
Developing Cultures of Sustainability: Innovative Ways of Engaging Creativity and Values

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Abstract

Our shift to a life sustaining society requires imaginative and creative responses from us all on an unprecedented speed and scale. However the important role of creative practice, art and culture in supporting leaders to foster these responses is under-articulated and the leadership skills required undefined.

This article identifies the growth of 'Cultures of Sustainability' within organisations as key for leaders to stimulate a truly systemic organisational response to climate change, peak oil and resource depletion. Hallmarks of these cultures are identified, alongside the critical role of creativity and imagination in their development. Through two projects the article explores innovative approaches to exploring and developing key skills needed for leaders to propagate cultures of sustainability.

When asked about their role in society's transition to a sustainable green economy, participants in a cultural and creative sector leadership courseⁱⁱ had a sobering response: "it's too big, too complex, we don't know how to".

This sense of being 'distant' or the issue too large is not uncommon and begs the question, how can leaders develop the skills for creating the space and context for themselves and for their teams to engage, listen, explore and respond? A space that can provide the means of engagement and collective responsibility, as well as the skills for co-creating a response map and compass once on a transition journey. Such a space is critical if we are really to embark on deep and appropriately scaled response to peak oilⁱⁱⁱ, resource depletion and climate change to make the transition needed to a life sustaining society.

As Joana Macy^{iv} puts it: "of all the dangers we face none is as dangerous as the deadening of our response". This space can be described in Brocchi's terms as "cultures of sustainability"^v, a culture where an organisation can develop values-driven and truly systemic responses.

This article considers what these cultures look like, focuses on the role of creativity and imagination as critical features of this culture and, through two innovative projects, explores the skills needed for leaders to develop cultures of sustainability.

Identifying cultures of sustainability

My experience as a leader^{vi} and facilitator has taught that to develop a culture in an organisation you need a good sense of what that culture looks like. So what are the hallmarks of a culture of sustainability?

Safe, connected and collective

The bottom line for all facilitation is an environment that feels safe for people to take risks, be authentic and enquire. This is heightened by the issues of sustainability as these issues bring personal values to work and requires our collective genius to reflect on and tease out dilemmas and complexity. A culture of sustainability allows for exploration of our interconnection with others, human or more than human, and for exploration of our identity as part of nature^{vii}.

Coherent and literate

In the midst of reviewing a recent leadership course with a client, a good friend and colleague concluded “this is firstly about providing coherence”, and I add to that, literacy. A culture of sustainability has a ‘Sense of Common’, a coherent sense of the common needs that are “bigger than self”^{viii} problems. The organisation is at ease with how team members relate to the multiple issues that the needs of sustainability invoke and their inter-relatedness; this culture accepts different perspectives, and understands that unknown environmental feedback cycles make our situation unpredictable. The culture promotes a literacy that enables shared understanding and shared feeling about the dilemmas we face.

Values-driven and creative

Cultures of sustainability recognise that values underpin and drive many of our attitudes and behaviours and so are a source for change. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and associated campaigning bodies has established a body of work, *The Common Cause Handbook*^{ix}, that identifies the significance of values in a culture of sustainability: “One of the most neglected factors in pushing for change is the set of values that motivates people...examining these values more closely reveals a wealth of opportunity to bring about lasting systemic change”. Cultures of sustainability are founded on organisational values, acknowledging that there may be a ‘values gap’ between them and individual values.

Creativity and change

The role of creativity in transition to a sustainable society is becoming recognised as critical^x, as illustrated in the following quote from Rob Hopkins, leader of the Transition Town Network^{xi}: “If we can engage our creative brilliance in this process, the future without oil could be preferable to the present with lots of oil”.

The potential of creativity, art and culture as a means of fostering innovative responses to sustainability is of value to all organisations, but is under articulated. From direct delivery experience I identify this potency as a means of:

- **Generating new narratives and stories:** imagining futures that are so rich and vivid they inform our current ways of being. The transition we are in has been described as ‘the great imagining’^{xii}.
- **Making meaning:** use of different media and metaphors to break out of the literal and logical and helping us perceive through feeling, sensing and intuition as well as thought.
- **Exploring and reflecting on what is important:** deeply reflecting on our values and how we relate and live.
- **Helping us relate to a broader temporal context:** be that the life cycle of a May fly, a human generation away (e.g. 2030), seven generations away (2200), or geological time scales.
- **Reconnecting:** with different aspects of ourselves, each other and fellow species in nature.
- **Exploring emotional skills:** rehearsing and exploring implications of change, loss, new and accepting uncertainty.
- **Developing creative skills and behaviours:** risk, courage, spontaneity, play.

