



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

CISL Cambridge Institute
for Sustainability
Leadership



Leadership capabilities for the 21st century:

Creating a thriving future for all



About the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL)

CISL is an impact-led institute within the University of Cambridge that activates leadership globally to transform economies for people, nature and climate. Through its global network and hubs in Cambridge, Cape Town and Brussels, CISL works with leaders and innovators

across business, finance and government to accelerate action for a sustainable future. Trusted since 1988 for its rigour and pioneering commitment to learning and collaboration, the Institute creates safe spaces to challenge and support those with the power to act.

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Executive Summary



The University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) is one of a growing number of voices calling for leadership to activate a transition to economies that work for people, nature and climate: the leadership we need for the future we want. We need to rewire how key economic actors – governments, business and finance – operate to create long-term value for all within the earth's natural limits.

Recent years have seen increased action to transform unsustainable systems and practices, but more attention needs to be paid to the leadership capabilities and qualities required at an individual and collective level to make fundamental and lasting progress.

Research shows with increasing clarity that there are multiple lenses through which leadership can be understood, which provide a richer understanding of the contemporary dynamics of leadership and how it plays out in specific contexts. Leadership is increasingly seen not simply as a set of capabilities possessed by an individual or a position held but also as:

- a process – a dynamic, collective and creative process of influence that shapes behaviour and organisational culture
- requiring a purpose – a clear, meaningful goal that inspires leaders and followers to operate in service of specific ends
- place or context specific – embedded in and shaped by particular times and places, at both a broad level, eg economic and social trends, and more specifically, eg local culture and values.



Executive Summary



In understanding leadership in this broader way, CISL has developed a framework that seeks to address some of the limitations of dominant ways of thinking about leadership. It brings together the significance of purpose, the relational nature of leadership expressed as four principles, and the importance of place and context to identify leadership characteristics for a sustainable future (see Figure 1).

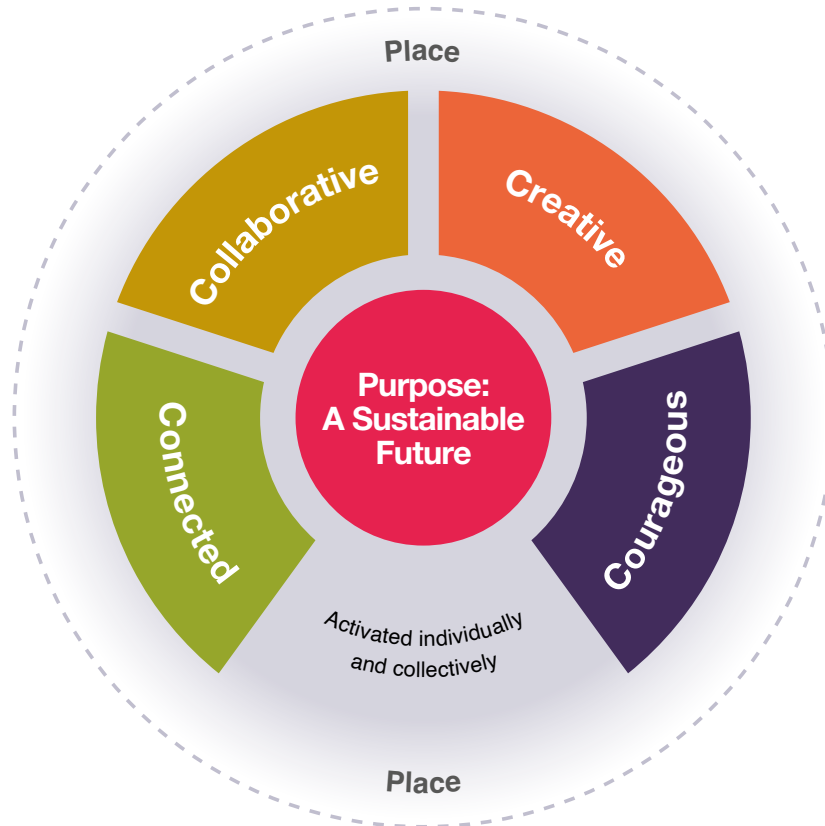


Figure 1: The Leadership Capabilities Framework¹

Purpose

An ultimate goal for leadership, providing direction, meaning and accountability.

Principles

The core characteristics of leadership showing most potential to work for a sustainable future.



Connected

Leadership that navigates the complexity and connectedness of life and nurtures the relationships that underpin the systems on which we all depend.



Collaborative

Leadership that is inclusive and works in alliance with others across boundaries to achieve collective change.



Creative

Leadership that experiments and innovates with curiosity, optimism and purpose.



Courageous

Leadership that knows the values that it stands for and nurtures the courage, integrity and resilience to pursue societal good.

Place

The various dimensions of context at both a broad and detailed level, over space and time, which shape how and why leadership is practised.

Executive Summary



The framework then unpacks what these leadership characteristics mean for actors at a range of scales – individuals, teams, projects, organisations, partnerships and collaborations, as well as broader social movements. It does this through identifying currently under-developed capabilities, expressed as mindsets and practices, that can be nurtured at every level to support each principle.



Mindset: a way of thinking and being, which incorporates knowledge, attitudes, values and emotions.



Practices: skills (specific capabilities) and agency (the capacity to act).

The resulting framework is designed to help individuals and collectives reflect on their own and others' leadership practice. The approach is focused on expanding leadership capacity. It is not about abandoning traditional leadership skills, including commercial acumen, but directing attention to and building the foundation for characteristics that have been historically under-explored and are emerging as critical to underpin leadership in the 21st century.

