

Chapter 4 – Participatory sustainability and leadership

Participatory leadership?

Participatory sustainability would not be participatory without participatory leadership. But what does "participatory leadership" mean? How far does that go? Is it really "leadership" if everyone's doing it?

The term "participatory" suggests that many people are involved and that there is something – some effort or group or lifeworld – that they are all involved *in*. It also suggests these people are not alone or dominating. It implies a larger "participatory field" within which all agents are participating in various ways along with others. So where is the *leadership*?

The term "participatory *leadership*" suggests that all these people and agents are somehow involved in shaping what's happening, in providing direction and impetus to the activity. Such a group or effort is often called "leaderful", i.e., full of leaders and leadership energy.

The obvious question raised by this image is "Isn't that a recipe for chaos, with everyone leading in different directions, getting in each other's way – a mob making a mess? Don't we need people moving in the same direction in order to get things done, and someone or something to get them moving like that?"

The answer to that question is "Yes and no." Truly, the more people share a direction, the more their collective impact will likely be. But we can ask: Does that common direction have to come from on high, or can it emerge from productive interactions among participants within the community or system itself?

When a situation arises that impacts the common good or "the general welfare", evidence suggests that initiatives and collaborations to address that situation often emerge spontaneously from the population unless there are significant barriers to such emergence and connectedness. In these cases even top-down leadership – if it is wise – shifts to serving participation, catalyzing conversations and supporting the self-organizing capacity of the community or system rather than directing the show. More on that later.

A less obvious and recognized aspect of participatory leadership involves the presence of non-personal sources of leadership, those directive influences and drivers that fulfill functions we normally associate with persons-as-leaders. Such demonstrable leadership sources range from agreements and institutional structures, to environmental conditions and situational requirements, to cultural assumptions, stories and practices. Some people also count spiritual, psychological and

psychic sources of guidance, motivation and inspiration, such as their muse, God, Nature, their upbringing, or the *I Ching*.

To the extent participatory leadership for participatory sustainability is present, we find both human and non-human sources of direction, initiative and energy showing up in structured and self-organized ways that sustain the human and natural living systems within which they operate.

The logic of participatory leadership for participatory sustainability

Sustainability is a monumental project. It seems to require profound expertise and management skill to pull it off. It seems to beg for a top-down, educated, powerful meritocracy of highly qualified elite leaders to make it happen against all the odds pushing against it.

But that is an illusion – an illusion fed by our efforts to impose our linear maps on the dynamic complexity of the world. That illusion not only undermines our efforts at sustainability, but has actually been one of the drivers of the profound non-sustainability we find in our current civilization. Rather than partnering responsively with the human and natural aliveness around us, we have sought to control it and reshape it for our own purposes, going to extreme lengths to prevent ourselves from being limited by its limits, needs and demands. We know what we want, we figure out how to get it, and we go for it – increasingly empowered by linear science, technology and global economics.

While this oversimplified narrative applies most directly to society's elites, it also applies to those of us in the "developed" and "developing" worlds who seek to use linear science, technology and economics to improve our lot, and to the systems that help us do that. Wherever we hear that it is "uneconomical" to do things in a sustainable way, we know that this illusion of domination and expertise is controlling the minds, hearts and behaviors of those involved. Our narrative of rightful dominance over nature – including human nature – depends on our assumption that we can directly cause what we want and that we can directly "fix" any consequences of that effort.

But the dynamic, nonlinear complexity of the world and its living systems – both human and natural – does not always so obediently comply with our linear machinations, especially in the long run. A sustainable relationship with living systems requires that our initiatives and responses have a comparable dynamic complexity and responsiveness as the systems we are working with. We need to see ourselves as partners with the life around us and with the vast potential of life's rich nonlinear aliveness.

In particular, we need to engage the gifts and energies of as many people and drivers as possible – including a wide variety of specialist fields, sectors, stakeholders, countries, networks, and ordinary people – in pursuing sustainability initiatives in their own locales and areas of influence while communicating and collaborating with each other across boundaries. The more self-organized such engagements can be, the more we will tap the voluntary resources of self-motivated people

and communities and the more eyes, ears, and minds will be applied to the monumental task of understanding and tracking changing conditions at every level of the systems we are addressing.

