

Presentation: The Paradoxes of Leading Community Engagement

E nga mana, e nga reo, e rau rangatira ma, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

If I ask you **WHY** you are interested in conservation and the community's role in it, I would expect a clear, enthusiastic answer – your love of this land, its flora and fauna; your passion to save an endangered species; or your delight in tramping. Whatever your motivation, you will have some compelling ideas about **WHAT** you would like to make happen – or conserve. My guess is that you might have less clarity about **HOW** you are going to achieve your vision and **WHO** needs to be on board with you to get there. We commonly have a vision, some goals and strategies, but the reality of actually building and sustaining momentum over the long, unknown journey is usually much more messy and complex than we ever imagined when we set out.

Today I want to normalise that messiness as the rich texture of leading community engagement. We cannot and should not try to control all the complexity in the name of “good leadership”. Rather, I suggest we need to **rethink our understanding of “good leadership”**, and in doing so, open up the potential for leadership of the many, not just the few. I will argue it is quite freeing for everyone when we let go of our images of leaders as heroic, wise, special people with all the answers. Rather, I want to encourage you to think about **leadership as learning**, where we bring wise questions and strong facilitation skills to shape vision and action together. When we think about **leadership as a living system that is in constant movement**, we inquire together to find good enough answers and build temporary support structures for a very adaptable, organic journey. Let me explain what I mean...

Community engagement can be thought of as a “*process* of building relationships with community members who will work side-by-side with you as an ongoing partner, in any and every way imaginable, building an army of support for your mission, with the end goal of making the community a better place to live” (Hildy Gotlieb, 2007). Community Engagement is both a *process* (the journey) and a key outcome in itself (a destination) from a leadership development perspective. Relationships are a central resource to achieve your vision – yes you need financial resources, yes you need ecological resources –

but community engagement is essential too. Community engagement challenges us to work with a diverse range of stakeholders (volunteers, staff, donors, members, funders, local and central government, businesses). Different stakeholders can pull our organisations in different directions at times, as if they each feel they own the vision. Our clarity of shared vision, mission and values helps anchor our sense of direction amidst that ambiguity. That sounds simple, but it is not done and dusted in one strategic planning day. Building trust and engagement requires ongoing thinking, learning and acting together along the journey, as we work as interdependent partners on a mission. **How** we work together and **who** lasts the journey, is fundamental to the sustainability of our efforts.

We all have unconscious assumptions about what “good leadership” looks like, influenced by the dominant paradigms around us – like that leaders are strong, decisive individuals who inspire and engage followers, build consensus, plans and structures to put vision into action. The paradox is that almost the opposite can be good leadership too. But we don’t hear as much about leaders as vulnerable inquirers asking questions, co-creating vision and action together, one conversation at a time. Leadership as letting go of the reins to enable others to share leadership doesn’t quite hit the headlines as often as the charismatic leader out front. And the point is not that one or other style of leadership is right or better. My point in deliberately polarising these qualities, competencies and behaviours is that our leadership responses need to stay in movement between these polarities.

Leaders need to be have a strong sense of self AND be able to be vulnerable – embracing the “oh shit” moments when we feel totally outside our comfort zones. Leaders need to be able to support consensus building AND at times have the courage to foster conflict to enable diverse pathways towards the vision. Beyond either/or thinking, both/and or and/and thinking encourages us to loosen up and let go of our fixed ideas about “good” leadership, and ask different questions. What are the counter-intuitive possibilities if I embrace both ends of this paradox? Could I reframe my sense of vulnerability as my strength?

As conservation people you probably already understand living systems in nature – and the way they learn, adapt and self-organise, often without any

identifiable leader at the top - like Johnson observed in the behaviour of ant colonies. I have found complexity science's insights into complex, adaptive, living systems a very helpful paradigm for understanding community engagement and leadership. Complexity thinking shifts our focus from the individual leader to thinking about leadership as a whole living, learning, moving adaptive system. It shifts our focus from thinking about leaders as some special, extraordinarily gifted breed that's not us – to thinking about leadership as learning and that opens up the potential for every single one of us to lead from wherever we are as active citizens.

So what does that look like in everyday practice? I want to share some ideas that emerged out of a collaborative inquiry with Inspiring Communities' national leadership team and my own PhD research about community leadership. The ideas are based around an understanding that there are at least four interwoven layers of a leadership system – personal, relational, structural and cultural – and that power dynamics run through all these layers.

At a personal level, leaders engage communities with **curiosity**: when they bring a learner, 'not knower' mind to everything. It's so freeing not to have to be the "know it all" leader. We can allow ourselves to be real, with all our own strengths and vulnerabilities. When we lead by saying, "I don't have the answer, but I am sure we can find a way forward with all the wisdom in this room", we invite the leadership of the many. When we stop taking responsibility for having all the answers, we truly value and engage the contribution of others.

That learner mindset involves some **letting go** of our personal need for power and control, and letting go of our fear of the unknown and unknowable. So much of what we are working with is not known or able to be neatly planned. We need multi-sensory noticing to see what is unfolding in the moment. There is no recipe book for complex problems. There is no failure either – only our increasing ability to learn and make sense of what we might do next. When we take off the expert, responsible leader hat, we start to intentionally redistribute power. When we engage people in everyday little actions, we start from where they are at, and grow apprentices into confident co-leaders through the opportunities we enable for people to step up.