CISL's ambition is to stress-test the framework in different contexts – geographically, culturally, organisationally – exploring how the purpose and principles are manifested in different places, building a database of case studies and empirical evidence, and refining our thinking based on these practical insights.

We invite you to engage with us as we connect with others globally to develop this leadership and help individuals and organisations discover the thinking and practices that will inspire, enable and accelerate progress towards a more sustainable future.

Introduction



The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership's (CISL's) latest thinking on leadership for the 21st century. It gives an overview of CISL's new leadership capabilities framework and its practical application, which underpins our graduate, executive and board-level education programmes, our business engagement and the impact of our network of over 30,000 leaders and practitioners worldwide.

The work proposes a broader understanding of how leadership works than is evident in many commonly used models. It applies this insight to identifying the characteristics of leadership that could work for a sustainable future, and a series of currently under-developed capabilities that can be nurtured at every level to support this purpose.

This creates a framework for leadership designed to help individuals and collectives reflect on their own and others' leadership practice. The framework serves as a lens through which current leadership approaches can be assessed, identifying what is fit for purpose, and provides a foundation for exploring how leadership interventions can be better aligned with a more sustainable future.

It is accompanied by a report that details the thinking and research underpinning this work for those who want to understand the background to the framework, insight into the methods used, and foundational literature and references.



More detail in **Supporting Report**



1

Changing world, changing leadership

The last century has seen unprecedented development and increased global prosperity. At the same time, population growth, increased economic activity and the associated impacts of consumption are pushing climate change, biodiversity loss and land use beyond critical thresholds. The benefits of prosperity and quality of life are also far from equally distributed, with extreme disparities in income, wealth and opportunities evident at a range of scales. Social polarisation, populism and protectionism reflect the growing distrust in many societies. The interaction of multiple systemic risks – including pandemic and conflict – intensifies pressure and threatens the stability of societies and economies.

Recent years have seen increased action to transform unsustainable systems and practices. Technological, legal, political, financial and socio-cultural solutions are central to this effort and do exist, yet progress remains deeply inadequate. In part, this is because more attention needs to be paid to the leadership capabilities and qualities required at an individual and collective level to make fundamental and lasting progress.

Research shows with increasing clarity that there are multiple lenses through which leadership can be understood, which provide a richer understanding of the contemporary dynamics of leadership and how it plays out in specific contexts. Leadership is increasingly seen not simply as something embodied in an individual or a position held but also as:

- a process – a dynamic, collective and creative process of influence that shapes behaviour and organisational culture
- requiring a purpose – a clear, meaningful goal that inspires leaders and followers to perform and take accountability in service of specific ends
- place or context specific – embedded in and shaped by particular times and places, at both a broad level, eg economic and social trends, and more specifically, eg local culture and values.

In understanding leadership in this broader way, CISL's framework seeks to address some of the limitations of dominant ways of thinking about leadership. These include: a tendency to default to a highly individual understanding of leadership by focusing disproportionately on the personal purpose, charisma and skills of an individual 'leader'; a curious silence about purpose that means that important goals like commercial performance and financial returns become elevated to ultimate measures of success rather than considering what they are in service of; and the prioritisation of content over context, which offers generic insights into leadership skills and behaviours, but may be disconnected from the rich cultures, places and history in which leadership is embedded.

In contrast, CISL's leadership framework starts with an understanding of leadership as:

“ **A dynamic social process within a specific place (context), which maximises the contribution of others towards the achievement of a meaningful purpose.** ”



1 Changing world, changing leadership

Thoughtful practitioners embrace at least one of these dimensions – process, purpose and place (context) – in their work. The value of this report is that it brings together the significance of purpose, the relational nature of leadership, and the importance of place and context to identify leadership characteristics for a sustainable future. These characteristics have been informed by emerging evidence regarding what kind of leadership has potential to achieve positive outcomes for people, nature and climate.

This lays the foundation for a framework designed to help individuals and collectives (teams, groups, organisations, partnerships, wider movements) reflect on current models and practices and evaluate their leadership development needs. The approach is focused on expanding leadership capacity. It is not about abandoning traditional leadership skills, including commercial acumen, but directing attention to the characteristics that have been historically under-explored and are emerging as critical to underpin leadership in the 21st century. It also appreciates the potential agency and influence of individuals but in the context of understanding that a collective capacity needs to be activated for leadership to deliver for organisations and society.

Building on the work in CISL's existing publication *Rewiring Leadership*² this new framework was developed during a two-year iterative process, blending extensive literature review with rounds of consultation and review with academics and leadership development practitioners. It represents a fusion of academic and practitioner-based insights.



More detail on **Background and Justification** in Supporting Report



More detail on **Method** in Supporting Report



More detail on **Understanding Leadership** in Supporting Report



2

Introducing the framework

Having recognised the value of understanding leadership as more than a person and position – but also process, purpose and place (context) – it is important that CISL’s leadership capabilities framework does not default to immediate identification of traits and behaviours at an individual level. The following key components are therefore adopted.

The first two components are a specific response to understanding leadership as a process and requiring a purpose.

Purpose An ultimate goal for leadership, providing direction, meaning and accountability.

Principles The core characteristics of leadership showing most potential to work for a sustainable future: connected, collaborative, creative and courageous.

Together the purpose and principles comprise the nature and characteristics of leadership as a collective phenomenon that could work for a sustainable future.

