

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT OF ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP: ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Leslie E. Wildesen, Ph.D. * [1]

Abstract *Environmental problems typically display global implications, long time frames, incomplete science, emotional contexts, and complex solutions. Environmental leaders need specific skills if they hope to solve – or prevent – these problems. They need four categories of skills: (1) self-knowledge and self-management skills, because unless they know their strengths and weaknesses they cannot manage effectively; (2) relational skills, because they must deal with other scientists, donors and patrons, politicians, and the public; (3) strategic skills, because they must plan and execute complex and detailed programmes and actions to achieve their visions and desired outcomes; and (4) systemic skills, because they operate within a systemic framework that includes the people, the culture, the legal framework and rules, the budgets, the physical environment, the economy, and the overall context of the specific action or programme of actions. All of these skills can be taught, and they can be incorporated into an integrated training programme for current and future environmental leaders. This paper describes the content and structure of one such program, originally developed for the Smithsonian Institution in the USA, and now available internationally.*

INTRODUCTION

Everyone on earth needs clean water, clean air, healthy food, sturdy and culturally appropriate shelter and clothing. Increasingly, people need culturally and environmentally appropriate transport, communications, and inclusive ways of organizing society, economy, education, and religion. Current environmental issues span national boundaries, cultures, income levels, genders, degrees of development, education levels, languages, and religious frameworks. Who will lead Earth's nearly 7 billion people in their quest for a sustainable future? What tasks will they be called upon to perform? What skills will be necessary for these leaders? How can they learn and practice these skills?

This paper is not an academic treatise. Rather, this paper shares a perspective on these questions gained from working with participants from around the world for over ten years in The International Environmental Leadership Course. This two-week intensive residential workshop was designed and developed by the author with Jeanne C. Crouch, and was delivered on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution (USA) with Dr. Francisco Dallmeier, Director of the Smithsonian's Monitoring and Biodiversity Program, from 1997 through 2006.

What is Environmental Leadership?

A recent Google.com search resulted in nearly 63 million search for the words "environmental leadership." Many of these links are to lists of academic curricula recently added to business schools, to manufacturers touting their "green" products or processes, to outdoor education programs for

elementary school students, or to regional associations of not-for-profit (NGO) organizations in the US and elsewhere. A search of wikipedia.com finds topics such as "leadership in environmental design" or "environmental justice" or "US green building council." Synonyms for the entry "environmental leadership" found during recent Internet searches include:

Environmental toxins claim, environmental toxins lawsuit, environmental toxins law suit, environmental toxins law firm, leadership training, environmental toxins lawyer, environmental toxins, leadership magic, environmental toxins attorney, leadership tools, environmental news, leadership coaching, environmental litigation claim, environmental litigation lawsuit, environmental litigation law suit, environmental litigation law firm, leadership summit, environmental protection, intuition as a leadership tool, environmental disaster, community environmental center, environmental artist, cognitive leadership, environmental change, environmental solutions, national leadership, and community environmental council.

And indeed, people who are considered "environmental leaders" work in all of these venues, topics, and tasks.

The Oxford American dictionary defines "leadership" as "guidance, control, management, superintendence, supervision, organization, and government." While I believe such terms actually describe organizational management rather than leadership, I will not argue the matter here. Maxwell (1999) lists 21 "indispensable" qualities no leader should be without: character, charisma, commitment, communication, courage, discernment, focus, generosity, initiative, listening, passion, positive attitude, problem solving, relationships, responsibility, security, self-discipline,

* Leslie E. Wildesen, Principal, ETCI, Inc., Portland, USA

servanthood, teachability, and vision. To both of these lists I would add the following terms: inspiration, imagination, energy, motivation, creativity, persistence, persuasiveness, collaboration, intuition, integrity, honesty, pride, patience, cheerfulness, and love. So, there is a very long list of key traits, skills, and tasks for any leader to have and perform. I think this is especially crucial for leaders in the global environmental context.

One of the most salient descriptions of what constitutes “environmental leadership” – as contrasted with business, military, religious or political “leadership” – is that of Joyce Berry and John Gordon, in their introduction of to their book of the same name, which was used as a text in the course:

“...we can define [the] difference between traditional leadership and environmental leadership by relating environmental leadership to the key characteristics of environmental problems: long times to solutions; complex systems; an emotion-charged context; a relatively weak and scattered science base; and an absolute need for integration across a wide array of areas of knowledge and human attitudes and concerns” (1993: 4).

