

Developing New Leadership

for

a more sustainable society



Terry Sexton, Jill Chapman and Gary King



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Contents

Introduction	3	
Section One		
Our Unsustainable Society		
1	Environmental Unsustainability	5
2	Economic Unsustainability	8
3	Psychological Unsustainability	11
Section Two		
Leading Our Society		
4	Seven Stages of Leader Development	14
5	Old Leadership	16
6	New Leadership	17
Section Three		
Developing New Leadership Capability		
7	Preparation	21
8	Challenge	24
9	Support	25
Appendix	26	
References	36	
About the Authors	33	

Introduction

“A human being is a part of the whole, called by us ‘Universe’, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of Nature in its beauty.”

Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955)

So what has Albert Einstein’s view of the human experience, in relation to the Universe, got to do with being a Sustainable Leader? As it happens, he has very accurately described the task leaders now face if we are to avoid our society destroying our future and that of generations to come. To become sustainable leaders our task is to free ourselves from the delusion of our consciousness that we are separate from the rest of the Universe.

The fundamental purpose of any leader is to ensure the long-term sustainability of the followers, teams, organisations, communities or society they lead. We are all interconnected. We cannot succeed in the long term if we are causing other people to fail. We cannot survive in the long term if our leadership is creating harm to the communities, society and environment we depend on to give us life. Yet many leaders today focus on meeting short-term goals to the detriment of long-term needs, and they focus on achieving their own success to the detriment of the people their leadership should be serving.

For organisations to be sustainable in the long term, the society that organisations serve also needs to be sustainable. The decisions made, by leaders of our organisations, collectively create the society in which we live. Every service or product we use has been influenced by a leader. When we purchase these products or services we are leading the whole supply chain, which in itself has collaborated to serve us. We are all leaders and, together, we can create a more sustainable future.

In section one of this short book we explore how our society is unsustainable. In doing so, we draw on research into the sustainability of our environment, economic system and psychology. In section two we challenge the old leadership that is creating this unsustainability and introduce the new leadership that can enable us to co-create a better future. Finally, in section three we demonstrate how new leadership can be developed.

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Section One

Our Unsustainable Society

When most people hear about creating a more sustainable society they tend to think of environmental sustainability. Whilst this is a major concern, our society is also unsustainable in many other ways. In this section we will explore three of these ways: Environmental Unsustainability, Economic Unsustainability, and Psychological Unsustainability. Whilst each of these is explored separately, they are undoubtedly interrelated.

1. Environmental Unsustainability

It is widely believed that economies need to continually grow; otherwise, they become unstable. As described by David Fleming (2016), the economy is similar to riding a bicycle. Unless you keep moving forward, you will lose your balance and fall over. The typical way the growth of economies is ascertained is by using a measure called 'Gross Domestic Product' (GDP). This is a measure of the market value of all goods and services produced in a period of time. There are many problems with using GDP as a measure of economic growth, but the most significant is that it measures quantity rather than quality. As a result, Governments can, and do, encourage economic growth to the detriment of the wellbeing of society. To increase their output and grow the economy, businesses are consuming the earth's assets at an unsustainable rate, producing goods and services that are often detrimental to our wellbeing. To match this level of output, we are encouraged to be consumers and, to quote Dave Ramsey (2003), "buy stuff we don't need, with money we haven't got, to impress people we don't like". We have become a consumer society that is designed to serve the economy rather than our wellbeing.

There is a real danger that short-term decisions by leaders in politics, banking and business, based solely on what will grow the economy, will prove to be costly to our environment in the long term. To be sustainable at the current level of consumption we need 1.7 planets (Global Footprint Network, 2017). By 2050 it is forecast that we will need 3 planets for us to live sustainably (United Nations, 2015). We are consuming our own future and that of future generations.

Probably the most famous research into environmental unsustainability is the Planetary Boundaries Research carried out by the Stockholm Resilience Centre at Stockholm University, in collaboration with Australian National University and the University of Copenhagen. The planetary boundaries concept presents a set of nine planetary boundaries within which humanity can continue to develop and thrive for generations to come. The framework was first introduced in 2009, when a group of 28 scientists identified and quantified the first set of nine planetary boundaries. The Planetary Boundaries framework has now been updated and published in Science on 16 January 2015. The nine planetary boundaries are the processes and systems that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth System. The interactions of land, ocean, atmosphere and life provide conditions upon which our societies depend.

The research has found that four of the nine planetary boundaries have now been crossed, as a result of human activity. The four are: climate change, loss of biosphere integrity, land-system change and altered biogeochemical cycles (phosphorus and nitrogen).

The lead author of the research report, Professor Will Steffen, has said that transgressing a planetary