The next component reflects the understanding that the purpose and principles are applied in and shaped by different contexts and cultures. The term ‘place’ is used here in the broadest sense – beyond simply geography – to reflect the multiple ways in which leadership is situated.

Place The various dimensions of context at both a broad and detailed level, over space and time, which shape how and why leadership is practised.

The framework then unpacks what the leadership principles might mean for the interactions of individuals at a range of scales – teams, projects, organisations, partnerships and collaborations, as well as broader social movements.

The framework identifies currently under-developed capabilities – expressed as mindsets and practices – that might be cultivated and expressed at all levels to support leadership for a sustainable future. This is not a comprehensive list of every potential leadership capability. All leadership capabilities, traditional or emergent, should be oriented to achieving the identified purpose and principles.

Mindset A way of thinking and being, which incorporates knowledge, attitudes, values and emotions.

Practices Skills (specific capabilities) and agency (the capacity to act).

Together, these components comprise CISL’s Leadership Capabilities Framework, as laid out in Figure 2.



More detail on **Component Parts** in Supporting Report



2

Introducing the framework

 Hover to reveal more information



Mindset

Practices

Figure 2: The Leadership Capabilities Framework (detailed version)

Purpose

Leadership that is in service of and accountable for achieving a sustainable future.

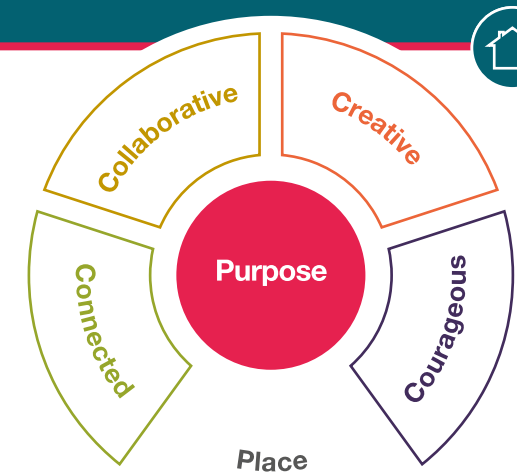
The concept of purpose has gained considerable traction in the last few years, although is relatively under-explored as a field in leadership. Attention is turning to how a values led purpose can inspire and motivate, guide decisions and shape behaviour, and align and accelerate value creation and action towards common goals. Purpose is a powerful tool for effective leadership, especially amid increasing complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty.

The exploration of leadership research underpinning this framework made the case for the 'why' of leadership being a critical – if not *the* critical – question that needs to be asked and addressed. If leadership is not consciously in service of something, it is hard to determine the nature of the leadership required, the skills and capacities that might enable that leadership, or how one might evaluate the performance of such leadership. Answering such a question is inherently shaped by values and does not suppose one universal response. Nonetheless, asking the question about the ultimate desired 'end' of leadership is crucial and represents a departure from many traditional approaches to leadership development.

CISL's framework is premised on leadership in service of a sustainable future. This represents its core purpose – an articulation of the ultimate ends or ultimate good – for leadership.³ We use 'sustainable' to mean:

“ A state of the global system, including environmental, social and economic aspects, in which the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁴

This definition reflects a long-term perspective that seeks to protect and restore the natural and social systems on which all well-being for everyone is based. Social equity and fairness are core to the definition, which is essential as some definitions of sustainability have neglected critical aspects of justice. As recently defined in the global standard for Purpose-Driven Organisations, PAS 808, *sustainability* is about long-term well-being for everyone – not just a few – now and for future generations.⁵ Achieving



it includes addressing the historical injustices that underpin the foundations on which purposeful leadership for a sustainable future is built, recognising that the why (purpose) is shaped by where (context) and for whom.

Much current leadership practice – certainly in a business context – has embedded within it an assumption that the purpose of leadership is to deliver greater organisational performance, with organisational success as the ultimate end, often measured in terms of revenue, profit, market share, efficiency, value or reputation.

To achieve long-term positive outcomes for organisations and society, we need change at the level of organisations and the context in which they operate. We need organisations to align their strategy, performance goals and measures of success with meeting society's long-term needs in a sustainable way. This transformation will require creative and courageous leadership, as even those organisations with a clear purpose to make a strategic contribution to a sustainable future often find themselves struggling to make progress in unsustainable operating contexts. It will require collaboration to transform proactively economies and societies, and the supporting policy and market conditions to allow such purpose driven organisations to succeed.

We believe that there is a need for leadership that has an ultimate purpose of contributing to a sustainable future, that recognises the need for and is equipped to contribute to necessary systemic transformation, and that can enable/deliver organisational performance as an optimal strategic contribution to this.

We also believe that values-led purposeful leadership is essential at all levels, including the personal, as individuals reflect on their unique strategic contribution to a sustainable future. Ideally, though not always easy or possible, nurturing a clear line of sight between individual, team, organisational and ultimate purpose lays the conditions for harnessing collective passion, energy and capabilities for impactful change (see Figure 3).





