

***Leadership development is not about filling a gap
but about igniting a field of inspired connection and action***

**Ten propositions on transforming the current
leadership development paradigm**

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(1) We live in a world of massive institutional failure, a world that presents current and emerging generations of leaders with unprecedented challenges.

How are the new generations of leaders in government, business, and civil society being prepared to deal with the profound economic, environmental, and social disruptions of our time? What resources and connections will help them, when thrown into the eye of the storm, to respond in innovative ways rather than resorting to the reactive responses of the past?

(2) Current generations of leaders are poorly prepared to deal creatively with the major challenges of our time because the present mainstream approach to leadership development operates on a flawed model.

The mainstream approach to leadership development is based on (a) experts assessing current skill deficits, (b) filling these deficits by putting people through individual-person-centric training courses, and then (c) being surprised when those “trained” individuals, upon returning to their institutions, are “sucked back” into the old systems. Instead, assessments should be done by experts looking at both the deficits and the positive leadership potential that could take the system to a new level. Second, leadership capacity building should focus not only on providing individuals with skills out of context (that is, in the classroom or remote training locations), but also on engaging the whole system in real contexts. (See Table 1, “Leadership Development Matrix.”)

The Leadership Development Matrix is based on two sets of distinctions: types of knowledge and intervention points. The three types of knowledge are technical, relational, and self-knowledge; the three intervention points occur at the individual, the institutional, or the whole systems levels. Most current leadership development programs would fill the boxes in the first column and the bottom row (focusing on building individual technical skills). While some of that type of training is useful and necessary, it is also true that the biggest gaps in current leadership capacity are systemic (the upper right corner of the grid), and almost no one is focusing on that aspect of leadership today. Creating an approach to leadership capacity building that focuses on system-wide transformation requires exactly the opposite approach from that taken by the current mainstream: an approach that begins with a joint assessment of the challenges, needs, and creative potential in the existing leadership system, and a delivery that engages (a microcosm of) the whole system with *all* of its key stakeholders (rather than just selected individuals) in its real context (rather than in a remote classroom) in a way that is personally and collectively transformative (rather than merely transactional).

Table 1: Leadership Development Matrix

Intervention Points	Types of Knowledge		
	Technical knowledge (technical skills)	Relational (stakeholder coalition building)	Transformational Self-knowledge (Identity, Will)
Whole system (multiple issues)	System-wide technical skill building/training	System-wide relational capacity building/training (multi-stakeholder dialogue)	System-wide transformational capacity building (multi-stakeholder innovation)
Institution (single issue)	Institutional technical skill building/training	Institutional relational skill building/training (multi-stakeholder dialogue)	Institutional transformational capacity building (multi-stakeholder innovation)
Individual	Individual technical skill building/training	Individual relational capacity building/training (multi-stakeholder dialogue)	Individual transformational capacity building (multi-stakeholder innovation)

The future of leadership development is in the upper right corner. So why is the present, like the past, boxed into the lower left area of the grid?

3. We are stuck in the old way of delivering leadership development for the same reason that Detroit got stuck building gasoline-guzzling cars: the sunk costs in existing methods, infrastructures, mindsets, and capabilities.

Changing the approach from developing individual technical skills to transforming a system means that you need to reinvent everything: you need new frames, new infrastructures, new people, new mindsets, and new support structures. You also need new business models (including funding mechanisms for participants who cannot afford to pay for it themselves but who are critical stakeholders in the respective microcosm of leadership learning).

4. Leadership is the capacity of a system or a community to co-sense and co-create its future as it emerges.

At the root of holding on to the outdated models of leadership development is the single-person-centric concept of leadership. Yet real leadership always takes place through collective, systemic, and distributed action.

Using the above definition—leadership as the capacity of a community to co-sense and co-create its emerging future—shifts our framing of leadership development from building individual skills to igniting fields of inspired connection and action.

5. Putting field-based leadership development into practice requires going on a journey.

The journey combines the personal, practical, systemic, and innovation aspects of the design to create a roadmap of individual and collective transformation.

Figure 1 shows a Theory U-inspired map¹ of such a journey: it includes a kick-off dialogue, a foundation program, shadowing practices, stakeholder dialogues, sensing journeys, a deep-dive journey and retreat, and rapid-cycle prototyping.