Examples of innovative practice

How can we support leaders to develop these cultures? What skills do leaders need in particular to harness collective creativity and imagination? Key aspects of two related creative responses^{xiii} are outlined as a means of illustrating the kind of skills needed for leaders to conjure these spaces, these cultures of sustainability.

A. The Case for Optimism event: the role of imagining

Initiated in April 2011 this one day event^{xiv} brought 30 creative leaders, artists, ecologists and policy makers with experience and commitment to this field to explore the role of creativity and art in the transition to a life sustaining society. Detailed documentation of the process, content and outcomes can be seen at www.caseforoptimism.org.uk. The event serves to illustrate two key leadership capabilities needed in promoting cultures of sustainability: (1) understanding the dynamics of hearing hard information; and (2) enabling release of imagination.

1. Understanding the dynamics of hearing hard information:

The structure of this event is based on the work of Joanna Macy. An eco-philosopher, Macy has developed over decades a structure and exercises for engaging and considering these issues that she describes as “The Work That Reconnects”^{xv}, as illustrated in figure 1 below. Critical to this cyclical structure is understanding that to hear the challenging realities that are driving the need for a response, we must avoid being numbed by them. We need to precede this information with an active appreciation for what is (i.e. the incredible world we inhabit and our dependency on it) to establish a strong positive platform from which to receive difficult information. The session started from Gratitude, a simple, one-to-one reflection on aspects of participant’s work and life that they were grateful for – despite the roller coaster of living and

working in the 21st century. Further exercises are described fully in Macy's book '*The Work that Reconnects*'. This simple activity established a dynamic that made it more possible to reframe our perspective of receiving challenging realities and so responding differently.

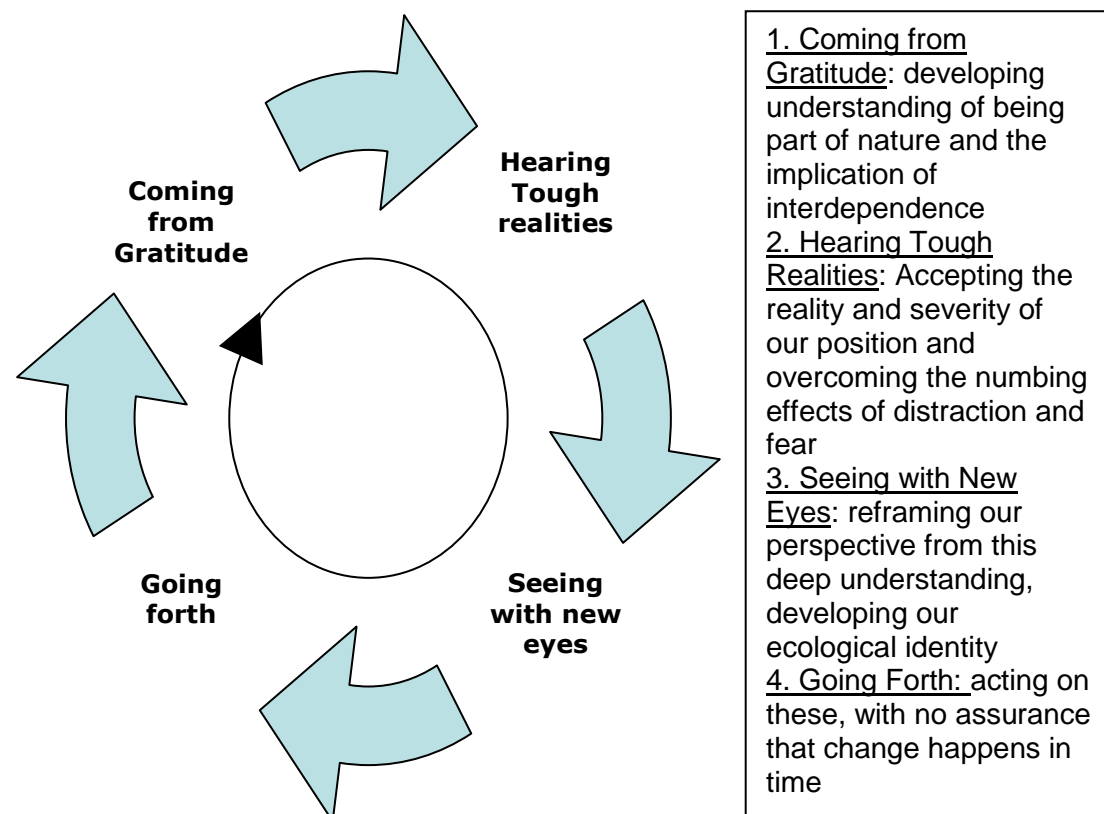


Figure 1: The spiral of *The Work That Reconnects*, J. Macy.

