

Leading for a Sustainable Future



The Sequoia Journal



Written By Jacqueline Wong

“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering.

Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”

~ The Fourth Mindfulness Training – Deep Listening & Mindful Speech
Extract from Book “For a Future to be Possible” by Thich Nhat Hanh

What does it take for a future to be possible? I think the answer to that question lies in a few subtle shifts that will be required - in our focus of attention, our perception, and our quality of listening so that we are able to deal with an increasingly complex world.

Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee in their book *Resonant Leadership*, echoed this

perspective in their research on emotionally intelligent leaders who embody the qualities of mindfulness, hope, compassion and renewal.

What has this got to do with leading in the future? We assert that these qualities have great relevance for leading in an increasingly uncertain and complex future and we will share with you our perspective

in framework that we have come to call the Sequoia Dragonfly framework. (See inset). We have found that we are able to apply the same framework working with human systems at all scales - teams, organizations and society.

By no means prescriptive, the framework is meant to be a guiding idea to bring attention into the elements that need to be attended to for personal, organizational and societal sustainability. Ultimately seeing and leading for the future is very much about being able to look far enough so that we are able to map out the implications of our actions, and plan for it, while we still have time. We surmise that it requires very different capacities than leading for the present, which has been the focus of most literature on leadership we find today.

Awareness. The root word for “leading” or “leadership” come from the Old English word “lithan”, which literally means “to go.” According to the Webster’s Dictionary, leadership means “to guide on a way, especially by going in advance.” In order to go ahead of others, the leader needs the ability for pre-cognition - more in the sense of a faculty for forethought or prescience and not as a paranormal extra-sensory perception. It is the ability to perceive information about events before they happen. Paradoxically, it requires that leaders are fully aware, awake, and observant of what’s unfolding in the present, so that they are able to discern patterns that are indicative of a future wanting to happen.

One of the central notions of leadership that was put forward by Greenleaf (1980) was that of the Servant Leader. Amongst the characteristics that Greenleaf outlined was the capacity for foresight. The other was awareness. He talked about the interrelationship of these characteristics as awareness allowed the leader to open up their doors of perception so that they can truly begin to appreciate how things

