

Generative Leadership

A lifespan approach to leadership and organizational sustainability

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The Generativity Manifesto. It may seem bold to characterize our inaugural point-of-view whitepaper as a manifesto. However, we do so quite consciously. “Manifesto” conveys our belief that there is a need for transformative change in how we frame the challenges and norms for leadership in today’s world. That, of course, has implications not only for how we conceptualize and assess leadership, but also how we approach development of leadership capabilities at all levels within the organization.

As for the changed circumstances that signal the need for transformation, they are numerous, and they have sweeping implications. Whether the focus is on leadership in the private or not-for-profit sectors, and whether the organization is a large global company or a smaller firm with a more regional footprint, we must reckon with these changes. Most of them have been nominally noticed, even called out as problems, but few have been effectively addressed and solved. A new normal is emerging, calling for fresh, innovative solutions, and here are some of its features:

- **Pervasive impacts of a global economy.** We are all affected by the global economy, whether we choose to operate close to home, across the nation, or around the world.
- **Advances in communications technology.** Technology brings opportunity and threat; it brings customers and competitors nearer, and it lowers barriers to entry.
- **Need to transcend the old leadership prototype.** *Think-manager-think-male* may still prevail in many sectors, but its constraining effects on performance are becoming undeniable.
- **Ethnic and cultural diversity.** As societies become more diverse, we must not only acquire new people skills, we must appreciate diverse peoples, their experience, values, and desires.
- **Generational differences in expectations.** A diverse talent market, e.g., millennials, women, and older workers, want work/life balance, flexibility, and autonomy – and they want meaning.
- **Unrelenting performance pressures.** Post-financial-crisis norms demand we run leaner and cope with heightened scrutiny, all while focusing governance on *triple-bottom-line* results.

Of course, there will be company-specific challenges associated with your particular industry sector and markets. But these strategic business challenges are always nested within the broader social-economic context characterized by the factors enumerated above. And a hallmark of our approach to leadership – *Generative Leadership* – is careful attention to the complexities of context, and an insistence on specifying why and how certain factors will be most relevant for your firm.

Now, before describing generative leadership, it may be helpful to first clarify what leadership actually means and what it must look like today. On the one hand, leadership is such a familiar and frequently used word that it may seem superfluous to define it. On the other hand, precisely because it is so familiar, its essential nature and mechanisms of action have not always been adequately distinguished from the role and duties of management. That is because leadership is too often equated with positions of authority and formal roles in an organizational hierarchy.

On leadership and management

How might we differentiate the actions and effects of management and leadership? How are they related and how do they interact? Here's our response to these questions.

Management is principally about control and execution of coordinated actions that produce desired outcomes. It manifests as a virtue in well-designed systems for producing its outcome reliably and efficiently. *Leadership*, on the other hand, is principally about guiding others by going before and showing the way to a desired end. It manifests as a virtue in the relational dynamics of leader-follower interactions that inform, motivate, and empower others to lead and to act individually and collectively in ways that are aligned with the mission.

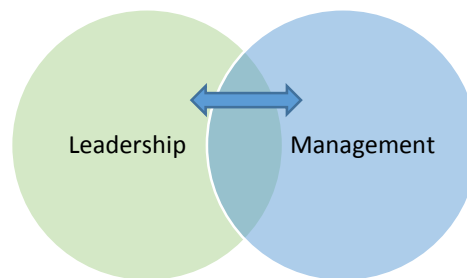


Figure 1 Relationship between leadership and management

The Venn diagram in Figure 1 suggests that these two modalities of executive action interact and overlap. We might even characterize the overlap area as the domain of strategic thought and action, where emerging or adaptive changes in purpose, goal, and direction imply needs to adjust operational systems of execution.

With that distinction in mind, we'd like to now describe generative leadership. Of course, that will require that we first examine the idea of generativity and how it modifies the meaning of leadership. We'll then proceed to make the case for why generative leadership is critical to business today. As you will see, it has practical implications for the enterprise as a whole, senior management, organizational culture, and the development of next-generation leaders.

What is generative leadership?

Generativity is a normatively positive and adaptive orientation in adult development that arises as a choice in the middle years of life. It holds particular relevance for leadership and for organizational sustainability. It manifests in our ways of being and acting as we begin to identify with our role and responsibilities for building the creative-productive capabilities of our organization and realizing its mission. It reveals an important shift in motivation.

