

CONSCIOUS LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABILITY:
HOW LEADERS WITH A LATE-STAGE ACTION LOGIC
DESIGN AND ENGAGE IN SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

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Summary of research | April 5, 2011

ABSTRACT: This is an empirical study of rare leaders from business, government, and civil society with a developmentally mature meaning-making system, or late-stage *action logic* (Cook-Greuter, 1999; Loevinger, 1966, 1976; Torbert, 1987). It explores how they design and engage in sustainability initiatives. Participants were assessed for their action logic using a variation of the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970). The sample has more leaders with documented, advanced meaning-making capacity than any other leadership study (six Strategists, five Alchemists, two Ironists). This study has significant implications for sustainability leadership theory and constructive-developmentalism. The results provide the most granular view to date of how such individuals may think and behave with respect to complex change initiatives. The leaders in this study appear to: (1) Design from a deep inner foundation, including grounding their work in transpersonal meaning; (2) Access non-rational ways of knowing, and use systems, complexity, and integral theories; and (3) Adaptively manage through “dialogue” with the system, three distinct roles, and developmental practices. Additional results include: 15 leadership competencies; developmental stage distinctions for six dimensions of leadership reflection and action; and 12 practices that differentiate leaders with a unitive perspective (Alchemists, Ironists) from those with a general systems perspective (Strategists). A constructive-developmental lens is shown to provide important insight for sustainability leadership theory. Finally, it is recommended that all leadership programs work to develop meaning-making capacity because of the enhanced abilities that emerge with each new stage.

Key Words: Leader, change agent, sustainability, sustainable development, constructive-developmental theory, adult development, action logic, leadership development, conscious leadership, conscious business, conscious capitalism

Introduction. The purpose of this research has been to better understand how to address our biggest social, environmental, and economic challenges. The specific area I have studied is how leaders and change agents with a complex meaning-making system design and engage with sustainability initiatives. By identifying how such leaders respond to sustainability challenges, future and existing leaders can be taught to be more effective.

If humanity is going to achieve important global objectives like the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals and mitigating our impact upon the climate, we will need to change. Research and experience suggest that some of our change efforts toward this more sustainable world will work, while many will not (Kotter, 1995). Amongst the myriad success drivers for a change initiative, a key component is the design of the initiative itself (Doppelt, 2010; Kotter, 1996). In turn, one of the most important influences on the design of change initiatives is the worldview of the designer(s) (Doppelt, 2010; Sharma, 2000). It is this leverage point – the worldview or meaning-making system of the designer of sustainability initiatives – that I have studied. Leaders with a more complex meaning-making system have access to enhanced and new capacities that others do not. This strengthens their ability to respond to sophisticated challenges (Kegan, 1994; Rooke & Torbert,

1998; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009; Torbert, et al., 2004). By better understanding how these individuals respond to sustainability issues, we can foster the development of more of such leaders.

Little is known about the impact of a leader's worldview on the architecture and development of sustainability initiatives. While the adult development literature (Kegan, 1994; Torbert, et al., 2004) offers some insights, there has been no empirical research in this area until this study. In general, there is very little robust research on the intersection of sustainability and leadership (Cox, 2005; van Velsor, 2009). While there is a consistent call for strong and courageous leadership to drive the sustainability agenda (A. P. Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2007; Senge, 2008), few studies describe what such leadership looks like in action. This study helps fill parts of that gap, specifically those relating to the design and engagement of sustainability initiatives.