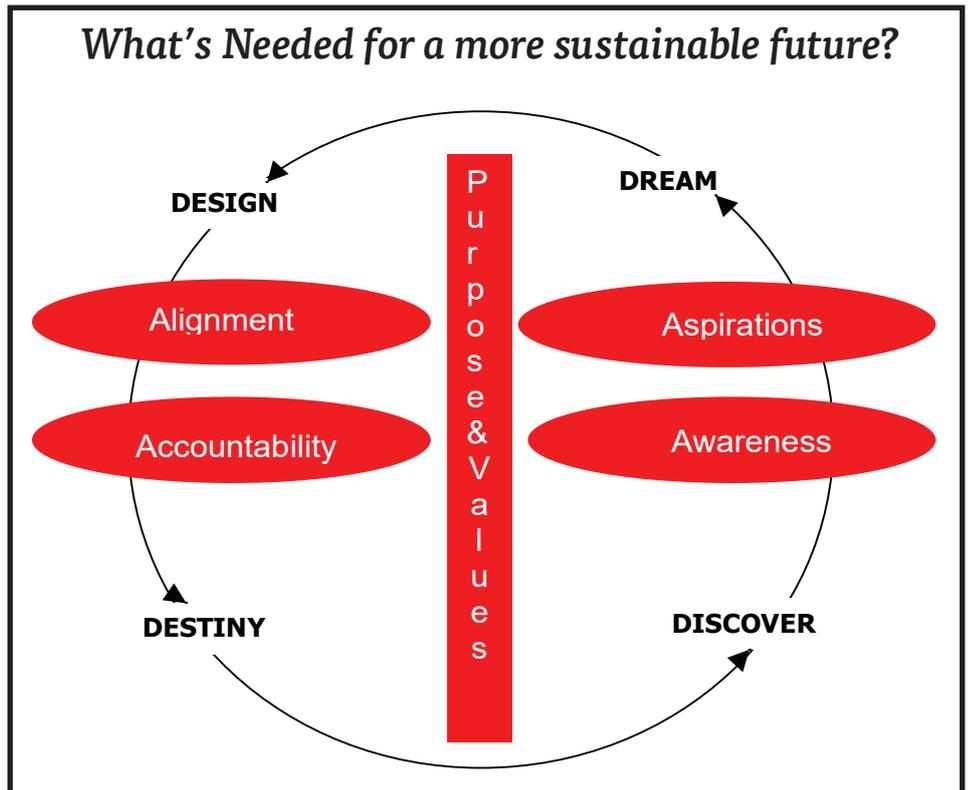


Fig 1: The Sequoia Dragonfly™ for Leadership Development

Leaders need to cultivate the capacities for Awareness, Aspiration, Alignment, Accountability, and Authenticity. The dragonfly is used as a generative metaphor for these five capacities because dragonflies are one of the most resilient existing species that have survived the prehistoric era. It is also often used in different cultures as a symbol of balance and grace. The wings of the dragonfly reflect and refract light and great leaders do the same - reflecting the light of those whom they lead and allowing others’ light to shine through. The 4Ds’ of Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny are drawn from a body of work called Appreciative Inquiry.

Awareness - is about living consciously and attuning to one’s inner self, to others, and to the larger world. Awareness allows the leader to exercise foresight, which is a critical quality and qualifier of leadership.

Aspirations - the capacity to visualize, create and garner movement towards a more important future possibility. Leaders who cultivate this capacity in themselves know that the real source of energy for change comes from holding a picture of what might be that is more important than what is.

Alignment - is the leaders’ capacity to forge an alignment of strengths in service of the purpose of their organization. They see the strengths that exist today and strengths that are latent. It is about being able to name and give life to what the organization and the community can become best in the world at.

Accountability - cultivating a deeper sense of ownership and belonging. What I truly own I will care for and steward. Accountability is not about creating more scorecards and key performance indicators. It is about fostering shared ownership for the outcomes that have meaning and value to us.

Authenticity - the genuineness of one’s being. It is about having the courage to be one self in the face of endless demands to be someone else. Authentic leaders are guided by a deeper internal compass comprising their core values and purpose, from which all other choices spring. It is also the body of the dragonfly and the control centre that determines the direction.

are interconnected. Awareness then allows the leader to act with foresight. In fact, he goes so far to state that foresight was a “central ethic of leadership”, asserting that it was an ethical failure if leaders fail to exercise a choice while there was still time to do so, thereby put themselves and their organizations in danger.

Awareness is also one of the domains of emotional intelligence, in particular, self-awareness. Awareness can also apply to external situations – whether one is tuned in to the environment and directing one’s focus of attention to what matters most and yet still be able to learn from the periphery, knowing that some of the best answers do not come from the center.

What must leaders of the future do to cultivate a deeper awareness?

Being aware means having the knowledge of something because you have observed it, or being mindful that something exists because you notice it or realize that it is happening.

Therefore awareness comprises the capacity for noticing data, and secondly, the process of making sense of the data one perceives. Peter Senge (2004) and Otto Scharmer (2007) from the Society of Organizational Learning in their works on Presence and the Theory U outlined a number of things the leader can do to cultivate a deeper level of ‘knowing’ (See inset). Over a period of one and a half years Senge and Scharmer and their colleagues from SOL held a dialogue with one hundred and fifty scientists, social and business entrepreneurs to understand how profound collective change occurs.

The three shifts he described were shifts in seeing, sensing and presencing (which is made up of the two words ‘present’ and ‘sensing’). The first shift requires that we suspend our own biases or ‘voices of judgment”, so that we are able to see with fresh eyes. The second shift is the ability to redirect our focus of attention from the object to the issue

at hand, and recognize that are collectively co-creating the results they are experiencing in the present. Finally the third shift requires that we retreat and reflect and allow an inner knowing to emerge. Robert Greenleaf in his essay *The Servant as Leader* similarly echoed the need for withdrawal – so as to find one’s optimum. Leader that are merely busy do not achieve as much as leaders who do what is essential and this can only come from devoting time for reflection and retreat.

Boyatzis and Mckee in *Resonant Leadership* called it waking up to resonance and renewal. Sustained high achievement demands physical and emotional strength as well as a sharp intellect. Leaders who care about sustainable performance value the time space to recover energy and

encourage others whom they lead to do the same. Jim Loehr, a performance psychologist has worked with hundreds of professional athletes, including some Olympics gold medalists. He found that top competitors in tennis know how to use precise recovery rituals in the 15 or 20 seconds between points – often without even being aware of it. These include shifting their focus of their attention on the strings of their rackets, assuming a confident posture, and visualizing how they want the next point to play out. These renewal-recovery routines have startling effects of lowering the heart rate of the players as much as 25 to 20 percent between the points.