At this stage of development, we become less focused on proving ourselves and advancing our individual interests and more concerned about enabling others to find their voice, to stretch and discover their potential to contribute. Its virtue is care, especially as we express concern and encourage development of the next generation, and as we promote the greater good. Its opposite is stagnation, which results in a narrowing scope of concern and impact, self-absorption, and a loss of vitality and growth as a leader.

It is important, then, to appreciate that generative leadership is not all about sacrifice. That's because the generous, other-focused energies that prevail at this time position the generative leader for greater impact. Acting as mentor, coach, and teacher, the generative leader gives back, while a cog-wheeling effect creates a reciprocal flow of growth and development; next-generation leader and generative leader both benefit.

Let's pause here to notice a few essential elements of this description, for it implies something that we must now state explicitly. First, that *leadership is essentially normative* in its purpose and function. It's not just about what is efficient and effective; it's also about what is appropriate—good, right, proper, adaptive—which is grounded in values that transcend individual interest and refer to common goods. This underscores the sense of ethical and fiduciary duty we expect in our leaders.

Second, it implies that adopting the role and responsibilities of leadership is *identity work*. Becoming a leader involves more than taking a new title and job description. It's more than merely directing others. It entails a broader scope of concern. In particular, it calls for taking an active role in developing next-generation leaders and in promoting business practices that are adaptive and ensure sustainability. As this new sense of purpose comes to define what it means to lead, an inner transformation occurs.

Third, reciprocal pathways of interaction between leader and follower reflect *the inherently relational nature of leadership* and leadership development. As our identity is being shaped for the role of leader, we see, as in all earlier stages of development, that trust, openness, and encouragement from another person allows us to experiment with new behaviors, to fail and learn from that failure. The relationship is a holding space within which daunting challenges can be reframed, vulnerabilities and limitations can be acknowledged and addressed. Mature self-awareness grows.

Finally, adopting *a generative orientation is a choice* in one's leadership career. It does not just happen like the greying of our hair or as a natural consequence of aging. Rather, it's a consequential choice. To embrace the path of generativity requires that we cultivate an ethic of care and focus our concern on the good of the whole. Moreover, it is a choice that is made repeatedly over time and across situations.

We've characterized generative leadership as *a way of being*. All leaders are first and foremost persons, and it's their personal qualities that attract others. These qualities include wisdom, experience, and practical savvy. But even more important for a generative leader are interpersonal and socially attuned capacities to relate to others (see Table 1 below).

Table 1 Generativity versus Stagnation

Characteristics of Generativity	Characteristics of Stagnation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitude of care and inclusion • Open to experience • Tolerant of differences • Creative-productive tendencies • Broad scope of concern • Other-focused (next generation) • Conscious of being a guide • Generous mentor, motivated to share knowledge • Encourages others to lead in their own style and voice • Emphasis on interpersonal values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitude of exclusion (rejectivity) • Closed to experience • Intolerant of differences • Conservative tendencies • Narrow scope of concern • Self-absorbed • Self-interest, focused on personal needs • Little self-less giving and outreach to others • Enforces current practices and conventions • Emphasis on instrumental values

What may be less obvious but equally essential to the meaning of generative leadership proposed here is that it is fully actualized in an organization only through widespread practical interdependencies. It is not only in leader-follower dyads that generative leadership is expressed. As members of a management team assert a generative leadership orientation, patterns of reciprocal behavior emerge throughout the organization. Acts of aligned leadership arise more frequently at all levels.¹

Why is generative leadership critically important today?

Leadership and organizational success requires practical intelligence, prudent judgment, and executional discipline. These are the impressive powers of the rational mind. Highly educated, honed by experience, and well-practiced in all essential functions of operating an enterprise, this aspect of mind is typified by goal-directedness and means-end problem solving. It expresses our impressive cognitive capacities for instrumental action and is mobilized by the drive to achieve. A classic hallmark of business.

What's not so evident from that aspect of mind is the connective tissue of relationships and the social-emotional forces that bind us to one another and to a cause. Of course, we do not and cannot exist only as rational-instrumental creatures, whether as individuals or in groups. Relational dynamics and social-emotional forces will have their effects, often decisively, on how the rational engine of achievement works and whether it thrives. But making those factors the explicit focus of leadership has not always been a hallmark of business.

What we posit as the fundamental rationale for generative leadership is this: Although our rational-instrumental capabilities have taken us quite far—from agrarian to industrial society, from old-time, labor-intensive manufacturing to high-tech innovation and process engineering—it will not suffice as we face the changed conditions of the 21st century. The relational and social-emotional factors that have taken a back seat in the past are absolutely critical now. Let us explain.