Purpose

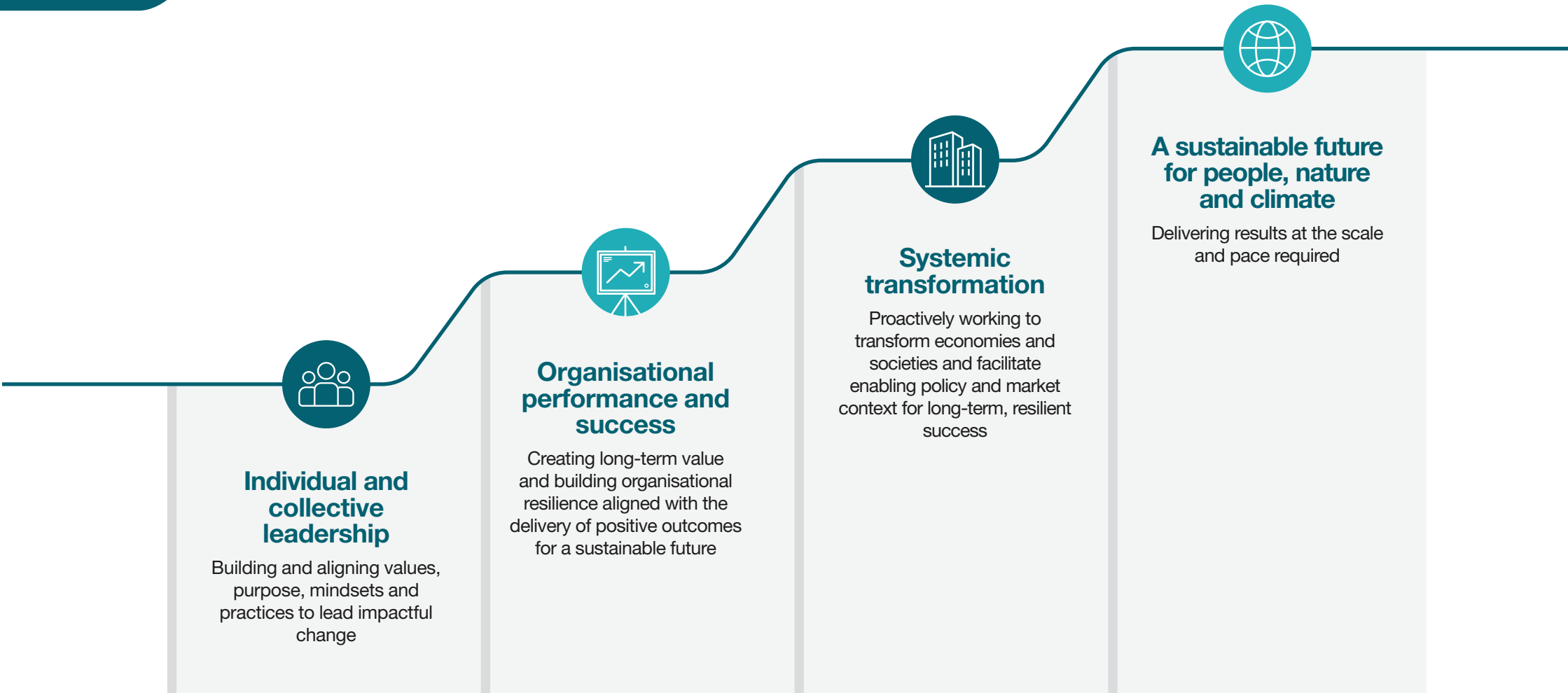


Figure 3: Activating Leadership for a Sustainable Future⁶

 [More detail on Purpose in Supporting Report](#)



Principles

The following four principles reflect an understanding of leadership as a dynamic, collective and creative process, with the associated mindsets and practices being applied at every level, individual and collective.



Connected

Leadership that navigates the complexity and connectedness of life and nurtures the relationships that underpin the systems on which we all depend.



Creative

Leadership that experiments and innovates with curiosity, optimism and purpose.



Collaborative

Leadership that is inclusive and works in alliance with others across boundaries to achieve collective change.



Courageous

Leadership that knows the values that it stands for and nurtures the courage, integrity and resilience to pursue societal good.



Connected

Leadership that navigates the complexity and connectedness of life and nurtures the relationships that underpin the systems on which we all depend.



Organisations are operating in a highly complex, uncertain and constantly changing context. Whether in business, government, non-governmental organisation (NGO), civic society organisation or even family unit, we are increasingly aware of the multitude of different interconnected factors that require navigation in modern life. This includes not just organisational processes, practices and wider economic dynamics, but the essential connections with society and the natural world that influence them – from the quality of interpersonal relationships, to local environmental conditions, to social norms and narratives that shape values and behaviours, to global climate trends.

Traditional leadership responses have often underplayed the importance of these connections, and prioritised order, control and efficiency as the primary way of responding to complexity. These responses, however, are showing their limitations – whether that is a people strategy that fails to bring out the best of human potential, or a government policy that leads to an unintended rebound effect in environmental behaviour, or a global financial crisis resulting from a failure to understand the sensitivity and interdependence of the financial system and its impact on economies around the world.



In contrast, connected leadership recognises our profound connections to each other and to the natural world, and that we ignore these dependencies to the detriment of organisations, and to wider social, ecological and economic health. Connected leadership is regenerative, which means it pays attention to the fundamental relationships between human, environmental and economic well-being, seeking to understand the wider systems in which we operate. It brings meaning, humanity and connection with nature back into organisations and communities, appreciating the importance of context, history, culture and place. Far from being an optional 'nice to have', this represents a robust, future-facing strategy for building resilient and effective individuals, teams, organisations, communities and economies on which we all depend.

Connected leadership also rebalances the tendency to compartmentalise with a desire to understand things more holistically.



