

# Leadership for Emergence: Exploring organisations through a living system lens

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this article, we outline a research project with adolescent-focused NGOs (non-government organisations) in Christchurch, New Zealand. This project involved 25 managers who used appreciative inquiry process methodology to explore their leadership practices, beliefs, and values. Throughout the article, we construct a conceptual leadership frame for fostering the emergence of adaptive, innovative and responsive organisational capacity that allows organisations to more readily adapt to the complex and changing conditions in which they operate. We describe this frame as a living system lens that is based on viewing organisations as complex adaptive systems of the kind readily found in the natural world. We go on to outline the leaders' reflections as they drew strong connections between the dynamics found in complex adaptive systems and their own organisations. Proactive mentoring, fostering interaction and shared learning, strategies for distributing power and decentralising control, and exploration and articulation of deeply held values emerged as the key leadership enactments that these leaders implemented in their roles.*

## Introduction

### A challenging context

We live in rapidly changing times, characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability. Our current landscape includes rapid advances in technology, the ability to connect and network worldwide, the need to innovate, and the unprecedented opportunity to influence others in many spheres. This landscape also features significant concerns – climate change, political instability and terrorism,

and worldwide financial recession are just a few examples. According to Degenhardt and Duignan (2010):

[The] Earth is changing, life is changing, society is changing, adolescents and their families are changing ... change is no longer incremental, developing along predictable lines; it is [therefore] difficult to find the patterns in the exponential, multi-dimensional change that is occurring on many fronts simultaneously. (p. 11)

Many factors thus exert pressure on organisations to change and adapt so that they can adequately engage with and thrive in this shifting landscape. These 'change forces' are often paralysing, destabilising and/or debilitating (Hopkins & Jackson, 2003, p. 91). As Fullan (1993) reminds us, leaders increasingly need to be heedful of initiative overload and change fatigue.

Educational institutions are also impacted by this changing landscape. They have to, amongst other tasks, juggle the demands of recessionary pressures on communities and organisations, build their institution's profile in the competition for enrolments, be creative with respect to engaging their communities, and adapt to shifting assessment regimes. Schools, especially, are swamped with change initiatives. For example, a small study of 12 New Zealand primary and secondary schools found that staff commonly had to focus on three to four professional development topics in any given year (Hill, Hawk & Taylor, 2001).

In addition to responding to these external pressures, educational institutions have to juggle many internal issues. Many schools in New Zealand are currently coping with record enrolment numbers as senior students choose to stay at school longer to prepare themselves for a more competitive employment market. Student diversity is increasing, which means schools need to be more responsive to culturally inclusive pedagogies (MacFarlane et al., 2007). The needs and expectations of the Generation Y population are shifting, and the changing role of technology and global networking in the information age is requiring schools to rethink what schools and schooling should look like in the 21st century. Staff recruitment and the retention of quality teachers can also create challenges, as do growing workloads and remuneration disputes. As Degenhardt and Duignan (2010) point out, '... schools need to change because the world has changed' (p. 10). They argue that our current educational paradigm is based on the world of the 20th century and that schools need to change radically if they are to meet the needs of young people in the 21st century.

## **The need for emergence**

Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008) differentiate between adaptive challenges that require learning innovation and new patterns of behaviour as opposed to technical problems, which can be solved with knowledge and procedures already at hand. Pascale, Sternin and Sternin (2010) state that 'adaptive problems are embedded in social complexity, require behaviour change and are rife with unintended consequences' (p. 8). Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008) argue that organisations, when faced with 'such an adaptive challenge ... must throw out the old notion about how an organisation should be led, organised and run' (p. 14).

Given that the majority of the challenges outlined above fit the description of adaptive challenges rather than technical ones, what can leaders and organisations do in order to adapt and respond while holding true to their core values and maintaining and developing the wellbeing of

the people involved in these workplaces? Can we design processes in our organisations that achieve this flexibility and responsiveness without chaos and confusion? We suggest that answers to these questions could lie in consideration of the emergence of organisational capacity.