Becoming a leader for the 21st century

This is not your grandfather's world! The challenges of leadership today are different, and the role of leadership is arguably more important than it was in the past. This basic observation is consequential for all of us who have reason to care about leadership—those who aspire to be leaders, those in positions of senior leadership, and those charged with helping developing leaders adapt and thrive.

But why do we say leadership today is different and more important? Is it because of the pace of change, generational differences, pressures from Wall Street, global competition, navigating the challenges of diversity and inclusion, or working across cultural/regulatory/economic boundaries? We submit that leadership is more difficult today because of how these factors and others combine and interact to create step-level increases in complexity and novelty that overwhelm our capacities to cope.²

For any one firm, the way these elements of change line up to challenge leadership may be different. Solving for some will be more highly weighted or differently prioritized. But seldom will there be only one dimension of change to deal with. And that means that we will most often need “all hands on deck.” There is much more navigational work to do than any one person or group can tackle on its own. Just as certainly, however, engagement of the whole will depend on the initiative of individual leaders.

¹ See Appendix One for further discussion of our point of view on leadership.

² For more on the coping challenge, see Appendix Two, The Challenge-Development Curve.

It's an oft-quoted observation that our species is tremendously adaptive because of our brain, the distinctive capacity of our highly evolved cerebral cortex. It has no doubt enabled our capacity to build and use tools and technology, to form and govern societies bounded by common values and ideals. Yes, we are an innovative and productive species. But it's equally true that we have only been able to sustain what we've built by leveraging the coordinated action of groups and organizations.

In the past three centuries the development of commerce and the market economy have increased the size and scale of our productive capabilities. With the formation of enterprises we lifted the limitations of what was possible with guilds and craftsmen alone. As a result, management as a science grew more sophisticated. And in recent decades our increasing reliance on intellectual capital and highly skilled talent has similarly added complexity and challenge to the role of leadership.

Paradoxically, with the increasing reliance upon intellectual capital, we have also come to appreciate the inherent constraints of an overreliance on IQ, competition, and individuality. Don't get me wrong, these factors of human productivity have been and continue to be critical to our success. However, without the capacity for forming relationships of trust, common purpose, mutual respect, and cooperation, the whole will never become greater than the sum of its parts. Social-emotional resources are vital.

It is this work of creating a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts that calls for the attention of leadership today. You may call it engagement if you wish, but that leaves us with the question of how engagement is defined in today's world. Generally speaking, to the extent that we are talking about an enterprise that hopes to recruit, retain, and get the most from today's professional talent market, engagement will need to look a lot less like it did in the hierarchical cultures of the past.

The question, then, is what must be done to develop a distinctively generative approach to leadership in your organization today?

The ways we help

The work that we do is responsive to five major challenges that face business organizations today in the realm of talent development, leadership, and organizational sustainability. All services are assessment based, business relevant, and supported by evaluation methods that ensure quality and validate impact.

1. Build company-specific strategies for getting **executive selection** decisions and onboarding right.
2. Provide assessment-based strategies for identifying and preparing **next-generation leaders**.
3. Help **leadership teams** promote a generative approach to leading organization wide.
4. Consult to management on building a **generative culture** and sustainable pipeline of talent.
5. Design **action-learning** programs that integrate leader development in real-world projects.

To learn more about **Generative Leadership** and its relevant applications in your organization, please write us at information@generativityllc.com.

Appendix One

We have listed below several aspects of our point of view on leadership. They are all supported in the research on leadership and lend support to our rationale for advocating *Generative Leadership*. We comment only briefly on them now but will address them more fully as their practical relevance is discussed in upcoming blogs and whitepapers.