In order to cultivate awareness, leaders need to recognize the need to give room for themselves and others

“Awareness is not a giver of solace - it is just the opposite.

It is a disturber and an awakener.

Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed.

They are not seekers after solace.

They have their own inner serenity.”

*~ Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*.*

"The Chicken in Sinai".

The story has it that a Prime Minister once visited a Sinai desert project – it was an exciting experiment on how the Sinai desert could be turned into a place to rear poultry and grow vegetables. The PM commended the host of the project after visiting the place, saying "This is great, when you succeed, you can bring the people here", as in they can then populate the place and have enough food and produce to sustain people. The host, however, gave answer that surprised the visitor. He said "No Sir, with all due respect, you are wrong. Only when we bring the people here, we will succeed."

to renew, recover and re-create their own optimal state. The term re-creation literally means to take time to refresh one's mind and body, outside of work, so that one can regain an own optimal state of well-being.

Aspirations. The first time I realized that aspiration was a capacity was in my final year in college. Many of my classmates facing the crossroad of a career choice and living a dream, went for the road most traveled – that which paid the highest or seemed to be most reputable. Sad to say, some of those organizations no longer exist or have sold off a large part of themselves and their identity in exchange for profit. I thought I was a late bloomer when I decided that I wanted to choose something that gave me a sense of meaning, a chance to contribute to something larger than I can on my own. After 18 years in the work force, I realized that most

people never realized till later in life that (or never at all), that this is actually a capability that needs to be imbued, consciously developed and sustained. To aspire is to long for something - even though human beings might be born with the innate ability of imagination, when we do not exercise that ability, it will start to atrophy, like an unused muscle that has come of age.

Aspiration is a desire or ambition to achieve something, an overarching goal or a big dream that one strives for. Representing a desired future reality, it excites people and challenges them to work for something that they may not yet know how to do, something that will give them a great sense of pride when they achieve it. However, being a future that has yet to happen, there is often considerable perceived risks and the only way this is going to

work is that the leader must first be trustworthy. They must trust the leader's competence, his values and his sense of optimism about the future.

There was an interesting story that came to me through an email when I was serving in the Singapore Prime Minister's Office in my early career as a civil servant that might help to illustrate this point. This was a story told by an eminent civil servant at that time. It was entitled "The Chicken in Sinai". The story has it that a Prime Minister once visited a Sinai desert project – it was an exciting experiment on how the Sinai desert could be turned into a place to rear poultry and grow vegetables. The PM commended the host of the project after visiting the place, saying "This is great, when you succeed, you can bring the people here", as in they can then populate the place and have enough food and produce to sustain people. The host, however, gave answer that surprised the visitor. He said "No Sir, with all due respect, you are wrong. Only when we bring the people here, we will succeed."

The Sinai project leader knew something subtle but important: they had to first earn the trust of the people and persuade them to come along into the unknown before they can succeed. Leaders of the future, in every sense of the phrase, need to know how to garner support around a dream that has yet to happen.

What must leaders do to cultivate the capacity for aspiration?

A best-selling author and structural consultant, Robert Fritz, in his book *The Path of Least Resistance* described a concept called the creative-tension, which he warned may seem deceptively simple on the outset, could take an entire life time to master. It is the core guiding idea for the discipline of personal mastery. Watching the way artists work and being an artist himself, Fritz was intrigued that they knew how to access their capacity to create in their

professional work, but were a lot less successful in transferring this capacity to the other domains of their lives. He shared that artists knew how to access the creative tension that comes from concurrently holding a picture of the desired reality and an honest, accurate picture of the current reality. Interpreted in another way, creative tension is an optimal state of eustress - defined in the model of Richard Lazarus (1974) as stress that is healthy or gives one a feeling of fulfillment. In other words, it generates a sense of hope and inspiration, the source of energy that motivates one to achieve one's goals. If the gap between the desired state and the current reality is perceived to be too huge or unrealistic, it can lead to disillusionment and in the extreme, distress - an emotional state characterized by the loss of hope and pessimism.