Organisational capacity refers to the collective capability that an organisation has to bring about effective change (Newmann, King & Youngs, 2000). Hopkins and Jackson (2003) state that as capacity develops within an organisation, the result is greater confidence to work in creative and resourceful ways and the development of a 'flexible system that is open to innovative ideas' (p. 91). Organisational leaders, argue Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008), must 'loosen up their organisation – stimulating innovation, creativity and responsiveness, and learn to manage continuous adaptation to change – without losing strategic focus or spinning out of control' (p. 20).

In this article we describe the findings of the Christchurch NGO Leadership Project, which was initiated and designed to enhance the leadership and organisational capacity of each of the leaders and organisations involved. We also describe in detail a conceptual frame that emerged from this project that we call a living system lens. This perspective or lens is based on 'complexity thinking', which involves viewing organisations as systems similar to the complex adaptive systems readily found in the natural world. Within this frame, ability to develop capacity in order to adapt to imposed changes and pressures is known as emergence, a phenomenon that occurs frequently in the natural world, where ecosystems, species, and environments self-organise and effectively adapt and innovate to meet imposed threats or opportunities. Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008) identify emergence based on complexity thinking as 'an alternative perspective for leadership that may be as equally important as traditional models of transformational leadership, which focus on the leader as a top down hierarchical leader' (p. xviii). Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja (2000) agree, stating that 'businesses ... can learn a great deal from nature' (p. 3). Complexity-informed leadership thrives in the face of adaptive challenges. These challenges are typical of the knowledge era, whereas technical problems are more characteristic of the industrial age (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008).

We argue in this article that it is this quality of emergence that schools and other organisations require in order to respond effectively to the context (landscape) of today. Throughout the article, we construct the argument that adaptive, dynamic conceptualisations of leadership processes and roles within an organisation – a living system lens – can provide us with insights into how to enable the emergence of organisational capacity. We also give a brief account of the NGO Leadership Project, noting in particular its research design and methodology. We then review some of the literature (including that relating to complexity thinking and complex adaptive systems) we drew on when conceptualising this living system lens. We end by discussing the experiences of the leaders in the project as they drew strong connections between the dynamics found in complex adaptive systems and their own leadership enactment in their organisations.

## Research Design and Methodology

### The Christchurch NGO Leadership Project

This project was initiated in 2008 with a focus on exploring, through the creation of a professional learning community (PLC), enhancement of leadership capacity in adolescent-focused non-government organisations (NGOs) operating in Christchurch. This PLC, which operated for 14 months, included 25 directors and managers of organisations that ranged in size from 20 to 80 people and covered a variety of settings, including education, recreation, and residential and community therapeutic support. All the managers were leading NGOs with at least 10 staff and had at least five years of leadership experience in a leadership role. An initiative of this type has not been previously undertaken in New Zealand. Its focus on gathering the majority of adolescent-focused NGO leaders in one city and the use of appreciative inquiry processes were particularly unique aspects of the leadership project. At the end of the research project in March 2010, the leaders who participated in it decided to continue their collective processes as a self-managing and sustaining professional network.

### Appreciative inquiry

The appreciative inquiry (AI) process is based on a number of principles that have been thoroughly articulated in the literature (see, for example, Cooperrider et al., 2000; Hammond, 1998). AI is most commonly applied as an organisational development tool, but we used it during our project as both a capacity-building change process and a research tool. In her book, *Appreciative Inquiry: Research for Change*, Reed (2004) describes how AI can address the criteria expected of research and explains how an AI approach can transform and add to traditional research expectations. Applied in such a manner, AI is a qualitative research methodology with connections to participant-based action research and emergent research methodological frameworks (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Reed (2004) applauds, as a research tool, the two key broad themes of AI methodology – ‘focus on the positive’ and ‘inclusivity’ – characteristics that distinguish it from other processes (p. 70). ‘Appreciative inquiry’, Reed goes on to explain, ‘focuses on supporting people getting together to tell stories of positive development in their work that they can build on’ (p. 42). AI research is commonly described as being research *with* instead of research *on* (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). As such, information collected during the investigation is utilised in the learning space rather than taken away to be analysed, and it thereby contributes to the developing knowledge of the participants and to the growth of the PLC as a whole. In this sense, the process relative to investigation findings is more about data creation and data synthesising than about data collection (Reed, 2004). In this project, we emphasised inclusivity by giving participants opportunity to have ongoing input into all aspects of the project, including the design of the interview questions, selection of additional participants, direction of discussions, choice of input from books and speakers, analysis of data, and ongoing modification of methodology.