Berry and Gordon speak of various skill sets required by leaders in the environmental context: “ethics and personal values; communications; management; conflict assessment and resolution; influencing legislation and policy – and, inevitably, ‘fiscal development’ or fund raising” (1993:7).

While many would say these various “qualities” and skill sets are inherent in certain people (and not present in others) and therefore cannot be taught, we in fact did teach and enhance them every time we ran the Environmental Leadership Course.

Who are the leaders?

Those who will lead the way to protect and maintain our natural and human environment are a varied lot. They are scientists, politicians, journalists, teachers, consultants, heads of (and members of) NGOs, religious figures, and concerned citizens of all nations. They span all age groups and they all expect to lead vigorous lives for many decades to come. They have doctorates, masters’ degrees, baccalaureates, or no formal education beyond secondary school. They like to hike, dive, sail, run, play volleyball and ping pong. They play the guitar or the piano or the drums, they dance, sing, act, draw, paint, and take photographs. They are from Africa, and Asia, and Latin America, and Australia, and the Pacific, and Europe, and North America.

They are Hindu and Moslem and Jewish and Christian and Buddhist and non-religious. They are from republics and democracies and kingdoms and dictatorships and all the political variations you can think of. They are from

rich families and poor families; from the cities and the countryside; from the tropics and the icy north; from continents, islands, and islands the size of continents. From nations with millennia of traditions, and from nations that gained “nationhood” within the past 50 years.

Some are widely known, some are not. But they all are doing important work, sometimes with almost no staff or resources. They are courageous. They are creative. They are humble. And they are already being successful.

What tasks do Environmental Leaders perform?

They raise funds. They hold meetings. They negotiate contracts. They prepare applications. They write articles. They give speeches. They inspire, motivate and lead their staff, their colleagues, their followers, their public, their nations. They create whole programs out of nothing but their imagination and determination: national forest systems, protected areas, eco-tours, native plant nurseries, “save the _____” campaigns, endangered species studies; programs to fight poverty, promote health, educate about the environment, encourage participation, ensure justice; programs funded by the United Nations, the World Bank, national or local governments and NGOs, grants, donations, and sweat equity. Then they get up the next morning and do it all again.

What skills are essential for these leaders?

Anton Camarota, one of our associates and author of *Finding the Leader in You* (2004), another text for our course, distinguishes between the “being of leadership” and the “doing of leadership.” While a certain amount of the “being” of leadership is inherent in the individual, its values can certainly be brought to conscious awareness and enhanced in a training context. And of course, all of the skills necessary for the “doing” of leadership can be taught, just like any other kind of skill.

Many times our participants already have had considerable success as environmental leaders, and therefore already have well developed skills in some of these arenas. Therefore, all that is necessary in the training room is to enable them to bring the existing skill to conscious awareness, develop additional skills, and help them systematize them all so they can be used at will and in appropriate contexts.

Robert Dilts (1996) points out that leaders in whatever arena – organizational, political, and especially environmental – need the ability to function well in four different but related skill areas: (1) self skills, (2) relational skills, (3) strategic skills, and (4) systemic skills. These skills, added to whatever subject-matter or professional or topical skills they may have,

such as biology, or law, or writing or business management, along with a large dose of creativity, enable the leader to bring their ideas to fruition in the real world. Therefore the course is structured along these four dimensions, using them as nested loops as in Figure 1:

knowledge and improving one's self-management skills can dramatically improve one's effectiveness as a leader.

This skill set relates directly to the allegedly "inherent" characteristics of leaders such as energy, motivation, courage,