Popularized by scholars such as Kurt Lewin (1947) and John Kotter (1995) in the last forty years, leaders subscribed to a school of thought that fit with their own analytical upbringing, thinking that by sharing data about problems in current reality, it will create the disequilibrium for overcoming inertia and creating change. (See Kurt Lewin's three stage model for unfreezing, change, re-freezing, and John Kotter's Creating a Sense of Urgency). However, latest research on neuroscience discovered that prolonged exposure to emotions of hatred, greed, fear and jealousy can have a negative physiological as well as psychological impact on the person experiencing them, and can also harm relationships, leading to what Boyatzis and Mckee (2005) call a state of dissonance. Daniel Goleman (2003) called these 'destructive emotions'. Perhaps realizing that skepticism is so commonplace, leaders for the future realize that there might be potential to create disequilibrium in other ways - by inspiring hope and optimism instead of instilling fear and dissonance.

One of the ways to build trust and create a sense of hope for the future is to practice listening for the dreams

and aspirations of the people we lead. Modeled after Boyatzis's intentional change theory, one of the first exercises we ask our new staff to do when they first join our firm is to write a Letter of Possibility to the founders and to themselves - we ask that they write from the place of their highest possible future self, their most generative place. We then have a dialogue with them, one to one, to listen to their dreams and their ideas for how our firm's purpose and platforms could be a conveyance to help them achieve some of those possibilities. We also ask them if what they have articulated were realistic and achievable, first by listing the strengths they bring that make these dreams a real possibility. Finally we ask them what support would they most need from us in order to realize their dreams and what would be the learning map they would like to create for themselves, like a GPS (Global Positioning System) would that illuminate the route they need to take to lead them towards their desired future.

Our belief is that organizations need to be worthy of people's commitment, and inviting them into an ongoing conversation about their desired future and the organization's vision helps to forge that commitment and sense of belonging. People commit to what they help to create.

Alignment. Leaders of the future do not only need to know how to bring out the best in those whom they lead, they need to know how to forge an alignment of strengths within their network of employees, customers, and even external partners, so that they are able to work in synchrony and in service of the purpose of their organization.

To do so, they must first possess the will and capacity to relate to the potential that is in others. This requires some degree of personal humility and the willingness to let go of one's ego-centricities and sense of self-efficacy as a leader, so that they can truly appreciate the strengths in others which are distinct,

complementary and superior to their own. A CEO of one of biggest social enterprise in Singapore once told me that his criteria for hiring is quite simple - first, they must possess a unique and desired strength that does not yet exist today in the organization, and two, they must demonstrate the humility and will to work well with others. These aptly summarized what we believe to be the two steps to creating the capacity for alignment in organizations that leaders of the future need to attend to.

The Gallup Organization, stated what the author Marcus Buckingham calls the strengths revolution and brought spotlight on to the idea that creating change and leadership's central task is to discover the natural talents for their employees and then position and develop each of them so that their talents are transformed into strengths. They found in their research that organizations that are able to do so are positioned to dramatically outperform their peers. In Gallup's database of interviews conducted over the years, covering over 1.7 million employees in 101 companies from 63 companies, they were asked the question "At work do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?" They found that only a shocking 20 per cent of employees surveyed feel that their strengths are in play every day. Furthermore, they also found that the longer an employee stays with an organization and the higher he climbs the traditional career ladder, the less likely he is to strongly agree that he is playing to his strengths. The Gallup Organization's findings underscored the importance and tremendous potential for organizations of the future who know how to tap into the unique talents and transform them into bona fide strengths.

One of the best quotes I have heard on this was shared by David Cooperrider (co-founder of Appreciative Inquiry) in an interview he conducted with Peter Drucker in 1994. Distilling the essence of his thoughts about leadership, Drucker shared "The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making our weaknesses irrelevant".

What must leaders of the future do to cultivate the capacity for alignment?

The additional challenge though for the leader of the future is that he needs to have a way to bring those strengths into alignment. In Goleman's work on Working with Emotional Intelligence, he shared the notion of the Group IQ, which is really the collective intelligence of the group. The collective intelligence of a group can sometimes be lower than that of the lowest individual IQ in the group, such as that reported in the phenomenon called group think. An example will be the famous case study on decision-making process preceding the disaster of the space shuttle Challenger. Furthermore, the higher the individual IQ, the more inversely proportionate will be the collective IQ. In other words, there are instances where the smarter the people are in the group, the worse will be the quality of their collective thinking and decisions. What is the delta here then?