AI principles informed all the learning experiences implemented in this project (for a full description of the methodology, see Jansen, Cammock & Conner, 2010). During half-day focus-

group sessions held every two months over 14 months and facilitated by members of our project team, the group of 25 leaders experienced a range of processes such as peer interviews, group reflection on relevant research-based literature, and input from leadership consultants, followed by collective sense-making and collaborative coding of emerging themes relating to notions of leadership and leadership practice. Data were recorded and collected by use of Dictaphone, video, and participant journaling. These experiences allowed the participants to reflect on their own practices and experiences as leaders and to make connections between these reflections and their own organisational settings.

## **Literature Review**

In this section, we review some of the literature that underpins the living system lens, including that relating to complexity thinking and complex adaptive systems. We begin by describing four key characteristics of complex adaptive systems and then begin to explore what it might mean to view organisations through a living system lens. We end by introducing some of the implications of this complexity thinking on leadership practice.

### **Characteristics of complex adaptive systems**

Complexity thinking is ‘the study of the dynamic behaviours of complexly interacting, interdependent and adaptive agents under conditions of internal and external pressure’ (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008, p. 3). Self-organising behaviour is common in the natural world and is characterised by a collective of independent agents that self-organise in a dynamic manner in order to create emergence – a patterned higher-order response to a threat or opportunity (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Wheatley, 2006). Biologists exploring the group behaviour of many species (fish, ants, bees, birds) noted that while the collective behaviour of these species was not predictable, neither was it chaotic. For example, starlings that flock in groups of thousands do not behave chaotically; there is a pattern to their flocking such that individuals operate in unison and do not collide with one another (see Figure 1). Studies of ecosystems as a whole show that they also change dynamically in response to external influences, and that while these changes are not necessarily predictable, they are not without pattern (Wheatley, 2006).

Complexity thinking explores ways in which humans in organisations also exhibit these characteristics and have the potential to self-organise towards a common goal. Human systems have some key differences from living systems. One with particular relevance with respect to emergence is that humans have consciousness and insight to a greater extent than other species. Humans can wield the power of human intention and, in theory, are capable of recognising danger (or opportunity) in advance and mobilising to take appropriate action (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008). The following sections explore these characteristics in more depth and relate each of them to organisations and leadership.

**FIGURE 1: STARLINGS FLOCKING IN RESPONSE TO THE PRESENCE OF A PREDATOR**



Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XH-groCeKbE>

#### *Individuals act as independent agents*

In a complex adaptive system, all individuals within it are independent agents who have the freedom (agency) to act in ways that they themselves can determine (Johnson, 2001). In contrast to a complicated system such as a large machine (e.g., car, aeroplane), which has many parts, the parts in a complex adaptive system do not have fixed roles but are able to initiate and create their own varying roles (Jansen, in press). The leaders in this project found Plsek's (2001) analogy of bricks and birds useful. Plsek suggests that we can perceive of our employees, colleagues, students, and clients as bricks or birds. If, Plsek says, we were to pick up a brick and throw it towards a target we could generally predict where the brick would land. We could also repeat the action without difficulty. However, if we were to pick up a bird and throw it towards a target, how likely is it that the bird would reach the target? We could always clip the bird's wings and thus gain accuracy and predictability, but what would be lost in terms of innovation and adaptability? In short, the brick perspective brings predictability, repeatability, and perhaps efficiency, whereas the bird perspective promotes diversity, responsiveness to change, adaptation and innovation.

#### *Interdependence through interactions with neighbours*

Agents acting independently would likely lead to chaos and confusion. In a complex adaptive system, individuals' actions are interconnected so that one agent's actions influence the context for other agents. In such a system, most information exchange occurs among close neighbours (Hargreaves, 2005), making a system's coherence dependent mostly on individuals' immediate



interdependencies rather than on centralised control. If we return to our earlier example of flocking birds, we can observe these short-range relationships in terms of the distances between adjacent birds. When a bird (and it can be any bird) makes some change to its flight, that change affects the flight of the birds adjacent to it. They, in turn, influence the birds alongside them, until the whole flock is flying in a pattern either subtly or markedly different from the flock's previous pattern.

