



A guide to nature-based leadership

An ecological approach

C. Charles



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Executive summary

A Guide to nature-based leadership: An ecological approach offers a hopeful path to organisational development and leadership. The publication describes the emerging field of nature-based leadership, its importance, its characteristics, and how to implement it. Nature-based leadership is leadership that draws from nature itself. Looking to nature as a guide provides practical insights about how to nourish, sustain and grow healthy relationships among people in settings of a variety of sizes — from oneself, to partners and families, to neighbourhoods, organisations, communities, regions and whole nations. The concepts are rooted in the successful living systems of bioregions and ecosystems of the living Earth. Nature-based leadership is an ecological leadership style that embodies principles from nature as a guide to human relationships. Nature-based leadership is inherently collaborative, regenerative and renewing. It differs significantly from current mechanistic and hierarchical leadership models and is a way forward to restore a healthy and dynamic balance between people and nature. Detailed text is offered to describe its attributes and relevance along with examples of its applications to both organisations and social movements, including to the work of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Appendices provide resources and examples of how to conduct workshops and courses to prepare others to embody nature-based leadership principles.

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Each of the following provided editorial suggestions and, in some cases, written text that is included in the final publication: Amy Butler, Luis Camargo, Matteo Giusti, Ana Valerie Mandri, Mamata Pandya, Jason Pitman, Stician Samples, Natalia Segovia, Sean Southey, and Anne Stires.

About the author

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Photo by Sean Southey

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*The driving force in nature, on this sort of planet
with this sort of biosphere, is cooperation.*

—Lewis Thomas, *The Fragile Species*



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Why nature-based leadership? Why now?

We live in times of extraordinary change, immersed in oceans of information, with immense mobility, technological tools, enormous disparities in life conditions, and staggering accumulations of impacts from the consequences of human actions. At the same time, the challenges of biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, excessive use of extractive technologies, displacement of millions of people and wildlife, wars, and more are transforming the present and intensifying the risks of losing a healthy future for people and the planet.

One of the most profound of the many challenges faced by humans is our shared lack of meaningful, responsible connection to the rest of nature. While there are many of us who feel these challenges deeply and are doing what we can to make a positive difference, one of the most accessible, powerful, systemic, and holistic approaches to helping make positive change is through nature-based education for planetary health (Camargo and Segovia, 2026) — and everyone can participate. A complementary approach, subtle and profound, is through a new and yet ancient approach to leadership — that is, nature-based or ecological leadership.

**Nature-based
leadership is
leadership that
draws from
nature itself.**

What is nature-based leadership?

Nature-based leadership is leadership that draws from nature itself. It is an ecological leadership style that embodies principles from nature as a guide to human relationships. This approach is a way of influencing oneself and others by applying principles from living systems. Nature-based leadership is inherently collaborative, regenerative, and renewing. It differs significantly from current mechanistic and hierarchical leadership models and is a way forward to restore a healthy and dynamic balance between people and nature. Nature-based leadership recognises and builds on contributions from ecology, Indigenous wisdom, environmental studies, systems theory, complexity, biomimicry, ecopsychology, conservation psychology, and place-based, nature-based education. Nature-based leadership draws on these and other disciplines to nurture leadership in all aspects of society with the aim that people in all relationships — with themselves, others, and the Earth itself — contribute to a healthy, peaceful, and regenerative present and future.

Each of us influences others, so whether we recognise that influence explicitly or not, we are exercising leadership in everything we do. Some leadership is overt and intentional; other forms are passive and non-directional. Since everything each of us does has an effect in some way on others, it makes sense to pay attention and make conscious choices about how our leadership is manifested. When we look to nature herself for guides as to how to demonstrate leadership, we are able to take an ecological approach. The results of a nature-based, ecological approach to leadership are evident in enhanced resilience, health, and well-being, whether as individuals, families, businesses, organisations, or societies throughout the world.

So, in the face of the many challenges we are facing from those local to global, making a conscious choice to learn and apply the principles of nature-based leadership is a creative, constructive, and subtle yet powerful way to facilitate positive change. The results are surprisingly refreshing and rejuvenating.

Among those actively engaged in conservation and actions to benefit living systems, such as the membership and leadership of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and its Commissions, there is already a natural affinity for this approach. We are proposing and offering to help seed the awareness, values, knowledge, skills, and experience to apply nature-based leadership to IUCN's shared work to achieve and care for healthy, resilient, and regenerative

environments throughout the world — culturally and ecologically, systemically and pervasively.

An enhanced fluency and understanding of these processes can facilitate the health of communities of all kinds. Communities need people with the skills and conviction to assist in developing nature-based leadership, practicing collaboration, and achieving positive results. Those attributes exist to a degree within each of us, and can be nourished among us all. We begin with a belief that there is a need to disseminate information about the characteristics of nature-based leadership and how to apply it. We believe that such information, coupled with an emotional resonance, can awaken empathy for the living world. An empathetic bond is the heart of nature-based leadership and action to care for the Earth. Along with encouragement to practice the arts and science of nature-based leadership, and the inspiration that comes from personal experiences, people throughout the world can successfully put these ideas to work, in their own ways, appropriate for the cultural traditions and ecological characteristics of the environments where they live.

**An empathetic
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The context: patterns that connect

It was the scientist and scholar Gregory Bateson who said “context is a pattern through time.” The context within which we live in the world today is unlike any other, and yet it is rich in pattern. To make sense of these times, we need to be discerning. We need to be able to read the patterns. We need to be able to see the strange in the familiar, and the familiar in the strange. This form of recognising patterns, and changes in the relationships within patterns, is fundamental to the creative process. Reading the patterns will inform our thinking, and help to give us the skills, insights, and experiences that will help us — each of us — contribute to the health of environments, beginning within ourselves, in our relationships with others, and in our ways of being members of communities of all kinds, from local to global.

Bateson claimed that, for us to recognise change, we have to see a difference in the relationships between the parts and the patterns that these relationships express. As the patterns vary in context, relationships can be detected. In natural systems, patterns are expressed within the context of the overall characteristics of an ecosystem. Organisms live in relationship to others. Each individual organism has relationships with others of its own kind, and with other different life forms.

Patterns may change in response to changes in climate, disease, reproduction rates, food supplies and other characteristics of habitat, and the general balance of interactions among the parts of any ecosystem. Patterns govern the continuity of life systems. Relationships determine day-to-day interactions. Both are subject to change. Sometimes the environment imposes changes. Other times, the change is born from within the self-regulating characteristics of life itself.

In natural systems, changes in patterns are most often emergent—that is, they are created from forces within the system rather than from outside influences. Emergent change tends to accompany the uninterrupted functioning of a system. Humans often exercise another form of change — that is, imposed change. Imposed change is directed at a system in an effort to alter or enhance its function.

Many of us today try to manage change and some of us think of ourselves as “change agents.” A premise of nature-based leadership is that we humans will be far more effective participants in any setting — family, business, community, and planetary — if we understand and appreciate both forms of change. We urge an approach that recognises emergent change within the context of natural systems, and uses great restraint in exercising imposed change. We comment more about the differences between emergent and imposed change when we talk about change as one of the ecological pathways to nature-based leadership.

Organisms live within a specific kind of context — a habitat. For wildlife, suitable habitats are those environments in which food, water, shelter, and space are effectively arranged in a pattern that is conducive to the species’ survival. Habitats are patterns of living relationships. Some relationships are explicit, like when a bluebird eats an insect or a hawk eats a vole. Other relationships are more subtle, like the effects of changes in rainfall cycles and the timing of the sexual maturation of sea turtles. Organisms must fit within and participate in the process of creating patterns within habitats in order to survive. All life forms must adapt to changes in time — that is, in Bateson’s terms — to adapt to the context of patterns through time, which means changes in patterns through time. If relationships change, so do the patterns, and vice versa. If we don’t, as humans, pay attention to these changes and our tendencies to affect them, there can be an accumulation of unintended consequences with sometimes disastrous results. The most obvious, profound, and dangerous example of imposed change by humans is global warming. The accumulating consequences of human activities on its vast scale throughout the world have resulted in climate change and all its associated effects.

ACTIVITY

Hard eyes, soft eyes

One way to begin to discern patterns begins with what we call “hard eyes, soft eyes.”

Go outside. Ideally, pick a place that you enjoy visually. Find a spot to stand in which you can see 180 degrees with ease. Take a few moments to scan from left to right, looking in detail at the environment and its contents. That process is looking with “hard eyes.” Reflect for a few minutes about what you see.

Now, do the same thing, but shift your vision so that you are looking at the big picture — that is, scan for the whole of what you are seeing and how it fits together. Forget about the detail and visually experience the whole of the setting, using the technique again of moving from left to right. This time you are using “soft eyes.”

What are the characteristics of the view you see with soft eyes? With hard eyes? Are there differences? Similarities? Both skills are useful. We often see only the parts, and not the whole. In thinking about the whole of what you see, how are the parts connected? Recognising patterns is a skill. Understanding the reasons and connections within and among patterns is a form of knowledge.



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Considering consciousness

Consciousness is what we pay attention to, according to the neuroscientist Karl Pribram. This perspective leads to a powerful set of explorations that helps inform how we approach nature-based leadership.

It is consciousness that limits the range of attention we honor in scanning the millions of contexts created by the brain-mind system. It is as though thoughts created by the brain-mind originate from endless cerebral meadows rich with flowers, butterflies and a myriad of other life forms. As we walk such meadows, our path is always narrow. What we become aware of is always limited and highly selective. It is consciousness that makes that selection. In the meadows of the mind, we may one day gather a bouquet, another day observe insects, and yet another time map the paths we have taken. Only rarely do we experience the meadow in its entirety.

