

connected leadership

a guide for sustainability solutions

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foreword

Throughout history, successful leaders have tackled an endless range of challenges. Be they religious, military, social, ideological, governmental or commercial, examples of inspirational leadership abound. But this guide takes as its premise that **the challenge of sustainability is like no other, in nature, scale or urgency, that we have yet known.**

There is no doubt that lessons learned from leaders past and present are highly relevant and the Oxford Leadership Prize plays an important role in drawing some of these together. But at the same time, there is no leadership theory pertaining specifically to sustainable development. I have taken the view that there is a clear need for a new approach to the leadership role in this area. This is largely uncharted territory and, as such, can be viewed as offering opportunity and possibility - **the possibility that we need to develop a new concept of leadership for sustainability. This is the challenge to which this guide responds.**

unpacking ‘sustainability’

Sustainability - the goal of sustainable development - is a notoriously contentious but poorly understood concept. Without exploring the full debate, a brief explanation of my understanding of the challenge is necessary to contextualise this work.

The simplest way to articulate this is to examine what we are doing now - how we are pursuing *unsustainable* development. Reliance on burning finite fossil fuels, ongoing degradation of environmental resources that form the very basis of our life support systems,

persistent poverty, injustice and inequality are all trends that *increased* during the 20th century - humanity’s “most developed” hour. And while these trends embed themselves worldwide, global population is projected to rise from just over 6 billion now to over 9 billion by 2050¹, with the aspiration to achieve an unsustainable mode of living spreading through cultures across the world.

“We cannot go on as we are, ignoring the effects of the world’s misuse of its resources while, at the same time, pretending that we have a society at ease with itself... radical change is essential”.

Blueprint for a Green Economy, Conservative Party Quality of Life Policy Group, 2007

We know we are living beyond our means. We know it cannot go on as it is set to. We know we must change. Crucially, **we know we must change now.** What is holding us back?

“The crisis is one of implementation”

Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, 2002

I suggest that various aspects of the human condition are preventing the change that most of us recognise as necessary. I suggest we all, in reality, have anxieties about common issues. I suggest that the right kind of leader can connect these anxieties with a shared agenda. I have come to call this kind of leadership **“connected leadership”**.

¹ UN 2004 revision of official population estimates and projections: http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/WPP2004/2004_Revision_press_release_Final.pdf

what have I done?

In this guide, I explore 5 key connected principles that I have developed to help tomorrow's leaders respond to the challenge of sustainability. This could be taken as a new model of leadership, or as a series of stimulating, inter-related ideas, compiled in an innovative manner - there is no pretence of proven accomplishment.

Throughout the project, I have tried to respect the fact that this challenge is greater than any one person can hope to fully grasp with modest resources. So I have researched widely and thoroughly and heard from many people, all of whom are listed on the inside cover.

But ultimately, I have not based my findings and conclusions only on the thoughts of a few individuals or organisations. My 5 key principles are the result of the lessons I have distilled from all of my research, reading and broader knowledge. I hope they represent an **objective and holistic, but inescapably personal, perspective on leadership and sustainability.**

why have I produced a guide?

With the option of submitting a piece in any format, I place great importance on my choice of presentation for this material. I could have taped my interviews or analysed my reading in an essay. Neither would have been true to the message that has come out of this work.

I have come to believe passionately in the urgent need for change if we are to make the necessary moves towards a more sustainable lifestyle. **Leaders must act now.** This is one of the most basic answers to the question of how they will be successful. **So this guide is designed to stimulate action, simply and effectively.** It hopes to communicate to a wide audience a clear and powerful message that will be used to underpin change tomorrow. A theoretical, exploratory essay or audio recording would fail to respond to the urgency of the message I have found. Regardless of how this work fares in the competition, this guide will still fulfil this role for me.

Throughout the guide,  signifies an exemplar case.

1

connected
thinking

challenge

There are worrying signs in all walks of life that we have become disconnected in the way we think. The challenge of sustainability concerns a complex series of connected and mutually dependent systems. I mean this in a far more profound sense than talking literally of systems in the natural world that scientists continue to understand in ever more detail. Governance systems, community systems, economic systems, cultural systems, even religious systems are all both inter-related and key to sustainability.

“The biggest frustration for anyone watching governments make such a horlicks of sustainable development is their apparent inability to make the connections between different policy silos.”

Jonathan Porritt²

Time and time again as I researched for this project, I heard the phrase ‘disjointed thinking’ ringing in my ears. We in the UK, and across much of the world, are quite literally institutionalised to think of the world in compartmentalised ‘silos’, with little emphasis on the myriad cross-overs between them. At school, we choose study options that teach us about ‘chemistry’ instead of ‘geography’ and then we emerge into adulthood where government makes decisions about transport in a building several streets from that which houses the department responsible for the environment.

