generous organizations?*

Today, we have many examples of evolving organizations. Many start-ups (Type I ecologies) are beginning to develop staff, business plans, shared purpose and visions to create more sustainable and generous organizations. Other organizations are moving away from protected silos (Type II ecologies) towards integrated relationships. In these organizations, leadership teams are showing up to serve the entire organization, not just their department. Organizations are becoming more aware of the risks associated with homogeneity, for instance some firms are working to create gender and racial parity. Investment firms are tracking these movement and using diversity, social responsibility, and environmental-friendly standards as investment strategies knowing that on average these organizations give back better returns over time. All these actions suggest organizations are evolving from being consumptive to something else. I suggest that the next level of organizational evolution will be toward the generous systems found in Type III ecologies in nature.

I have titled this book *Leading from the Roots: Nature Inspired Leadership Lessons for Today's World* because I believe this is the direction that leadership needs to move toward. In an interdependent world, we need a higher purpose that spans the boundaries of our organizations, sectors, and geographies, and creates conditions conducive to the life of our organizations, our communities and our planet. And what better teacher and muse can we look toward than Nature, with its 3.8-billion-year research and development experience?

In the next section, I explore the dynamics found in living systems. Leaders can use nature's design principles (described in Chapters Two through Nine) paired with these living-system dynamics to shift their leadership practices to grow generous organizations.

Design Lessons Found In Nature:

What would leadership look like if its highest purpose was to ensure that future generations thrived?

In 2002, Janine Benyus wrote a book titled *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*. Biomimicry seeks sustainable solutions drawing on nature's time-tested patterns and strategies. When I read the book, I felt the content was profound and it sparked a journey of experimentation on how I could apply biomimicry design principles to the living organizations that I was working with. While the field of biomimicry continues to evolve in its thinking of nature's design (Baumeister, 2014), I have found that Benyus' original principles raise valuable lines of inquiry for us to follow as we build a robust living bridge from nature to organizations and leadership.

In this book, I use both biomimicry and nature as a source of lessons and design principles to lead in a more effective, efficient, and innately satisfying way, and to provide a vision of leadership that can foster genuine, transformational change. I have made slight changes in the wording to reflect what I've learned in applying these to my work with organizations.

- *Chapter Two: Nature Runs on Sunlight*
- *Chapter Three: In Nature Waste Is Never Wasted*
- *Chapter Four: Nature Fits Form to Function*
- *Chapter Five: Nature Rewards Cooperation*
- *Chapter Six: Nature Banks on Diversity*
- *Chapter Seven: Nature Uses Feedback to Curb Excess*
- *Chapter Eight: Nature Depends on Local Expertise and Self-Organization*
- *Chapter Nine: Nature Taps the Power of Limits*

As we shift our leadership practice to incorporate these design principles, our organizations will begin to evolve towards a generous system.

Understanding the Dynamics of Living Systems:

To apply nature's design principles and move from a mechanistic to a biological way of leading, we need to rethink our basic assumptions about how the world works.

We will need to understand and work with organizations as living systems (Allen, 2015).² The following are the seven lessons I have learned that explain the dynamics and the forces at play in living systems. Together, they help to describe the predominant conditions one finds when operating in complex, living systems. You can imagine them like Russian nesting dolls, where each concept narrows successively from the first big idea of “interdependence” to the final, most immediate concept of “this moment.”

1. Living systems are interdependent—change in one part of the system influences other parts of the system in expected and unexpected ways.

Nature is interdependent. Everything mutually creates everything else, there are no independent entities. John Muir (1911) captured this aspect of nature when he said, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe” (p.110). Everything we do affects the world in both observable and unpredictable ways. Similarly, what we perceive as external is central to our very being. Assuming interdependence presents a radical challenge to how many of us perceive things: I’m a self-made man! I think; therefore I am! That is not my responsibility! But I would challenge anyone to actually disprove the basic assumption of interdependence.