This participatory approach is so important for sustainability partly because of the ubiquity of sustainability challenges. They are everywhere, sharing certain qualities in common but manifesting in diverse unique ways requiring unique local responses everywhere, appropriately shaped by unique local contexts, understandings, resources and constraints. There is no way to handle this fabric of complex simultaneity from the top down. It is all quite beyond the capacity of centralized planning and management (a lesson painfully learned by the Soviet Union). Perhaps even more significantly, well designed broad participation tends to mimic the self-organizing nature of natural systems, the way nature sustains itself. Our alignment with – indeed, our embodiment of – this dynamic of nature within our own social systems and activities may be the most fundamental key to their sustainability.

As noted earlier, the more people and organizations can be energized to do the work involved in developing sustainability, the less financial and management resources will be required from centralized entities (especially governments). Furthermore – and this is a real bonus – greater engagement engenders greater buy-in from those who have participated. The more people and groups are well and truly involved in co-creating policies, programs, plans and possibilities for sustainability, the more their concerns and aspirations will be well addressed in the process and thus the more willingness and energy they will bring to their part of the sustainability enterprise and the less resistance they will offer, for they will have a shared sense that it serves their (now enlightened) self-interest.

Levels of participatory leadership

The International Association for Public Participation and other specialists in the field of public engagement envision a scale of involvement that has major implications for leadership⁵². At the bottom are efforts to inform and educate people about issues and possibilities. Above that we find official decision-makers' efforts to solicit input from the public and stakeholders about their ideas and preferences – perhaps even engaging people in efforts to ensure that their ideas, needs and dreams are taken seriously in subsequent decisions.

A phase shift happens when real collaboration and partnership begin: people work together directly with leaders to develop policies, programs, and activities that impact or involve them, including framing the issues and establishing guidelines. At the high end of this level of participation, we find power being delegated to certain groups to take action in areas formerly held by officials and still perhaps overseen by those officials.

The final shift to fully empowered participatory leadership involves granting or allowing people full voice and final decision-making and implementation power in particular realms and/or enhancing their capacity to do all of the above for themselves as needed in any realm. To a certain extent this final step can involve simply getting out of the way of people's natural self-organizing impulses

(which happens most obviously and naturally when established social institutions collapse, as in natural disasters⁵³). But often it can be done strategically – and prior to catastrophe – by asking questions, establishing forums and networking facilities, convening conversations, providing channels for people's passions and resources for community projects, and otherwise creating contexts within which more generative self-organization can emerge naturally.

This spectrum of participation suggests a sequence of progressive empowerment, which is often what is needed, especially when shifting from centralized power to broader participation. However, it can also be used situationally, with established authority engaging the level of participation it believes appropriate for a given circumstance. It can also be taken as an agenda of demands for greater participation from groups who desire a greater role deciding and implementing programs that impact them. Or it can be seen as leadership principles to be used, as needed, by all the leaders in a leaderful group or community in engagements with their peers.

Ideally over time our social institutions and cultures will embed these various forms of participative leadership into the routine functioning of society. We see examples of that currently in requirements for environmental impact statements, for public hearings, for jury trials; in the existence of letters to the editor, market economies, worker owned businesses, and public spaces for conversation; and in the democratic expectation of freedom of press, free speech and free association.

We can use all the above leadership dynamics to move towards and sustain participatory sustainability.

What does participatory leadership look like?

In this section you are invited to imagine that we live in a time in which participatory leadership is increasingly present in widespread efforts to support sustainability. What might we report back from that time to people living twenty years earlier, like now? Here is one possibility...

As was the case with you folks, our conception of leadership tends to center on the functions of decision-making, management, implementation, and coordination of activities. We remember how these functions were almost always handled in your era by individual managers and management hierarchies.

In our current leaderful groups and activities, such leadership roles tend to be distributed more broadly and horizontally and/or be available to anyone who volunteers for them, often based on their individual competence or passion. In our transition we studied many local disaster responses and some grassroots movements like the 2011-2012 Occupy movement⁵⁴ and the 1986 Great Peace March⁵⁵ which self-organized through such dynamics. We often enhanced or catalyzed that natural tendency using methods like Open Space "unconferencing"⁵⁶ where people who share a concern are helped to gather with like-minded others. Such self-organizing efforts once were mistakenly labeled "leaderless" because "no one is in charge" of the whole operation. We almost

always now refer to them as "leaderful" because in fact they succeed to the extent that many people are taking responsibility of all kinds in all aspects of the organization or activity.