Connected

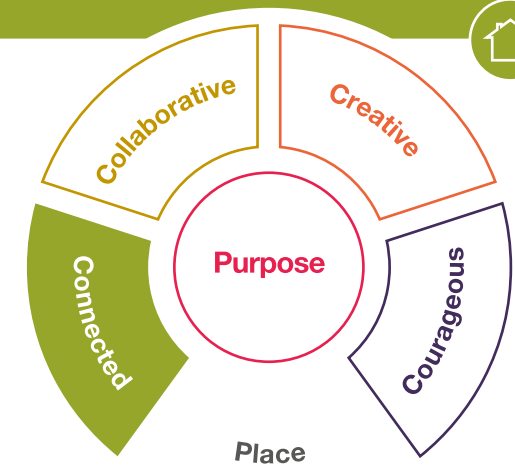


It is not paralysed by the scale of this ambition. Instead, it strives to make sense of and provide direction in a dynamic way, without trying to reduce or control complexity. It does this by gathering broad and rich data from multiple perspectives, with a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping surface-level events and impacts.

Connected leadership is seen for example in the food manufacturing

company that engages in deep listening and authentic engagement with a wide group of stakeholders beyond the supply chain as it develops its strategy for creating long-term value. It is reflected in the municipal planning department that has invested in rich, place-based data, before developing an effective urban resilience plan that is tailored to the local context. It is evident in the financial institution that has undertaken a robust mapping of critical environmental

and social dependencies so that the natural and human systems on which long-term economic health is based are protected and restored. It is seen in the local community leader who shares powerful stories that draw on the locality's history, culture and environment to make sense of the challenges facing the area and articulate a future that integrates restoration of the local environment with employment opportunities and social cohesion.



Connected mindset

- Embraces a big-picture, systems view that appreciates the interconnections and relationships between the parts of the whole and seeks insights from multiple perspectives.
- Sees patterns and underlying structures that help navigate and make sense of complexity.
- Appreciates our critical dependency on each other, wider society and nature for thriving economies, lives and places.



Connected practices

- Create stories that make sense of complexity, bringing meaning and direction for others.
- Foster nurturing and empathetic relationships with both humans – through deep listening and authentic engagement, and with nature – learning from living systems.
- Build key impacts and dependencies – human, societal and nature – into robust economic and organisational decision-making.

Connected leadership is the principle that lays the core foundations for the pursuit of a sustainable future for all.



More detail on **Connected** in Supporting Report



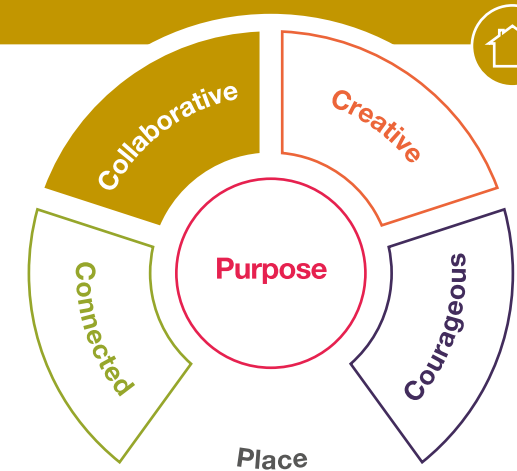
Collaborative

Leadership that is inclusive and works in alliance with others across boundaries to achieve collective change.



There is little doubt that contemporary leadership challenges require co-operation and collective action. The scale and complexity of the issues that societies face mean no one sector – government, business, finance, civil society or academia – can tackle them alone, and the need to work together towards a common purpose is firmly embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals. Effective collective action is also necessary for organisational success, given the complex and distributed nature of many organisational ecosystems. Increasingly, successful organisational performance means leading collaboratively. Whenever diverse individuals or agencies are brought together, from a cross-cultural team to a multi-stakeholder alliance, it is essential to invest in favourable conditions for that group to work effectively towards a shared purpose and generate collective benefit. Yet often, collaboration is approached naïvely, the potential co-benefits of enhanced trust and improved outcomes are far from realised, and we can be left (individually and organisationally) feeling undervalued, excluded or over-stretched.

Effective collaborative leadership is therefore about working in a way that co-creates genuine benefit for



multiple parties, with a focus on the common good rather than personal or organisational gain. It starts with an appreciation that diverse contributions from multiple stakeholders within and beyond organisations can be exciting and enriching, if they are mobilised effectively to contribute to a shared purpose. It links ideas, people and resources that would not normally connect, and facilitates learning and exchange that is both beneficial for organisational performance and effectively addresses wider sustainability risks and opportunities. It requires confronting historical and contemporary power dynamics embedded in specific contexts that disadvantage certain groups and individuals from participating fully in and benefitting from collective action. Collaborative leadership understands power. It seeks both to remove barriers to inclusion, and also tactically leverage existing power dynamics for the sake of collective benefit.



Collaborative

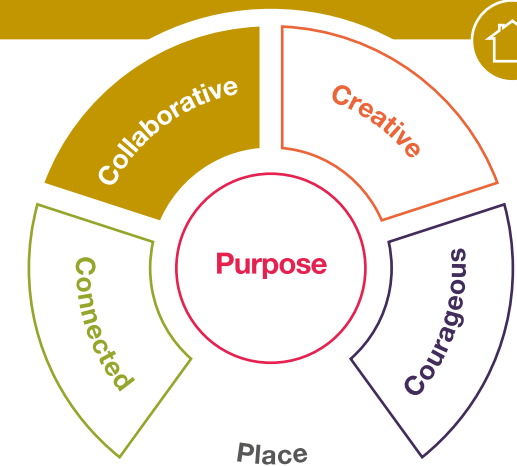


Collaboration however, and certainly formal alliances and partnerships, is not a panacea and needs to be thoughtfully approached, purposeful in design, clear on responsibilities and rights, and accountable for results.

