THOMAS BRUHN: HOW CAN LEADERSHIP BE A MEANINGFUL ELEMENT OF A HEALTHY ECOCIVILISATION?

Abstract

Leadership can refer to different aspects that I find crucial to distinguish. On the one hand, the term leadership can refer to a structural role in organisations or groups. On the other hand, it can refer to a personal quality of individuals. From the perspective of an emerging ecocivilisation, both understandings of leadership are currently experiencing various challenges such as overwhelm with complexity and leadership dilemmas. The aliveness-oriented vision of an ecocivilisation is not consistent with leadership ideas that are oriented towards notions of goals and success as they are set by non-ecological organisations. Additionally, I argue that the notion of an emerging ecocivilisation challenges the entire understanding of leadership as it has been discussed in the recent past, and I emphasise the importance of a healthy "culture of dying" as an integral part of an aliveness-centered ecocivilisation.

Keywords:

Aliveness, leadership dilemmas, consciousness, dying

Today's world is full of highly praised leadership approaches, personality assessments and trainings for leaders. They promise competencies for more effective problem solving and success in organisations or activities of various kinds. What I often find missing is an honest reflection on what kind of leadership suits (or does not suit) which context and for which kind of purpose. Most leadership approaches I am familiar with have been developed within and in response to a world that does not thrive on the principles of an ecological civilisation. Rather, discussions on leadership focus on how to equip humans and structures to better manage or cope with the challenges of human interaction in the presently existing

structures. That means that many leadership approaches still start from premises and assumptions (e. g. about the purpose or success of leadership) that are not consistent with the fundamental notions of an ecological civilisation (Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

As the civilisational model of modernity is increasingly overwhelmed with the complexity of the current social and ecological challenges, and those who are trying to serve as leaders within those structures are in a terrible situation. Regardless of how well-meaning or good-hearted they may be, they are unable to "fix" or "heal" the unhealthy and overwhelmed systemic structures they are operating within. And yet, they are employed as leaders, faced with the expectation that they guide their respective area of responsibility towards continuing the functioning of these very structures (Keil & Zangrillo, 2024). One result is that leaders in all sorts of contexts feel immensely overwhelmed and torn in typical leadership dilemmas, trying to "manage the unmanageable" until they either collapse or move further to another context.

One keyword that keeps being mentioned these days is the role of consciousness or mindsets for leadership. For various reasons I personally sympathise with the interest in these aspects, simply because it draws attention to the fact that consciousness is an integral element to leadership as opposed to understanding leadership primarily as an accumulation of skills, tools and practices. At the same time, I worry that consciousness and mindsets may be seen primarily as tools of further self-optimisation to become more effective and more efficient leaders in the existing structures of our civilisation. Focusing on consciousness does per se not express anything about the purpose around which leadership is oriented. As long as one is following a goal-oriented understanding of leadership, any approach, consciousness etc. will likely be instrumentalised as a means toward achieving the respective goals, regardless whether they are in accordance with any aliveness-centred purpose or not (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Aşkun, 2025; Kouzes & Posner, 2019).

Taking the perspective of an ecological civilisation, I would like to propose a quite different approach towards leadership and the notions behind it. The central orienting principle of an ecological civilisation is the thriving and flourishing of (human and non-human) life (Cobb Jr, 2021; Korten, 2017, 2018; Lent, 2021). Leadership, then, generally describes the ability

(or structures, roles or people) to enable dynamics that foster the flourishing aliveness of a (sub-) system (Kuenkel, 2022; Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009; Schein, 2017).

Aliveness is an intrinsic potential in certain complex systems that can either be oppressed or fostered, but it cannot be made or managed (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Kuenkel, 2019, 2022). Leadership in the context of an ecological civilisation is therefore not a practice towards any kind of achievable goal. Its focus shifts away from channeling resources for the successful achievement of preconceived goals towards continuously sensing and nourishing the aliveness of and within the respective system. In my view, leaders are thus people who are a) in touch with and continuously further unfolding their own aliveness and simultaneously b) sources and catalysts for the aliveness in the relationships they are embedded in.