- **Leadership is a context-dependent variable of performance.** To discuss, conceptualize, assess, or develop leadership in the abstract is fruitless when your aims are practical, i.e., when you are seeking to affect attitudes, focus actions, and influence outcomes in your business.
- **Leadership is relational.** Leadership development and performance are realized within the crucible of relationships: through the interpersonal exchange of leader-follower relationships, and through the dynamic interactions within a group.
- **Leadership is essentially normative in purpose and function.** Leadership is about more than instrumental efficacy in achieving desired outcomes. It also and importantly shapes norms and values that tell us what is appropriate, good, adaptive, and healthy.
- **Seldom is the heroic leadership of one person enough.** This is especially critical as we consider the fiduciary duty of management to build a sustainable leadership capacity, one that is able to adapt, evolve, and thrive in the face an ever-changing scene of challenge.
- **Leader development and leadership development.** Leader development concerns individual capabilities to assert leadership in an organization. Leadership development addresses overall capabilities and the conditions (e.g. culture) that promote effective leadership at all levels.
- **Leadership is art, management is science.** Leadership is inspired, prompted, even demanded by circumstances and relies on intuitive “sight” to read situations, people, and relations. Only then does it translate its insight into the strategic discipline of management science.
- **Leadership and management, as nouns and as verbs.** As nouns, they direct our attention to an object, a person or group, or an organization-wide phenomenon or force. As verbs, they point to modes of executive action at the individual, group, or organizational level of analysis.
- **Leadership as emergent action.** Whether in the mind of a designated authority or from the spontaneous, unfolding interactions of a group, leadership insight and action often arises as a consequence of circumstances in the surrounding environment.
- **Leadership can be treated as a cause or a consequence.** As cause, leadership is an *independent variable* (or predictor) in a study, and as consequence it is the *dependent variable* (or criterion). In either case the separation is merely conceptual; they are unified in action.

Appendix Two

When stress and strain mount in organizations, they can impair and even sap our adaptive capacity. Quite simply, we lose our resilience due to the fatigue that can set in from facing continual demands on our coping resources, cognitive and affective. This, in turn, constricts our range of intellectual, social, and emotional functioning and undermines our ability to view issues objectively, to respond proportionately, and to be a source of composure, encouragement, and good judgment.

Of course, external factors can contribute to rising levels of felt challenge: time pressures; resource constraints; volume of work; and the novelty and complexity of the tasks at hand. We conceptualize the effects of these factors and the dynamics of dealing with them in the Challenge Development Curve presented below.

Figure One. The Challenge-Development Curve

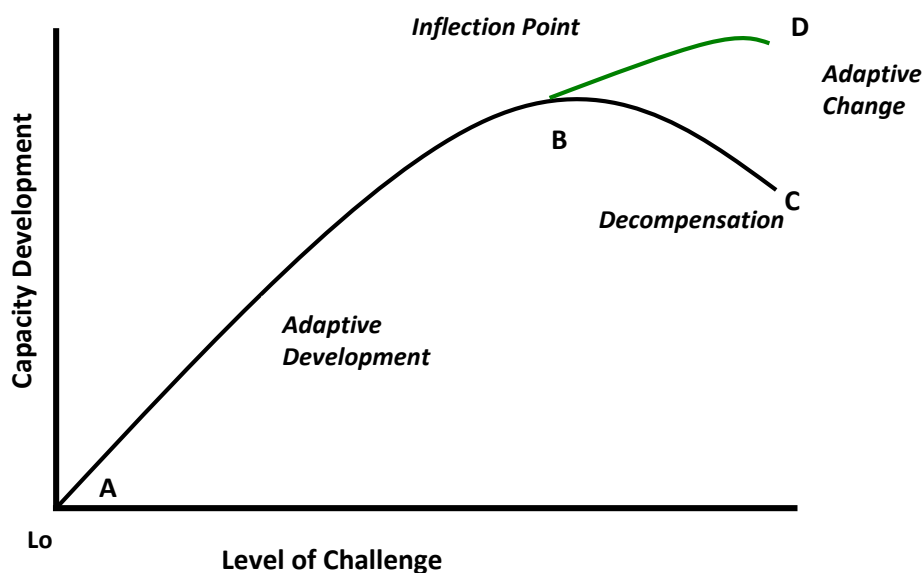


Figure One illustrates how increasing levels of challenge, those associated with stretch assignments, conditions of novelty or complexity, or certain kinds of organizational change, stimulate learning and development up to a point (b) beyond which further increases in challenge overwhelm us (b-c). This curvilinear relationship between challenge and development (a-b-c) can be *moderated* by access to resources, such as expert advice, stakeholder feedback, joint problem-solving, and mentoring. These effects are represented in the green line b-d.

Such moderating factors work by stimulating reflection, reframing the problem, and providing a fresh perspective, which facilitates adaptive adjustment when facing challenging situations. The beneficial effects of these moderating variables is *mediated* by psychosocial competencies, such as a practiced capacity for reflection, openness to self-examination and personal change, and a capacity to talk openly and repair ruptures in relationships. Development that affects these mediating variables thereby catalyzes the positive effects of the moderating variables.