For most of us, “paying attention” as a form of consciousness is a process of reducing our vision. It is an act that involves a narrowing of perception. The differences in what is seen through the activity, “Hard eyes, soft eyes,” help to illustrate this point.

Normal consciousness is what we pay attention to in a reflexive way. We think of consciousness as a ray of sunlight lancing through an opening in a cloudy sky and pouring out onto the Earth. This ray of finite width scans only a small portion of the landscape. So, too, consciousness scans only a small portion of our mindscape. Self-imposed habits in consciousness create a narrow range of options in terms of normal thought. Much more is available to each of us through the range of capacities we each can access. Consciousness is what we pay attention to.

Consciousness opens the doors and windows that let the light of creativity illuminate our spirit, our practice, our hearts, and ultimately, the powers we have through our individual and collective energies to make the world a better place.

Since all change is driven by consciousness in some form, we encourage the intentional practice of nature-based leadership. Nature-based leadership is informed by an understanding of the characteristics of healthy communities in nature. It is an ecological approach to leadership.

To practice nature-based leadership, we turn to natural systems for perspective and guidance. By grounding ourselves in the ways of ecosystems, we can enliven our capacities to choose forms of consciousness that will help to heal the strife that exists within the human communities of the world and impacts the resilience of all living systems. It is nature that will guide us to the kind of empathetic, dynamic equilibrium that is needed in order to heal the rifts between culture and nature.

We embrace the view that consciousness is universal. Consistent with the worldviews of Indigenous and traditional peoples throughout the world, as well as those of contemporary scientists, we believe the evidence is increasingly clear that there is consciousness of some kind in all life.

We believe that natural consciousness and cultural consciousness must be brought together in dynamic balance and harmony, integrated and whole. Most humans are out of balance, with too much emphasis on the cultural, and too little on the natural ecologies of consciousness. Putting them back into balance is the hope for the future, the promise of community, the way of coming home. Nature-based leadership helps to re-right the balance.

ACTIVITY

Nature's touch to the heart

Think about your most inspiring personal experience in nature. Sketch it in images or words, or both.

Think about a place where culture and nature is most in balance. What are its characteristics? What would it be like to live there?



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Ecological pathways to nature-based leadership

It can be said that humankind has shared at least two compelling urges, designed by evolution, which formed the basis for all beliefs, rules of conduct, and ways to address survival. The first is framed in how we strive to understand and coexist with the rest of the natural world and our role within it. The second is how we get along with each other as humans. Most humans today tend to be out of balance, disconnected from nature. There are exceptions, notably often within Indigenous peoples where nature and culture are inseparable (Cajete, 2015), such as the Aboriginal peoples in Australia and New Zealand and the Makunas from the Northwest Amazon. The people of Bhutan value the interconnectedness of culture and nature. The country's Constitution mandates that 65 percent of the land be under forest cover for all times to come. However, on the whole, most people pay far more attention to human relationships than to our relationships with other than humans. Through nature-based leadership we look to nature as a guide for principles by which people can more effectively get along with one another, collaborate to solve challenging problems, and, in the process, heal the human relationship with the living Earth itself.

The lessons we can learn from nature are compelling. In this spirit, we offer seven characteristics of natural systems that translate powerfully in designing and sustaining healthy human relationships at home, at work,

within organisations, communities, and nations. These are the ecological pathways to nature-based leadership.

The ecological pathways are natural guides to nature-based leadership. They are representative examples of characteristics of nature that are helpful in guiding human relationships. We like using these seven; however, you can pick others. For example, others we sometimes use are adaptation, resilience, and change. The guides need not be used sequentially nor do you need to use them all, however we find it helpful to keep all seven in mind, especially when applying them to organisations. They form an ecosystem when you apply them. This is an ecological approach to life and leadership.

Diversity

The first teacher of the value of diversity is the natural world itself. In ecosystems, diversity nurtures survival while specialisation favours extinction. A diverse ecosystem has inherent more options for survival than do less complex ecosystems. It is unlikely that any natural disaster can stress a diverse ecosystem to the point of extinction. Diversity assures resilience. Monocultures, however, are vulnerable.

Diversity tends to be an indicator of health in ecosystems. This reminds us to think in terms of the many ways in which people choose to learn and participate in family and civic affairs, business and daily life, locally to globally. Diversity is not solely cultural or ethnic. Much diversity is invisible and takes shape in the form of human values, personality characteristics, and preferences for ways to learn.

From individual humans to complex communities, widely varied human organisms and organisations have characteristics of ecosystems. Just as there is an evolutionary advantage to a diverse ecosystem, there is a survival advantage to human organisations that are inherently diverse. For example, in times of downsizing businesses, the business will tend to be more resilient to the extent that its employees are able to use a variety of skills. Similarly, in expanding a business, it will tend to be successful where a diversity of people with varied strengths and roles are involved. Whatever the size of an organisation, the extent to which there is variety among people's talents and interests will tend to enrich the skill base and the capacity for creative problem solving.

Individual human beings can benefit from a willingness to broaden their personal base of interests and talents. This can even affect a person's physical well-being. For example, people who spend decades in a job, without benefit of continual opportunities to learn, will tend to be more stressed by change than their counterparts with a broader base of experiences. Loss of a job, divorce, death in the family — any of life's difficult surprises — can be magnitudes more difficult for a person without a wide range of skills for coping with such changes.

Human communities have the inherent capacity for diversity. Diversity, however, is not always visible. In fact, overemphasis on the visible differences associated with cultural and ethnic diversity can often be divisive rather than community-building forces.

Recognising and valuing diversity in human communities includes having a respect for preferences in learning styles and behavioural patterns under stress. When in doubt, opt for diversity. That is, be inclusive and consciously respectful of varying perspectives when attempting to solve difficult problems over time.

ACTIVITY

Diversity assessment

1. Do a mental inventory of the diversity in your life. Remember that diversity can mean far more than cultural and ethnic differences. Which settings and communities in your life are the most diverse? Which are the least? Think about what you consider to be the strengths of each. Make two columns, one titled “most diverse” and the other “least diverse.” List those communities under the columns in which they best fit. On the far right of the page, leave room to write about the strengths of each.
2. Then, write an action that could be taken in each setting or community you listed to enhance their strengths by increasing their diversity.

Change

Nature is constantly in a process of change. In the large view, change tends to be evolutionary. Even dramatic changes take place within a framework of overall dynamic stability and continuity. Our human tendency is to have some fear of change, especially sudden change or changes we cannot control. There are many positive, proactive approaches we can consciously employ to work constructively with the natural process of change.

In terms of natural and cultural systems, we recognise two major qualities of change: imposed change and emergent change. Because of our gifts of consciousness, humans are facile at imposing change. Imposed change is something we do to something else. Emergent change is change that we experience from causes beyond our control.

Here is an example. Vaccines and immunisations are changes that we impose upon microbes and germs. Germs in turn adapt to the changes we make in them and adjust their life forces to accommodate those changes. We then witness the emergence of new resistance to our imposed changes. Historically, humans have been better at imposing changes that cause things to happen rather than developing the more passive skills of seeking evidence for emergent change. We seem to prefer taking charge and doing something rather than investing in the contemplative and reflective acts that accompany emergent change.

Change is continuous in all systems. Often human urges toward action interfere with our ability to recognise the subtleties of those nonhuman changes that guide the evolutionary processes. Unless we learn to read emergent changes in the context of natural systems, it is likely that the knowledge we accumulate will be more of an indication of how we cause change than of how we respond to change.

ACTIVITY

Personal capacity for change

1. Think about the various settings, such as family, friends, profession, lifestyle, habits, and preferences, in which you exercise your capacity for change. On a scale of 1 to 5, mark where you think you stand with respect to your approach to change in each, with 1 being “not at all interested in change” to 5 being “very interested in change.” Note that not all change is positive, so reflect on these potential changes as being positive and constructive.
2. Create a column for “emergent change” and one for “imposed change.” Put examples from your daily life in each column. Indicate, for example, what instances of emergent change you observed today. What, if any, imposed change did you personally take action to effect? Do you have a preference in your own life?
3. Overall, where do you think you tend to be most often with respect to your capacity for change on that scale of 1 to 5? If you think you’d like to adjust the scale, making yourself either more or less prone to select constructive change as a personal option, try it for a week in at least one of the areas that matters most to you. You might try family before you try profession — just to ease into the concept!

Niche

A niche, in the ecological definition of the word, is how an organism makes a living. Every organism has a niche and is therefore inherently important. When we actively apply this concept to our relationships with one another, it can be palpably felt. Walk into a setting where everyone has a voice and treats everyone respectfully and you quickly notice the peaceful good humour that pervades. Disagreements still occur; however, there are processes for resolving them, and everyone participates. What is most important about the application of this concept is that it be authentic.

The first definition in our dictionary refers to a niche as a “recess in a wall where objects may be placed.” This definition mirrors the tendency for over-compartmentalisation that exists in traditional science. Consider the difference between “niche” as a compartment and “niche” as a role. As a compartment, the word rings of the dreaded cubicles in prisons or some offices — a place of isolation and fixed expectations. Used to indicate a role, the word is alive with possibilities — each person can have multiple niches, and various niches over time. A niche requires action. An organism has something to do. Every organism makes a contribution of some kind.