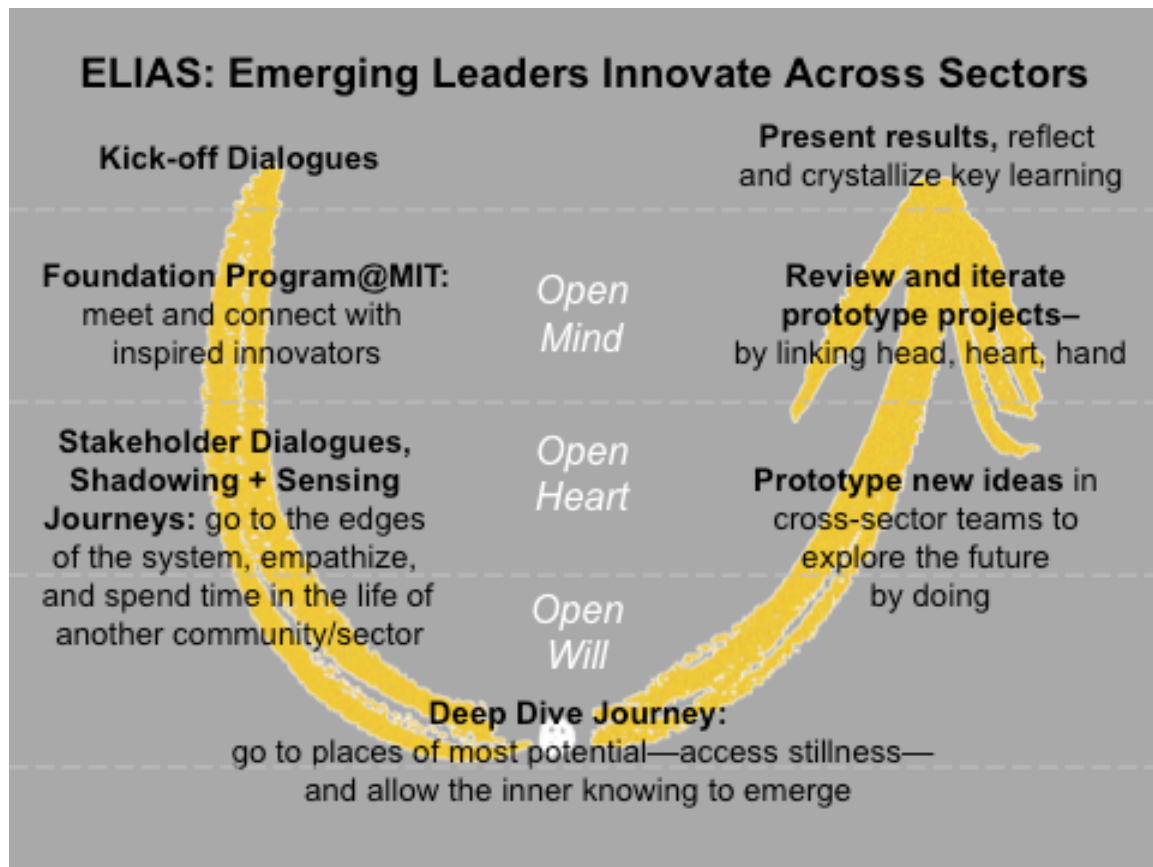


Figure 1: A Field-based journey of transformative change

We delivered this design for the first time in 2007 in a capacity building program for high-potential leaders from 15 global institutions across all three sectors.² The results were stunning. Almost every participant reported significant degrees of personal transformation and developed powerful connections across boundaries (between NGOs, businesses, and governmental players). But the most impressive results came from their prototyping initiatives. They included: ecosystem innovation for sustainable food supply chains in Brazil; cross-sector water management capacity building in China; the launch of a women's micro-venture network in the Philippines; a sustainable mobility lab in China; a climate change lab in Southern Africa; the creation of a new company called Just Energy that blends solar energy with revenue creation for rural communities in South Africa and Colombia; and a stakeholder dialogue-based way of setting commodity prices in Indonesia, and a field-based tri-sector leadership program (using the same ELIAS type model and frame) is now being implemented on the country level in Indonesia (where it is beginning its second year) and is being replicated in other countries, including China.

One might ask what sparked all of these initiatives of change that continue to unfold and deepen their impact. What is driving them? It is not a grand master plan. It's actually no plan at all. It is a field of inspired subsets of emerging leaders linked across institutions and sectors. One of them, a leader in a global multinational company, put it this way at the end of the ELIAS leadership program: "I no longer work *for* my company. I am working *from* my company." The difference between working "for" and working "from" is in the level of awareness and consciousness that moved from a single company (ego-system-centric) to the whole social and ecological context that this company operates in (eco-system-centric).

(6) Leadership development is not about filling a gap but about igniting a field of inspired connections.