Because an individual's actions are interconnected, the actions of one person are highly likely to influence the context or environment of another or others. Therefore, although there is independence, there is also interconnectedness, with the latter encompassing not only individuals but also groups and levels. This influence varies depending on the strength of the connectedness of these social interactions. However, as the NGO project leaders asked, are humans really this like-minded and, if so, how can this interconnection work to the organisation's advantage? They found the answer, in part, through their identification and consideration of the next characteristic of complex adaptive systems.

#### *Self-organisation through decentralised control*

Control in a complex adaptive system is likewise based on networks of specific short-range relationships. The freedom of individual agents to choose what to do and think in association with opportunity to contribute ideas about their own organisations enables continually emergent behaviour, or constant adaptation and learning. An essential precondition for the emergence of this self-organising behaviour is agency; the system must have the ability to make its own decisions and responses. Self-organisation is thus 'the tendency for certain systems to operate far from equilibrium and then shift to a new state where constituent elements generate unlikely combinations. Emergence is the outcome of this, a new state or condition' (Pascale et al., 2000, p. 113).

Emergence in a complex adaptive system can be either spontaneous or enabled by the provision of certain conditions. Davis and Sumara (2006) describe the conditions for emergence as 'enabling constraints' because they provide a fine balance between coherence and randomness. Because these conditions are neither 'too loose' nor 'too tight', they allow sufficient space for innovation without degeneration into chaos. However, while these conditions can be planned and focused, outcomes cannot be fully determined, as they are the result of the emergent behaviour of the system.

Self-organisation is achieved through networks of connected relationships, and this dynamic behaviour is perpetuated by cyclic feedback loops; the result is dynamic complexity that generates new ideas and ways of operating. In organisations, networks create the interactions and relationships required for sharing learning and enable the 'cross fertilizing processes of improvement rather than imposing standardised leadership templates on everyone' (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 184).

#### *Emergence is motivated by threat or opportunity*

Complex adaptive systems (CAS) are influenced by external change or disturbance that provides impetus or purpose for the emergence of new ideas and patterns. In organisations, this force should therefore not be seen as problematic but rather as an impetus for the emergence of new

ideas and operations. In the natural world, ecosystems evolve constantly in response to threats to their survival and also to opportunities for growth. In complex adaptive systems, these stimuli to change and adapt are often described by the term ‘strange attractors’. These attractors do not occur in isolation but arise from the interaction between an organism and its environment (Pascale et al., 2000, p. 71).

In human systems, ‘emergence needs a ripe issue’ (Pascale et al., 2000, p. 130). Self-organisation is internally motivated because it is a response to a perceived need or threat. It can also be motivated in response to an engaging vision or opportunity, not a vision that has not been externally devised and imposed but one that has resonance with organisation members:

It is instead derived from an organisation’s latent appetites, which are already present but awaiting articulation. It isn’t something a leader ‘gives’ or ‘does’ to followers. It is emergent. The attractor comes into existence because it resonates from sympathetic chords in the environment, the times, the organisation’s members, and a leader who can express the challenge in a way that invites others into the dance that is being choreographed as it is performed. (p. 133)

## **Viewing organisations through a living system lens**

Since the 1990s, literature pertaining to leadership within organisations has begun to embrace the idea that organisations should not be viewed simply as rational and linear-based structures but as entities more akin to complex living beings that mimic biological systems with the ability to adapt in response to uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Wheatley, 2006). The traditional techniques of management are designed, in large measure, to ensure organisational stability, operational efficiency, and predictable performance (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008). This thinking is based on an assumption that organisations are like machines (Morgan, 1997) and that good management is something that is orderly, rational, and systematic. Uhl-Bien and Marion note:

Formal planning processes, centralised decision making, hierarchical organisation structures, standardised procedures, and numbers orientated control systems are still the rule in most organisations. As important as these structures are to organisational efficiency, they tend to limit flexibility and create impediments to innovation, creativity and change. (2008, p. 19)

Traditional models such as these have come under increasing critique. Hamel (2007), for one, considers that the hierarchical form of management is no longer useful: ‘Like the combustion engine, it’s a technology that has largely stopped evolving, and that’s not good ... what ultimately constrains the performance of your organization is not its operating model, nor its business model, but its management model’ (p. x). The type of management model being critiqued here is one that emphasises hierarchy, centralised power, and the skills of the all-knowing ‘heroic leader’ (Mintzberg, 2009, p. 105).