When these systems become dysfunctional, we have noticed that it is often because behavior patterns from more hierarchical times and cultures – domination, passivity, arrogance, victimhood, irresponsible license, etc. – begin to overwhelm the collaborative responsibility dynamics that enable shared leadership. Our participatory bias towards inclusion makes it hard for us participatory leaders to exclude sources of disruption. But we've also noted that the existence of undue disruption can, itself, drive away more conscientious participants. So we try to consciously ride this fine edge. When we feel we've had to exclude someone or some energy, we reflect on what might be done to increase our capacity to include that form of disruption rather than using our renewed collective coherence to feed our self-righteousness.

In our leaderful organizations and activities we also find much situational leadership – people rising into (often ad hoc) leadership roles in situations that match their particular leadership gifts. Coordination in such circumstances often happens informally, through conversations among relevant players, sometimes stimulated by problems that surface where two or more frontline activities intersect. We find that a participatory system can often heal and transform itself as necessary in this way, for knowledge of the activity is most concentrated within the activity itself and just needs productive conversation to rework any kinks.

Often the overall guidance for a leaderful system comes from consensus or supermajority agreements and collective understandings arising from dialogue and deliberation that seek to honestly take into account the needs, perspectives and concerns of all members and parts of the system. Success in this generates a level of shared orientation and "ownership" that then enables relatively independent agents to act in ways that harmonize without having to be consciously planned and woven together. Similarly, we often gather ideas, information, and resources using crowdsourcing, and evaluate possibilities and innovations using "wisdom of crowds"[57](#) approaches like prediction markets, both of which generate useful intelligence from mass participation.

We find that many leadership functions beyond decision-making, management and implementation can also be held by many people or fulfilled or facilitated by social institutions and environmental contexts, so we've been learning how to be adept at designing such institutions and contexts.

In many groups and communities, participants collectively co-create the visions and goals that guide their collective activity, grounding themselves in the deep needs or aspirations that brought them together in the first place or the common circumstances they find themselves in. Sometimes we formalize such inspiring statements, embedding them in our group culture as guidelines that motivate future members who were not among the original founders of the vision. These dreams and standards work until they don't, at which point individuals or dissident groups challenge them and become leaders in their transformation. We believe that individual visionaries, community vision co-creation activities, vision statements, and visionary dissent all perform leadership functions which guide people as a community or activity evolves.

Of course good leadership also involves helping the led system and its members learn, innovate and evolve. This facet of leadership embraces education, reflection, training, coaching and

reviewing successes and failures. It involves ensuring accountability and quality improvement. It involves eliciting creativity to meet new challenges and opportunities. All these can, of course, be initiated and managed by individual leaders or top-down management structures. But they can and are also undertaken collectively, instigated situationally by many people, or realized through cultural agreements and regular practices. Among the most widespread approaches to participatory learning in our culture, you will find co-created teaching modules and activities, mutual education networks, and learning communities of practice where practitioners in a field reflect together on their experience and support each other in expanding their individual and collective knowledge and competence and in building their community of practitioners.

We even find it useful to notice how situations themselves often lead us to learn by presenting challenges we cannot deal with except by improving our observation, increasing our understanding and changing our behaviors. This, too, is leadership. We could say that the unsustainable aspects of our world and our civilization continue to lead us to better ways of living by teaching us both the necessity and means of sustainability.

Which leads us to the leadership functions of foresight, preparedness, stewardship and support – caring for the ongoing aliveness and well-being of our group, community, activity and world. Again, this can be done in a top-down way by individual leaders and centralized institutions. But it can also be done collectively, bottom-up. We've long known that science itself is a collective activity, using the experiments, sensors and the modeling and analytic resources of dozens or thousands of people to come to the conclusions of evidence. We increasingly use citizen science – which crowdsources scientific data gathering and processing – to expand this natural scientific participation even further⁵⁸. Specialized peer-to-peer (p2p) networking sites increasingly enable people to support each other and share resources in highly participatory ways⁵⁹ that directly enhance sustainability by reducing consumption while increasing social capital which, by meeting deep communal and spiritual needs, further reduces consumerist impulses⁶⁰. We particularly value leadership that sets up and promotes the use of such networks, as well as modeling exemplary participation in them. The more we use such systems, the more they become a culture that itself exerts powerful leadership over our collective behavior.

