

RIFS-Blogpost

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Relational Leadership as a Leverage Point: a Transdisciplinary Collaboration for Climate-Related Transformation in Business]



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Participants at the 2025 Head of Climate Base Camp formed a community of practice for climate leadership.

“It felt like we were finally a herd of green zebras – free to show up as our full, authentic selves, bringing both the

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

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courage and vulnerability that define us as climate professionals.”

1.1 Written by F. Beyers, I. Amorim, J. Kwan and T. Bruhn

That was how one participant of the “Head of Climate Base Camp” in 2024 described the unique space they encountered – one where vulnerability met strategy and climate ambition was woven into the fabric of authentic human connection. The conditions to build deep trust with previously unfamiliar peers from potentially competing organizations was frequently named as a key enabler for conversations that quickly allowed for a certain depth and complexity of the discussed issues, simultaneously enabling concrete action from the participants in their respective contexts. The ongoing collaboration between RIFS and the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD) exemplifies the institute's practice-oriented transdisciplinary research approach.

1.2 Navigating climate transformation in a fragmented landscape

Organizations today are under mounting pressure to act on climate change. From net-zero pledges to reporting requirements, the external landscape is shifting fast. Yet, inside companies, climate leads often navigate a complex terrain between siloed departments, misaligned incentives, and the invisible weight of "business as usual."

In this context, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and the Research Institute for Sustainability – Potsdam (RIFS) launched an experimental and transdisciplinary collaboration in 2022. The aim: to explore whether and how a relational approach to climate leadership could serve as a leverage



point for accelerating change – not just within individual organizations, but across sectors and systems.

1.3 Base Camp: Building trustful relational dynamics for transformation

The third edition of the “Head of Climate Base Camp” in 2025 recently brought together Heads of Climate from leading global companies in a carefully designed and professionally facilitated setting over four days at RIFS in Potsdam.

Taking into account the participants’ high level of expertise, the event was structured around a mixture of small group conversation formats, deep listening and dialogue, as well as reflective practices and informal exchanges that fostered trust and built strong personal relationships for effective peer-learning. Also, the external guest speakers (in 2025 from the Greenhouse Gas Protocol and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research) were integrated in an interactive format that connected their input to the concrete challenges the participants were working on.

The design was grounded in transdisciplinary group facilitation expertise and complex systems theory, inspired by the leverage point concepts for transformation as suggested by Donella Meadows’ framework to address deeper layers of systemic change.

- At the personal level, it sought to activate intent by creating spaces for authentic connection and reflective dialogue – supporting shifts in mindset, identity, and relational capacity.
- At the organizational level, it aimed to influence mid-level leverage points such as internal feedback loops and structural alignment, enabling climate leads to reflect and refine their



roles as translators between strategic vision and operational implementation.

- And finally, at the systems level, the format fostered cross-sector feedback loops and trust-based networks, opening new pathways for collaboration in sustainability governance. In this way, the event served as a design intervention – laying the relational foundation needed to unlock transformative leadership and coordinated action.

And something happened: the shared meals, storytelling circles, and playful activities laid the groundwork for what participants later described as a “community of practice.” WhatsApp groups and buddy pairs emerged. Ideas for follow-up calls and cross-organizational projects began to take shape. Suddenly, climate leads who had often felt isolated and overwhelmed by the complexity of their challenges, found themselves in a constellation of peers facing similar tensions and willing to support each other through them.

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1.4 From dialogue to organizational impact

While each Base Camp was only a few days long, the effects of the first two iterations rippled outward. Participants spoke of returning to their companies with renewed clarity – not only about their strategies, but about how to bring others along. An important theme at this third iteration of the Base Camp was the changing societal, political and organizational conditions for sustainability-related work. It was noted how important it seems to control the overall narrative while reframing targets. It was surprising that sustainability-related targets were expected to remain stable over the long term (e.g., targets for 2030 and beyond) while other organizational targets are routinely adjusted on a quarterly basis. Many climate leads saw



themselves as translators between high-level ambition and everyday implementation. What the Base Camp offered was a chance to reflect on their role not just as implementers, but as agents of cultural change, and many participants expressed a gain in confidence about their role, including an appreciation for being pragmatic rather than “selling” sustainability in a business context from a moral perspective.