Collaborative leadership is seen for example in the organisation that is committed to building collective capacity for innovation and change throughout

the workforce and beyond its supply chain, creating the conditions for shared leadership, an enabling culture, and nurturing the potential of all employees in pursuing sustainability outcomes. It is demonstrated by the social entrepreneur who is proactive in connecting people and ideas across disciplinary, sectoral, geographical and cultural boundaries, fostering dialogue and nurturing a shared ambition for social change. It is reflected

in the team that seeks to address unconscious behaviours, language and cultural references that might exclude or undermine team members. It is seen in the industry collaboration for sustainability that is thoughtfully co-designed, appropriately resourced, and effectively co-ordinated in a transparent and accountable way.



Collaborative mindset

- Actively welcomes and values different people and perspectives, parks ego and self-regulates own contribution to ensure the inclusion of others.
- Is committed to the power of collective agency and unlocking the potential of working towards a shared purpose and solutions.
- Recognises the impact of power and privilege, opposing those dynamics that exclude or diminish certain people or groups.



Collaborative practices

- Build the capacity to span boundaries, foster exchange and mobilise diverse actors to contribute to collective action.
- Understand and leverage existing relationships of power in particular contexts and remove barriers to inclusion.
- Encourage collective clarity on purpose, roles, responsibilities and decision rights, systems and processes, and accountability for results.

Collaborative leadership is the principle that characterises the way in which we work together collectively for a sustainable future.



More detail on **Collaborative** in Supporting Report



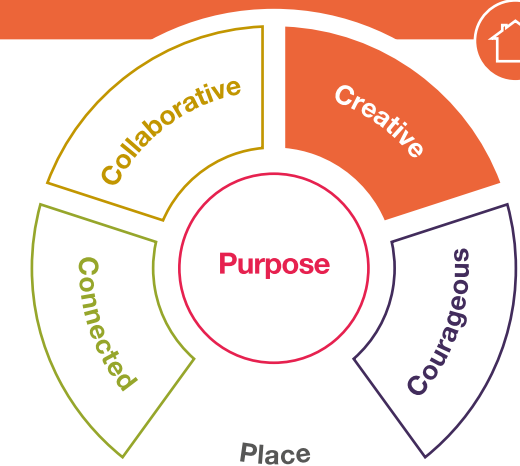
Creative

Leadership that experiments and innovates with curiosity, optimism and purpose.



Creativity is at the heart of sustainability. The need to imagine and realise a better and fundamentally very different future demands the best of human ingenuity and inventiveness. Genuinely transformative change will only come from a complete reset in how we think and act. We must let go of existing mental models and break away from conventional thinking towards a new way of seeing the world, and then harness this imagination and energy for change. Yet much leadership lacks creativity for a variety of reasons. Creativity may be seen as the preserve of a certain department or role. The prevailing culture in an organisation or society might be so pressurised, controlling or critical that there is not the perceived time, freedom or safety for curiosity or exploration. Resistance to change or organisational inertia means that transformation is hard, and dominant ways of doing things seem entrenched. Fear of failure for individuals, teams or organisations can stifle the appetite for experimentation or innovation, while defensiveness can limit learning and growth.

Creative leadership in contrast is characterised by a willingness to inquire, explore and learn, underpinned by both the confidence to question and a willingness to change. It is not simply



seen in introducing the new and novel, but also examining critically existing institutions, practices and activities, and redesigning and rebuilding in a more purposeful way. It is able to sense an emerging appetite for change, harnessing the interest and energy of others. It is not overly discouraged by setbacks or perceived failings but sees them as opportunities for learning and moving on from ways of thinking and doing that are no longer fit for purpose. It seeks to create cultures of psychological safety where individuals feel free to express their ideas and 'fail' without fear of criticism or retribution. At the same time, it is not irresponsible, chaotic or interested in innovation for the sake of innovation. Although it is willing to disrupt and challenge the status quo, it does so in service of the common good and seeks to channel creativity effectively, being held accountable by the best available data.



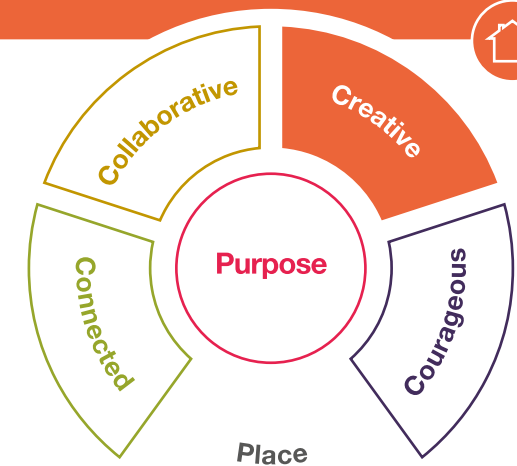
Creative



Creative leadership is shown for example by the entrepreneur who works in resource-constrained circumstances to develop a start-up that meets an unmet social need using low-cost and locally appropriate technology. It is seen in the community activists who spend time looking, listening and learning in their local context, sensing where there is an

emerging impetus for social change, and then building momentum around that energy by drawing others in. It is evident in the partnership facilitator who senses conflict and tension between different agencies and uses that creative tension to encourage the generation of a new approach to addressing a sustainability challenge. It is seen in the organisation

that intentionally fosters structures, rules and cultures that enable the conditions for purposeful experimentation, emergence and learning towards sustainability outcomes.