There is a huge leadership challenge here, for without drastic alterations in the way we conceptualise the world, we

² Online blog, 26/09/07: <http://www.jonathonporritt.com/pages/>

will not achieve the scale of change demanded for sustainability to be realised.

solution...re-connected thinking

Leading individuals, working in leading organisations, political parties and civil movements, need to advocate **holistic thinking**. There needs to be a world-view that builds on systems-thinking and understands the complexity and mutual dependence of all sorts of components, be they tangible or intangible. Our mental silos need to be broken down, methodically and with determination, so that decisions we take do not prove later to be short-sighted or counter-productive at a broader scale.

This can only happen if dogged leadership goes a step further than the current state of play. Retrospectively criticising unsustainable bio-fuel production, which causes more harm than good to local environments, is arguably not good enough.³ Leaders with connected thinking will instinctively, and advisedly, construct plans that already consider the wider implications of their actions and do not cause further harm to the environmental or social systems upon which we as human beings are dependent.

If connected thinking can be demonstrated by leaders, it is conceivable to talk of a **world where we consider the full implications of our actions**. This will revolutionise the development path of human society.



“If we damage the environment, we damage ourselves.”

Sara Parkin

³ UN Press Release, May 9th 2007: http://un-environmental-initiatives.suite101.com/article.cfm/potential_biofuel_problems

2

**connected
partners**

challenge

Society has become so compartmentalised that sectors have become disconnected from each other. The private sector pursues the highest internal rate of return possible, while the public sector seeks to maximise its external rate of return. Just think about this language - **different people working towards opposing goals within the same society.**

This is no basis for sustainable living. Without co-operative and joint action, the effectiveness of individual efforts is significantly reduced. My research uncovered the frustration that this causes.

“We need multi-lateral, cross-sectoral action, otherwise you get a plethora of different initiatives which are incompatible when combined, thus hampering progress.”

Will Stephens

The leadership void here is explicitly cited by the Corporate Leaders Group (CLG) on Climate Change as holding back action to mitigate climate change. In its 2005 letter to Tony Blair, the CLG identified a ‘Catch 22’ whereby government feared business resistance to new climate change policy, while business resisted committed investment for a low carbon economy without long-term government policy providing a stable investment climate.⁴

But in a world that is fundamentally inter-connected, the absence of partnership between national government and big business is just one

⁴ http://www.cpi.cam.ac.uk/programmes/energy_and_climate_change/corporate_leaders_group_on_cli.aspx

problem. Actors large and small, from all sectors, need new partnerships - partnerships that they may never have considered before - to effect real change. Interestingly, those connected to politics were always also quick to emphasise to me that solid, constructive partnerships, galvanising stakeholder buy-in, were the only way to ensure that the political cycle does not un-do good work.

solution...re-connected partners

Leadership is needed to connect partners that do not currently co-operate under ‘business-as-usual’ circumstances. Leaders must show potential partners that this is not about mutual sacrifice for the greater good, but that **strategic networks** can achieve connected models of benefit.

★ Forum for the Future, the UK sustainable development charity, prides itself on working with over 120 leading organisations in business and the public sector.



By actively engaging with leading organisations (above), Forum for the Future pursues its vision of business and communities thriving in a future that is environmentally sustainable and socially just.

It is this leadership, dedicated to re-connecting partners, that will contribute to accelerating the change that is so necessary to achieve a sustainable world. Crucially, connected partners will produce change that is durable.

3

connected
people

challenge

Globalisation theorists tell us we have never been more 'inter-connected'. **Community breakdown, social exclusion and xenophobia** all offer strong challenges to this assertion. A key challenge for sustainability leaders is disconnected people.

Further, what is often misunderstood is that a key focus of sustainable development is people. Too often, naysayers dismiss it as environmentalism in disguise, but what are we sustaining here? Aren't we ultimately trying to ensure that human life can continue to exist in a meaningful, better way? **Justice, inclusiveness and equality are central concepts.** To lose sight of this is to fundamentally misunderstand the concept as a whole.

Beyond these issues is the reality that **sustainability will not be achieved without behaviour change.** This does not mean self-sacrifice and a minimalist lifestyle. But it does mean individuals *choosing* to use new technologies and live differently to improve their quality of life.

So in order for sustainability to be achieved, the true thrust of the concept must be properly understood, across the world's cultures. For the necessary level of behaviour change to occur on a global scale, people will have to *want* to change because they can see it is in their own interests.

"Moving towards a more constructive dialogue between people and across interest groups will always be key to achieving sustainable development goals."

Gideon Amos

solution...re-connected people

Leaders must respond to these challenges, striding forward in their efforts to connect people with:

- the anthropocentricity of sustainable development
- the real, tangible benefits that each and every one of them can experience
- each other, generating the sense of community that we need to repair broken societies
- the reality that lifestyles will need to change, but that this can be a positive change in their quality of life
- the belief that what they do *does* matter

How can leaders do this? People need to be empowered. Communication, positivity, consultation, education and example are all key concepts.