Leadership in actual production and innovation is also increasingly participatory. Open source culture has expanded and merged with the so-called maker movement, with people sharing designs and manufacturing products at home and in community production facilities ("hackerspaces" featuring 3D printers and equipment for ceramic, wood and metal fabrication) which they then use, trade, give or sell locally⁶¹. On the other side of the coin, ordinary citizens engage in mapping and connecting the existing needs and resources in their communities – human, social, and natural⁶². We have a very palpable sense of co-creating our shared, leaderful local economy.

Perhaps the most significant shift in leadership from your era to ours is the sense that leadership does not involve telling people what to do or getting them to do it, but setting the conditions under which people can do what they need or want to do by themselves, together, in healthy ways. Primary among the tools for doing that are advanced forms of conversation in which people can

clarify their individual and collective needs and dreams and form collaborations for realizing them. We strongly believe in including diverse people, perspectives, interests and information in these forums and pursue that in a number of ways. Most often, we simply invite open attendance, either general or from a specific target population. Sometimes we take the extra effort to ensure a certain level of diversity using random selection, scientific sampling, and/or stakeholder analysis and recruitment. We take seriously the guidance to "get the whole system in the room" – especially when doing visioning, design, policy-creation, conflict resolution, or reorganizing work.

When it is impractical to include everyone, we use a well-selected (and often randomly selected) microcosm of the larger population that reflects that population's diversity containing about a dozen to several hundred people. Such a "minipublic" does its dialogue or deliberation in a publicly visible manner, with media coverage and considerable fanfare, as well as creating opportunities for the broader public to give input and participate in their own conversations on the subject. In this way the whole population can be involved – either vicariously or directly – in whatever solutions or resolutions are generated by the whole multi-level conversation. Participatory leadership gets exercised in initiating, framing, convening, facilitating, being part of, recording, reflecting on and using the results of such conversations^{[63](#)}.

A broader aspect of our effort to lead and engage participation for sustainability includes designing systems and catalyzing a culture where our self-interest naturally aligns with the common good and the well-being of the larger living systems we are part of. Some of this is spiritual and philosophical and so we support initiatives and practices that raise our consciousness to a point where our interdependence is obvious. Some of this is educational, and so we have many workshops, courses, games, contests, songs, plays, videos, art and entertainment which engage people together in realizing the truth and dynamics of enlightened self-interest. Some of it is organizational, and so we have collaborations and competitions among housing complexes, neighborhoods, and communities to excel in various sustainability parameters^{[64](#)}. But we also believe that we need systems that lead even ignorant selfish people to participate in sustainability. We consider our carbon taxes and other efforts to "internalize the social and environmental costs" of products into their market prices as a means through which our whole society exerts sustainability leadership on itself in an ongoing way. Through internalized costs, our individual and corporate participation in the market serves sustainability because beneficial products and services can readily beat their less benign competitors through normal market mechanisms. Instead of destroying the earth and degrading human communities, the market shapes our participation to the benefit of all of us and our world.^{[65](#)}

Related to this is our increasing willingness to follow the guidance of nature itself, i.e., to be led by nature to participate more sustainably in its dynamics and cycles. In addition to advanced approaches to recycling and reuse of all forms of material and capital and all forms of nontoxic renewable energy (often generated at the neighborhood level), we have greatly expanded the use of permaculture^{[66](#)} (designing self-organizing, self-sustaining living systems, especially gardens and building sites, based on disciplined ecological observation and principles), biomimicry^{[67](#)} (using the ways nature and organisms solve practical problems as guidelines for engineering our own solutions), and evolutionary science (for its guidance on everything from addictions and death to activism^{[68](#)} and organizational transformation).

All these realms of leadership get engaged with a variety of leadership styles by people according to their personalities, skills and circumstances. Some specialize in inspirational visionary leadership or in evoking – or even provoking – people into active involvement, greater creativity, or critical appreciation of what's going on. Others are more facilitative and catalytic, providing opportunities and resources for greater productive engagement, or removing obstacles to participation – especially those that impede disadvantaged or marginalized people. Servant leaders develop awareness and capacity in themselves and others to enhance participation. Some leaders educate people, especially about nature and systems, promoting consciousness of interconnectedness, interdependence, feedback dynamics, and the need to experience and work with the wholeness and aliveness of life, among many other sustainability factors. Some lead by innovating technologies, structures, and ideas that support participation and sustainability. And some leaders have a knack as transformational agents, seeing problems and crises as opportunities to not just fix or heal but to shift us individually and collectively to higher levels of consciousness and functionality and to establish systems that embody and promote such capacities. And the systems, structures, visions, and capacities promoted and established by such leaders then serve as sources of leadership themselves, shaping what the rest of us do and how we do it.