A living system lens offers a perspective that is complementary to the more traditional formal models. It proposes that ‘we should enable collective intelligence and informal dynamics in human organisations rather than suppress them. Complexity dynamics, and their emergent outcomes (eg: adaptability, innovation, learning) are crucial for success in the highly complex world of the 21st century’ (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008, p. xiii). As we described earlier, a living system lens such as this grew out of the concept of complex adaptive systems (Davis & Sumara, 2006), which



emphasises organisational systems made up of groups of independent agents that collectively respond to external pressures by self-organising and innovating, effectively emerging in new adaptive patterns (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008). This concept also emphasises the need for participants to constantly learn and adapt in response to ongoing change (Pascale et al., 2000; Senge, 2002).

### **Implications for leadership practice**

A living system perspective can provide some guidance as to processes that enhance self-organisation and emergence in organisations. Complexity thinking also introduces an alternative way of thinking about leadership. A key assumption in this thinking is that many such processes have an emergent, bottom-up quality, which means that no one person completely understands or is able to fully predict the outcome of a specific action. ‘This’, Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008, p. xviii) say, ‘raises a question which is quite troubling to leadership researchers; if the leaders are not in control, how do they lead?’

The leader’s role, when viewed through a living system lens, is one that enables the conditions in which complex dynamics can occur. Wheatley (2006) argues that complex behaviour tends to have conditions that influence collective behaviour; the leader’s role, therefore, is that of determining the combination of factors that guide the collective behaviour. Wheatley also maintains that understanding how the interactions work can be just as important an element in change processes as understanding the system components themselves. Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008) offer two roles for leadership: to enable the conditions in which complex mechanisms can emerge; and to promote coordination between the adaptive and administrative structures. They describe the need for leaders to ‘plan and coordinate the structure within which complexity based emergence can evolve, to protect this creative/adaptive dynamic, and [to] create strategy that includes adaptive organisational flexibility’ (p. xix).

## **Results and Discussion**

As a result of reflecting on the above notions and reading related literature, the participants in the NGO Leadership Project became increasingly aware of the similarities between their organisational context and leadership processes, and what they were reading with respect to complexity thinking, complex adaptive systems, and adaptive leadership. We describe and discuss the insights gained and the leadership practices identified, drawing on both the literature the leaders considered and citing interview and focus group commentary from the NGO participants as we do so. Four leadership implications are described, each one of which corresponds directly to one of the characteristics of complex adaptive systems described earlier.

### **Engage in proactive mentoring of individuals**

The NGO leaders strongly identified the need to see each of their staff as independent agents, with the freedom to innovate, interact, and contribute of their own volition. They emphasised the need for proactive mentoring, which involved developing the agency of each of their colleagues. One of

the leaders expressed this approach this way: '[It's about] creating a space where other people's dreams are realised, and that's what I hope to achieve with the team of people that I work with' (NGO Manager 4). The leaders also emphasised that proactive mentoring requires an intentional focus on ensuring that the development of each person in an organisation is being fostered:

I've got a whole series of doors there; that's what I'm trying to create – all these different doors – and then people are kind of choosing to open them, individually and collectively. (NGO Manager 12)

Research on 'extraordinary performance' conducted by Cameron (2008) at the University of Michigan suggests that such development is best achieved in work environments that are highly positive and appreciative, and that allow staff to 'play to their strengths'. A key part of the process involves regular personal management interviews that are developmental in nature and whose purpose is to gauge the strengths and work interests of staff and, from there, create 'space' for each person to develop his or her strengths in alignment with the vision of the organisation (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). Hopkins and Jackson (2003) likewise argue that the crucial leadership role is that of orchestrating and nurturing spaces for the growth of social capital and emotionally intelligent relationships.