But leaders of all kinds can contribute and this is a powerful lesson.

★ *"Our bridge designs are not just routes connecting one side to another. They are overtly places that reinforce and celebrate people's experience of connection, coming together, sharing."*

Jonathan McDowell



4

**connected
living**

challenge

In our globalised world, we have somehow managed to become disconnected from place. The worst effects of pollution are often not felt at the source of the pollutant and so our disconnectedness allows us to go on polluting. Responding to climate change is the same example but on a global scale. Meanwhile, supply chains stretch across the world, originating in 'unseen places', allowing us not to question them. **With this type of disconnected living, widespread change is unthinkable.**

This goes hand in hand with a more personal challenge that must be faced by the leaders of tomorrow.

“Everyone talks about the importance of living sustainably but there is still a general lack of inspiring exemplars.”

Rowan Gray

Behaviour change is complicated but there is no doubt that **role models** are a powerful device for inspiring people. Tony Blair memorably declared that he would not curtail his long-haul holiday flights to reduce his carbon footprint. Regardless of whether this is the right or wrong approach, the controversy this statement caused shows just how influential the actions of leaders are on society. **Leaders cannot display disconnected principles and lifestyles and expect to lead other people to sustainable lives.**

“Today, every time I go out in my car I have an effect on ecosystems and on people who live far away from me, in space as well as in time.”

Dominique Bourg⁵

solution...re-connected living

Successful leaders are going to have to lead by example in their everyday living. In order for them to maintain their integrity, their **living must be connected to their values**. The power of demonstrating that more sustainable living can be achieved through one's own actions cannot be overstated.

But at a higher level, it falls to leaders to inspire in people a true sense of **connected living**, a true appreciation that their **actions do matter** and **do** have important impacts - even though many of these may not be felt in their own environment. And that by that logic, other people's actions may affect **them**, in any place, at any time. We do all truly live in a connected world. Leaders must help us remember this and live by its lessons.



“Leadership needs to better connect people to the outcome of their collective behaviour.”

Greg Clark

⁵ Special Report, Climate Change, Research*EU, no. 52, June 2007

5

**connected
futures**

challenge

We have become disconnected from the reality that our individual actions affect the way life will be in the future. Of course, people argue, *individual* actions have a negligible impact, but collectively, all of our individual actions matter. And this is not always a question of future generations, but often of future years within our own lifetimes.

How has this happened? So often in my research, I heard the phrases “electoral cycle”, “political cycle” or “business cycle” as if these were the only timeframes within which we operate. But there are all sorts of processes, climate being the supreme example, that operate at far longer timescales. I believe, especially with the level of knowledge we now have about systems like climate, that many people intuitively understand that we can no longer act only for the short-term. And yet **we do not feel connected enough to the future to think long-term.**

“So how does leadership get people to think long term and act short term?”

Greg Clark

solution...re-connected futures

Leaders of sustainability must be **visionary**. But, more, leaders must **instil in us all that same vision**. A vision of a future that we can be proud of. We live in a world where there is a shortage of leaders who thrive on the pride of what they have achieved for others, leaders who are fundamentally value-driven. We need leaders who can be **optimistic** about the future, rather than constantly presenting us with facts and images showing the catastrophe that lies ahead.

We need leaders who can connect with the belief that lies somewhere deep within us all that we do care about the future state of the planet, about how we will live when we are old and about how our children will live. Leaders need to offer us **innovative, strategic insights** that show us how we can achieve a future that is sustainable and that appeals to us all.

★ Buildings have a lifespan of many decades and the built environment itself can last for centuries. The BedZED development in the London Borough of Sutton is a well-known UK exemplar of a carbon-neutral eco-community. Its power is in the fact that people can visit it, see that it works, and envisage themselves doing something similar. But it would never have been a success if the leaders that designed and built it, when faced with the reality that the built environment must change to achieve sustainability, had not **constructively engaged** with finding a solution. Their vision becomes a vision for the rest of us and it is a vision which reconnects us with our future.



closing thoughts

What I present here, the sum of my research and of my thoughts, does not claim to reveal anything new.

But that is why it is so important. My principles to guide solutions for sustainability revolve around what we have lost - what we have become disconnected from.

The urgency of moving towards sustainability is unquestionable. I argue here that to do so **we must rediscover:**

- connected thinking
- connected partners
- connected people
- connected living
- connected futures

Society will not find these connections on its own. The 20th century has proven this. This is undeniably a challenge for leaders, the nature, scale and urgency of which I believe we have never yet encountered. A new approach is surely required.

Leaders, be they individuals, organisations or communities, can use this model of **connected leadership** to respond to the challenge of sustainability. It has emerged from wide reading and even wider conversation that to show strength in all five areas is to become one of the successful leaders that we need. Crucially, each principle should be seen as a **way of thinking**, not a prescriptive way of behaving.

Lasting change can be structured, but it cannot be imposed. The active support of the majority is paramount.