One of the limiting characteristics of early biological science is the tendency to classify organisms in terms of their complexity. It has seemed perfectly normal for humans to perch on the highest limb of the tree of life, distributing all else below and considering all else to be less important than humans. Hierarchies bring with them the baggage of superiority. That is one of the most powerful messages of early science. It is evident in evolutionary and ecological terms that all organisms, if they are here now, are successful survivors in the evolutionary sweepstakes. They evolved into the forms they now possess. In a sense, each stands on a stage of equivalence — each is a survivor through the patterns of billions of years of life on this planet. Only the success stories are here. Contemporary ecology and science encourage us to recognise this fact.

It is important that we recognise the concept of equivalence of niche in our human relationships to the degree that we recognise and appreciate that everyone has a contribution to make, a service to provide. We cannot treat one another hierarchically and still preserve the freedom and dignity that is inherent in the gift of human life. We each must learn the skills of respect for life in all its varied forms with all its many roles.

ACTIVITY

Niche detector

1. Think of examples of circumstances you know of in which people are treated disrespectfully. Identify three things you can do about each of them in order to help enhance the ways in which people are treated with respect. Pick one — and do it.
2. Check your results, and keep at your efforts to minimise the times that people around you are treated with disrespect. Persistence pays, and it benefits the common good.

Cooperation and competition

Although competition exists in natural systems, its role has been overemphasised. Cooperation is prevalent and actually more pervasive than the role of competition in the natural world. Plants and animals live in dynamic relationship to one another in diverse kinds of living communities. Healthy communities have historically been characterised by cooperation in numerous forms.

Cooperation cultivates communication and connectedness. Cooperation tends to facilitate learning. Cooperation nurtures a sense of shared purpose, efficacy and accomplishment. Mentoring and intergenerational learning are forms of cooperation. Public and private partnerships are as well. In the world of business, for example, there is a constant dynamic tension between finding areas of common concern around which to collaborate in order to serve the interests of consumers and the economy overall versus maintaining competitive advantage in a business sense.

Competition is a highly threatening experience for many, particularly if one is not a willing participant who has chosen to play. It appears most often as a form of forcefulness and aggression. We find ourselves caught up in a contest that seems out of our control. One-upmanship, strident questioning, and forcing people to become defensive are common strategies used by people who elect to bully others. If you are not a willing participant in a competitive process, your emotions may quickly jump into the fray. You may feel bewildered and confused.

However, if those involved have willingly entered a competitive setting, the spirit of play dominates and each participant knows the rules and limits of the game. This can take the form of a quest for personal excellence. Such competition is seldom threatening. It can be invigorating.

Just as there are consequences to competition in human affairs, so too are there in the natural world of ecosystems. People often make forceful arguments about how the natural world is a “dog-eat-dog” environment governed by the laws of tooth and bloody fang. This is not as accurate as once thought. From an evolutionary perspective, cooperative interaction among species in ecological systems is more prevalent than competition.

As the study of nature has increased, it has become clear that competition is insufficient for explaining either evolution or ecology. Field scientists the world over have begun to recognise that cooperation is a far better process for explaining what is happening in nature, now and in the past. Clearly there are aggressive, territorial and violent behaviours, but, for the most part, these are localized and infrequent. Nature progresses by getting along. In the game of life, nature plays to stay in the game while humans tend to play the game to win. Words related to competition include winning, beating, overwhelming, devastating, destroying, striving, struggling, clashing, colliding, conquering, killing and driving them back. Words that connote cooperation include helping, nurturing, assisting, guiding, uniting, partnering, combining, joining, facilitating, harmonizing, and sticking together. Learning to see cooperation in nature provides a clearer view for seeing it in human affairs as well. If competition exists in nature, then cooperation does as well. When we balance the tendency to compete with a tendency to cooperate, we take a giant step toward civility, community health, and peace in the world.

ACTIVITY

Tally the two c's

1. Make a list of the ways and settings in which competition serves you in your life. Do the same for cooperation. Be alert to both throughout one full day. Be aware of how you feel in each circumstance. Note whether you tend to be more relaxed, less stressed, in one circumstance or the other — and which you prefer.
2. Make two columns. Title the first column “competition” and the second “cooperation.” During a 24-hour period, keep track of when you compete and when you cooperate. Note the time, duration of the activity, and a one-sentence description of the circumstance. At the end of the 24 hours, tally the numbers. Which, if either, do you do more than the other? Think about the nature of that 24 hours. Reflect on whether this seemed to be a typical day, and whether it required more than one kind of tendency than the other. Write a summary of your thoughts about the ways in which you tended to compete or cooperate, or both.
3. Mark your calendar for two weeks from now. Do the exercise again. Notice the similarities and differences, and write about the results.
4. Consider your environment. Pay attention to whether those around you, whatever the setting, appear to be cooperating or competing with you.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is one of the most provocative natural guides to community building and nature-based leadership. Its mystery lies in the notion that when we see someone do something or take some action, we have no idea whether the person is acting in the name of conscious choice, inattention or reflex. If it is reflex, then the act is a mechanical response to some previous experience or stimulus. Choice is not involved. If, however, the person under observation makes a choice and decides what action they choose to take, then self-regulation guides the outcome rather than reflex.

Some humans abdicate the responsibility for self-regulation by simply giving the power of choice to others. For example, the concept of governance in different cultures provides a way to look at self-regulation by its absence. In totalitarian regimes, individuals are expected to give the responsibility for governance to those in charge. Self-regulation is relinquished for obedience to external forces. This is manifest among leaders who equate power with control.

Contemporary views of ecology and ecosystems hold that the natural world is a self-regulating system. The central dynamics of natural systems are those that have developed through time and have met with lasting success. As the scholar Erich Jantsch noted in his classic, *The Self-Organizing Universe* (1980), nature is the most successful management system in the world. It has persisted through immense spans of time and is still here and functioning.

Within humans, self-regulation is tied to accountability. Self-regulation is a discipline and a foundation for lifelong health. It is also a habit of mind, spirit, and body. There may be cultural, behavioural and physical differences, including neurological attributes, which affect how people demonstrate and practice self-regulation.

Efforts to establish and maintain democracies and free societies throughout the world are tied to this capacity to self-regulate. Autocratic, authoritarian approaches deny self-regulation. One of the most compelling challenges in the world today is that of rebuilding communities in war-ravaged environments. And yet, it is a challenge filled with hope. It is the capacity to self-regulate that makes it possible for regeneration to occur. It is what allows conflict-ridden communities to restore order — enabled by the individual self-regulating actions of many people. Nothing will maintain peace more effectively than the

individual actions of many, combined into a self-regulating whole with a commitment to safety, health and well-being.

When we apply this concept to organisations, we instantly see that most people have the capacity to keep their energies and emotions in check, to discipline themselves, to establish rigor, and to take personal responsibility for their actions. Clear ground rules, established through good communication and shared responsibility, provide a context within which people's capacities to self-regulate can flourish. Self-regulation is analogous to an internal locus of control. Those people who internalise responsibility for outcomes, and see a relationship between effort and accomplishment, tend to achieve in diverse settings. Success as we define it nurtures the human capacity to self-regulate.

When principles of community building and nature-based leadership are applied, healthy organisations can become learning communities in which everyone takes responsibility and feels accountable for the overall climate in which their efforts take place. When people participate in the process of setting the ground rules for behaviour, communicate them to one another, and believe in their value, effective compliance with those rules is more likely. Discipline and morale problems are virtually nonexistent in environments where self-regulation dominates in people's behaviour.

Applying this concept to family and home helps keep tempers in check. Harsh words that cut to the heart are spoken infrequently and energies stay in balance. Family members are able to focus on what matters, and not what hurts. It starts with self-knowledge and practicing the arts of self-discipline, which really is what we are calling self-regulation.

ACTIVITY

Personal guide to self-regulation

1. Think about where in your life you are most successful at exercising self-regulation. List the categories in which you are most successful—such as balancing work and personal activities, keeping healthy and exercising regularly, making time for friends and family, and managing your emotions in times of stress.
2. Now make a list of those areas in your life in which you are most challenged to exercise self-regulation. It could be the same list — such as balancing work and personal activities, keeping healthy and exercising regularly, making time for friends and family, and keeping your emotions in check in times of stress.
3. Put a continuum under each list, with “most successful” at the far left and “most challenged” at the far right. For each category, mark a place on the continuum for how you handled it — one week at a time. At the end of each week, review your results. Look for patterns. Set a goal for yourself, in each area, to achieve the kind of balance you personally are seeking. If it is to be most successful in each area, terrific. If it is to keep track of those areas in which you are persistently challenged, that too is useful. Use this tool as a personal guide to self-regulation.

Optimisation

There is an unfortunate tendency in much of contemporary industrialised culture to think that most is best. The popular sayings, “Who dies with the most toys wins,” and “Everything to the max,” reflect this tendency. Most Indigenous and traditional peoples of the planet have historically and currently lived lives that demonstrate a balance, living in respectful reciprocity with other forms of life. Much of that wisdom is incorporated today in what is referred to as traditional ecological knowledge and is increasingly combined with contemporary science.