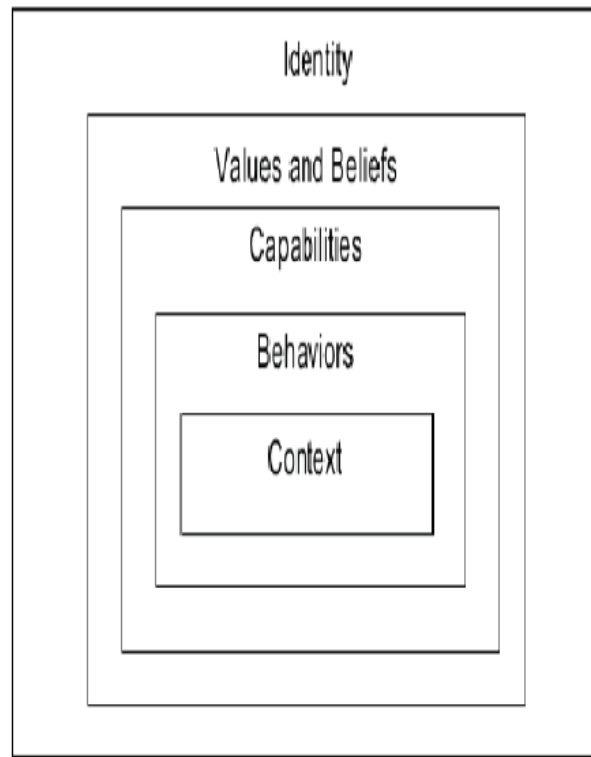


Figure 1. Nested loops which contain the conceptual basis for the International Environmental Leadership Course, based on Dilts (1999).

Camarota's "being" includes the top two levels, identify and beliefs, and his "doing" includes the bottom three, capabilities, behaviors, and contexts. Dilts' "self" and "relational" skills correspond to the lower three levels, and his "strategic" and "systemic skills" relate to the top two. All three frameworks are used in the course.

What follows are descriptions of each of these four basic skill sets, and how they relate specifically to environmental leadership.

Self Skills

Self skills are about how you conduct and manage your own behavior in various situations. These skills enable you to select the attitude and emotional state that will be most effective in entering a situation and to generate that attitude within yourself. A key point about these self skills is that you can choose the state of mind and attitudes that you will utilize. You do not ever have to let your attitudes and internal state be a random event (i.e., whatever state you were in when you woke up that morning). It is our experience that increasing one's self-

persistence, passion, integrity, honesty, pride, patience, cheerfulness, love, focus, generosity, initiative, passion, positive attitude, self-discipline, and servanthood.

You need to know yourself. Several ways to do this include: understanding the ways in which you have typically taken in and processed information (visually, auditorally, kinesthetically); how you have approached various aspects of your personal environment (people, places, things); and how you typically approach a project or activity (do you move away from problems or toward a goal? look for small details or at the big picture? focus on the past or on the future?).

For example, many people who consider themselves to be leaders focus on the big picture of the future, and move toward this goal actively. This is the classic profile of a visionary, and these are wonderful personal traits, as long as the person understands that it is necessary to have an assistant (or many of them) who can handle the small details, make sure problems get solved, and ensure consistency over time in approach, tone, and quality of action. Leaders who do not recognize the need for this will flounder (usually sooner

rather than later) and will never be able to sustain their “big idea,” no matter how worthwhile it is. This is especially true in the task of solving environmental problems, which tend to be very large scale and very long term (global climate change comes to mind immediately).

On the other hand, many environmental scientists tend to focus on the details, and design their studies to respond to past studies and findings, for the purpose of finding the best explanation for the current situation. This too is a wonderful set of traits, and it is extremely important for someone with these skills to team with people who can easily keep focused on the overall goal of the project, rather than getting caught up in the details. The scientists who understand their specific area of expertise but who fail to connect with “big-picture” people who can link the specifics to a larger scale plan and adequate resources will also be unable to create the changes they seek.

You also need to hone your perceptual skills and become aware of the impact of your behaviors and attitudes on others. Further, developing the flexibility to be able to modify your behavior and style to the situation is crucial for leaders. It is not enough to simply understand yourself, although this is a crucial first step. You must also be able to step into another person’s shoes, to understand and value their needs, motivations and ways of approaching the issues at hand.

Which brings me to the next category, Relational Skills.

Relational Skills

This set of leadership skills is all about how you communicate with others, and the depth and effectiveness of the relationships you are able to build. Clearly, any leader must influence others to achieve his or her outcomes. Leaders persuade, motivate and inspire others. They catalyze followers/team members/employees to action. If you are to reach your vision, you must have highly developed relational skills.

And, it is important to realize that those “others” with whom you communicate perhaps – probably – will not share your same personal profile or values, beliefs and work style, nor will they be aware, oftentimes, of how such things affect their behaviour. Therefore, the “leader” often must do all the work (or a large part of it) in developing and applying these understandings.