Once again, we believe the differentiator is emotional intelligence. Leaders who are successful in creating strong alignment on strengths are aware that positive emotions are critical to sustained high performance for a team and sustained physiological well-being for their employees. In addition to knowing themselves well, they manage others' emotions and build strong, trusting relationships in the team. They know about the positive contagion of emotions, they instinctively and deliberately devote time to build strong trust and high quality of relationships within the team.

Perhaps one might think one of the least likely places to find such an example of resonant leadership will be in a classical command-and-control culture like the military. The Singapore Armed Forces since seven years back, began a series of year-long leadership and organization development programs.

"The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making our weaknesses irrelevant".

~ Peter Drucker

This series of programs are designed and led by two leading practitioners, Daniel Kim and Diane Cory, affiliates of the SOL. The focus of the program is to build 3rd Generation capabilities in world-class fighting force. The Chief of Defence Force, General Desmond Quek, shared his vision for the 3rd Generation SAF through the acronym O-N-E SAF – where 'O' stands for the capacity for Operationalizing the first spiral of an integrated SAF (essentially to align the strengths of the three Services – Air Force, Army and Navy), 'N' stands for Nurturing people so that they are able to fulfill their fullest potential, and 'E' is the capacity for Engagement so that every one is committed and feel a strong sense of pride for the services. He sees 'N' and 'E' as the two essential leadership qualities for enabling the 'O' – which represents a high level summation of their collective fighting capability. The SAF recognizes that 3rd Generation Leaders need to be resonant in order to be effective.

Leaders of the future see the potential in those whom they lead, thereby giving life to what the

organisation can become best at.

Accountability. Leaders for the future build a strong sense of accountability. According to Peter Block, author of bestselling book, *Flawless Consulting and Stewardship*, "to be accountable is to care for the whole and do it for its own sake." Ironically, leaders of the present do things in the name of fostering accountability but paradoxically reduces it. The common practices proposed by legions of consultants to increase accountability take it's word in a literal sense – they look at accounting as a basic and age-old metaphor for setting key results. Even with the expansion of the classic accounting balance sheet to include more process indicators (as that advocated by the Balanced Scorecard approach by Kaplan and Norton) the model is still fundamentally driven by a hidden assumption that the way to high performance is to measure and track inputs so that we can get the maximum outputs. In so doing, one obscures the fundamental purpose of measurement and over-emphasizes the ability of measurement systems to build and foster true accountability.

The real and only purpose of measurement is to provide accurate account of the health and vitality of the organization, much as the vital statistics and indicators of blood pressure, body-mass-index and so on, indicate the health and vitality of a human system. It is not a substitute for the leadership task and process of nurturing true accountability, in the sense of creating an organization where people experience a strong sense of belonging and ownership (Block, 2008).

The social psychologists, McMillan & Chavis (1986) in their essay *Sense of Community* provided the following one-sentence definition: 'Sense of Community' is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." McMillan and Chavis also further highlighted that a shared emotional connection is the "definitive element for true community" (1986, p. 14). What we feel a strong sense of emotional connection for, I will choose to build, nurture and uphold. I would like to extend what these authors shared that by cultivating a sense of community, accountability will emerge as a natural by product.

It is no longer possible to use complex systems of measurements to measure the endless outcomes that are important and meaningful to organizations. Many of these outcomes have never been achieved before, where do we find anyone to benchmark against? Leaders of the future bring people together to part-take in the co-creation of a higher possible future, so that people become owners of the organization and therefore do their part in making it happen.

What must leaders do to cultivate a strong sense of accountability?

Leaders need to shift from being stewards of the outcomes to stewards of the purpose, the people and the process. Leaders are held accountable for the outcomes of their people's performance. Rather than to manage outcomes (which truly essential is not something you can "manage"), leaders of the future go upstream to create the conditions for the best outcomes to become possible.

In order to foster a stronger sense of community and accountability, leaders of the future need to acquire 'process intelligence'. This is a term I use for teaching process facilitation and good meeting designs to top leaders who need to chair and participate in endless meetings, ranging from typical work meetings to longer corporate planning sessions. The quality of most of these meetings, to say the least, leaves one feeling cold. Considering the amount of resources that are expended in meetings (not to mention economic costs and psychological duress brought about by sitting in enclosed rooms for extensive periods of time), it is a wonder why meeting process design has not become a core subject in MBA classes.

