PREPARING LEADERS TO NAVIGATE EXPONENTIAL CHANGE

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Is the field of leadership development evolving quickly enough to keep pace with *exponential change*?

How do we prepare leaders and organizations to navigate a world of underline exponential change? This is important to ponder, as the world as we know it has changed. Drastically. And it will continue to do so at an ever quickening pace. Ways of operating that brought leaders success in the past are no longer useful. Our global society is now grappling with a special class of problems known as complex or "underline wicked problems."[1] Such problems require completely different tools, methods of working, and ways of thinking.

But how and where do leaders go to become proficient in such "complexity-relevant" competencies?

This question matters. Our success ~ as organizations and individuals ~ hinges upon the answer. When we lack complexity-relevant tools, methods, and thinking, we are easily overwhelmed by today's volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA). We often struggle with a sensation that ~ despite our best efforts ~ we simply can't keep up. We're "*in over our heads*" [2] and "*falling further and further behind our times.*"[3]

In addition, when people are unprepared to

navigate VUCA conditions, the well-being of our organizations suffers. "*Delay in responding [to change] can be very costly, even disastrous. Companies and governments are going out of business every day because they have failed to adapt, or because they adapted too slowly.*" [4]

Conversely, when people are well-prepared, we can maintain our composure even within the intensity of pressures around us, as we have tools and know-how to surf the turbulence outside and within us. Fortified to face complexity, leaders can guide others through challenging moments. Together, we can make wiser choices and move cohesively toward shared goals. For these and many other reasons, time and money spent preparing leaders to navigate a world of exponential change is an investment in the health and longevity of an organization.

With this understanding, it becomes clear why the field of leadership development is growing ever more vital. How this field evolves (or doesn't) has profound implications for the life of our organizations, as well as society at large. So how is the area of leadership development developing?

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"The Future of Leadership Development" (an HBR article)

The HBR article, "underline The Future of Leadership Development,"[5] provides a powerful exploration into this topic. Its authors, Mihnea Moldoveanu and Das Narayandas, did a stellar job at presenting a "snapshot" of promising

trends they were observing in the field in 2019 (when this article was published).

Much has changed since then, so it feels important to ask: **Is the field of leadership development evolving quickly enough to keep pace with exponential change?** Meaningful responses to this question will best emerge from dialogue. This article seeks to support such conversations by (1) Refocusing attention on some of the promising ideas highighted by Moldoveanu and Narayandas, (2) Adding other trends and some of our thoughts, and (3) Inviting readers to add their observations to fill out our understanding.

(1) Key Insights & Trends from "*The Future of Leadership*" Article:

- THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO DEVELOP LEADERS: Moldoveanu and Narayandas assert that, "*The need for leadership development has never been more urgent. Companies of all sorts realize that to survive in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment, they need leadership skills and organizational capabilities different from those that helped them succeed in the past.*"
- MORE PEOPLE ARE BEING ASKED TO TAKE LEADERSHIP ROLES: Moldoveanu and Narayandas emphasize, "*There is also a growing recognition that leadership development should not be restricted to the few who are in or close to the C-suite... Employees across the board are*

- *increasingly expected to make consequential decisions that align with corporate strategy and culture. It's important, therefore, that they be equipped with the relevant technical, relational, and communication skills.*"
- THERE IS A MISMATCH BETWEEN TRADITIONAL EDUCATION PATHWAYS & CURRENT NEEDS: Moldoveanu and Narayandas illuminate the gap that exists between "*the skills that executive development programs build and those that firms require – particularly the interpersonal skills essential to thriving in today's flat, networked, increasingly collaborative organizations. More than 50% of senior leaders believe that their talent development efforts don't adequately build critical skills and organizational capabilities...As demand grows for executive education that is customizable, trackable, and measurably effective, new competitors are emerging.*"
- A PROMISING INNOVATION: THE EMERGENCE OF "PERSONAL LEARNING CLOUDS (PLC)" : Moldoveanu and Narayandas explain that "*Traditional executive education is simply too episodic, exclusive, and expensive...Corporate universities and **the personal learning cloud – the growing mix of online courses, social and interactive platforms, and learning tools from both traditional institutions and upstarts** – are filling the gap.*" Moldoveanu and Narayandas define the "personal learning cloud" (PLC)" as "*the growing assortment of online courses, social and interactive platforms, and learning tools*