The resource base for nearly all things in nature is balanced and abundant. When nature overproduces a resource, the resource lies dormant until environmental conditions change significantly and the resource is needed. A good example of this is seen in mangrove swamps. Mangroves are border plants with their roots embedded in shallow estuaries and their leafy top-sides thrust into the air above the reach of high tide. They are stable under normal conditions and produce heavy crops of leaves that fall into the water and sink to the zone at the depths of the roots, providing sustenance for the plants. Normally, far more leaves join the detritus levels than are needed. Is this wasteful? No. The surplus of leaves is locked into the estuary bottom, and is the precise resource needed when a hurricane or typhoon rips the swamp to shreds. Without the productive leaves at the mangroves’ tops, the plants die back. Not for long, however. Seed pods from mangroves many miles away come floating on tides. When they first fall into the sea, the pod floats like a stick upon the water. Gradually, they become waterlogged and one end sinks so that the pod points downward. It becomes heavier and eventually sinks downward in the once-surplus detritus where it stabilises and takes root. The cycle begins anew.

Nature keeps energy and resources in reserve. Rather than maximising everything, nature tends to optimise its use of resources. The human idea of “saving for a rainy day,” is a form of keeping energy in reserve. When we pace ourselves and avoid burnout, we are acting optimally. Classic burnout is working to the max. Nature reminds us to be moderate rather than excessive. This does not mean we don’t work hard nor that we don’t strive for excellence. It does mean that we take care to nourish ourselves and others along the way.

Organisations that function optimally tend to be pleasant, calm, happy and not stressed. Business offices that work optimally — in the face of deadlines, supply chain disruptions, board meetings, budgetary challenges, and personnel issues — are also characterized

by a healthy grace rather than a stressed-out, frayed-at-the-edges mentality. Health, family relationships and personal satisfaction are all associated with optimising rather than maximising the moments of our daily lives. Clear deadlines, clear expectations, realistic goals and habits of pacing oneself are all tools to help effectively optimise strengths and interests.

Whereas the healthcare field has a growing understanding of these concepts, such as in approaches to preventative medicine, the business community is demonstrating an understanding of this concept in spotty and inconsistent ways. Maximising profits is a short-term lifestyle; optimising profits is a long-term strategy for success.

The new communications technologies add to the frenzy. With immediate access to people more easily than ever before, the rates at which decisions are made and actions requested are escalating in frequently inhumane, and certainly less-than-optimal, ways. Beepers, personal digital assistants, smart phones, and laptops all play a part. Each of these technologies creates convenience but each also contributes to an environment of such accessibility that people are increasingly frayed and fragmented. Text messages, Email and phone calls can reach us nearly anywhere, and they do, in enormous volumes. All the more reason to self-regulate and optimise — saving some energy in reserve.

ACTIVITY

Optimisation check list

1. Make your own personal checklist of those areas in which you want to pay special attention to living optimally. As a place to start, look at your personal guide to self regulation. The topics could be the same. Each week, assess how you are doing in each category. Are you burning out or feeling rested and balanced? If the latter, you are probably living optimally. If not, make a conscious choice to adjust how you are approaching the area — whether it is work, family, recreation or whatever else is of importance. This is a lifestyle issue. It can help to assess each of the major parts, and then think about your overall approach to life.
2. Here is another approach. List each of the following (all cues to living optimally) along the left side of a page: laughter, peaceful relationships, learning, good works, healthy eating, plenty of rest, exercise, recreation, hobbies, professional accomplishment, personal energy, progress in financial nest egg and personal nourishment. (You may wish to use these as a start, or fill in your own list.) Across the top, enter dates for the next two weeks. Leave a space under each date to check “yes” or “no” in each category to indicate whether or not you think you’ve optimised in that category. Track the number of “yes” checks you achieve in the two weeks’ time. Start another two weeks. After a few months, see if you think you are moving in the right direction for yourself. If not, get a fresh start and try again.

Connectedness

A major failing of much of contemporary formal education systems is the dominant tendency to divide, separate and classify, based on a premise that by doing so we become more intelligent. Much of schooling has to do with discrete separation of knowledge — biology, physics, chemistry, history, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature, philosophy, etc. Each of these is a manifestation of the single, seamless world of the universe, and yet we seem to feel more empowered if we repackage them into supposedly manageable portions. The illusion created by the separation becomes the overarching premise, and we often miss the vision of the world as a unified whole. Our task in contemporary times is to learn how to again “read” nature as a self-regulating, coherent system.

In nature’s ecologies, every part is connected to every other. The ripples of any action affect whole living communities, sometimes in ways not seen. When we internalise the concept that all things are connected, it helps us to remember that such connections are healthy and to be nourished. In organisations, this reminds us to create opportunities for everyone to feel a sense of shared purpose with one another, to be mutually supportive of one another. Everyone in an organisation has a role to play, a contribution to make to the success of the organisation. Practicing the principles of nature-based leadership contributes to that sense of shared purpose.

New technologies can be powerful allies in this regard. However, these electronic media cannot replace the need for physical person-to-person contact. Humans need to balance the experiences moderated through electronic and other high-tech devices by also maintaining intimate contact with other humans and the natural, living world.

To serve some of the physical needs, we also need gathering places. Bring people together in various forms of celebration and activity. Work together to accomplish tangible results. There are many approaches to cultivating healthy organisations and communities through nature-based leadership in which people of all ages recognise that they are genuinely connected to each other. The act of connecting may well determine the quality of the future we share in all communities on Earth.

ACTIVITY

Connecting with the connections

1. Think of five ways in which to increase the sense of connectedness you experience in your daily life. Try one each day for five days.
2. Connectedness is fundamental to community. List three ways that connectedness is functioning well in a community in which you are a member. List three ways in which connectedness is dysfunctional. Work with each — working to sustain the ways in which connectedness is thriving, and working to decrease the dysfunction within those that are not.

Community

While we don't list community as one of the seven natural guides, it is the ecological metaphor that holds all of the natural guides together. A community is a set of species interacting in an environment. Those interactions are guided by natural processes. The seven natural guides are examples of particularly effective natural processes that serve to enhance and maintain the resilience and regenerative capacities of communities of many kinds.

ACTIVITY

Natural guides to community building

1. With all seven of the ecological pathways to nature-based leadership in mind as background, go outside into nature and find an example of one or more of the natural guides. Without doing harm to the environment, bring back evidence of some kind to demonstrate that you have found an example.
2. Record your observations.
3. Reflect on how these natural guides seem to fit — or not — in the context of the many community settings in which you live and work.

Examples of the ecological pathways and natural guides being used for organisational development and social change

Nature-based leadership is a new approach for defining and teaching leadership. However, its principles are clearly demonstrated in Indigenous traditions. Where something similar appears in current organisational and leadership development literature, it tends to show up as ecological leadership, if at all. Here are a few examples of ways in which the author has applied and observed nature-based leadership in contemporary situations.

Project Learning Tree and Project WILD

Independent scholar Bob Samples first introduced the natural guides as management principles in the 1970s and 1980s. They were not widely adopted but did make their way into the literature and, to some extent, into practice. Bob's wife and colleague, Cheryl Charles, applied the concepts to the development in the United States of the K-12 supplementary curriculum resource, Project Learning Tree, beginning in 1976. She was explicit about applying them to the development and implementation of Project WILD beginning in 1981 (Charles, 2018). Cheryl was founding national director of both projects. Decades later, both projects remain available nationally and internationally. They are among the most widely used interdisciplinary environment education curriculum resources for elementary and secondary school educators in the world.

Children & Nature Network

When author Richard Louv, Cheryl Charles and others co-founded the Children & Nature Network in 2006, Cheryl applied the natural guides in their efforts to facilitate the development of the worldwide movement to reconnect children, and people of all ages, with nature. Twenty years later, the Children & Nature Network is an example of how the ecological pathways can be used to facilitate social change through nature-based leadership (Charles, 2018).

Centre for Environment Education, India

The Centre for Environment Education (CEE) was founded in 1984 by Kartikeya Sarabhai as a Centre of Excellence in Environment Education under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India. Kartikeya's approach to organisational development was inspired, in part, by the work and legacy of his parents, Mrinalini Sarabhai and Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, other family members and a remarkable community of innovators as well as scholars with whom he collaborated through the years.

A national institution, CEE's mandate has been to develop environmental awareness leading to action for sustainable development across a country with a very varied biogeography and diverse educational systems.

Cheryl Charles and Kartikeya Sarabhai first met around the time the Centre was founded in 1984. Then in 1987, Cheryl was part of a delegation sent by the US Department of State to work with the Centre in support of its work in environment education. Cheryl found the visit the most profound and inspiring professional experience of her life, and nearly 40 years later it remains a highlight. Cheryl was invited to bring Project WILD to India through the Centre.

Through the years, Cheryl and Kartikeya have remained friends and colleagues, including through their shared work as members of the IUCN's Commission on Education and Communication. In January of 2025, Cheryl participated in the conference "Educating for Sustainability Action" at the Centre headquarters in Ahmedabad. A side event was held to celebrate the 40 year anniversary of the founding of the Centre. Cheryl reflected on the Centre in the context of the natural guides to nature-based leadership and organisational development as part of her remarks at the opening plenary session of the conference.

It was clear to Cheryl, by observation and reflection, that the Centre is founded on and guided by its deep commitment to the guiding principles made manifest through an ecological approach. Cheryl asked Mamata Pandya, a colleague she met first in 1987 as a young professional at the Centre, to also reflect on the ways in which CEE exemplifies a nature-based approach to organisational development. Mamata worked at the Centre from 1985 until 2014, and was at the anniversary events and conference in 2025.

Mamata wrote the following:

From the very beginning the leadership style and organisational culture was closely 'nature-based'. The management style drew upon the basic organisational principles in Nature.