We even see people, systems and habits that resist needed shifts towards sustainability as leading us by drawing our attention to factors that we have so far overlooked in our efforts to create energetic participation in co-creating a more sustainable world. Once we come to see that we are all participating in whatever happens next, we see leadership everywhere. We see our job as consciously enhancing the capacity of people and systems to lead us in directions that make sustainability-sense.

So this is what we mean by participatory leadership. It is distributed, engaged, situationally responsive, and systemically embedded. It comes in many diverse forms. There is no one way to do it. But in its fullness it involves the participation of many people in leading, in co-creating cultures that help us all be sustainability leaders, and in recognizing how we are and should be led by the wisdom of self-organizing natural systems.

Guidelines for leaders who promote public engagement

Obviously, there is both participatory leadership and leadership for participation. The two overlap each other. In our current stage of leadership development, it is arguably most important for existing leaders to be capable of engaging stakeholders and publics in participatory activities that further sustainability.

The field of public engagement is filled with guiding principles and values. A major effort was undertaken in 2009 to integrate the major themes of these guidelines into a single statement of "Core Principles for Public Engagement"[69](#). Below is an abbreviated version.

1. *Careful Planning and Preparation*

Through adequate and inclusive planning, ensure that the design, organization, and convening of the process serve both a clearly defined purpose and the needs of the participants.

2. *Inclusion and Demographic Diversity*

Equitably incorporate diverse people, voices, ideas, and information to lay the groundwork for quality outcomes and democratic legitimacy.

3. *Collaboration and Shared Purpose*

Support and encourage participants, government and community institutions, and others to work together to advance the common good.

4. *Openness and Learning*

Help all involved listen to each other, explore new ideas unconstrained by predetermined outcomes, learn and apply information in ways that generate new options, and rigorously evaluate public engagement activities for effectiveness.

5. *Transparency and Trust*

Be clear and open about the process, and provide a public record of the organizers, sponsors, outcomes, and range of views and ideas expressed.

6. *Impact and Action*

Ensure each participatory effort has real potential to make a difference, and that participants are aware of that potential.

7. *Sustained Engagement and Participatory Culture*

Promote a culture of participation with programs and institutions that support ongoing quality public engagement.

The transition

Clearly, we can't simply flip a switch and end up in leaderful organizations and communities. The transition will likely happen in a number of ways.

First, advancing virtual technologies for collaboration and participation generate their own evolutionary momentum as more and more people join in these online spaces and bring what they learn there into face-to-face engagements. This trend can be expected to proceed regardless, especially among younger generations, leading-edge businesses and civil society initiatives.

Second, leaders in all sectors will find it increasingly productive to use advanced methods of dialogue, deliberation, choice-creating, visioning, and other forms of conversation and collaboration on the ground. Their leadership will become increasingly catalytic and facilitative, helping the systems they are leading to move rapidly up the empowered participation spectrum from input-informed management through partnership and delegation to full collective empowerment and self-organization. This requires openness and transparency and a certain letting go of control and outcome – skills and qualities that will grow increasingly important as the evolution of participation accelerates.

Third, the increasing scarcity of resources, the increasing dysfunction and collapse of established systems and institutions, and the increasing natural and economic stresses and breakdowns will challenge all centralized hierarchical structures. Protest actions, mutual aid initiatives, alternative economic and political ideas, and leaders in challenged power centers will all stimulate experiments with increasingly participatory approaches simply because such approaches will prove cheaper, more effective and more resilient than the outdated efforts to control everything.

It is not clear whether efforts to manage and support an orderly, conscious transition to greater participation will be more or less productive than the spontaneous emergence of self-organized participatory approaches as a response to otherwise overwhelming challenges. The fact of the matter is that both trends are already underway, filled with the distributed leadership that will be characteristic of any future civilization able to sustain itself.

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