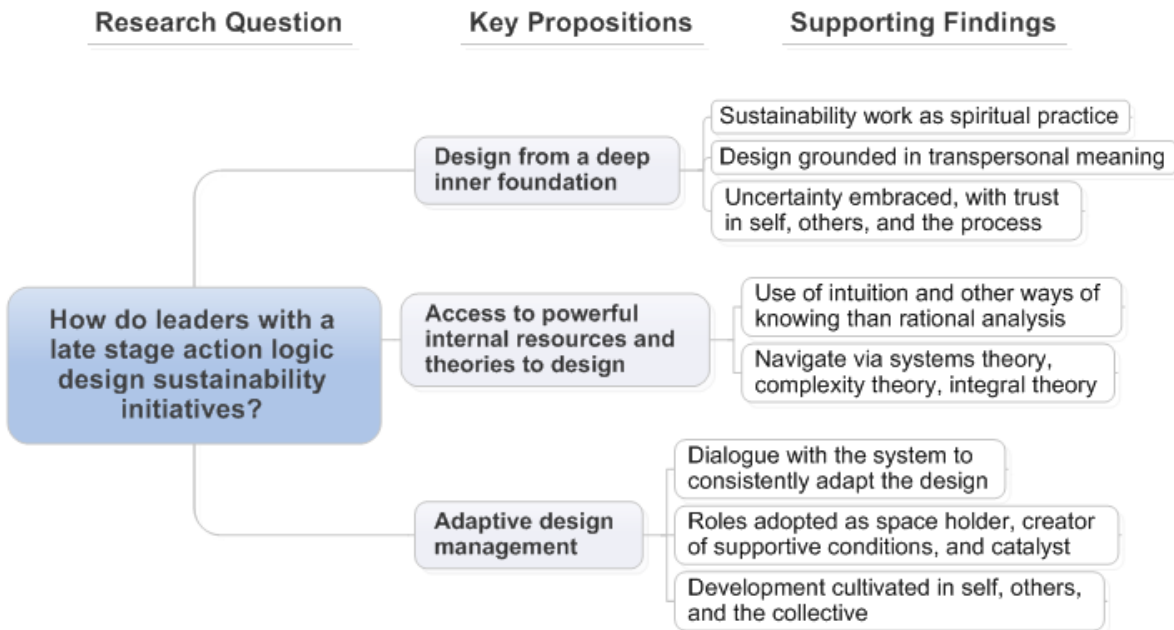
Methodology. I used a variation of the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970) to assess the meaning-making capacity, or *action logic*, of 32 leaders and change agents from business, government, and civil society who are engaged in sustainability work. From this sample, I identified 13 who measured at the three latest stages assessed by this instrument. I interviewed them about their experience and process regarding the design and engagement of sustainability initiatives. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, and building upon insights from my literature review, I then compiled a set of propositions and findings about this topic.

Conceptual Framework. The conceptual framework that has guided my inquiry is composed of two theoretical lenses: constructive-developmental theory and sustainability leadership theory. Constructive-developmental theory (Cook-Greuter, 1999, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Loevinger, 1976; Torbert, 2003; Torbert, et al., 2004), a branch of psychology, is a stage theory of adult development. Research indicates that there is a range of worldviews, meaning-making structures, or action logics through which adults have the potential to grow. Roughly, each of the stages of development involves the reorganization of meaning-making, perspective, self-identity, and the overall way of knowing. I have used the lens of constructive-developmental theory to identify and differentiate the meaning-making structures amongst the research participants. Additionally, this theory informs my framing of how change agents design and engage with sustainability initiatives. The findings of constructive-developmental theory ground my belief that holding a late-stage action logic, all other factors being equal, may grant a significant advantage to change agents who design sustainability initiatives. Later action logics offer a broader vision and deeper understanding of the territory (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Torbert, et al., 2004). Similar to scaling a mountain, the higher one climbs, the further one can see.

My second theoretical lens is sustainability leadership theory. This field goes by many different names, depending on the perspective it addresses. These titles include corporate social responsibility (CSR) leadership, environmental leadership, and ethical leadership. The most relevant dimensions of this literature for my study are those that identify the values and worldviews (Boiral, Cayer, & Baron, 2009; Shrivastava, 1994), competencies (Hind, Wilson, & Lenssen, 2009; N. K. Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Lee-Davies, 2009), and the behaviors (Doppelt, 2010; Quinn & Dalton, 2009) that sustainability leaders need. Most of this research is exploratory, and, until this study, none of it has measured the influence of developmental maturity on sustainability leadership. Nonetheless, some studies (Boiral, et al., 2009; Doppelt, 2010; Hames, 2007; Hardman, 2009) strongly support the need for leaders that have a sophisticated worldview and have begun to document what such a perspective looks like in practice. I have used this literature to gain insight into how leaders with a late-stage action logic might design sustainability initiatives.

Summary of Findings: There are three major propositions I make based upon the findings of this study. They are: (1) These leaders design from a deep inner foundation; (2) they access powerful internal resources and theories to distill and evolve the design; and (3) they adaptively manage the design. These propositions, respectively, relate to three different aspects of change agency: Being, Reflecting, and Engaging. "Being" refers to fundamental or essential qualities of these individuals;

that is, it has to do with characteristics of *who they are*. “Reflecting” concerns *how they think* about and gain insight into the design. “Engaging” addresses the *actions they take* to develop and manage the design. Each of the three propositions are supported by two or three major findings, and all are summarized in the figure below.



I have consolidated further details about these findings into two tables below. The first concerns sustainability leadership competencies, and the second relates to the role and approach of sustainability leaders with a late-stage action logic.