I do know that when someone invests in their own development that they have a sense of contribution; they want to be a part of what's around, and feel enthused, stimulated, and they want to be there. And I guess I just try hard to create that sort of environment so that can happen. (NGO Manager 10)

In terms of Plsek's (2001) bricks and birds analogy described earlier in this article, proactive mentoring means attending to 'feeding the bird', a sentiment shared by this leader (NGO Manager 4): 'I've tried to have a heightened awareness of what is their [employees'] passion, what are they really good at, what can they do with ease, that's not stressful for them. And, then, how can we build on that?' The leaders, picking up on this comment, suggested that proactive mentoring needed to be prefaced by a 'health check' of their organisations. This check, with respect to mentoring, would require the leaders and other members of the organisation's management team to explore questions such as these:

- Who are we actively looking out for?
- How can we best come alongside them and ask them how we can support them?
- What do they need?

The leaders also noted that this mentoring needed to be much more regular than a yearly appraisal meeting and that it should be intentionally scheduled to avoid it being by-passed by other pressing demands.

## **Foster interaction and shared learning**

The second implication for practice that the leaders identified was the imperative to enhance communication, interaction, and sharing of ideas within their staff in order for them to have opportunities to self-organise. Senge (2002) explains that when relationships are activated and enhanced within an organisation, they promote the self-reflective inherent ability of the system to regulate itself – a process that leads to a high level of innovation and self-organisation:

We build organisations where people are continually learning how to learn together ... the organisations that will readily excel in the future will be the organisations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organisation' (p. 57).

Peck (1991) suggests that 'a healthy organisation is one in which all participants have a voice' (p. 62).

The NGO leaders strongly endorsed the importance of sharing learning within their organisations. As one pointed out, leaders do not necessarily have all the answers and so benefit from learning from others. Leaders can, however, she said, play a key role in promoting shared learning: 'It's an attitude to learning. I firmly believe that I haven't got it all together. There are some things that I'm quite good at, but learning and reflecting on that, that's something I can model' (NGO Manager 3).

This leader's views align with Fullan's (1993): 'For complex change, you need many people working insightfully on the solution and committing themselves to concentrated action together' (p. 34). Reflecting on this thinking, one of the participants in the NGO project described what her management team was doing to develop a culture for learning within her organisation.

We do quite a lot of work with our staff – what are our expectations for each other, how we articulate that, what are our strengths? We have the conversations where we ask a lot of questions [as well as] reflecting, debriefing, processing, and try to put that into practice. It requires a high level of integrity and trust. (NGO Manager 2)

Senge (2002) sees leaders as designers, stewards, and teachers, responsible for developing and nurturing learning communities, facilitating the conditions receptive to improving the quality of people's thinking, their capacity for reflection and team learning, and their ability to develop shared understandings of complex issues. Wheatley (2006) similarly maintains that 'we need leaders to understand that we are best controlled by concepts that invite our participation, not policies and procedures that curtail our contribution' (p. 131). This view of the leader's role was encapsulated by one of the NGO leaders when he said, 'So, personally, I think I'm on a journey. I don't have all the answers. I want to be learning. I want to be around people who can teach me and can inspire me' (NGO Manager 5).

The NGO leaders developed several questions that they thought would be useful for leaders endeavouring to facilitate shared professional learning in their organisations. These were:

- Who are we learning from?
- Who has a voice in our organisation?
- How can we enhance the networks operating in our settings?

## **Distribute power and decentralise control**

The NGO leaders were particularly interested in Fullan's (1993) claim that 'it is not possible to effectively control a complex organisation from the top' (p. 37). They noticed that an essential aspect of enabling emergence in complex adaptive stems is to foster decentralised control, where agents have autonomy to act in a self-determining manner. Leadership in this context has a look which is very different from that of the traditional manager's role.

I'm not a formal leader, but I have a formal role as a leader in an organisation. That doesn't mean that I'm always at the front, or in control. ... [I see] leadership as being a fluid, movable thing, an enabling thing, and, you know, even our clients, all at different times, have the ability to lead and do, and I love to encourage and see that, and it's the same in our staff. (NGO Manager 11)

The leaders' response to Fullan's claim also resonated in these comments from another NGO leader:

One of my key beliefs is that leadership can come and should come from all places in an organisation, so leadership is not necessary in one person, who then sets the direction and sets the tone and makes the decision. I think leadership is a shared experience in an organisation. (NGO Leader 14)