What enabling infrastructures does it take to ignite a field of inspired connection and action? We have found the following seven enabling conditions to be critical: (i) a shared desire to innovate among the senior leaders of the participating institutions; (ii) a diverse microcosm of players that mirrors the key stakeholders of the larger whole; (iii) dialogues with inspired remarkable persons who have changed the system; (iv) deep-dive sensing journeys that take the group to the edges of a system, where they can experience it through the eyes of its marginalized stakeholders; (v) stillness and deep reflection practices that allow people to connect to the sources of inner knowing and to the profound journey of discovering who they really are and what they are here for; (vi) rapid-cycle prototyping projects that provide safe practice fields to link the intelligence of the head, heart, and hand; (vii) a support infrastructure that helps to move the projects with the best results from the prototyping stage into the next stage of institutional innovation.

(7) The delivery of field-based leadership programs requires a new collaborative competence in order to customize and situate the programs in context.

Each country is different. Each situation requires a specific way of discovering, developing, and strengthening the cross-sector leadership capabilities and system. At the outset of a field-based leadership development program a joint situation analysis should be conducted. That analysis starts with listening: deep listening to all the key players in order to identify “the crack”—that is, an urgent and important collective challenge or opportunity that cannot be addressed by conventional ways of operating. Over the past few years, we have seen some common elements and threads: (a) at the core of the intervention there is always a multi-stakeholder innovation project that addresses a community’s key challenge or opportunity; (b) to support this cross-sector innovation work, there often is a need to work with the team at the top of the participating institutions and sectors (for example, the cabinet of a country or ministry officials); (c) it is always important to include frontline and community operators in order to make them real co-creators and partners in the multi-sector change effort.

(8) Systems change requires innovations in cross-sector infrastructures.

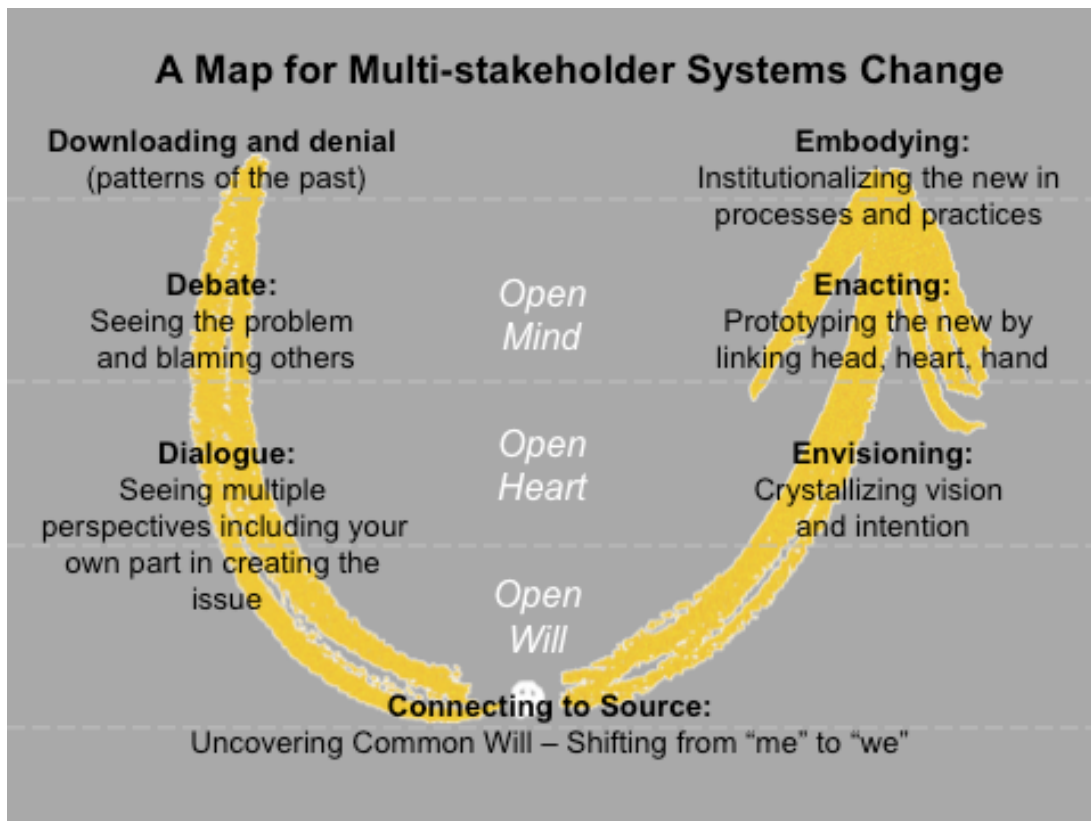


Figure 2: A Map for Multi-Stakeholder Systems Change

There is often a societal void that prevents profound positive change from taking place. It is not a lack of vision, good will, resources, or ideas. It's a lack of *shared seeing and sensing* of the current situation and of emerging future possibilities. There are many individual and institutional ways of interpreting a situation and ideas about what should be done. But what is missing is a shared seeing and understanding that would enable the whole system to move very quickly from idea to action.