Mamata commented further, addressing each of the natural guides.

Diversity: CEE has always valued and celebrated diversity. This was clearly reflected in the profile of the human resources. The programme strategies were innovatively designed to address the huge diversity in the nation-wide canvas that CEE was mandated to work for, and within.

Niche: While celebrating diversity, the niche strengths of individual and programme groups were recognised, respected and supported for their respective contributions.

Cooperation: Inter-group cooperation was built into the larger programme structure. Cooperative work without silos was not just encouraged, it was the norm. This principle extended beyond the organisation through collaborative projects and partnerships. Developing partnerships between governmental and non-governmental institutions was a key strategy adopted from the start. This helped utilise the complementary strengths, avoid duplication of effort and encouraged a synergistic convergence of ideas and goals.

Self-regulation: The organisation followed the approach advocated by Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, one of India's prominent institution builders. "One wants permissive individuals who do not have the compulsive need to reassure themselves that they are leaders through issuing instructions to others; rather they set an example through their own creativity, love of nature and dedication to what one may call the 'scientific method'.

Optimisation: While there was a basic organisational structure, the effort was always to find passionate people and let them build programmes around their passion. There was a remarkable level of flexibility even in the 1980s and '90s when concepts like "work from home" if they needed, for a specified period, were almost unknown. Thus there was a genuine attempt at optimising different strengths and situations within the overall structure.

Connectedness: The organisational culture engendered a strong sense of community. From shared celebrations to the setting up a crèche for the children of young employees (mothers as well as fathers), to physical spaces designed to encourage small groups to meet over lunch, the leadership was sensitive and supportive to making people feel connected to one another as well as to the larger CEE family.

Community: The connectedness created a strong sense of community. The shared passion of a diverse group, who were all venturing into an unfamiliar terrain of environmental education at a time when it was completely new

to India, fostered a deep sense of community. We were proud (and continue to be so) to be the pioneers in the field.

Mamata and her colleague, Meena Raghunathan, have written about the various ways in which CEE has contributed to India's journey to sustainability through an ecological approach in their book, *Inspirations: Individuals and institutions that defined India's sustainability journey* (2025). Their book corroborates Cheryl's view that CEE exemplifies nature-based leadership.

Organisation for Environmental Education and Protection (OpEPA).

OpEPA is another organization, like CEE, that demonstrates nature-based leadership and has since its founding. Here is a brief description of its founder's approach:

Luis Alberto Camargo is the Founder and Director of the Organization for Environmental Education and Protection (OpEPA). OpEPA is a non-profit organisation that holds registrations in both Colombia and the USA and is dedicated to promoting nature-based and regenerative education, heritage interpretation, and weaving. OpEPA has worked with over 130,000 children, youth, and educators fostering a more sustainable and peaceful world. Luis holds the Regional Latin America Vice-chair position in the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication and co-leads the Colombia Regenerativa initiative. Additionally, he is a co-founder and board member of Catalyst 2030 and The Weaving Lab, organisations that seek to create thriving learning ecosystems by supporting Change Leaders in becoming more aligned, collaborative, and systemic. As a climate reality leader for The Climate Reality Project and a core team member of the Regenerative Communities Network, Luis is dedicated to addressing issues related to social entrepreneurship, regeneration, conservation, climate change, environmental education, environmental peace, wilderness medicine, and wilderness expeditions. Luis focuses on reconnecting youth to nature and people to the Earth, to build more sustainable, regenerative, and peaceful communities.

IUCN Commission on Education and Communication (CEC)

There are various ways in which the CEC demonstrates nature-based leadership. One example is its initiative #NatureForAll, co-created with the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas. In 2020, #NatureForAll convened a task force to establish the vision and programme of work for #NatureForAll for the period 2021-2025. The resulting plan explicitly incorporated five of the natural guides in its Ecological Pathways to Change: diversity, niche, cooperation, connectedness, community.

Here are excerpts from that guiding document:

The #NatureForAll movement is a living system of interconnected communities of change. It is inherently interrelated, self-organis^{ing}, self-regulating and regenerative. It is based in the recognition that humans “are” nature, not separate from nature. . . Invoking “ecology” to ground our theory of change is a reminder, rooted in wisdom traditions and contemporary science, that everything is connected to everything else. Ecology reminds us to consider the interrelationships of organisms and systems with their environments and each other. Ecology guides us in knowing that Earth is “Home to Us All.” All for nature. Nature for All. . . NatureForAll draws from how natural systems work to outline the organising principles moving forward.

One of the explicit ways in which CEC has demonstrated nature-based leadership is in its use of language. As described in this publication, *A guide to nature-based leadership*, metaphors matter. CEC’s recent commission chair, Sean Southey, makes a significant effort to use natural systems metaphors in his public speaking and presentations. The CEC does the same in its publications, programmes, conferences and meetings. As described in this publication in detail, nature-based metaphors are inherently regenerative and rooted in cooperation.

When we think of the settings in which we are called upon to apply our leadership skills, it is helpful to start with a sincere respect for the differences that characterise the members of any family, group, organisation or community. While we are more alike than different, as humans, we also have precious differences. These differences need not divide us. They can and do enrich us all. This is especially important to remember when you, as a leader, are working with groups of people — whether at home, in an organisation, in a small group or among many.

One of the ways in which differences divide us takes the form of what we refer to as “invisible differences.” Those are differences that are not clearly evident. They can’t be seen, necessarily. These invisible differences — things we cannot see and may not realise exist — can often be what most gets in the way of our being able to work collaboratively.

We enjoy taking a friendly and easily-used approach to people’s preferences for how they learn. The approach is simply one of many such tools for exploring learning styles or other such preferences. We have found its applications to work in all settings in which human beings come together to work collaboratively to solve problems — whether in families, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, organisations, entire municipalities and beyond.



Photo credit: Adobe Stock

Learning preferences

You may be familiar with personality inventories. Similar to learning styles inventories, these are useful approaches to gaining personal insight, as well as insight into the “invisible differences” that exist within any group.

We believe that invisible differences are to be respected and appreciated. Each of us has preferences for how we like to learn, and how we like to participate in all of life’s events—including our work within organisations and in community. One of the greatest hazards to effective community building is to assume that all of us approach problems in the same way. Nature-based leadership makes it clear that we must address problems from an ecological perspective. Within a living ecosystem, remember that every organism has a niche, a contribution to make. In the context of learning preferences and personality traits, we recognise that there are authentically different preferences, and that none is more effective or better than another. Each of us can learn from one another, and any group tends to be served well by having a variety of preferences in the mix. That is inevitable in most groups, simply by virtue of the inherent diversity among any group of ten or more people — unless they have been organised by learning style in the first place.

Here is a simple way to conduct a personal self-assessment of your own preferences. Read each of the following descriptions of an activity and decide which of them sounds like something you would prefer over the others. Think in terms of your first choice, second, third and fourth. After reading all four choices, rank them in order of your preference—from most to least appealing.

1. Ask a number of conservation and environment leaders why they take the time to get involved and why they care about the environment. Write or tell a story about why leaders care.
2. Conduct a fact-based analysis of the number of native and nonnative species of vegetation that exist in your community — or any other fact-based analysis that would be helpful to understanding local ecosystems. Document and report the results.
3. Build a demonstration water purification system to show how a household can conserve and protect water resources — or build something else of practical value that you can do in a hands-on way that will demonstrate something useful.
4. Invent a way to mobilise people to take action — or invent some other way to stretch the edges of people’s thinking about how to solve problems affecting the environment.

The first activity corresponds to the preferences of the Poet, the second to the Scholar, the third to the Engineer, the fourth to the Entrepreneur.

After you’ve picked the activity you would be most likely to choose over the others, see whether the brief description below seems to be a match with your own preferences. Look at each of the other choices you made, in their order of preference. See whether your selections — from most to least preferred — seem to be a match for the kinds of approaches to learning you prefer.

Obviously, these are a short-form introduction to these learning style preferences. Whether your choices seem a fit for you or not, the process is a way to begin to appreciate the notion of invisible differences.

Poet

These are the folks who want to have a reason to be involved. They want to answer the question “Why care?” before they choose to learn about something. They tend to like personal involvement, wanting to know why it matters to them to engage.

Scholar

Scholars like the facts. While the poets tend to have some emotional involvement in what they learn, and how they learn it, scholars don’t want to muddy the waters much with emotion. They tend to be good readers, if not listeners, and like going to substantive sources of information. They prefer to approach things rationally, to the extent possible. They are looking for answers to the question, “What?” They want to know the facts.

Engineers

These folks are “hands-on.” If something can be built, not just talked about, that is their preference. They prefer to get to action. “How?” is the question they ask themselves and try to answer by doing.

Entrepreneur

These folks like to transform things from “what is” to what could be. They tend to ask themselves, “What if?” If we tried it this way, what would happen — or if we took this approach, what results would we get? They tend to use their intuition, moving quickly to action if something “feels right.”

Each of us holds within us the capacity for all of these learning style preferences — and each of us does tend to approach learning with one of these preferences more “front and centre” than the others.