- *from both traditional institutions and upstarts.*" They explain "*Organizations can select components from the PLC and tailor them to the needs and behaviors of individuals and teams. The PLC is flexible and immediately accessible, and it enables employees to pick up skills in the context in which they must be used. In effect, it's a 21st-century form of on-the-job learning.*"

The authors illuminate a gap that exists between "*the skills that executive development programs build and those that firms require – particularly **the interpersonal affective, and perceptual skills needed to lead coherent, proactive collaboration**.*" They note that, *"most executive education programs...seriously underplay important relational, communication, and affective skills.*" Moldoveanu and Narayandas recognize that these types of skills tend to be "*difficult to teach, measure, or even articulate. They have significant affective components and are largely non-algorithmic. These skills include leading, communicating, relating, and energizing groups. Mastery depends on practice and feedback.*"

In addition to these key points, "*The Future of Leadership Development*" also illuminates the increasing influence of digitization on learning environments, and the burgeoning variety and choice within the landscape of providers.

(2) Reflections on "<u>The Future of Leadership Development</u>"

We appreciate all the valuable insights Moldoveanu and Narayandas offer. Having studied the implications of VUCA for years, we feel **the "*communicative, interpretive, affective, and perceptual skills needed to lead coherent, proactive collaboration*"** is most urgent to track. As Moldoveanu and Narayandas noted, companies seek these skills, but most executive education programs seriously underplay their importance. And in the five years since the article was written, far too little progress has being made on this issue.

This dilemma around "soft skills" must be remedied. To do so, we must first recognize that the "***communicative, interpretive, affective, and perceptual skills needed to lead coherent, proactive collaboration***" **require radically different types of learning experiences**. This is one of the reasons why we find Moldoveanu and Narayanda's concept of a Personal Learning Cloud (PLC) to be an innovation worth tracking.
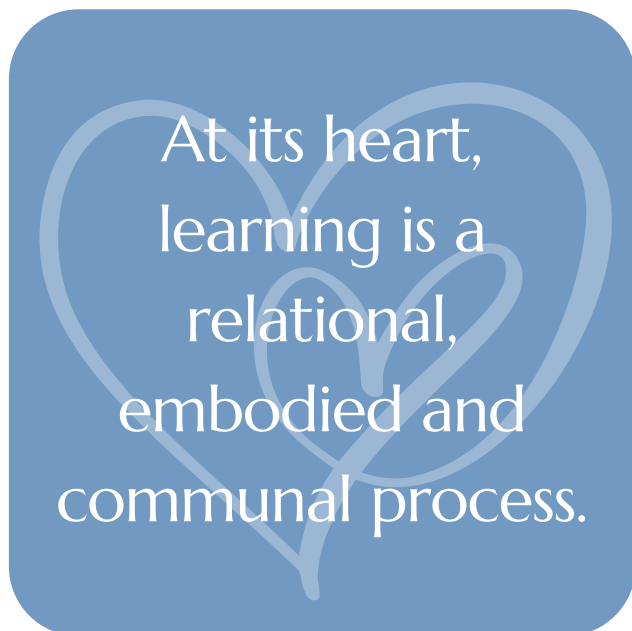
> The "communicative, interpretive, affective, and perceptual skills needed to lead coherent, proactive collaboration" require radically different types of learning experiences.

The PLC appears to be a disruptive technology with the potential to liberate the field of leadership development from dogma and "old world" learning constraints. The PLC offers an unprecedented level of variety and choice. Companies and people can now explore for themselves **what** information is most essential, **how** it is most effectively transmitted and **by whom**. It enables learners to take responsibility for their own learning and learn how to learn.

Yet, for PLC's to live up to their full potential, a fundamental shift in mindset is necessary. Society in general (and the field of leadership development specifically) is currently limited by a common belief that learning is a technical and individual process. This notion is an artifact from the industrial age that's no longer relevant in the "Age of Disruption." [6]

In order to learn what we need to learn ~ *at the rate we need to learn* ~ we must remember that *at its heart, learning is a relational, embodied and communal process*.

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We'll take this even further and assert that most of the *"communicative, interpretive, affective, and perceptual skills needed to lead coherent, proactive collaboration"* **can ONLY be learned with other people**. The skills needed for coherent, proactive collaboration are best cultivated in co-creative, collaborative learning experiences which occur within a community of practitioners.

