

System collapse: leadership in relation to ‘deep’ adaptation, managed retreat, mass migration and societal collapse

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Abstract

‘Transformational change’ is often lauded as an aim of personal and organisational development and also of ‘systems’. ‘Transforming the energy / food / transport / finance / educational system’ is an aspiration of many initiatives including some we Panellists are engaged in. What might be involved in such a transformation is less often spelled out, but process theories such as Lewin’s ‘unfreeze, change, re-freeze’ give the impression that a bit of jiggling about and changing of org charts should do it. This is reinforced by analogies with ‘rites of passage’ that require an initiate to suffer a managed de-personalisation (a ‘liminal’ phase) before acceptance into a new role in this cultural group – which thus ensures its own continuity.

In this panel session we will examine transformations where neither reintegration nor continuity are likely outcomes because the overall system is collapsing. How might we approach such a prospect, and what is the role of leadership?

We are concerned with situations in which there is realistic profound uncertainty about a foreseeable ‘trans’ over a tumultuous interlude, and ‘formation’ may never occur in a recognisable form. In other words – with existential risk at the level of community, society or ecosystem. Such catastrophes occur often, when ecosystems collapse, countries are overrun, towns disappear beneath a slag heap and so forth. Climate change is a foreseen crisis that poses many challenges of this existential magnitude, inadequately served by the language of ‘system transformation’. So the aim of this panel is to explore an alternative lexicon. We will pay special attention to the implications for leaders, leadership and (critical) leadership studies.

The five panellists will approach this nexus from different perspectives and we invite contributions from audience chaired by TBC.

Panellists and their contributions

Dr Sasha Maher and Dr Rhiannon Lloyd: Managed Retreat

It is estimated that USD\$125bn of real estate in New Zealand is liable to catastrophic flooding as a result of the effects of climate change. This renders large parts of the national economy uninsurable for one of its major foreseeable risks. (Carbon News, 2023). One response is to plan a ‘managed retreat’ to less flood-prone locations – raising many questions about the relations between state, local government, financiers and the individual. For example – who decides to stop servicing a

particular community, where and how to relocate, who pays and many other issues. Dr Maher will present findings from a study of a coastal community in New Zealand where a community was divided by differing understandings of the significance of the 'place', 'nature', and of 'trust' in science and other technical forms of expertise. The challenges to leadership are profound and important.

Dr Sasha Maher holds a PhD in Anthropology and Management from the University of Auckland. She recently joined the Business School as Lecturer in Sustainability after extensive industry experience in business development, policy, strategy, and sustainability professional roles. Sasha is the Subject Group Lead for Sustainability for the Faculty of Business and Economics. Sasha has also worked recently as climate change advisor at the policy think tank, the Environmental Defence Society and is currently an Affiliate at Motu Research an economics and policy institute where she leads a project on international cooperation and carbon markets. Her research interests focus on role of leadership, expertise and knowledge systems in climate change solutions.

Dr Rhiannon Lloyd is a Senior Lecturer in Leadership in the Management and international business department at the University of Auckland Business School, and the Executive Director of the Kupe Leadership Scholarship at the University of Auckland. She is also a member of the Aotearoa Centre for Leadership and Governance, UABS. Rhiannon's research tends towards a critical perspective, and focuses on environmental and responsible leadership, responsible (youth) leadership development, and frontline leadership. Many of her research streams challenge traditional leadership paradigms, such as human-centrism and anthropocentric views of power, and centre the natural environment as a core component of leadership work.

Prof Stefano Pascucci: Circular economy and Systems Change in the shadow of the Anthropocene crisis.

The Anthropocene is defined as the 'era of the humans', an unprecedented geological period for which human actions have irreversible consequences on the Earth ecosystems. The notion of the Circular Economy (CE) has emerged as one of the most important ways in which we can respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene. It incorporates efforts to keep socio-economic activities within planetary boundaries, mimicking living systems and industrial ecologies. Scholars and practitioners have often depicted CE as a 'vehicle' to navigate the uncharted territory of the Anthropocene, and guide much needed socio-technological and organizational innovations for example by: (i) designing products for slowing, narrowing, and closing loops of resource use; (ii) delivering performance and functionality rather than ownership.