In our current civilisational situation this may create additional dilemmas for people in leadership position: 1) When leaders catalyse the aliveness in themselves and their relational field, they are likely to experience conflicts with the objectives they are tasked with. 2) When leaders care about the thriving of the people they work with, it is highly likely (and desirable?) that these people develop their own notions of objectives and orientation for their thriving. Leadership might therefore mean leading people toward leaving the leader. In this way, the decision to orient one's leadership around the notion of an ecocivilisation will challenge leaders in "non-ecological" contexts and present them with tensions that need to be navigated carefully.

On the other hand, the notion and vision of an ecocivilisation invites us to look differently at the term leadership. While I would say that leadership certainly exists as a quality (of people and processes) also in the context of an ecocivilisation, I would simultaneously argue that the idea of an ecocivilisation very much challenges the notion of leadership in the first place. Oriented towards the aliveness in oneself and one's surrounding, people who eventually provide leadership in their context will likely not aspire "to be leaders" or identify themselves as such. As their concern is on the aliveness in themselves in their environment, they care about thriving as a purpose and end in itself. The more authentically they grow and sink into this aliveness, they may become sources and catalysts of aliveness and thus "provide leadership" to the flourishing of their system. Still,

leadership is probably neither an objective of these people nor part of their sense of identity. It is rather a secondary quality that emerges as these people continue to move on their path of cultivating aliveness in themselves and their relationships.

With all that said, I would like to highlight at least one very specific aspect of leadership because I find it so remarkably neglected: Leadership in the context of an ecological civilisation includes guiding through processes of decay, farewell and dying. I find this aspect so crucial because ideas of "flourishing" or "thriving" are often communicated as if they were about an ever-increasing intensity and dynamic. In my view, such notions are ignoring the cyclic nature of aliveness. Leadership in service of aliveness necessarily needs to include giving space for processes of dying, mourning, grieving and loss. Leadership that always wants to see everything thrive would oppress the intrinsic nature of aliveness to also go through phases of decay and renewal. In human systems this becomes a particular challenge as cycles happen simultaneously but not in correlation with each other; while some relationships may thrive, others might be in the phase of decay or renewal. For the overall aliveness of a system (organisation), such phenomena of decay or renewal are not "a problem". On the contrary. My personal experience teaches me very clearly that in systems, where death and farewell is not experienced with dignity but avoided or ignored, also the living elements can become strangely static and paralysed. I actually see it as one of the crucial weaknesses of currently dominant organisation structures, that they do not allow enough adequate space and rituals for gradual decay, resting and farewell.

Organisations that are inspired by the notion of an ecocivilisation need to carefully integrate a culture of decay, rest and farewell (death). These may not happen in synchronicity for entire organisations. While some people and groups are thriving (accelerating), others may be in a phase of decay (slowing down) or renewal (resting). Each phase deserves specific rituals and guidance in rhythms that are distinct from the rhythms of other phases. One of the biggest challenges for leadership in an emerging ecological civilisation seems to me this navigating of simultaneous phases of flourishing and decay, birth and death. An ecological civilisation embodies space for the simultaneity of all these different phases and rhythms in lively relationships with each other.

With these brief reflections, I have shared my perspective at "leadership challenged" from the perspective of an ecocivilisation. As our civilisational mode is experiencing several social and ecological crises, leaders in established organisations and structures are faced with various significant challenges that often cannot be "resolved". With the emergence of visions for an ecological civilisation, present notions of leadership are challenged, and new understandings of leadership emerge. In some sense, I have argued that the notion of an ecocivilisation may even challenge the very notion of leadership as a quality that can be pursued or trained. Maybe the explicit attribution of "leadership" is just an echo of a civilisational paradigm that human organisations may barely remember in a few hundred years.

And yet, for the time being, we are blessed enough to witness humans and processes to which we attribute "leadership" in the emergence of an ecological civilisation. To them it might come as a surprise, and they may not attribute this to themselves because they may say that the actual "leadership" lies in the intrinsic miracle of life itself.

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Dr Thomas Bruhn

Dr Thomas Bruhn is a physicist leading the research group "transformative spaces and mindsets" at the Research Institute for Sustainability in Potsdam. His research focuses on the design of communication processes for transdisciplinary groups of decision-makers, e.g. at the UNFCCC climate conferences. He is an expert for collective learning and co-creativity and is particularly interested in the role of mindsets like compassion and mindfulness. He is trained in various facilitation approaches and psycho-dynamic leadership. Before joining RIFS, Thomas did research on self-organising semiconductor nanomaterials. He serves on the board of directors to the German Association to the Club of Rome.