Unfortunately, most of us have not yet internalized our place within an interdependent context (Hutchins, 2014). We are drawn to separation of function and division of labor in the name of efficiency. Our logic models are linear and reflect a single cause and effect. If we do “A” then “B” will happen and that creates “C.” I used to be a math major and loved these logic trails. However, I now see organizations as complex overlapping spider webs where the links and relationships are diverse and vary in strength. When a fly gets stuck in a spider web, the fly tries to get free. In so doing, it creates ripples in the web (Allen & Cherrey, 2000). Changes that occur far away can create disturbances locally. These intended and unintended consequences are hard to predict in a system and therefore, linear logic is no longer helpful.

Interdependent systems also ask us to change our strategies to accomplish goals and tasks. For example, if we assume things are independent, it is natural to ask,

² Leading Living Systems. TEDX talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAwHiM-1FnM>

“Who can make this work?” Or “who can get this done?” But if we assume things are interdependent, the question becomes “What interactions will make this work?” It may be that when we shine a light on interdependence, we can help others to understand how relationships and emotions in human living systems work.

2. Living systems become more diverse as they evolve.

As living systems grow and evolve, they become more diverse. If we use the human body as an example of a living system, we are clearly more complex and diverse than the single cell organisms that our life started with. For example, we have muscular, nervous, circulatory, endocrine, lymphatic, digestive, respiratory, urinary, reproductive, integumentary, and skeletal systems that all provide critical and distinct functions within our body. We carry both diversity and interdependence in our body, most of which function together without conscious thought. This diversity of functions is designed to operate interdependently with other aspects of our body.

Our organizations are filled with diversity of perspectives, viewing points, functions, ages, ethnicities, genders, experiences, talents, and gifts. When we see our organizations as a living system, we need to see this diversity as a natural phenomenon within our organizations. We can then ask, “How do we leverage diversity to help our organization evolve into a generous system?”

3. Living systems are never static, they are always in flux.

Once we begin internalizing the notion of interdependence, it’s important to know that everything we’re connected to is always changing. This, of course, means we are as well. The prevailing wisdom is that people don’t like change. This may be true, but change is a fundamental characteristic of being.

Our aversion to change skews the way we understand leadership. Too often, leadership is imagined as an external power source needed to start the (dreaded) change process, like a key starting a motor. This is sometimes called “change management.” But when we see that change is a natural state, we begin to rethink how we approach the role of leadership.

I have a colleague who used to be a buyer for a major retail chain. She has a refreshing view of change because her experience in retail was that fashion

changed all the time. When she became a leadership consultant, she was inclined to see change as a natural event in organizational life. This gave her a special insight with her clients because she could help them relate to how the changes in their work were akin to fashion's ongoing transformation. Change is not something to be fought and we do not have to initiate it. Instead, we need to consider how change is already occurring and what direction it is moving in. The leadership question is not, "How can I create change?" it is, "How do I transform the energy that already exists in the living system into life-supporting change?"

4. *Living systems are filled with feedback loops that facilitate evolution.*

In an interdependent system, we can sense the direction of change through feedback loops. Nature is filled with feedback loops that reinforce certain behaviors and other feedback loops that balance the system by discouraging behavior. This is how the living system thrives over time.

In my consulting practice, I use feedback to facilitate intentional change. Through qualitative interviews, I am able to find unexpressed or partially expressed themes and patterns in the thoughts of people in an organization.

When I present my findings to the interviewees, it creates a new feedback loop. The data I report often raises issues that haven't been acknowledged by the full group, but have been felt individually and expressed in cliques. By naming these issues, the feedback can unleash a powerful force that drives the entire organization to become more effective. While this technique is similar to what other organizational development practitioners might do, intentionally using feedback as a way to help the team or organization evolve increases the power of this intervention.