Fullan (1993), along with other commentators, does not advise an overthrow of the traditional 'top-down' approach to leadership but advocates instead for a balance of 'top-down' direction and 'bottom-up' emergence (p. 37). Overdoing the top-down control, he argues, can stifle creativity and innovation, whereas over-emphasising bottom-up emergence can lead to chaos, both of which are likely to be counterproductive to the growth of the organisation. Effective leaders delicately balance this tension by creating spaces where members of the organisation can operate according to their strengths: 'in an open system what matters most is not the CEO [chief executive officer] but whether the leadership is trusting enough of its members to leave them alone' (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 67). The leaders participating in the NGO project supported these views:

A lot of it is about power, sharing power, and if you've got people who have got enormous vision, desire, and willingness to explore all sorts of possibilities. They are capable of me handing stuff over and saying, 'Hey, I'm liking this, go for it,' and 'What can I do to support you?' (NGO Manager 6)

My experience is that if you're with the right support, the right training, the right encouragement, and that sense of being part of something, they will rise to the occasion, you know. Sometimes they'll screw up, like everybody does with bits and pieces, but the guts of it is all there, and they do amazing stuff. And when that happens, that's good for everybody. (NGO Manager 20)

The NGO participants also noted the relevance of concepts of distributed leadership that encompass a multitude of definitions, all emphasising a shift in power and responsibility from one leader in a position of authority to the sharing of this role with some or all of the participants in an organisation (Gronn, 2008; Robinson, 2008; Spillane, 2006). Oduro (2006) states that distributed leadership is not a leadership style as such. Rather, it is a way of thinking about the roles, delegated responsibilities, and processes within an organisation.

The NGO participants were particularly interested in a claim made by Hopkins and Jackson (2003) that clarity is still needed on 'what operational images of distributed leadership in action might look like' (p. 96). According to Hopkins and Jackson, because leadership in many schools is locked into management structures, distributed leadership models in schools will only be realised if the internal social architecture of schools is redesigned.

The questions the leaders considered useful when determining how to bring about shared power and decision-making in their own organisations were these:

- Where and with whom is the leadership situated?
- Who makes the decisions?

- How can we redesign the social architecture of our organisations to facilitate a variety of ways for gaining input from everywhere in the organisation?

## **Explore and articulate shared values**

Sergiovanni (2001), writing about leadership within the context of schools, argues that schools need to be culturally tight and managerially loose. Teachers, he claims, are motivated more by values and beliefs than by managerial controls. This claim ties in with Wheatley's (2006) assertion that in complex adaptive systems, order and design are not externally imposed but emerge as a result of the combination of individual freedom and shared core values. One of the main outcomes of this process is that the members of each component of the system choose to work together to achieve a collective purpose, as illustrated by this comment:

We are constantly having to adapt the programmes we offer based on the shifting and unpredictable funding flows which can change markedly every year. The trick seems to be staying true to our *maia* [core values], while allowing the programme to morph and adapt. (NGO Manager 9)

Because self-organisation is largely internally motivated, leaders can enhance conditions for this emergence by providing opportunities for those in their organisations to explore and articulate their individual and shared values. In schools, for example, this process could involve staff identifying what motivates them as educators and uncovering the values and beliefs that they hold in regard to their roles in education (Jansen et al., 2010).

During the initial stages of the NGO project, the participants undertook peer interviews based on appreciative inquiry principles. Each participant was asked to recall a peak period in his or her leadership and then to explore the values and beliefs underpinning that experience. Participants then collectively analysed these interviews in order to enumerate these values (which the leaders also saw as personal attributes). Those identified included commitment, compassion, dignity, respect, equality, generosity, honesty, integrity, humility, passion, and quality. Davies (2006) maintains that effective leaders display strategic wisdom based on a clear value system that can include integrity, social justice, humility, respect, loyalty, and a sharp distinction between right and wrong. He argues that defining core values or a set of beliefs is 'vital' because this practice provides 'a bedrock on which to base critical decisions' (p. 115).