In the language of the Theory U-based map of systems change below: most systems are stuck on one of the first two levels. Moving beyond these first two levels of systems change requires all the different stakeholders to *see themselves as part of the whole* that perpetuates the problem at issue. Only this shift from “downloading” and “debate” to “dialogue” opens the space for collective action (see Figure 2).

One helpful mechanism to cross the gaps between ministries and sectors would be to conduct tri-sector development market-space sessions in each country in order to encourage and support initiatives that work cross-ministry and cross-sector.

(9) Leadership intervention must be cross-generational and put youth and emerging leaders into the driver's seat of change.

At present, more than 50 percent of the global population is under the age of 25. They are the real stakeholders of the future in their countries—and the base for a much needed new constellation of emerging leaders. Yet most leadership development work focuses on older people in the later stages of their careers. To reach and spark the emerging future leadership capacities in any system requires an approach that engages and interweaves three groups:

- a workstream for senior executives and high-level political leaders
- a workstream for high-potential emerging leaders who already have significant leadership responsibility and are on a fast track to a senior position in their institutions (ELIAS primarily focused on that group)
- a workstream for young professionals and students that inspires them to catalyze and support hands-on and frontline driven innovation and change.

These three workstreams are integral parts of the same larger whole. During the prototyping stage of the ELIAS program, for example, we used MIT student teams to help kick-start and accelerate some of the prototyping projects that also included students from the countries that hosted the prototyping initiatives.

Interweaving these three levels of leadership development effectively requires a highly skilled network and support structure that—ideally—would be set up as a globally distributed action learning leadership school: the *g.school* for pioneering a green, globally linked and locally grounded regenerative ecosystem economy. The *g.school* initiative, if launched at MIT and replicated quickly, could provide a critical enabling infrastructure for field-based leadership development work worldwide.³

(10) Leadership development needs to focus on regenerating social systems

“What bothers me most about dealing with poverty in our communities,” the Prime Minister of a southern African country said to me recently, “is the poverty of ideas that we see in development work today.” Most leadership training focuses on personal or interpersonal skills (columns 1 and 2 in Table 2), and most systems respond to leadership challenges on the first two levels (reacting and redesigning). Yet, given the disruptive challenges of our time, we see more and more situations in which leaders need to respond by operating from change levels 3 and 4 (reframing and regenerating), not only in terms of their personal and interpersonal skills but also in terms of their institutional and system designs. The lack of programs that teach leaders and leadership systems how to respond to challenges on those deeper levels of whole system innovation may well be the most important educational blind spot of our time.

Only very few organizations have the global reach and convening power to bring together key leaders on country levels across all sectors and systems that, if connected around the same shared intention, could start to move their systems into a better way of operating. A transformational leadership capacity building that focuses on strengthening and renewing whole systems could have a major impact on development work today.

Table 2: Levels of Leadership Responses to Change

Levels of and Responses to Change	Micro: ATTENDING (individual)	Meso: CONVERSING (group)	Macro: STRUCTURING (institutions)	Mundo: COORDINATING (global systems)
1. Reacting → Habits → Rule-enacting	Listening 1: Downloading habits of thought	Downloading: Talking nice, politeness	Centralized: Machine bureaucracy	Hierarchy: Central plan, regulation
2. Redesigning → process → rule-revealing	Listening 2: Factual, object-focused	Debate: Talking tough	Decentralized: Divisionalized	Market: Competition
3. Reframing → mental models → rule-reflecting	Listening 3: Empathic listening	Dialogue: Inquiry	Networked: Relational	Negotiation and Dialogue: (Mutual adjustment)
4. Regenerating → Sources → rule-generating	Listening 4: Generative listening	Collective Creativity: Presencing, flow	Ecosystem: Co-sensing and co-creating	Collective Action Arising from Shared Seeing + Common Will

¹ See C. O. Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009).

² The MIT ELIAS program (Emerging Leaders Innovate Across Sectors) works with leaders from business, government, and nongovernmental organizations.

³ g.school@MIT: creating leaders for a green, locally based (“glocal”) economy in an action-oriented learning environment. Concept paper, Cambridge, MA, 2009.