We each begin the process of developing our learning-style preferences as children. Not surprising, we carry those preferences with us throughout our lives. What is surprising is that we tend to think — even as adults — that everyone else must prefer to learn in the same ways we ourselves do. Even if these differences are brought to our attention in our youth, they are not often acknowledged in the context of families, neighbourhoods, work settings and organisations. Within businesses and a variety of work environments, we are quick to acknowledge that we have seen increasing attention to use of personality inventories and other devices for discerning different styles among employees. There is still much work to be done within work environments, and even more to be done to carry some of what can be learned from those tools to the diverse kinds of cultural and environmental contexts that people

bring to the organisational settings in which issues affecting people and the planet are being addressed internationally such as those within the International Union for Conservation of Nature and its commissions.

We offer learning styles and preferences as one means by which to understand invisible differences. Our purpose is to increase the options for each of us to stretch our capacity to learn beyond our well-developed preferences and habits. It is also to prepare us for the inevitable variety of people we find in any family, neighborhood, school, business, civic, organisation or community setting.

Any preferred approach to learning is cultivated through habit. Our preferences, however, need not imprison us. Each learning style has value and merit. That we have such preferences need not isolate us but can be a foundation from which to expand our options. In fact, given how the human brain functions, we all have inherent capacities to expand our repertoire of preferences and skills.

If one reason to learn more about learning preferences is to expand our individual capacities for effective problem solving, another is to increase the likelihood that varied groups of people will be able to work collaboratively to solve problems — again, whether in families, neighbourhoods, schools, businesses, civic, church or other organisational settings. In fact, by appreciating that there are differences in any group that have to do with how people prefer to solve problems, we can begin to plan for those differences. We can learn to respect the fact that problems will tend to be solved more effectively in a group setting if the group has various skill sets, and therefore diverse strengths.

There is an interesting finding from the world of business that speaks to the power of respecting this variety. It goes like this: Teams of people who have similar learning styles will tend to quickly come up with solutions to problems. Groups of people with a wide variety of learning style preferences tend to take far longer to come up with solutions to problems. Whose solutions endure? Those that came from the diverse, rather than like-minded, groups of people had more inherent resilience and tended to last longer when applied in real-world settings.

With this as rationale, in part, for why it is useful and important to learn about how people prefer to learn, here is a framework for understanding these invisible differences in greater detail. These insights are all applied actively and intentionally within the practice of nature-based leadership.

Subjective and objective

sub jec'tive, adjective. exhibiting or affected by personal bias, emotional background.

ob jec' tive, adjective. exhibiting or characterised by the emphasis upon or tendency to view events, phenomena, ideas, etc., as external and apart from self-consciousness; not subjective, hence detached, impersonal, unprejudiced.

Subjective

A major component of understanding learning-style preferences is to note the differences between subjective and objective learning. A person who prefers to learn subjectively tends to want the content and processes to be personally meaningful. They will judge the worth of what is being learned by asking the question, "What does this have to do with my life? Why is this important?" For example, if such a person is asked to name all of the capital cities of the nations in Africa there will be less enthusiasm than if the question were, "In which capital would you most like to live if you could, and why?" The subjectively-biased person wishes for personal fulfillment of emotions and feelings as well as knowledge.

Objective

People with an objective preference are far more interested in whether what they learn can meet the test of accuracy. They want the knowledge they acquire to be verified by academic rigor. In fact, they prefer that the knowledge they seek is seen as true by the culture at large. An objectively-biased person might relish making a list of endangered species or watersheds in a region. Both tasks have a right answer and can be checked in standard references. As youth who prefer objectivity mature, they tend to be drawn to content and methodologies that reflect disciplined scholarship in lay and professional fields. This does not mean they will necessarily be your community's accountants, physicians, or scientists. They might, but they could also be mechanics, pilots, athletes, academics or any number of other things. Each will tend to have a commitment to learning, and testing their learning, against objective measures.

Subjectivity and objectivity are simply preferences. In the long run, one tendency is based on how it feels and the other is based on the data on which it is grounded. People demonstrate their invisible differences

when they select, through habit, the means by which they process information to learn. As each of us experiences more success with our preferred style as we live more and more years, we can become less flexible, less aware and less tolerant of others' preferences. On the other hand, if we realize that we personally have all these capacities within ourselves, and that the decisions of any group will tend to be strengthened by the combined use of these different preferences, we can move ourselves tangibly toward greater flexibility and fluency of thinking. We can also be more effective as facilitators of collaborative problem solving in any setting. We can be more effective leaders.

Active and reflective

ac tive, adjective. exhibiting a process in which an effect is achieved or function is performed; the doing of something.

re flec tive, adjective. exhibiting mental consideration, contemplation.

There is another pair of preferences that also forms the foundation for learning styles. People tend to prefer to learn by being active or by being reflective. Many people, for example, feel that time is being wasted if there is not a flurry of activity that accompanies learning. "Don't just stand there, do something!" might be their slogan. Others prefer the tranquility of time to reflect before their learning has meaning. They might prefer a banner that reads, "Don't just do something, stand there!"

Taking action has more popular appeal in a society that emphasises productivity and results. It indicates that something is getting done. From Sunday school, where a child might be told that "the devil finds work for idle hands," to schools where children who daydream and gaze out of windows are brought back abruptly to "pay attention," many cultures put a prevailing emphasis on the value of action. Moving too quickly to action can mean we did so without enough consideration of the consequences of those actions. On the other hand, too much reflection can mean immobility.

Combining these preferences into characteristic styles:

getting to know the people

We can begin to describe the characteristics of people who cluster their preferences for either objectivity or subjectivity, action or reflection, into a combination that can be described as a learning style. Again,

these styles are simply preferences. Each of us has the capacity to use all these styles; we simply tend to favor one or two more than the others.

Subjective/reflective

Poet

Subjective learners tend to be deeply immersed in their emotions and feelings. Reflective learners cherish the opportunity to carefully explore the meaning of their learning experiences. We have chosen the metaphor, the Poet, to characterize those people who tend to prefer processing information and experience through a combination of subjectivity and reflection. The Poet likes intimacy and courtesy. They tend to value friendship and show genuine concern for others. Poets find it pleasant to learn by engaging in conversation with others. They enjoy working in small groups where they can get to know others personally. They are interested in the personal well-being of others and often act passionately as peacemakers, resolving problems among coworkers, family members and friends. Poets want what they learn to apply directly to themselves. Remote abstractions are not satisfying. The question asked by the Poet is “Why?” Poets need to know why they should care about being involved in the project at hand. If you can give a Poet a reason to participate, they can be a great contributor. If you haven’t answered the question, “Why care?,” you probably won’t get a Poet’s attention.

Serving the poet: implications for building community

Whatever the setting—family, civic group, business, or non-profit organization as just a few examples—there are likely to be some Poets in the mix. Whatever the agenda, it helps the Poet to have a way to ensure that their personal stake will be addressed.

Here are a few examples of ways to plan for the Poet’s needs:

Keynote address

Start a keynote address with a personal story that connects to members of the audience. Describe why you are speaking and why your topic is important to those in the audience before you get too deeply involved in the content.

Staff meeting

Imagine you and 10 or 15 members of your organisation are working together to accomplish something tangible to improve the habitat for wildlife in your region. At the beginning of the meeting, take the time to make sure everyone has the opportunity to say, briefly, why they care about the project — and what they want to accomplish from this

particular meeting. Giving each person a brief opportunity to speak personalises the process, and also cultivates the kind of personal involvement that Poets enjoy.

Business

The manager who walks around and checks personally on their employees has the opportunity to hear the Poet's stories and suggestions. Inviting the Poet's opinion and acknowledging their ideas with respectful consideration are ways to keep the Poet happy and simultaneously serve the business.

Community engagement event

Create a feeling of being "at home" for the volunteers who serve your organisation. Start each activity with an opportunity for each community volunteer to speak. That honors the individuals involved, and creates a climate for friendly appreciation of one another essential to the optimal engagement of the Poet. Something as simple as asking "What do you most enjoy about volunteering for this organisation" and recording the responses for all to see is a way to create that climate.

Reflective/objective

Scholar

The reflective learner likes to mull things over and approaches learning contemplatively. Combine a preference for contemplation with a preference for objectivity and the metaphor of Scholar emerges. In the classic tradition, people with these preferences tend to have an abiding respect for facts. They seek accuracy, order and correctness. Sometimes, in the search for these qualities, these people may not notice deadlines come and go. With a preference for exactness, they often wish for more time to acquire more data, more substance, more knowledge. Objectivity to many means having the "answers" and results that are quantifiable. Scholars ask the question "What?" They want to know the basis for understanding a problem. They are happy to be provided information in a concise, linear fashion. They don't mind listening — in fact, the traditional approach with an expert providing a lecture is quite appealing to the Scholar's tastes.

Serving the scholar: implications for building community

Once again, if you find yourself in a public setting, you are likely to find some Scholars in the mix. Scholars tend to be relatively patient with the Poet's need for a rationale. And, because they too are reflective, they can wait to take some action. They do, however, need well-organised information that appears to be accurate as a foundation for their

interests in being involved in any community initiatives. Here are a few examples of ways to plan for the Scholar's needs:

Keynote address

After you've given the Poet a reason to listen to you, and a personal hook of some kind, it is time to address the Scholar's needs. The second part of any keynote address is the section in which you can lay out the facts. Do it concisely, clearly, and substantively — and you will gain the respect of the Scholar.

Staff meeting

Imagine the same group of people working on an issue. The Scholars want and need to make sure that the project is standing on solid ground. A briefing based on research, a presentation from experts, a well-prepared overview of the salient facts affecting the situation — these are examples of how to serve the needs of the Scholar as well as the group as a whole.