If more complex meaning-making systems are correlated with greater leadership effectiveness (Eigel & Kuhnert, 2005; Fisher & Torbert, 1991; Harris & Kuhnert, 2006, 2008; McCauley, Drath, Palus, O'Connor, & Baker, 2006; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Strang & Kuhnert, 2009), then sustainability leadership development should focus on building the meaning-making capacity (i.e., action logic) of leaders and change agents. An important implication of this study for sustainability leadership theory is that the existing suite of leadership competencies identified in the literature may be insufficient for addressing many sustainability challenges. New leadership competencies are likely needed to help cultivate leaders who can handle complex global issues. Based upon the results of this study, I propose 15 competencies (see Table 1). These are likely appropriate for change agents and sustainability leaders who hold a late-stage action logic. Development of these competencies may help facilitate their growth into the later action logics of the Strategist and Alchemist, and therefore unlock the capacities offered by those ways of making meaning. This should not be considered a definitive list, but rather a first step toward a competency model for sustainability leaders with a late-stage action logic.

This study also revealed, for the first time, empirically identified variations in how individuals with late action logics perceive and act in three important dimensions. These are: (1) the principal role they take as a change agent; (2) their perspective on service; and (3) the general approach they use when designing change initiatives. None of these dimensions have been articulated in the constructive-developmental literature or sustainability leadership literature before. These findings are synthesized in Table 2.

Table 1

15 competencies that may support development of sustainability leaders with a late action logic

Sustainability Leadership Competency		Description and Notes
Deeply Connect	<i>Ground sustainability practice in deep meaning</i>	Honor the work of sustainability as a spiritual practice, as a sacred expression. See sustainability work as a vehicle for transformation of self, others, and the world. Act in service of others and on behalf of a greater Other (e.g., universe; spirit; consciousness; god; collective intelligence; emptiness; nature).
	<i>Intuitive decision-making and harvesting</i>	Use ways of knowing other than rational analysis to harvest profound insights and make rapid decisions. Be able to easily access this type of information alone or collectively, and facilitate individuals and groups to do so.
	<i>Embrace uncertainty with profound trust</i>	Willingness to not know, to wonder into the mystery of what will emerge next. Able to humbly rest in the face of the unknown, ambiguity, and unpredictable change, and not need to “push” for an immediate answer or resolution. Deeply trust oneself, co-designers, and the process to navigate through uncertainty.
Know Oneself	<i>Scan and engage the internal environment</i>	Able to quickly become aware of and aptly respond to psychological dynamics in oneself so that they do not inappropriately influence one’s sustainability work. Deep attunement to emotional, shadow, and personality-driven forces; able to “get out of the way” and be “energetically clean” when engaging with others.
	<i>Inhabit multiple perspectives</i>	Able to intellectually and emotionally hold many different perspectives related to a sustainability issue, without being overly attached to any of them. Able to argue the position of and communicate directly from different viewpoints. Be open, curious, and inviting of new perspectives, especially those that challenge or counter one’s own.
Adaptively Manage	<i>Dialogue with the system</i>	Able to repeatedly sense into what is needed to help a system develop (e.g., make it more sustainable), try different interventions (e.g., prototype; experiment; seed ideas), observe the system response, and adapt accordingly (c.f., Snowden & Boone, 2007). Able to look <i>at</i> the system, <i>through</i> the system, and <i>as</i> the system as part of the dialogue.
	<i>Go with the energy</i>	Able to identify and take advantage of openings and opportunities for system changes that are well received by members of the system, thereby building on momentum and moving around obstacles. Also, able to identify blockages or tensions (in individuals, groups, or systems) that hinder progress, and inquire into them.

Cultivate Transformation	<i>Self-transformation</i>	Able to consistently develop oneself or create the environment for self-development in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive domains, as well as other areas. Based upon deep self-knowledge, including personality dynamics and shadow issues. Able to create communities and engage mentors that consistently invite/challenge a deeper self to come forth.
	<i>Create developmental conditions</i>	Able to create the initial conditions (e.g., environment) that support and/or challenge development of individuals, groups, cultures, and systems. Able to sense what the next developmental step might be for others or a system, and create fertile ground or an intervention that increases the likelihood of development or the emergence of novelty. Requires a general understanding of how individuals, groups, and systems develop.
	<i>Hold space</i>	Able to effectively create the appropriate (e.g., safe; challenging) space to help a group progress (e.g., work through an inquiry; build trust; self-reflect), holding the tension of the important questions. Able to hold the energetic potential of what is needed in the space, creating the environment for the emergence of answers/outcomes.
	<i>Shadow mentoring</i>	Able to support others to see and appropriately respond to their psychological shadow issues and their “programming” (e.g., assumptions; limiting beliefs; projections; stories). This is <i>not</i> psychotherapy work, but the use of basic “maintenance” tools like the 3-2-1 process (Wilber, Patten, Leonard, & Morelli, 2008) to address shadow issues.
Navigate with Sophisticated Theories, Frameworks	<i>Systems theory and systems thinking</i>	Understand the fundamental concepts and language of systems theory. Be able to apply systems thinking to better understand sustainability issues and support the development of systems. (Bertalanffy, 1968; Laszlo, 1972; Senge, 1990)
	<i>Complexity theory and complexity thinking</i>	Understand the fundamental concepts and language of complexity theory, especially as it relates to leadership. Be able to apply complexity thinking to better understand sustainability issues and support the development of complex adaptive systems. (Kauffman, 1995; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Stacey, 1996; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008)
	<i>Integral theory and integral reflection</i>	Understand the fundamental concepts and language of integral theory. Be able to use integral theory to: assess or diagnose a sustainability issue and design an intervention; tailor communications to different worldviews; support the development of oneself, others, groups, cultures, and systems. (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Edwards, 2009; Torbert, 2000; Torbert, et al., 2004; Wilber, 1995, 2000)
	<i>Polarity management</i>	Understand the fundamental concepts and language of polarity management. Be able to recognize and effectively engage important polarities such as: subjective-objective; individual-collective; rational-intuitive; masculine-feminine; structured-dynamic; challenge-support; and big picture-details (Johnson, 1992, 1993)