Creative mindset

- Nurtures a humble, open curiosity and a willingness to disrupt and adapt.
- Appreciates the emergent nature of creativity, and the importance of harnessing creative tension.
- Understands experimentation and failure as an essential part of learning and growth, is willing to take thoughtful risks and is open to new possibilities.



Creative practices

- Seek information, ask questions of the particular context, listen to feedback, and engage in reflective practice, learning and unlearning.
- Enable generative conversations that use the creative value of tension to surface new ideas and innovative solutions.
- Build psychologically safe learning cultures that support purposeful experimentation and risk-taking.

Creative leadership is the principle that brings the energy and imagination for change towards a sustainable future.



More detail on **Creative** in Supporting Report



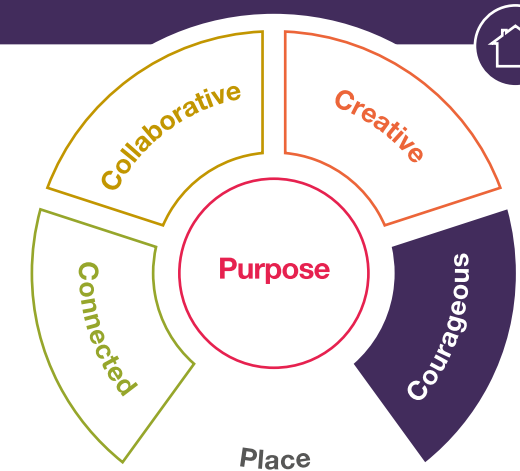
Courageous

Leadership that knows the values that it stands for and nurtures the courage, integrity and resilience to pursue societal good.



Much of the progress towards more sustainable outcomes for people, climate and nature has been made as a result of courageous leadership. In fact, courage threads its way throughout all the other principles, providing the impetus and commitment to act. It takes courage to try and make sense and provide direction in the midst of complexity, and to acknowledge the importance of people and nature in economic decisions. Courage is needed to build relationships with unlikely partners and to confront entrenched power dynamics in order to be inclusive and therefore access diverse perspectives and information. It takes courage to experiment with new possibilities for the sake of a more sustainable future, risking failure or being seen as an outlier when there is social or financial pressure to conform. Yet courage is often an underexplored dimension of contemporary leadership, despite its importance for pioneering change, confronting power and persevering in the face of resistance.

Courageous leadership acts in line with core principles and purpose, even when this costs something significant or proves unpopular in the short term. These values and ethical convictions provide a sense of direction, help navigate complex decisions, and build resilience to persevere in the face of



opposition. Yet courageous leadership also recognises that there are sometimes no easy or simple answers, especially in a polarised world where information and truth are increasingly contested. Courageous leadership continuously examines whether existing norms, rules and processes are serving societal good, with the humility to recognise the complexity of such issues, and a commitment to own the consequences of difficult decisions when these need to be made. It is not to be confused with arrogance or an unfounded confidence but rather engages in self-examination – seeking growing consistency between purpose, values and action, thus building both internal resilience and relational trust. It also seeks to be wise and practical in achieving impact, distinguishing what is of first importance from where there can be flexibility, sensing the right windows of opportunity, and seeking to bring others along rather than alienate.



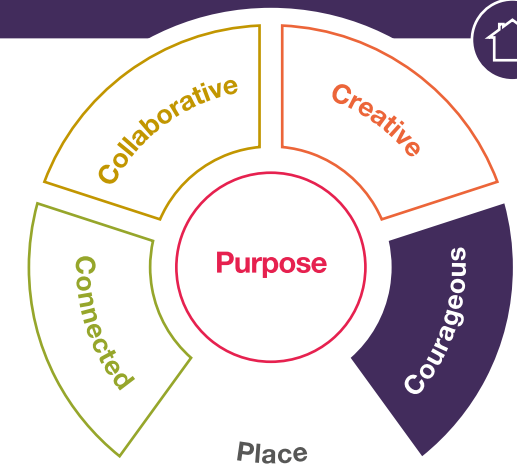
Courageous



Courageous leadership is seen for example in the organisation that nurtures an ethical and values-based culture that creates the space for a full range of people to surface moral issues and values, and explore these without fear of negative consequences in service of sustainable solutions. It is demonstrated by the global director

who is comfortable not knowing all the answers, encourages other voices, invites challenge and constructive critique, is humble about mistakes, and is willing to change direction. Courageous leadership is evident in the organisation that pivots from an extractive to a regenerative business approach, despite internal doubts and

opposition from short-term-oriented stakeholders, because it believes that the transformation is good both for the business and society. It is seen in the social movement that perseveres in campaigning and acting peacefully for transformational change despite opposition and threats from vested interests.



Courageous mindset

- Has the moral courage and sense of accountability to pursue societal good wherever possible, and own the consequences of challenging decisions.
- Withstands challenge, is comfortable with discomfort, and perseveres and grows in the face of setback, through a purpose and values based confidence.
- Is vulnerable, authentic, open and humble, and able to self-evaluate and adapt accordingly.



Courageous practices

- Consider ethical and moral dimensions in a systematic, transparent and collective way, surfacing the implications for key decisions.
- Practise brave acts in the smaller things to build moral courage and confidence.
- Undertake regular self-reflection and examination, informed by feedback.

Courageous leadership is the principle that drives the agency and resilience to act for a sustainable future.



More detail on **Courageous** in Supporting Report



Place

Throughout the exploration of purpose, the four principles and the associated mindsets and practices, there has been a continuous reflection on the importance of place and context – the multiple ways in which leadership is situated. Place is used in its broadest sense – beyond simply geography – to encompass the historical, cultural and other contextual dimensions at a broad and local level that shape how and why leadership is practised.