Therefore, the fuller potential of PLCs requires a shift in focus from:
- Individual to collective
- Intellectual to embodied
- Technical and units-based to experiential and holistic
- Transactional to relational
- Management-led/externally imposed to learner-led/internally-driven

"Community Learning Circles": The Next Possible Iteration of PLCs

PLCs that make these shifts mentioned above might more aptly be referred to as "***Community Learning Circles***" (CLCs). As such, CLCs would have the potential to unleash powerful learning experiences that are more fluid, distributed, people-led, and self-managed (and thus better suited for a world of exponential change).

We believe CLCs will distinguish themselves from their PLC predecessors by the following distinctions:

SOCIAL
Learning experiences suited for the 21st century will be social in nature. People have always

learned better together due to the interactions that can occur between learners. But many "new world" skills can only be learned with other people. Take, for example, collaborative decision-making. This critical skill is required to make wiser decisions in uncertainty and create greater buy-in from the variety of stakeholders involved. Yet few of us have been in places (schools or executive training programs) that support the acquisition of this skill so most of us lack the necessary capacities for collaborative decision-making. This lack of is not a reflection of an individual failure. It merely reflects a breakdown in our systems for preparing citizens and leaders to navigate our new world.

Yet the lack of this skill in individuals has systemic repercussions. Organizational efforts to convert to more "flat," "teal," or network approaches often get stymied as people are entrenched in traditional patterns of authority and power. So what appears as a resistance to change, may be an indicator that the new and needed competencies have not yet been adequately cultivated.

Developing skills to make collaborative decisions is not something that will happen by itself. It's a process that has to be learned in a social context. CLCs could enable social learning to occur in discussion forums (such as small live groups or online digital platforms). But the highest value CLC offerings would be ones that engage our whole being rather than privilege just our cognitive thinking. Particularly valuable would be platforms that enable learners to do things together, as shared action supports

embodied learning.

EMBODIED

The "communicative, interpretive, affective, and perceptual skills needed to lead coherent, proactive collaboration" require embodied learning. They cannot be learned from a book. They are skills that must be practiced regularly ~ and together ~ in community. To grasp why, think of learning a team sport. We do not become better at a team sport by reading about it (although we can gain some ideas through books). Nor can we truly learn them by practicing on one's own. Practicing team sports requires us to move together...The team or community provides the vital context for such learning.

"*Embodied knowledge is the skill to act appropriately at the appropriate time. It is*

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immediate, available, and responsive." [7] Thus, in exponential change, embodied knowledge trumps academic and intellectualized knowledge hands down! So while many digitized learning options may appear innovative due to technological advances, truly innovative learning platforms will focus on more than just the cognitive. CLCs will be the type that enable people to collectively experiment, try things, and reflect upon such experiences afterwards. Such learning experiences are inherently integrative and holistic.

HOLISTIC

Unprecedented levels of change require us to bring the best of ourselves, and all of ourselves, online. Therefore, CLCs will call forth and integrate the power of our heads, hearts, and hands.

CLCs will NOT teach debate or use it as the primary method of deliberation and problem-solving. Despite the preponderance of debate in today's culture, its use grows increasingly problematic. When working with wicked problems, debate is not only ineffective ~ its often counterproductive. Debate fosters fragmentation. Wicked problems require integration (the variety of stakeholders affected by a challenge must come together, view the challenge from multiple angles, integrate the diversity of perspectives, and co-create new possibilities to "tame" the challenge). Such synthesis and integration of ideas can only be achieved through dialogue.

Everyone ~ not just 'leaders' ~ should become practiced in the art of dialogue. Unfortunately, few schools or executive training programs cultivate such skills, but CLCs could. Similar to collaborative decision-making, dialogue skills can only be learned in community. CLCs would center dialogue and enable people to experience how constructive solutions that consider the needs of all can be collaboratively created. Such opportunities help people move beyond "either-or" thinking by providing practice in how to merge different perspectives of an issue in a dialectical ("both-and") manner. This type of learning is crucial for humans to effectively address the enormity of challenges we currently face.

SCAFFOLDED

CLCs will provide learning experiences that are interrelated and scaffolded. This is important as effective leadership (as well as most "*communicative, interpretive, affective, and perceptual skills needed to lead coherent, proactive collaboration*") are in fact high-level, interpersonal skills. Successful execution of such skills requires the mastery of subskills. Like steps in a dance, subskills are best practiced one at a time … and before being combined into larger sequences.