The question central to leading community engagement, is what do I need to be doing (or letting go of), to enable the leadership contribution of others to this system? One day we might need to be actively influencing and inspiring people – encouraging them to come along to our next activity, or persuading the Mayor about our latest strategy. Another day we might be so overloaded we can't possibly do everything – and realise that in leaving a gap, in not holding everything so responsibly, we could be opening up a space for someone else to step up into a leadership role. That's quite a different leadership response of trust in the whole system's capacity for leadership, that is not just dependent on us – which could also free us from burnout too! Another day we might be an enabler, setting up the conditions for others to lead – we might be documenting enough information for someone else to step in, or we might be convening a conversation about shared values so everyone understands what's mutually expected. Leadership is not only about influence, or letting go or enabling from somewhere in the middle. It is an ongoing learning and discerning about when, whether and how to intervene in this system. It's something of a dance as we step up, step back, step alongside to support, encourage and find an appropriate place for our own and others strengths to contribute towards the vision.

Relationship competencies are hugely important in our community engagement work. Facilitation and communication skills support reflective **inquiry within ourselves and with others**. Amidst the busyness of our work, it is one of the hardest challenges to intentionally set aside time for individual and collective reflection. Even when we have team meetings or Board meetings, it is more likely we will be focused on the reporting on tasks, and making decisions about key issues, than discussing what we are learning. Spaces for peer learning might explore: what's worked, what would work even better, what patterns are we noticing over time? what does this suggest about future possibilities or how we need to adapt our structures or actions? We build everyone's ability to analyse and adapt when we engage in ongoing cycles of noticing, reflecting, sense-making, exploring possibilities, and taking action together. When we leave it all to the CEO or the team leader to interpret what is happening and what is needed next, we shut off opportunities for sharing the load, and for growing engagement, skills and knowledge.

Situations of **uncertainty**, messiness and tension feel really uncomfortable. Our sense of security is disturbed and changes are often not of our choosing. Assessing whether a situation is simple, complicated, complex or chaotic can help us learn and discern an appropriate leadership response. Simple situations have a high degree of certainty and agreement – we can choose and follow a known recipe. In complicated situations, we can increase agreement by finding common ground or reduce uncertainty with technical expertise. But in complex situations much is unknowable and we learn by doing together with key stakeholders.

Take a typical community engagement scenario. Maybe your membership has been in decline and you can barely get a quorum for your AGM, let alone enough people to stand for your committee or attend your working bee. At one level it is a real crisis for your organisation, tipping towards chaos, yet the crisis may also hold the seeds of a breakthrough. Sometimes organisations need to die and take new forms. Sometimes new blood comes forth from publicity about risk of closure, turning things around just on the edge of collapse. Sometimes tensions and conflicts are a healthy disturbance of old patterns. On the edge of chaos, it's really messy and it's stressful, yet it can also be at a tipping point for new learning, innovation and transformation.

The change we want to see in the world is rarely achieved with a linear, logical pathway. Little things often achieve as big an impact as the big things we put our energy into. Our brief words of encouragement might have a life-changing impact on someone's decisions. As Gleick identified, the flap of a butterfly's wings can impact the weather half a world away. When we let go of the idea that we as leaders are the all-powerful influencers of everything, we shift our focus towards noticing where the energy is in a living system and how and whether we might intervene. It's often our questions that support sense-making through the unknown: What resources have been released from this forest fire that might be the seeds of the new lying in the undergrowth, waiting to emerge?

Structures, agreements, roles and plans are our common response to manage and lead our way through complex situations. These help as long as we see them as **temporary**, not fixed. We need to keep noticing when and how these structures need to evolve organically into new forms. Our instincts are to find

some simple rules and structures to anchor us. One of the important lessons from complexity thinking is to **maximize connections** across every level of the system. Interactions as neighbours, as peer learners are crucial, getting beyond roles, hierarchies and boundaries that have traditionally divided leaders and followers, governance and management, organisation from organisation, sector from sector, residents from decision-makers. For example, we know how vital it is that managers and Board Chairs interact well! We generate new thinking when we structure peer learning interactions to exchange information, new ideas and share assets.

We need to be careful to **avoid too much specialisation** of roles. We are taught to look for inefficiencies and duplications. That's a useful question in complicated systems but in complex systems duplication might be the vital excess needed for adaptation in turbulent times. Two people attending a meeting or sharing a role might be a great investment in leadership development and succession planning. The time we spend consulting people can be an investment in generative thinking and shared commitment to the way forward, not a waste of time and effort!

This adds up to a solid culture of **'doing with'** in preference to **'doing for'**, built on a foundation of **collaborative inquiry** in order to redistribute power, to support resourcefulness, to enable the growth of the leader in everyone. A **diversity** of people, perspectives and practices supports learning and adaptation by increasing the range of possible pathways forward. To hold that diversity, there need to be **commonalities** of vision, values and culture for working together. Co-creating shared understanding of vision, mission and values lays the foundations of understanding around the **WHY** and the **HOW**, that supports a diversity of **WHAT** practical, achievable action steps will be shaped by **WHO** as you go.

So I leave you with three key messages from this quick romp through some ideas about leading in this community engagement space:

- ▣ **Embrace the paradoxes** with a learner's inquiring curiosity and a leadership capability to facilitate inquiry together.
- ▣ Keep learning and discerning **appropriate leadership responses** - whether it be **influencing, enabling, or self-organising** - for whatever

the level of complexity of your community context. Engage the leadership of the many to support a sustainable pathway forward for yourself and your organisations

- ▣ Try thinking about **leadership as a whole living system**, not just individual leaders – with past, present and future patterns, rhythms and movements – and see if that helps you find and work with where the energy is

And in the spirit of curiosity, I end with an invitation for your questions – and the wise caveat from Eugene Ionesco “it’s not the answer that enlightens but the question”

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