Interestingly, the most prevalent value that emerged from the AI interviews was humility:

What I mean by that is that I'm not driven by the need to have my name up in lights, and to be, you know, to enter some NGO management award scheme and win the gold medal. (NGO Manager 22)

And it's been huge, because she's had a huge amount of praise from the organisation, nationally, as a whole, and she's been able to take that on instead of me jumping in and saying, 'Actually, I'm a manager, and so I should actually be getting that credit'. Do you know what I mean? (NGO Manager 7)

This value is evident in Duignan's (2006) account of the five pillars of effective school leadership proposed by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in England. The first pillar is 'self-confident and self-effacing leadership, a desire to make an impact upon the world without a strong need for personal status' (p. 112).

Collins (2005) identifies two key leadership qualities in his account of an extensive evaluation project aimed at determining the key factors differentiating ‘good’ companies from ‘great’ companies, that is, companies that excel over a sustained period. His team was surprised to find that ‘larger than life celebrity leaders who ride in from the outside negatively correlated with taking a company from good to great’ (p. 8). Instead, each of the ‘great’ companies had leaders who exhibited a blend of extreme personal humility with intense professional will. He coined the phrase ‘Level 5 leader’ to denote these leaders and also noted that people working with these leaders typically used, when describing them, words such as quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, and understated, traits evident in these comments from two of the NGO participants:

I struggle with speaking about myself. Once I get into a vein, I’m okay, but I do struggle with it. I just draw from the Maori proverb that the kumara [sweet potato] doesn’t speak of its own sweetness. (NGO Manager 17)

I’m at a place in my life that the highest qualities for me are things like character, love, strength, a servant heart, servant attitude; those are the greatest things for me, and really, you’ve got two cars, ten cars or no cars, none of that matters. (NGO Manager 5)

In his report, Collins (2005) concludes that ‘perhaps one of the most damaging trends in recent history is the tendency (especially by boards of directors) to select dazzling, celebrity leaders and to de-select potential Level 5 leaders’ (p. 35). He postulates that potential Level 5 leaders are highly prevalent in our society and that in order to identify them we should ‘look for situations where extraordinary results exist but where no individual steps forth to claim success. You will likely find a potential Level 5 leader at work’ (p. 35). Humility on the part of the positional leaders in an organisation thus seems essential if the organisation is to self-organise and thrive as a complex adaptive system; leaders need to emphasise that leadership is a process that all members of an organisation can contribute to rather than a position held by a select few.

The questions that the leaders raised in relation to exploring and articulating a shared vision included these:

- In what ways do my staff see my leadership values expressed?
- What processes do we have in place to collectively explore, articulate, and operate by our deeply held personal and organisational values?

## **Summary and Conclusion**

As this article goes to print, we consider that summing up the content of this article is well served by the fact that we are situated in Christchurch, New Zealand, in a context post the major earthquake that the city experienced on 22 February 2011. It has been fascinating to observe the interactions that have emerged in communities since this event, especially in regards to the topic of this article – self-organisation and emergence. We have seen countless examples of these processes. They include the ‘student volunteer army’, made up of over 1,000 tertiary students, who initiated and implemented major liquefaction-clearing operations around the city, and the ‘farmy army’, a group of over 500 farmers who drove their tractors into the city and spontaneously responded to needs as they found them. Communities have taken in neighbours who have lost or



have badly damaged homes, set up informal welfare centres, and shared water, food, vehicles and toileting facilities; the list goes on. It is interesting to view this situation through a living system lens because it allows us to see how an enormous external change not only triggered the temporary breakdown of conventional organisational structures but also led to the spontaneous emergence of self-organisation – of individuals responding to the threat and the opportunities to support themselves and others that this threat afforded.

A living system lens offers a perspective that is complementary to the more conventional organisational leadership models. It provides another research tool with which to explore, within the context of leadership practice, how organisations can adopt the innovative and adaptive functions of a complexity-based process, while also drawing on the strengths of a properly structured bureaucracy that allows for coherence and keeps the organisation from spinning out of control.

We suggest, from the findings of our research with the Christchurch NGO leaders, that a living lens focus has merit because it enables leaders to consider their practice from a fresh perspective and from there identify what leaders can potentially do to enhance both their individual leadership capacity and collective organisational capacity. This process, in turn, creates conditions for the emergence of creative, adaptive organisations, the members of which are willing to learn with and from one another, have the freedom and confidence to innovate and contribute, and are resilient and responsive to change.

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