Martial arts is a great example of scaffolded learning. "Kata" is a Japanese term that means 'form'. It is a method that supports the memorization and perfection of smaller movements that are later choreographed into larger sequences. The same learning principles can be applied to learning the relational interactive skills most needed for addressing

today's challenges. CLCs would break down such high level skills into subcomponents. These sub-skills could be practiced as short patterns. Correct form would be modeled and supported.

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DYNAMIC

In a rapidly changing world, we need to constantly learn and unlearn, to reconstitute our understanding based on what's happening in the moment.

Unfortunately, most education (including executive education) treats knowledge as static and limited in scope. This approach has created cultures in which leaders are expected to have all the answers. Yet, in complexity, we need just the opposite: People with an attitude of unknowing; keeping one's mind open to new possibilities; integrating what on the surface

may seem contradictory.

Success in complexity requires us to 'un-habitise' and unlearn; to literally stop doing most of what we learned to do in a static, mechanistic, command-and-control world. But where do we learn how to do this? Conventional education (including conventional approaches to leadership development) were designed to foster success solving "ordered problems" in static conditions which no longer really exist. Today's turbulence require leaders to have new places to learn new skills in new ways.

CLCs might well be the optimal spaces where leaders at all levels are developed. CLCs would provide learning experiences that treat knowledge as "living," held between people, and dynamically shifting. Such experiences would help us recognize how people and ideas are changed by each other (ie, the ideas we hold shape us, and likewise, we influence the shape of the ideas we hold). Neuroscience illuminates this point. Studies show that culture physically shapes our brains. [8][9]

Synapses in our brain are formed by repeated behaviors that become habits. "Plasticity" is our capacity to rewire our brains by practicing new behaviors and developing new habits. "Plasticity" is a cause for hope. Plasticity is the way we can replace old behaviors with new ones that are better suited for our times. We can literally "reshape" our brains to be better-suited for complexity. But plasticity requires repeated practice, not intellectualized learning.

Such learning happens best when we participate in communities engaged in regular, embodied practices.

CLCs would provide dynamic community learning spaces which are autonomous and self-organized. Such spaces would be for more than "just learning." CLCs would be places where we could co-imagine and co-create the new world we collectively want to live in.

IN SUMMARY

The future of leadership development matters. The authors of this article are grateful to Moldoveanu and Narayandas for the insights and trends they shared in their 2019 article by this name. We wish to reinvigorate the sense-making they started.

The five years that has passed since its publishing makes the time ripe to consider: **Is the field of leadership development evolving quickly enough to keep pace with exponential change?**

For leaders to survive and thrive in a world of exponential change, it's essential to re-examine what we learn (content) and how we learn (pedagogy/andragogy). We believe the most essential competencies required for exponential change relate to the "*communicative, interpretive, affective, and perceptual skills needed to lead coherent, proactive collaboration*" Moldoveanu and Narayandas spoke about. We propose that CLCs might well be the optimal spaces where leaders at all levels can be developed.

(3) Inviting Your Voice

The ideas presented by Moldoveanu and Narayanda are an important contribution to the field of executive education. Yet the ideas presented in their article and this one are just the beginning. Far bigger seismic shifts are needed to meaningfully reshape "*the future of leadership development*".

What trends are you noticing? What competencies do you sense are most needed? We welcome the addition of your voice and ideas to take our thinking even further. Please reach out to us to share your ideas.

> "Community Learning Circles" (CLCs) might well be the optimal spaces where leaders at all levels can be developed.

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Authors' Note:

Our thinking in this area has been shaped in a community of professionals who have been examining the cross-sectionality of more human-centered and "complexity-relevant" approaches to learning and working. Such approaches are referred to as "Transformative Social Systems" (a/k/a "TSS").

To learn more, see "Introducing Transformative Social Systems" (TSS): *Developing Competencies for the Deep Meeting of Hearts and Minds* by Golden & Mompoint-Gaillard, 2023.

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Laureen is an amplifier of dreams who believes in humanity's capacity to heal ourselves & our world. She brings a developmental orientation to her work with individuals and organizations that's been shaped by her background in education & mental health. She has a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, a Master's degree in Special Education, and holds two Montessori certificates. She also has a Master's degree in Social Work and is a Board Certified Coach (BCC).

Laureen stumbled into leadership in 2011 when she founded and led the Ohio Montessori Alliance. Experiencing the potentials and perils surrounding the role of leader was what catalyzed her fascination with "The Learning Imperative" and how society might develop leaders at scale through Transformative Social Systems (methodologies, frameworks, and communities of practice that are well-suited for today's complexity and reconnect us to the heart of our humanity).

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