2. Enabling release of imagination

To create a new reality we must first imagine it. Understanding that the role of our imaginations is pivotal to our ability to 'turn' things around is therefore a key leadership skill.

“Humans are capable of a unique trick, creating realities by first imagining them, by experiencing them in their minds.as soon as we sense the possibility of a more desirable world, we begin behaving differently, as though that world is starting to come into existence, as though, in our mind’s eye, we are already there. The dream becomes an invisible force which pulls us forward. By this process it begins to come true. The act of imagining somehow makes it real..... And what is possible in art becomes thinkable in life.” – Brian Eno^{xvi}

Having established appreciation and then heard difficult information, the Case for Optimism event went on to collectively imagine the cultural and creative landscape of 2030. This was achieved by “backcasting” from a sustainable post transition world^{xvii}.

The event supported leaders active in promoting a creative response to sustainability. The value of the structure to these participants is illustrated in feedback including: “Being part of these conversations reinvigorates your sense of responsibility, you feel more committed to getting on and doing – because it matters, but also because it connects you to other people in a really exciting way.” “I think the images of what it all could be like in 2030 were brilliant, totally positive and I am full of optimism”.

Leaders need to prioritise time capacity and in house or commissioned facilitation capacity to initiate such release of imagination if they are to foster a culture with a sense of hope and purpose.

B. Be/Me/We/Do: Skills for understanding and initiating cultures of sustainability

By stepping into other states or roles we can break out of our default mode of perception. For most of us our focus is on ourselves (Me) and is action orientated (Do). Through this process we can, for example, shift this to a reflective state (Be), perceiving from the position of “other” (We). Experiencing the states of Be, Me, We and Do and shifting between them provides individual, team and organisational insights into the key aspects of Cultures of Sustainability identified earlier.

Be/Me/We/Do is an exercise designed as a means of engaging different forms of learning, is physically active and enjoyable. Also by physically stepping into states the participant is more likely to take on that role. The activity is best perceived as a square dance between four bases (states) that we can step between, illustrated in figure 2. The four bases are:

(article continues overleaf.)

Me: identity, Self, values, ego and persona. Your thoughts and emotions. Your body and what it senses

Associations:

Positive: power and purpose

Negative: ego/ self deception

We: layers of family, town, world, universe, ancestors, future beings, more than human world. Greater “we” of Jung’s collective unconscious

Associations:

Positive: meaningfulness loving,

Negative: exclusion, identity loss

Be: awareness (senses), settling (mind distraction) discernment (ego/authenticity), spaciousness (sense of horizon), consciousness

Associations:

Positive: contentment, wholeness, equanimity, valuing, authentic.

Negative: complacency, arrogance, belief of arrival/stasis

Do: our potency individually and collectively, at all layers identified in “we” and over time (daily actions to lifetime/ geological time). Unconscious and conscious. Proactive, reactive

Associations:

Positive: flow, result, courage, inspiration, motivation,

Negative: fanaticism, control, not listening

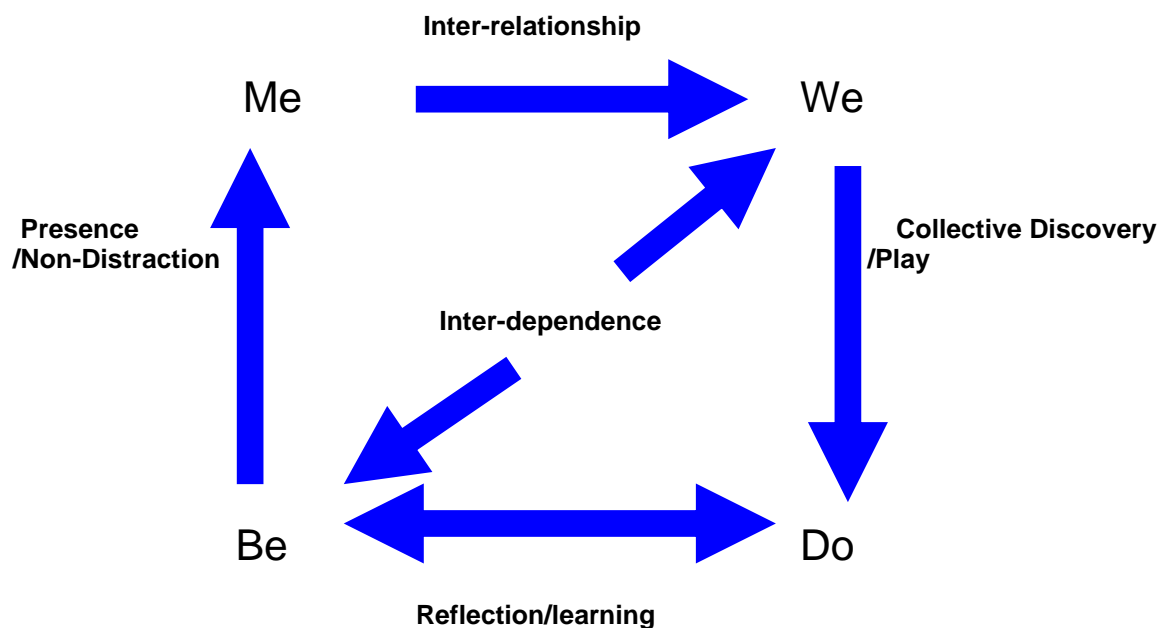


Figure 2 : The Be/Me/We/Do square dance

It is the shift, the steps between these states that provides experience of skills and understanding needed in fostering cultures of sustainability. These steps are described below and are followed by an outline structure of a delivered exercise.

- **Be:Me:** To act effectively as leaders we need to understand what we stand for and the context we are in. The Be:Me move implies deeper understanding of our role in this moment in planet history – this sustainability crisis is happening on our watch. This step requires skills of non-distraction – being more present in order to strengthen attention and observation and so maximise possibilities.
- **Me:We:** This is the shift away from the 80s mantra of the self, to recognising our inter-relationship. Satish Kumar refers to this as the shift from ego to eco^{xxiii} and is expressed in the simple poem “Me, we”^{xxix}. In business terms it is increasingly recognised that an implication of complexity is heightening the importance of partnership as routes to innovation and growth and that customer value is best served from collaborative work.
- **We:Do:** This step is of collective exploring; linking creative process to innovation with value outcomes. This is the realm of play – spontaneity and collective exploration, as IDEO’s Peter Skillman says “enlightened trial and error over the planning of the lone genius”^{xx} that can lead to co-authoring of new solutions. This step is evolution’s process of adaption^{xxi}. A means to respond in changing circumstances is a critical element of a culture of sustainability.
- **Do:Be:** This is the step of reflection and learning, the feedback loop, “doing informing the “being”” and vice versa^{xxii}. Our learning needs to draw on all four of Carl Jung’s ways of knowing^{xxiii} -- feeling, intuition, sensing as well as thinking.
- **Be:We:** This move is understanding the fundamental implications of interdependence and as such is the basis for systems theory and permaculture. This understanding shapes the context for our values, our motivation and behaviours, and shapes our identity. Grasping interdependence means we review our role with everything.
- **Me:Do:** This is the old step of independent action, of habitual doing with no reflection on implications for others. It is not included in this square dance as we are generally well practiced at it.

This exercise has been developed through company development with a Creative Director of Encounters (a sustainability creative engagement organisation^{xxiv}), research commissioned by NESTA^{xxv} and developmental workshops^{xxvi}. The activity is best preceded with a physical warm up or games to set the physical and playful tone. With the space clear and the four states laid out on the floor (the “dance floor”) participants firstly explore embodying each state through guided description as they travel to each one. The next stage is of reflective learning with participants invited to step between different states, considering the skills needed in each shift, followed by spontaneous feedback of insights. The frame then can be used as a means of exploring:

- Mapping for leaders; placing themselves (on the dance floor) and asking; what draws you there? Where do you want to be? Which of the skills/steps can help you shift? Is there a position difference for you personally and professionally?
- The position and development opportunities for whole teams and organisations (and societies); by asking the same questions as above of representatives.
- Understanding of the differences and dynamics within teams; by simply witnessing where individual team members place themselves, and then by literally standing in their position and considering the different locations.

The following feedback responses from a workshop^{xxvii} using this approach illustrates the kind of experience participants have had:

“Horizon is lifted. Validation of my leadership role. Questions position of me and organisation. Use frame in strategic thinking. Understand where others are in the frame. Act more from Be. Balance all states. Getting to We before Do.”

Summary and Conclusions

Fine judgement is needed to create cultures that feel safe and connected, that have a sense of realistic positivity and creative opportunity. This needs to be achieved subtly, yet with a degree of urgency. This is the craft of behaviour modelling and ground rule setting.