Business

Invite the Scholar to assemble a team of people to present an analysis of business centres within the corporation. They are likely to be good at synthesising a variety of quantitative data and presenting it succinctly. Use the presentation as part of a strategic visioning session in which the Poets have already established the rationale for the importance of the vision — now the Scholars can provide a factual data base from which to inform the visioning process.

Community engagement event

Most community-based public events in the last several centuries were effectively designed to meet the needs of the Scholar, in the sense that Scholars are patient and appreciative recipients of information through traditional means such as lectures and formal presentations. It is appropriate to serve the Scholar in any setting — with, for example, concise delivery of information in a succinct oral presentation. To only serve the Scholar, however, misses the opportunity to engage the whole brain, and the whole ecology of learners who tend to be in the mix.

Objective/active

Engineer

The unusual combination of objectivity and action becomes clear if we remember times when we followed a recipe to make a meal, or read and used instruction sheets to build a model, or read a manual to install a software program on a computer. Engineers need a conceptual

blueprint to provide the basis for taking action. With such a starting place for guidance, Engineers move quickly into action. In no time at all, there is a gourmet meal, a model city and a communications network! The Engineer is a willing partner to the Scholar as they quickly find ways to apply the objective “truths” of reflective colleagues. If the Engineer’s urge to take action exceeds their concern for objectivity, problems may arise. Engineers tend to fix things that are not broken and live a lifestyle of “Ready, Fire, Aim!” Asking the question “How?” Engineers want to know how to do things, how to put ideas into action. They want to be grounded in solid information; they simply need to work at things in practical, constructive, and, ideally, “hands-on” ways.

Serving the engineer: implications for building community

There often are not a large number of Engineers in collaboratively-oriented organisations. They frequently are too busy taking action to have the patience to sit through meetings. However, there are usually a few in the mix — to be cherished for their need to get things done rather than simply talk about it! Here are a few examples of ways to plan for the Engineer’s needs.

Keynote address

After establishing the rationale, and providing the facts, now it is time to address the needs of the Engineer who may be sitting in the audience. Ideally, the Engineer would have the opportunity to take your ideas and try them. In lieu of that, offer “10 things you can do” or “five easy steps for putting these ideas to work.” Put the steps in sequence with visuals. Use a combination of numbered steps and simple instructions interspersed with video clips that show what the process looks like.

Staff meeting

These folks are the hardest to get in the door to a staff meeting, and the most difficult to keep in their chairs for any period of time. They get frustrated with “process” and have a limited tolerance for seemingly interminable discussions about why something is important. Knowing this, make sure every meeting includes some steps for taking action. Use a timeline with names attached to the goals you set, and a means by which to be accountable for results. Engineers get results. They will put up with the discussion phases of a process as long as there is some payoff in visible and tangible results.

Business

Engineers tend to be tenacious. They love to solve problems that involve doing something physical and tangible. In business settings, they’ll take a product idea and literally build it. They will invent systems as long as

they can follow them through to action. Most businesses need at least a few Engineers to make sure that something tangible gets accomplished. On the other hand, we've seen some businesses, because of their mission, made up almost totally of Engineers. That too can be a limitation if the bias is always toward action without reflection.

Community engagement event

Engineers are the perfect “hands on” learners. They are the ones who want to actually **do** the lab experiment, plant the plants, and build the demonstration projects. They are a perfect complement to the other learning styles, those who prefer to observe and make sense of it all, without building it themselves. The shift to more action-oriented, hands-on learning has served the Engineers. Once again, the key is an appropriate, balanced mix of opportunities for each of the learning-style preferences to be engaged and contributing.

Active/subjective

The entrepreneur

Action characterizes the entrepreneurial person just as it does the Engineer. The primary difference is that the Entrepreneur relies heavily on personal knowledge and that perplexing form of making decisions called hunches. This does not mean the decisions are necessarily flawed. Rather, Entrepreneurs often read the edges of situations and see paths to success that few others discover. They are risk takers. People with other learning styles often sense an air of danger in the Entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs learn from everything — they turn all experience into information and knowledge to use when needed. They tend to be casual with the conventions of others. This offends some — particularly the Scholars who are substantively opposite in preference to the entrepreneurs. Scholars are objective and reflective in style, Entrepreneurs are subjective and active. Scholars want far more evidence before they take action than is the characteristic style of the Entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs ask the question “What if?” They love taking an idea and turning it into something else. Invention is their favorite mode. As a result, theirs is often the least predictable of the four learning styles.

Serving the entrepreneur: implications for building community

Entrepreneurs are in some ways the most quixotic of learners. Because they love to invent and adapt, and because they operate on less data than many others, they move quickly. Most important, if everything is presented to them as complete, they are bored and will look somewhere

else to apply their creative problem-solving abilities. Here are a few examples of ways to plan for the Entrepreneur's needs.

Keynote address

No matter how personally inspiring your presentation, no matter how solid the evidence you offer for your recommendations, no matter how clear your counsel about how to replicate or apply your insights, Entrepreneurs still want the opportunity to turn what you have to say into something that is fresh and unique from their own perspective. So, at the closing of your keynote, put your ideas into a larger context where there is room for the creativity of others.

Staff meeting

Entrepreneurs are often visionaries. They can take intractable problems and suddenly leap to a creative solution that, when applied, will work in the real world. Their need to get to action can deeply frustrate the Scholars in particular. In the context of a meeting or series of meetings to work collaboratively to solve a problem, make sure there is room for the Entrepreneurs to invent. In combination with the strong rationale of the Poet, the objective substance of the Scholar, and the methodical hands-on accomplishments of the Engineer, the Entrepreneur's insights and tendency to act can be just the right additional element. You lose the Entrepreneur's energy and talents if too much lead time is spent on homework that they think is unnecessary and ponderous, and if you wait too long to test the ideas in the real world.

Business

Many businesses are based on that first entrepreneurial vision that saw a need and moved to fill it. Dreamers who can fulfill the dream through action epitomise the effectiveness of the Entrepreneur. They sometimes can be spread too thin, enticed by the abundance of possibilities for action in the world. In a business context, you will often find one or a small group of these intuitive and action-oriented people. Surround them with the detail orientation of the Engineers and the Scholars and their vision will tend to be realised with follow-through over time. Add the Poets to the mix and the world will hear the story of why the business is valuable and deserves the consumer's or investor's confidence.

Community engagement event

Entrepreneurs are typically those people in a group who don't fit the mold. They are a burr in the side of many, walking in the door with all the answers without cracking the page of a single book. They quickly synthesise, and fill in the blanks, without reading everything word for word. They optimise the intuitive leap. Create the space in any

organisation for the Entrepreneur to see the reasons of the Poet, benefit from the detail of the Scholar, watch it being built and how it works as the Engineer gets things done. Then leave room for the Entrepreneur to add the unpredictable, the fresh idea, the intuitive leap that makes it all have promise in another setting, another way.

ACTIVITY

Valuing variety

1. Revisit the four approaches to learning. Now that you have learned more about each of the preferences, have your answers changed? Draw a circle with the four quadrants. Fill each quadrant with just enough color to indicate your own personal preferences. For example, if you are a Poet, fill that quadrant completely. If your second preference is to be an Entrepreneur, fill that quadrant about three-quarters. If next you have attributes of the Scholar, fill that quadrant about half. Finally, if your least-preferred way of learning is like the Engineer's, fill in the quadrant about one-quarter. Take a look and imagine this is your "whole brain." Under different circumstances, you can exercise some capacities more than others. Remember, the preferences are personal. Celebrate the variety within yourself.
2. Without pigeonholing people, do an environmental scan of the groups of people with whom you participate — whether at work, school, recreation or any other pursuit where you spend a lot of time. Based on these brief descriptions, diagram at least one of the groups using the quadrant circle. Put the initials of each person in the quadrant that you imagine is their preferred learning style. Think about the ways in which this diversity of preferences serves the purposes of the group.

3. Take the four preferences to members of the group. Ask each person to self-identify their preferences. You will likely be surprised. That is one of the gifts of getting to know more about the learning-style preferences of the people you are close to. The variety is enriching, and those differences are invisible.

4. If you are in a management role, or even if not, encourage the use of a personal inventory — whether personality, learning, or another kind — as a way for any group of people to get to know more about themselves and one another. Discuss the results.

Remember, each preference has validity and diversity tends to be an indicator of a healthy ecosystem — whether family, civic, work or in nature.



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Motivation

Personal motivation is another area in which invisible differences are important. Just as with preferences related to learning styles, we can never see another's motivation.

Assor and Vansteenkiste (2009) provides a framework categorising motivations into four distinct types, each with unique implications for leadership, pro-environmental behavior, and action or inaction.

These types are:

Extrinsic motivation (external source, action): This type of motivation arises from external rewards or pressures, prompting individuals to act. For instance, a leader might use incentives or consequences to encourage people to adopt eco-friendly practices. While this can be effective in achieving short-term goals, it may not foster a genuine, long-term commitment to environmental stewardship or connection to their natural environment. An example would be students picking up litter in return for a sticker or a corporation paying staff to volunteer at a community tree planting event.

Identified motivation (external source, non-action): Here, the motivation comes from an external source, but it is accepted and valued by the individual. This leads to a more voluntary form of engagement, where the person aligns with the external values even if they do not always translate into immediate actions. Leaders leveraging this form of motivation might emphasise the alignment of pro-environmental behaviors with the organisation's values, helping team members internalise these goals as part of their personal identity.