To me, process intelligence is about the application of emotional intelligence in the context of designing and facilitating conversations and meetings in ways that will lead to not only greater ownership and accountability, but also stronger alignment, aspiration and awareness. Leaders who are process savvy understand that communities are built one room at a time (Block 2008), and one meeting

at a time. They pay attention to a set of principles that help to maximize learning and outcomes and appreciate the need to engage people in the process so that there is genuine ownership.

Authenticity. Leaders of the future need to find their own 'center', a capacity to regain balance in the face of ever-expanding sphere of demands. Authenticity is about the courage to live true to one's deeper purpose and values, and to lead by making choices consciously and consistently, guided by one's internal compass.

By being stewards of the purpose of the organization, they lead by sharing the founding stories, and remind people of the reason for their existence. Recounted in the book *Built to Last*, by Porras and Collins (1994), Sony's founder, Masaru Ibuka started Sony among the ruins of war-shattered Japan in 1945, he rented an abandoned telephone operator's room in a bombed out department store, with seven employees and \$1600 savings, he began work. Amongst his first priorities was to codify the company's ideology and manifesto. Porras and Collins (pp.50) translated it as follows:

"If it were possible to establish conditions where persons could become united with a firm spirit of teamwork and exercise to their hearts' desire their technological capacity... then such an organization can bring untold pleasure and untold benefits.... Those of like minds have naturally come together to embark on these ideals.

Purpose of Incorporation:

- To establish a place of work where engineers can feel the joy of technological innovation, be aware of their mission to society, and work to their heart's content
- To pursue dynamic activities in technology and production for the reconstruction of Japan and the elevation of the nation's culture
- To apply advanced technology to the life of the general public"

Principles for Fostering a Sense of Community & Accountability

Make conversations generative.

All meetings should be a representation of the world we are trying to create. Creating a safe space or “container” for the conversations is therefore important as trust is fundamental to allow for openness and creativity.

People commit to what they help create.

By including people in the conversation as co-creators of the future, they are given a chance to place a stake in it, and this in turn gives them the natural motivation to make it happen. Performance measures are merely indicators of well-being, they do not by themselves lead to greater health.

Living visions is not equal to vision statements.

Building shared visions is about painting a rich picture of what the desired future will look like, feel like and sound like, in tangible imageries and descriptions, beyond a statement. Vision statements are representations of our highest human intentions taking form in words – we need to choose the words carefully.

The process of conversation is what creates the commitment and change.

Immersing in the elements and stories of the future evokes ideas, clarity and energy. As a result, people are better able to act in concert and alignment, with greater speed and confidence. Attend to the process of engagement if you care about the quality of outcomes.

Clarity of the ends must precede the means.

Be purpose driven. The clearer we are about the “why” and “what”, the easier is the “how”. People will conspire to help you achieve the outcomes once they have internalized the vision as their own.

Back in 1945, Masaru Ibuka exhibited the qualities of a leader of a future that has yet to be created, by lighting the path and creating a clear organizational purpose, so that Sony employees that come after have entire lifetimes (and generations) to live into it.

What are the ways for cultivating greater authenticity?

There are many exercises for helping one to discover one's own purpose and core values. The most important ingredients are an open mind, an open heart and an open will (Scharmer, 2007). The first place to begin will be to take a look at one's own core values. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) designed a questionnaire called "Your Operating Philosophy" and allows the reader to complete a

series of self-scored items that can be plotted on a graph to show which is our most preferred, second and third operating philosophy. The three operating philosophies are the pragmatic, the intellectual and the humanistic operating philosophy and it explains the difference in the way of perceiving and determining value.

Finally, to discover our true purpose, we need to take the time for renewal so that we have to reflect on what truly matters most to us. By understanding what matters most to us, we become clearer in our ability to lead from our true purpose. Leaders of the future know how to keep some "space between the logs" so as not to squelch the fire.

Center & Ground

"The leader who is centered and grounded can work with erratic people and critical group situations without harm.

Being centered means having the ability to recover one's balance even in the midst of action. A centered person is not subject to passing whims or sudden excitements. Being grounded means being down-to earth, having gravity or weight. I know where I stand, and I know what I stand for: that is ground.

The centered and grounded leader has stability and a sense of self. One who is not stable can easily get carried away by the intensity of leadership and make mistakes of judgment or even become ill."

By John Heider, The Tao of Leadership
Inspired by Lao Tzu's Dao De Jing

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