I have experienced a range of strong reactions in developing and delivering these approaches; for some participants you are the messenger they don't want to listen to. Expect emotions and respect the need for a grounded, appreciative starting point. Recognise that people relate to sustainability in many different ways. Avoid being perceived as preaching by respecting the knowledge in the room and not presenting yourself as an expert.

Establishing cultures of sustainability requires leadership courage, clear sense of values and above all a means of personal engagement and fuelling creative and collective Imagineering. Leaders need the opportunity to experience and develop a range of capacities not usually emphasised within leadership development. Educators and facilitators need to innovate, in the mode of We:Do, with engagement mechanism design to support leaders in creating cultures of sustainability.

“The interlinked challenges we face (ongoing financial crisis, the end of the oil age and the challenge of climate change) will require creative and dynamic responses from all sections of society. It strikes me that if a leadership programme doesn't address these challenges; it is preparing leaders for yesterday, not tomorrow. “

– Ruth Potts, leader of New Economics Foundation's Great Transition Programme^{xxviii}.

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References

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ⁱⁱ Clore Leadership Programme short course June 2011

ⁱⁱⁱ Term for describing plateau and decline of global oil extraction. Triple digit USD(\$) oil (Brent) prices were reached in mid-2008 and have been for most of 2011 to date. Richard Branson is warning of an oil crunch within five years (The Guardian 8th February 2010).

^{iv} Macy, J. (1998). *Coming back to life: the work that reconnects* Canada: New Society Publishers, p24. See also www.Joanamacy.net

^v Brocchi, D. (2008). The cultural dimensions of sustainability in S. Kagan & V. Kirchberg (Eds.) *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures* (p.37). Germany: VAS.

^{vi} Chief Executive of The Circus Space 1991 – 2004 and The Media Centre 2005 – 2009. The author is a trained innovation coach and sustainability facilitator.

^{vii} This is the central theme to the Deep Ecology movement see Harding, Stephan (2006) *Animate Earth*, Dartington UK; Green Books pp 56

^{viii} As defined in Common Cause: the case for working with our cultural values www.wwf.org.uk/change September 2010

^{ix} <http://valuesandframes.org/handbook/>

^x Recently through the Work of Mission, Models Money (a cultural sector think tank) <http://rethink.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk/> and in the Transition Town movement a rapidly growing network of sustainability activists developing localised energy decent plans <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>

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- ^{xi} Quote from the film Economics of Happiness: <http://www.theeconomicsofhappiness.org/>
- ^{xii} A term initiated and credited to Lucy Neal
- ^{xiii} These have been developed in association with the Clore leadership Programme, a UK fellowship programme designed specifically to strengthen leadership across the cultural and creative sector. www.cloreleadership.org
- ^{xiv} This event was co-created and co-facilitated by the author with Hilary Jennings and Lucy Neal with support from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Clore Leadership Programme.
- ^{xv} See earlier reference.
- ^{xvi} Brian Eno, 1985: <http://longnow.org/essays/big-here-and-long-now/>
- ^{xvii} A technique developed in the Transition Town movement. Rather than constructing ideas for going forwards from the present, backcasting involves reflecting back to now from an imagined future and so is not rooted in current thinking, releasing more imaginative possibilities.
- ^{xviii} Kumar, S. (2009). Eco-psychology: an eco-spiritual view from the east. *Journal of Holistic Healthcare* 6(3).
- ^{xix} By Muhammad Ali credited as the shortest ever poem.
- ^{xx} IDEO Industrial design company, quote from clip <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PClcM>
- ^{xxi} Described by educational psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith as 'adaptive potentiation': "We try out techniques, strategies, scenarios, personas, in delimited zones, where the usual urgent determinations of life don't automatically apply". Sutton Smith, Brian (1999) *Ambiguity of Play*, Harvard.
- ^{xxii} Is best danced with a Frank Sinatra swagger - do be do do, do be do be do do)
- ^{xxiii} Harding, S. (2006). *Animate earth*. Dartington, UK; Green Books.
- ^{xxiv} www.encounters-arts.org.uk
- ^{xxv} Technology of Foolishness by Teo Greenstreet, April 2010. http://www.nesta.org.uk/calendar/assets/events/leadership_in_times_of_uncertainty
- ^{xxvi} Three sessions with Clore Leadership Programme and Bee School http://www.grovehouse.info/images/Bee_School_Flyer%5B1%5D.pdf
- ^{xxvii} Clore leadership Programme short Course January 2011..
- ^{xxviii} <http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/the-great-transition>, Quote from The Case for Optimism event April 2011