The case for articulating an ultimate *purpose* for leadership – leadership in service of a sustainable future – comes with the acknowledgement that there is no universal definition of a sustainable future and that questions about ‘why’ need to be accompanied by questions about ‘where’ and ‘for whom’, because what is deemed ‘good’ gains practical meaning in specific circumstances, grounded in different value sets, worldviews and cultural contexts.

Place in the broadest sense is core to all of the principles. For *connected* leadership, the richness and diversity of human experience is rooted in different cultures and contexts, which shape the dynamics of human interaction with ecology and the natural world. Place (context) based connected leadership is seen for example in the engineering company that develops a participatory approach to infrastructure planning and works with diverse local groups to co-design urban spaces that foster social, ecological and economic regeneration.

When exploring *collaborative* leadership, there are clear contexts – geographical and other – of inclusion and exclusion, with place, culture and other contextual factors shaping our ideals of inclusion. At the same time, different histories, cultures, institutions and social structures affect the dynamics of exclusion and need to be considered as we seek to leverage and challenge existing power dynamics. Place (context) based collaborative leadership is seen for example in the social enterprise that has taken the time to understand the historical social, cultural and economic dynamics that have shaped particular neighbourhoods, and then works with multiple partners to develop an employment programme that addresses some of the systemic inequalities in the system.

Emerging research suggests that context is key to understanding *creative* leadership – understanding the structural and social dynamics that stimulate and shape innovation and creative thinking. Place (context) based creative leadership is seen for example in the cluster of tech companies that seek to harness the potential benefits of co-location or another contextual association by pioneering a hackathon focused on accelerating the impact of social innovators.

The moral reasoning and ethical sensitivity core to *courageous* leadership equally needs to be contextually embedded if it is to truly grapple with the realities and complexities of contemporary decision-making. Place (context) based courageous leadership is seen for example in the organisation that wants to develop a clear public ‘voice’ on what it stands for and acts for. It takes the time to create safe spaces for employees within and beyond the organisation and the supply chain to contribute perspectives based on their geography, culture, history and values, so that this voice represents the multiple places and people connected with the organisation.

CISL’s framework therefore sets out some of the ways in which our understanding of leadership needs to be as much about context as about content, and the multiple ways in which it is ‘placed’ or situated. This marks just the starting point for this critical dimension of the work.

 [More detail on Place in Supporting Report](#)



3

Activating leadership globally

This report sets out the leadership we need to deliver the ultimate purpose of a sustainable future, leadership that is connected, collaborative, creative and courageous in nature and is situated in particular places in the broadest sense of the word.

Such leadership needs to be activated at all levels – from the individual to team, project, organisation and wider collective endeavours – through a set of mindsets and practices that have historically been under-developed and that we believe should be nurtured to build capacity to lead change for a sustainable future.

Many of these mindsets and practices already exist and are expressed in various ways individually and collectively, although not as consistently as needed and likely in tension with existing or dominant models. Effective leadership will need to be agile and adaptable in how these characteristics are adopted alongside traditional practice.

CISL's ambition is to stress-test this new leadership capabilities framework in different contexts – geographically, culturally, organisationally – exploring how the purpose and principles are manifested in different places, building a database of case studies and empirical evidence, and refining our thinking based on these practical insights.

There appears to be sufficient emerging evidence to warrant the exploration of purposeful leadership that is connected, collaborative, creative and courageous, and the part it might play in building the types of individuals and organisations that contribute to a sustainable future. The question is how far and how fast can this leadership reach into the world and make a material difference in terms of impact on people, nature and climate?

We also want to assess how these mindsets and practices can be developed beyond the individual and be embedded effectively in an organisation's culture and across the systems in which they operate. This will inform the creation of a curriculum, toolkit and diagnostics for leadership development.

We invite you to engage with us as we connect with others globally to develop this leadership and help individuals and organisations discover the thinking and practice that will inspire, enable and accelerate progress towards a more sustainable future.



Endnotes

- 1 The starting point for this work was CISL's existing publication *Rewiring Leadership: The future we want, the leadership we need*, which made the case for a purpose-driven approach to leadership and identified specific thinking, values and practices expressed in the Cambridge Impact Leadership Model. <https://www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/resources/sustainability-leadership/rewiring-leadership-report>.



- 2 Ibid.
- 3 The concept of purpose is explored in the following CISL working paper: Victoria Hurth and Aris Vrettos, *Unleashing the sustainable business: how purposeful organisations can break free of business-as-usual* (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, 2021), <https://www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/resources/unleashing-sustainable-business>.
- 4 This is the definition used in ISO 37000:2021 – *Governance of organizations*, building on the classic Brundtland definition of sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”: International Organization for Standardization (ISO), ISO 37000:2021 – *Governance of organizations – Guidance* (ISO, 2021), <https://www.iso.org/standard/65036.html#:~:text=This%20document%20gives%20guidance%20on,govern%20can%20fulfil%20their%20purpose>.
- 5 This is the definition used in the global standard for Purpose-Driven Organisations, PAS 808 – a guidance document produced by the BSI: The British Standards Institution (BSI), *PAS 808: Purpose-Driven Organisations: Worldviews, Principles and Behaviours* (BSI, 2022), <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/standards/pas-808/>.
- 6 Model adapted from *Rewiring Leadership: The future we want, the leadership we need* <https://www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/resources/sustainability-leadership/rewiring-leadership-report>.



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