However, these interventions focus on business strategies and neglect the opportunity to better understand the socio-ecological foundations, and impacts, of CE. In addition, pioneers of CE tend to accept business logics and collective responsibility for externalities, rather than challenging them. Given this background Prof Pascucci will present how an alternative approach would locate CE within the ambiguities and contradictions of capitalistic political economy, and to understand the eroding of natural ecosystems as a signal of the dysfunctions of unlimited production and consumption. This, in turn, points to the potential impossibility of CE as a complete solution to the challenges of the Anthropocene. It highlights the need to (re-)think our relation to nature and to prioritise understanding the intricate entanglement of social and ecological dimensions of the Anthropocene. It calls on us to go beyond the boundaries of current approaches to CE.

Stefano Pascucci is Professor in Sustainability and Circular Economy at Exeter University Business School and currently serves as Head of the Management Department. He is a social scientist interested in sustainability connected to organization theories, innovation management, entrepreneurship and value chain analysis. His research focuses on agribusiness, sustainability and circular economy. He is particularly concerned about how to analyse the interplay between sustainability, innovation and value chain configurations. He holds a PhD in Agricultural Economics and Policy from University of Naples Federico II (IT).

Prof Jonathan Gosling: Systems Psychodynamics of defeat

The field of Systems Psychodynamics integrates open systems theory, complexity theory and psychoanalytic thinking. It has made significant conceptual and practical contributions to leadership studies, leader development and related industries (Lawler and Sher 2023), as well as to social change more generally. A key idea is that task and sentient systems co-exist in juxtaposition to each other: covert – often unconscious – purposes can undermine or divert the overt goals, structures and processes of any system of organisation. Furthermore, fantasies about these undeclared purposes can readily form a ‘system of beliefs’, generating values, choices and actions that need to be managed if governance or leadership is to be effected in any way. The work of leading is therefore largely to do with a world of imagined, feared, hoped-for purposes. These psychodynamic forces become especially powerful in the face of anxiety, which may be defined as the anticipation of self-inflicted failure. This is the predominant condition of the contemporary social world. In this panel Prof Gosling will address a more particular set– when failure becomes defeat. For example: when attempts to mitigate the effects of climate change fail, resulting adaptations to changed circumstances may be drastic enough to destroy the fabric of trust and continuity on which organisations, institutions and societies depend (along with the material systems of energy, food, transport, water, and so forth). What can leadership offer in these circumstances? How might both task and sentient systems be addressed in ways that enable ‘transformation’? What, in other words, are the dynamics of leadership in systemic defeat?

Jonathan Gosling is an independent academic now serving as Principal Consultant and co-owner of Pelumbra Ltd (a consulting company). He is a Visiting Professor at UWE and Emeritus Professor at Exeter University, where he co-founded the One Planet MBA. He hosts writing retreats and convenes a consortium of business-school faculty members keen to bring one-planet perspectives to the study and development of leadership.

Prof Brad Jackson: Promoting a Place-Based Leadership Approach to Climate Change Adaptation

Climate change presents unprecedented leadership and governance challenges. Managed retreat, defined as the strategic withdrawal of people, assets and activities to reduce risk to place-based climate change harm, will be one of the most vexing. This is because of the deep uncertainty and profound social, environmental, economic and cultural disruption(s) that will be caused by relocating communities. It is, therefore, imperative to better understand and promote the leadership and governance practices that need to be developed for individuals, businesses, communities, regions and governments to proactively respond to climate change in a responsible, integrated and sustainable way. Some attention has been given to developing governance frameworks that lay out roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. However, the specific leadership and governance practices that are required for proactive, pre-emptive retreat have been largely ignored. Such practices require urgent attention as they will take considerable time to identify, develop and refine at the local, national and international levels. In order to achieve positive leadership for managed retreat, I propose that we must take a place-based, long-term stakeholder perspective that is focused on cross-sectoral collaboration.

Brad Jackson is Professor of Leadership and Governance and Programme Director of the Community Enterprise Leadership Foundation (CELF). Brad's current research explores the inter-relationship between leadership and governance practices in promoting and sustaining social and economic innovation and the application of place-based approaches to foster cross-sectoral leadership development and education.

References

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