5. *Living systems cannot be steered or controlled, only attracted or nudged.*

Being interdependent and connected by feedback loops means that behaviors are mutually-reinforcing and create strong redundancies. One result of this is that networks inherently resist control. Human beings can be attracted or nudged to change, but when they are pushed or forced, they resist. Adults like to

be asked for their opinion. They like the opportunity to freely share their talents to help make something meaningful happen, rather than being told to do so. One would think this would be obvious to leaders, but I think many are deeply attached to a top-down assumption of leadership. It blinds them to the fact that trying to “drive” change takes more time, money, and resources than leveraging the natural tendencies of the living system.

6. Living systems only accept solutions that the system helps to create.

When the living system and the people in it are actively engaged in co-creating change, there isn't a reason to resist change. We can take this a step further and say that, as in all living systems, people support what they help to create. This is obvious; the homeowner-built deck is swept regularly and re-stained on schedule, whereas the one at the hotel is treated ambivalently. In the same way, a vision and values statement created solely by a management team ends up in the employee's recycling bin. But the one that is articulated through a genuine, participatory employee engagement process is posted by staff and referenced during moments of contention: “That idea isn't who we are—but THIS is!”

I once worked with an organization which was recovering from a toxic leader. The new CEO wanted to shift towards a healthier culture. He noticed the staff's need to heal and asked me to facilitate a retreat to help with that process. At the end of the retreat, they came up with some recommendations to continue the move toward a healthy culture. They decided to generate a working group to develop operating principles for all staff members. These operating principles spoke to their communications, relationships, and how they treated each other. It became a living document in the organization that reshaped their behavior. If you've never experienced that level of employee ownership, you may regard the idea with understandable skepticism. But such moments of authentic interactions do happen and can result in widely-supported decisions.

7. Living systems only pay attention to what is meaningful to them here and now.

This final dynamic firmly ties the experience within an interdependent system to our everyday concrete moments. During our every waking hour, we

give attention to something. It may be a loved one, a meal, a task, a phone call, or even staring out the window without purpose. Whatever it is, and despite what apologists of multi-tasking might think, we can give our conscious attention to only one thing at a time in a single moment. This helps explain why living systems only pay attention to what they care about. That might sound obvious, but it is often neglected by leaders who have not fostered feedback loops to help them better understand the changes occurring in the system they are part of (not apart from). This can cause leaders to force changes because they do not know how to communicate why what they say matters to others.

Leaders often don't appreciate how meaningless information can be if it falls outside a person's sphere of concern. They tell employees that a change is happening and how the change will occur, but fall short of explaining the change in terms of why it matters to the employees. The result can be confusing and frustrating. In a living system, we need to articulate why things matter. If we want employees to actively support the larger purpose of the organization, we need to answer these questions:

- *Why does this matter to the individual employee?*
- *Why does this matter to the organization?*
- *Why does this matter to the larger society?*

In Summary:

Organizations were created as a part of the industrial revolution and shaped by our fascination with machines. When positional leaders hold the conscious or unconscious assumption that organizations are machine-like, they see them as separate and inert, rather than as interdependent living systems. This mindset leads to consumptive organizations that devour resources and give little in return, and are ultimately unsustainable. We need an organizational vision that recognizes organizations as living systems that can evolve and be led to be more generous. Nature provides us with many examples of generous living systems that are diverse, complex, self-sustaining and resilient. By using nature as an inspiration and model, leaders can begin to create generous organizations that work for all. Unlike the consumptive organization, generous organizations use fewer resources, are more effective, and are more fun to work in!

Questions to Consider:

This book rests on the question: Can organizations evolve and if so, toward what end? If we see our organizations as living systems, we can begin to help our organizations shift to be more generous ones. Here are a few questions that leadership teams can reflect on to begin this process.

- *Do we believe that our organization is a living system?*
- *Do we believe that our organization can and is evolving?*
- *Where do we see our organization along a continuum between highly consumptive (Type I ecology of weeds and annuals) to somewhat consumptive (Type II perennials and weeds) and highly generous (Type III ecology, cooperative, diverse and highly resilient)?*
- *What are the indicators that exist in our organization that suggests that we are leading a living system?*
- *What organizational behaviors do not align with living system dynamics?*
- *If we are migrating towards a generous organization, what are the indicators that support that shift?*