Table 2

Comparison of role, service, and design approach of research sample participants

	Principal Role as a Leader or Change Agent	Perspective on Service	Principal Design Approach for Change Initiatives
Strategists	<i>Catalyze.</i> Point toward a greater vision; expose people to new perspectives; push their edges; support and enable their fullest growth and greatest potential; remove problems and barriers; reframe, integrate information for others.	As an individual, be of service <i>to</i> others and the world. Service is grounded largely in <i>personal</i> meaning.	Operate <i>on</i> systems by actively influencing those with authority, power, and influence to make the perceived changes needed in the system.
Alchemists	<i>Create Supportive Conditions.</i> Create space and processes for vital dialogue and development of individuals and collectives; seed new ideas and meaningful connections; address blockages in systems to improve flow; create an energetic field and the spaces for innovation to emerge and group meaning-making to develop.	As an individual, be of service to others, the world, and the development of a greater Other (e.g., spirit, consciousness). Serve <i>on behalf of</i> that greater Other, acting as a vehicle or vessel for its will. Work to alleviate suffering. Service is grounded in <i>trans-personal</i> meaning.	“Dialogue” <i>with</i> systems via experimentation and probing, while concurrently creating conditions that help systems and the individuals that constitute them to develop themselves.
Ironists	<i>Hold and Wonder.</i> Hold a unified perspective with the other as One; hold a partnership of beyond us and them; hold and rest in the tension of not knowing and wonder into the moment – without predefined constructs and perspectives – to allow what is needed to emerge; each time a solution arises, wonder and inquire into it; hold the space for the integrative nature of consciousness to express; hold a mirror up to individuals and groups so that they may see themselves, self-reflect, and wonder; attune to evolving nature of consciousness and wonder “where are we?” “what are we becoming?” and “what is needed and wanted next?”	Serve spirit <i>as</i> spirit itself. Sit with all suffering that is arising from a position “outside” of the space-time continuum. Rest in it as an expression of what is arising. Take action as deemed appropriate. Service is grounded in <i>unitive</i> meaning.	Anchor in Oneness and design <i>as</i> the system. That is, wonder into what the system needs and wants to become next, listen closely, and principally hold the energetic tension for that next stage of maturity to emerge. Support the individuals and the system to bring forth that new way of being, in whatever ways needed.

Conclusion. In my opinion, the widespread development of leadership consciousness is integral to global sustainability. This work is a vital piece of the puzzle, as postconventional meaning-making offers significant advantages and abilities over earlier worldviews. With this research, I have attempted to accomplish two things. First, I wanted to strengthen the linkage between the fields of leadership development for sustainability and constructive-developmentalism. Secondly, I wanted to empirically identify specific actions and capacities of leaders with a late-stage action logic. These, in turn, can be used to help guide the development of leaders and change agents into the postconventional realm, thereby aiding them to unlock greater potential. I believe that I have made strong advances in both of these areas.

From a scholarly perspective, I recognize that the propositions, competencies, and practices postulated in this study are hypothetical and subject to validation and refinement. I invite other researchers to do this work and therefore drive our collective understanding of developmentally mature leadership. However, from a practitioner standpoint, I believe that now is the time to act. We have enough evidence to make bold strides forward regarding the design of leadership development

programs for change agents globally. I have looked closely at the existing research, studied peers who are sustainability leaders, and personally served as a sustainability leader using many of the competencies and practices discussed here. From this empirical and experiential research I can state unequivocally that there are considerable leadership advantages to holding a late stage meaning-making system. We should, therefore, shift our attention to embedding practices that foster developmental maturity into leadership development programs whenever possible.

This material has been excerpted from: Brown, Barrett C. (2011). *Conscious leadership for sustainability: How leaders with a late-stage action logic design and engage in sustainability initiatives*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA.

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