

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP MAKES SENSE

BY **JOHN VARNEY**

The mysterious phenomena of leadership and teamwork entered my awareness in my youth through scouting; they became more apparent to me as I lived them out on the mountains. In my architectural career I observed that contracts do not successfully build buildings, but people do. For the last twenty years I have been privileged and fascinated to work as an external resource to leadership teams in all kinds of organizations. It has only now become clear to me that our ability to succeed has much to do with how we make sense of our lives. To put it in other words, leadership is a meaning-making activity. This is of supreme importance as we move towards a knowledge-based economy, knowledge being the product of meaning-making.

In closed mechanical systems, sustainability is the prolongation of useful life – designed for low maintenance, easy repair, or replacement of components. In living systems, sustainability has more to do with feeding the system, nurturing, protecting, ensuring fitness and well-being, maintaining identity and integrity. The former requires good engineering; the latter requires leadership. Such leadership may depend ultimately on the flair of a single individual but, at the same time, needs to be diffused throughout the system so that everyone shares responsibility for sustaining the whole.



SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY, ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT, SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS, SUSTAINABLE TEAM, SUSTAINABLE SELF

Every whole is embedded in a greater whole so it can be useful to think of a leadership hierarchy.

Sustainable community, economy, environment,
Sustainable business
Sustainable team
Sustainable self

How big is the whole we can sustain? If we can sustain our self, then we may be valuable team players. Valuable teams may add value to business and valuable business will contribute to society. The reverse is also true; good communities will foster sound companies, creative teams and wholesome individuals. It has always been so, though we may not have applied such language to describe it.

The key to sustainability of the system is that it all makes sense to everyone, each in their own terms. Leadership is, then, a sense-making activity, adding meaning to everybody's work in relation to some ideal that contains their contributions. Meaningful work is fulfilling, intrinsically rewarding, increases self-esteem and *raison d'être*. In a world where such qualities are increasingly rare, the provider of meaningful work might expect higher productivity, better recruitment and staff retention – the very stuff of sustainable organizations.

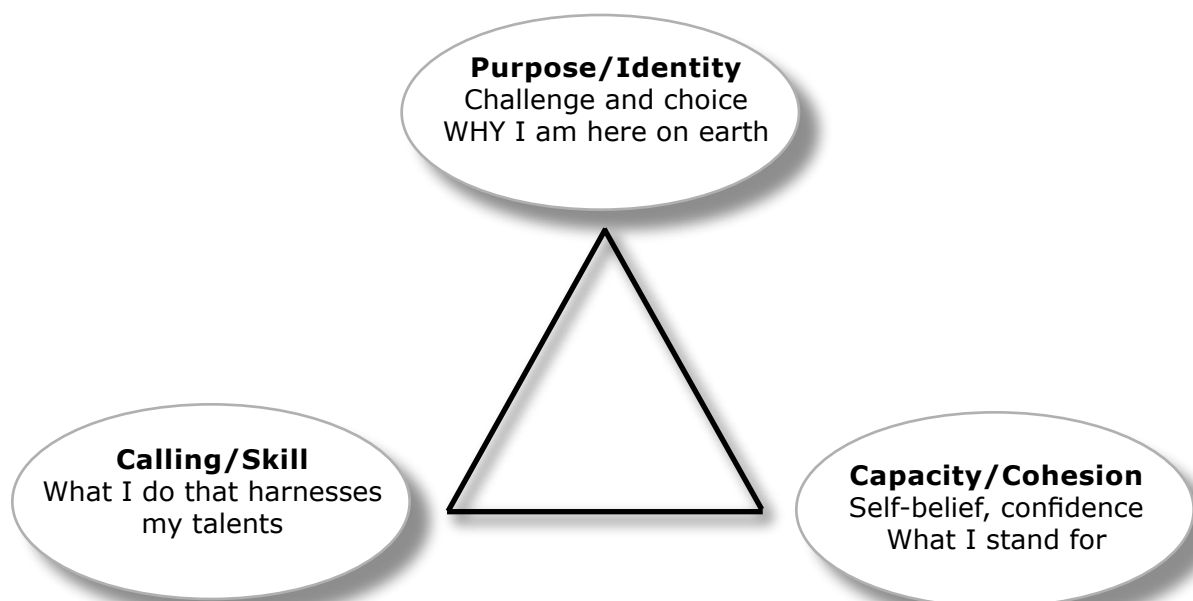
Leadership balances three key aspects in the self, in the organization, and in other individuals in order to sustain life.

1) Our Calling is what is meaningful for us to do. It is founded on our acquired skills and knowledge – not just what we explicitly deploy, our job description as it were, but also what we hold tacitly that derives from broad life experience. Effective leadership will tap this hidden resource and enable it to be brought to bear.

2) Capacity is what we can hold together. When the pressure or the fear or the sheer scale of things will break the team (or the individual) apart, self-regard enables it to continue the struggle in face of adversity – confidence holds it together as a living being.

3) Purpose imbues with meaning the field of the endeavour. Leadership throws down the gauntlet and brings forth a decision to meet the challenge, usually transcending perceived limitations. Provided the choice is freely made, this is the most powerful force available to us – the act of will. It is this that gives us our identity – and we will fight to maintain who and what we are!

Of course, these three aspects of our psyche, at individual, team, organization, or community level, are not separable – if we are one whole, then we need to work on all three at once. I see it in myself and in my own business. I see it in the client teams and organizations with which I work and also in client communities. This is leadership as meaning-making and, in the absence of those old-fashioned 'great leaders', it becomes the leadership work of each and every one of us.



LEADERSHIP, THEN, CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS THE CAPABILITY TO PERCEIVE OR CREATE A FIELD OF MEANING ON WHICH THE GAME OF LIFE IS PLAYED.

Consider Henry V (as Shakespeare has it), on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, needing to hold together his troops as they risk their limbs and their lives for the common purpose. Making meaningful the threat of death is no mean achievement! The purpose has to seem all embracing, beyond all the pleasures or pressures of ordinary existence.

*And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered –
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
Make him a member of the gentry, even if he is a
commoner.
And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.*

Challenge and choice

Purpose can be clarified by an inspirational speech or collectively by a shared process but ultimately every individual makes their own decision to embrace shared meaning in an unmistakable act of will. Hence Henry V later says, "... he which hath no stomach for the fight, let him depart ..." (4:3:19). Gideon, in the

Bible (Judges 7), likewise faced with an enemy with overwhelmingly superior numbers, gives his people the choice; "*Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early ...*" and then, with a little advice from God, goes on to further weed out the ones who are not truly committed – his force reduced from 30,000 to 3,000 and then to 300 – but he won the day! Permitting personal and individual choice is to harness the will. As is well known, an army of conscripts is weak. In my own experience, I learned that to be on a mountain with someone who did not believe in success was in itself a guarantee of failure; or else a cause of grave danger.

Leadership, then, can be understood as the capability to perceive or create a field of meaning on which the game of life is played. The 'meaning-field' of common purpose enables each person to make sense of their lot in terms of their personal intent, capacity, and calling. Within that field, patterns of possibility illuminate opportunities and guide actions locally. Shared values inform every individual how to act even when there is no overt communication. To be in the meaning field is to be 'in communication.'

In so far as we create and identify with a purpose, it will define what is meaningful in our beliefs and values, in our attitudes, assumptions, and behaviours.

Provided leadership has done its work, meaning will sustain the organization.

About the author

John Varney is chief executive of the Centre for Management Creativity (CMC) which works with a range of organizations across the globe to develop innovative and creative approaches to organizational challenges.