For example, if you are trying to gain support for your environmental project or program it is your responsibility to prepare the briefing materials in a format that can be readily understood and appreciated by your audience. If the boss (or the Prime Minister or the UN delegate) wants to see numbers in a spreadsheet, don’t go into the meeting with a narrative text and some slides (and vice versa). If you are anticipating a large meeting with a lot of different people and organizations, make sure you are prepared for all of the possibilities, and have materials that respond to many contingencies.

The leader must be skilled at developing rapport with others. There are very simple techniques to do this. Some leaders have a natural ability to do this, others need to enhance or develop their rapport skills. This can be done by learning the physiological, tonal, and linguistic basis of rapport.

Great leaders use these skills to create a relationship, then build that relationship through demonstrating their own competency and by deepening their understanding of the background, style and world view of those they wish to influence. Again, some leaders are naturally skilled at stepping into the world of others. Others must first learn its importance and then learn how to do it. Once one has developed this skill it becomes much easier to develop or negotiate a strategy that meets the needs of both the leader and those s/he wants to lead or influence.

In fact, self skills and relational skills taken together form the basis of what Daniel Goleman calls “emotional intelligence” (Goleman 1997, 2000; Cherniss and Golman 2001). In my experience working with leaders from all walks of life and in observing leaders on the world stage, it is the combination of these two sets of skills that separate leaders who are *both admirable and effective* from those who are *merely effective*. In other words, leaders who have strong self and relational skills are the leaders others want to emulate.

Which brings me to Strategic Skills.

Strategic Skills

Effective leadership requires knowing how to chart the course or navigate the path that will enable you to achieve your vision and desired outcomes. Self and relational skills are not enough. You must be able to evaluate where you are with respect to where you want to be, and what will be required (which people and what actions) and when in order to move closer to your desired outcome.

Planning, designing, negotiating, scheduling, prioritizing, setting goals and outcomes – all these tasks require strategic skills and tools. The higher up in your organization or program or public visibility you go, the more you need to be able to develop goals that are achievable, budgets that are realistic, programs that work for all the players, and measurements that everyone can understand and apply. You need to develop strategies for discussing controversial topics, and for generating support among opponents – and for doing the next steps if you cannot generate the needed support at this time. You need to figure out how to stay motivated, and how to keep your staff, colleagues, and followers motivated, especially when the situation may not be going your way. And you need to create a strong system for whoever comes after you to keep the project or program going.

Which brings me to Systemic Skills.

Systemic Skills

Systemic thinking is the ability to understand the system (not just the specific situation) in which you are operating. This includes the people, culture, legal framework and rules, budgets, the physical environment, the economy, and the context of your specific situation, among other things. It also includes understanding the interrelationships among all the parts of the system, and understanding what actions serve to disrupt the system, and what actions serve to maintain it.

This set of skills enables the work to continue at all, and can cause it to be much more effective and broader in its impact. Many people have built organizations that wither and die when the founder leaves, whether it is a nation, an NGO, an academic department, or a consulting firm. That can be OK, if the founder simply wants to accomplish a single mission, such as getting a single species listed as endangered, or getting a single protected area designated. Many worthwhile and successful groups form, function, and dissolve once their goal is reached. Many worthwhile and successful leaders are leaders only for a single day, or a single issue, or a single project.

But if the leader wants to *keep on* getting (multiple) species listed, or getting protected areas designated; if the leader has created an ongoing organization with staff, members, beneficiaries, donors, and ongoing projects; if the leader expects the *new* government to continue the programs developed with the *old* government – then that leader needs to create a system, with an organization and funding and staff or volunteers and community support, to carry on the work. In addition, many organizations achieve some of their aims but fail to leverage off of the related work of other organizations. Strong systemic skills enable you to achieve much more by capitalizing on the synergies and interrelationships available, to reach your goals.

The leader also must understand the system within which he or she operates, including the political, community, religious, social, economic and historical factors that go into creating the situation as it is now, in order to best move to the situation as it is desired to be. In other words, from the mechanics of how a bill becomes law, to metaphors of organization (are you “growing a business,” or “fighting the enemy”?), the leader must understand the interrelatedness of these factors.

How do leaders learn these skills?