The trustful atmosphere that several participants half-jokingly described as “group therapy” was widely acknowledged as the key component of the event’s success. The transdisciplinary process architecture for facilitating relationship building, particularly on the first day of the gathering, created an atmosphere in which everyone felt comfortable speaking openly to everyone else about the core issues of the various challenges directly. It was possible for participants to express what they did NOT understand or where they did NOT succeed and thus go directly into exploring technical, organizational and personal aspects of the challenges, often discovering that the nature of their challenges was remarkably similar or importantly linked across different sectors and organizations.

One component of this rapid trust building was the fact that several participants (about 25%) participated for a second time. People who had appreciated the first version in 2023 had sent one of their colleagues in 2024 to build a basis for joint activities in their companies and now returned for the second time to deepen the experience. Additionally, this year’s program featured a session that allowed alumni unable to attend to participate online. It seemed natural that the group of live participants immediately integrated the online alumni swiftly and naturally as if they had been present with them in the previous conversations.



The third iteration of the Base Camp also resulted in another step in the learning process of the facilitation team, composed of RIFS researcher Thomas Bruhn and WBCSD staff member Jenny Kwan. Integrating the perspectives of both hosting organizations, the facilitation team “danced” between the curiosity-driven reflection (“research” / going deep) and the action-driven concretization (“business” / moving forward). Both facilitators identified with both aspects of the facilitation and moved flexibly between the changing needs of the group, sometimes slowing down, sometimes moving fast, sometimes breaking up in small groups to work in more detail, sometimes reflecting among all participants in a big circle to enable cross-fertilization. In terms of the process hosting, this involved a high degree of flexibility and a careful navigation between continuously sensing and adapting to the needs of the group and simultaneously keeping track with the overall flow and objectives of the overall process. The continued learning in the transdisciplinary constellation of the hosting team remains a key aspect of the Base Camp’s format, supporting the knowledge integration among the participants – in this case between science and business.

1.5 WBCSD Head of Climate Base Camp 2025

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1.6 Systems thinking, human relationships

The Base Camp also seeded cross-sector alliances. New collaborations began forming – not through formal agreements, but through shared purpose and personal trust. Topics like internal carbon pricing or Scope 3 Emissions emerged as shared challenges where collaboration made sense. Importantly, these networks weren't about creating more bureaucracy. As one participant put it, “We don't need ten lawyers to formalize things. We need people who will show up and stay in touch.” The continued use of informal monthly calls for peer learning, reveals an appreciation for distributed leadership and agile coordination. These dynamics resonate with previous research insights from other business sectors, such as the textile industry, where long-term collaboration hinges on interpersonal trust and informal governance, not just institutional mandates (Beyers 2024).

1.7 Leadership from the inside out

Perhaps the most profound insights were personal. Many participants spoke of a shift in mindset: from being primarily technical experts to becoming relational leaders. They began to see the value of how they show up in their organizations – building bridges, fostering commitment, and leading with both heart and strategy. This shift touches on what Meadows calls a deep leverage point: intent. It's not easily measured, but in Meadows' framework it shapes everything. As participants reflected on their purpose, they described feeling more empowered, more connected, and more



capable of navigating complexity, embracing change processes rather than resisting them. One participant captured it in the words: “I’ve always wanted to make a difference. Now I see how I can do that by being fully myself – in relationship, in dialogue, in action.”

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1.8 Toward a new narrative of climate leadership

In our understanding, the annual Base Camp wasn’t just an “event”. It was an impulse in a wider systemic context – a bet on the idea that how we relate determines how we can shape change. It suggests that investing in relational dynamics – in trust, authenticity, and deep listening – may be one of the most underutilized levers for climate transformation in business. As climate governance continues to evolve, it may be time to rethink what leadership really means. Not just policies and plans, but people in relationship, finding courage, clarity, and companionship in the face of complex change. Careful design of relational space can play a key role in this.

One key aspect (and an issue for continued research) remains the investigation of how the fruits of the Base Camp contribute to further change processes in the different organizations. Translating the momentum from intense gatherings like the Base Camp into concrete action can be challenging, as the inspiration and energy of a conference can easily be stifled by the demands of everyday work. RIFS will therefore continue to explore the impacts of activities and interventions like the Base Camp and its associated community of practice.