The best way to learn these skills is by experiencing and practicing them in a safe learning environment, apart from the daily activities of one’s regular work, with a group of like-minded and equally dedicated people from around the world. Since 1997, I have worked with hundreds of

participants in the International Environmental Leadership Course. Based on the outline above, the course comprises 17 modules, beginning with self-knowledge tools such as behavioural profiles and discussions of desirable leadership characteristics and concluding with group presentations incorporating team skills, negotiation, and metaphor.

Along the way, participants learn to define and evaluate desired outcomes; understand and apply the fundamental presuppositions of leadership; create and maintain personal states of excellence and call upon them at will; elicit detailed information through specific human language patterns (independent of the actual language used, e.g., Hindi or Spanish or English or Farsi or Sinhalese); notice and “edit” their own behaviours when needed; create and maintain focus (noticing and managing congruity and incongruities); break information into appropriate “chunks” for easy transmission and understanding of the intended audience; negotiate and resolve conflicts; develop suitable missions and visions for self and organization; prioritize actions and see from other people’s perspectives; create compelling futures, for self and organization; create practical strategies for achieving desired outcomes (modelled on the strategies applied by Walt Disney); apply the various “logical levels” to solution of a problem (from “skills” up to and including the spiritual dimension); and understand and create effective verbal, visual, and kinesthetic metaphors to aid communication and help reach goals easily.

During the course, the instructors spend more time learning and practicing leadership skills than talking “about” leadership, although there is enough lecture to set the scene and provide a context for how these skill sets have been applied to environmental issues in the past. In addition, most participants have some personal experience of leadership (positive or negative) to draw upon, and everyone knows something about some important environmental leaders through the world media who can serve as other models of effective behaviour.

The Course uses the example of Dr. Karl-Henrik Rob  rt, the Swedish founder of the international environmental management program called The Natural Step, as a continuing teaching tool during the class, through his audio and video presentations of how he founded that organization in the 1980s (see <http://www.naturalstep.org> for more information). He is a very visible example of an environmental leader who successfully applies all four skill sets in an ongoing way.

Most of the learning during the workshop is acquired doing actual exercises on each of the specific skills and then applying them to environmental problems or issues. Participants are asked to bring case studies or problems to share with their colleagues and the instructors, and are encouraged to use these real-world situations as topics for the various exercises. That way, participants will not only

have learned a new skill, they will have accomplished important tasks toward reaching their goals as well, during the workshop.

It is important to keep a positive focus, especially in an environmental context. That is, it is important to focus on what you *want* to happen, not on what you *don't want* to happen. Therefore, the Course teaches explicit tools for developing desired outcomes, measuring their accomplishment, correcting course when you get off track, maintaining focus and support during the process, and communicating success to supporters, donors, staff, volunteers, and community members.

Any of the topics could be expanded into a week-long workshop by itself. The instructional pace is intense, and for some participants it is quite challenging because the training is in English (although participants are encouraged to use their own languages to conduct the exercises).

What next?

As one of the participants in the 2006 session of the course pointed out, none of these skills is restricted to the practice of *environmental* leadership – they are skills *any* kind of leader must have. I agree. However, these skills are specially critical in the highly complex environmental arena described by Berry and Gordon (1993: 4) quoted at the beginning of this paper, and given the fact that the stakes are so high.

And that is the main point: Many environmental issues are large scale, long term, cumulative, and cross boundary. They are in fact classic problems of the commons (Hardin, 1968). Their resolution requires collaboration, negotiation, and focus in addition to developing technology and collecting data, and requires exceptional leadership in addition to good science. This leadership may come from scientists, and it should in many cases. For example, scientists must take the lead in developing consensus data and models of

biodiversity, global climates, agricultural programs, social equity programs.

But scientists alone cannot solve the earth's problems, whether they be biological, climatological, agricultural, or social. We will need political and social and economic and academic and community leaders too, with finely-tuned leadership skills that foster collaboration, negotiation and focus. The author and her collaborators are proud to have at least a small role in helping this to happen.

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- [I] A slightly different version of this paper, originally written by Wildesen with Jeanne C. Crouch, M.S., was published in *Environmental Issues: Behavioural Insights* (2009) Edited by Parul Rishi. Wildesen and Crouch can be reached at Environmental Training & Consulting International, Inc., 1970 NW Overton St., Portland OR 97209 USA; <http://www.envirotrain.com>, info@envirotrain.com