Intrinsic motivation (internal source, action): Intrinsic motivation is driven by internal desires and interests, leading to self-initiated actions. Leaders who nurture intrinsic motivation focus on creating an environment where individuals find personal satisfaction and meaning in pro-environmental actions. This often results in sustained, enthusiastic engagement because the actions are inherently rewarding to the individual.

Introjected motivation (internal source, non-action): This type of motivation originates internally but is driven by internal pressures to avoid feeling guilt and maintain pride. This is often cited as a motivator in the decolonisation, indigenisation, and self-determination of Aboriginal learning and education in Australia and for recognition and access of connection to Country. For example, students begin to enjoy studying traditional ecological knowledge because helping them to understand their Country makes them feel good about themselves. While it may not always lead to immediate action, it reflects a form of internal conflict where individuals feel compelled to adhere to certain standards or expectations (a lived experience by many oppressed cultures and identities). Leaders need to recognise and address these internal pressures, providing support and creating a proactive and supportive culture around pro-environmental behaviours, potentially transforming introjected motivation into more active forms.

Understanding these different forms of motivation is crucial for both individuals and organisations in fostering nature-based leadership. For individuals, recognising their own motivations can lead to more effective personal strategies for achieving environmental goals. For organisations, understanding the motivational landscape can inform leadership approaches to better engage employees and align organisational practices with broader environmental objectives.

By reconciling and leveraging these motivations, nature-based leadership can create a more harmonious and effective strategy for promoting sustainable, regenerative practices and accounting for diverse perspectives. Leaders can tailor their approaches to address the specific motivational characteristics of their team members, fostering a culture of environmental responsibility to be both internally rewarding and externally impactful.

ACTIVITY

My motivational preferences

Think about the four motivational styles. Which do you think is your personal preference? Since you are reading this guide to nature-based leadership, you likely already appreciate the need for humans to take action to benefit the environment. What are examples of ways to respect each preference — and still lead to action to care for the Earth?



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Intercultural communications

Just as learning-style preferences and motivations are forms of invisible differences, culturally-influenced preferences may be invisible as well. For example, these differences can be related to gender, economics, faith and ethnicity. They can arise from generations of influence, and recent life experiences. It is respectful and helpful to enter any group of people with a view that there are likely to be differences — not seen, but present — that will exist among us. Without preparing oneself and others to greet such differences with appreciation, the group's work together will likely be hampered. It is the differences we cannot see that tend to get in the way of our effectiveness in working together. Invisible differences matter.

Knowing more about invisible differences helps us to understand the varied ways in which people in families, groups, businesses, organisations and communities prefer to solve problems.

One of the forms of creating, honoring, sustaining and nurturing community over time has to do with a few artful courtesies. One of those is to acknowledge people. Personal acknowledgment is a particularly important courtesy. It conveys respect and cultivates a feeling of being welcome, “at home,” and held with regard. In settings where people do not know one another, or are growing to know one another,

or even in settings where they do know one another — it is always important to personally greet and acknowledge each person who enters the room. Staff and business meetings are no different than dinners in your home in this regard. Such courtesies can be particularly powerful in settings where people have highly divergent backgrounds and may feel “culturally different” as they enter an unfamiliar setting.

Differences divide us. They also enrich us. One of the first imperatives in diverse organisational settings is to establish an environment where differences are acknowledged respectfully. Once that has occurred, then it is possible to build a foundation for cohesion and cooperation.

Whatever the community, wherever it exists, there will be perceptions that divide and discriminate. We have found it to be particularly helpful, as a result, to start with the differences that are not obvious. That is why we refer to invisible differences. We recognise differences that are not tied to skin color or other physical attributes. We start with those differences that have to do with preferences for learning. Doing so quickly moves people’s concerns about differences historically associated with “race” or ethnicity — and brings the focus to the enriching common ground of shared learning and common purpose.

With that as a foundation, it is helpful to move to the broad topic of culture. Respecting differences, acknowledging personal stories, and creating a setting in which mutual appreciation can be cultivated — these are the foundations for intercultural communications and intercultural learning in community settings.

The idea of intercultural communications is to cross the boundaries of cultures. You rarely fully step into another culture; you can come to the boundary, see, and appreciate it. As a nature-based leader, there are ways to facilitate communications in these complex and rich settings. Think of the “edge effect” in natural systems: the places where habitats overlap, at the edges, tend to be the most biologically diverse. From a human perspective, they are fertile grounds for creativity, innovation, adaptation and effective problem-solving.

Here are some guidelines:

- **Don’t assume you know where another person has walked.** Whether their life history, ethnic background, family life, or economic circumstance — you can’t be sure. The first rule is “don’t assume.”

- **Begin by listening** — fully, authentically, without preparing your next speech, and without prejudging those who are speaking.
- **Stay open**, even if stressed.
- **Respect yourself**, even if others behave as if they do not respect you.
- **Respect others**, even if you do not agree with them.
- **Stay committed**.

The big challenge is keeping all of us together in a sufficiently coherent whole — that is, in communities — so that generations to come will have the kinds of opportunities for peace and fulfillment we imagine are the rights of all.

ACTIVITY

Graceful arts

1. Think of the settings in which you feel most welcome and at home. Think of those places where you are least at home and feel unwelcome. Identify five things about each that characterise the differences.
2. Beauty is a powerful friend in creating settings in which people feel welcome and at home. Whether making a meal for yourself to enjoy alone, or gathering friends and family around you to enjoy a meal, pay as much attention to the setting as to the meal itself. A single flower in a vase, the smell of hearty soup or warm bread — each of these can enhance the sense that life is to be cherished and aesthetics nourish the soul. Make these "graceful arts" a part of at least one meal a day for two weeks. At the end of that time, reflect on what you've learned and how you felt through the process — especially comparing the differences between when you practice those arts, and when you do not.
3. Learning about tradition and ceremony in varied cultures is another source of insight about the graceful arts. Include traditional cultures from all over the world and directions: East, Far East, West, Global North and Global South. Each month for one year, choose a culture from which to learn. Pick a subject, like seasonal change or child-rearing. Create a collection of stories and examples from each culture. Look for commonalities and differences in the patterns that connect. Practice a graceful art from each culture to bring beauty to your surroundings.



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The power of metaphor

The words we choose have more impact than we sometimes consider. One way has to do with what metaphors engender in our individual thinking, and within groups, including at social, political and cultural levels.

At the most specific level, we have found that organic, biological, natural systems metaphors have inherent the capacity to stimulate regenerative thinking. They tend to nourish creativity. Mechanical, non-living metaphors have the opposite effect. They are controlling, limiting and non-regenerative. “Circle the wagons” has one effect. “Life is an eddy in the water’s flow” has another.

Nature-based leadership is based on natural systems metaphors.

That is one of the most important distinctions between nature-based leadership and conventional, dominant, mechanistic, and hierarchical leadership models.

Nature-based leadership requires a profound shift in our metaphorical framing of the world — moving from mechanistic to systemic, from individualistic to collective, and from anthropocentric to ecocentric views of the world. Framing shapes our perceptions, aspirations,

and actions, acting as an invisible force that drives cultural narratives and encompasses societal norms.

Use of mechanistic metaphors has long framed and dominated our view of the natural world. This worldview reduces nature to a collection of isolated parts functioning like a machine, with humanity as the “engineer” controlling and manipulating its components. In this view, forests are “resources,” rivers are “inputs,” and species are “units” to be managed. The mechanistic metaphor justifies exploitation, viewing ecosystems as lifeless entities to be dissected and commodified.

A systemic metaphor and framing, on the other hand, recognises nature as a complex, interdependent web of relationships among living entities. From a mechanistic lens, a forest might be seen as a collection of trees with only commercial value. Through a systemic metaphor framing, however, the forest becomes a living network of trees, soil, fungi, animals, and weather patterns, each influencing, sustaining, and generating value for one another, humans included. Caring for nature from a systemic perspective is not about maximising “outputs” and “profits,” but enhancing resilience, balance, and a thriving process of co-creation with nature.

Individualistic metaphors often emphasize personal success, independence, and self-interest. In individualistic societies, success and status are often equated with wealth accumulation and consumption. In such a worldview, metaphors like “self-made” individuals, “climbing the ladder” of success, and “competing” for resources highlight the importance of personal gain over communal well-being. Advertising such individualistic cultural framings further reinforces metaphors that tie our happiness to ownership, our fulfilment to material gains, and our identity to what we possess.

By shifting to collective and nature-based metaphors, we can inspire a sense of shared purpose and interdependence. Instead of “climbing the ladder,” we can speak of “mycelial relationships” and “weaving” together. Collective and community metaphors frame progress not as an individual race but as a communal journey, where everyone’s well-being is intertwined. “Abundance” is not associated with material wealth but with thriving ecosystems, meaningful relationships, and rich nature routines. “Growth” is reimagined as the flourishing of all life forms, rather than endless economic expansion.

Since the Industrial Revolution, a dominant framing has artificially separated human development from the ecological functioning of the biosphere. This anthropocentric framing of progress is an ecologically unsustainable fiction that drove humanity to exceed multiple planetary boundaries and jeopardises the prospects of future generations for a peaceful, healthy, and fulfilling life. Such disconnected framing from nature is a defining characteristic of the Anthropocene. Disconnected metaphors portray humans as “masters of nature,” existing apart from the ecosystems that sustain us. This framing underpins an unsustainable form of progress based on overconsumption, resource exploitation, and environmental degradation.

Nature-based ecocentric metaphors frame humans as integral participants in nature’s processes. We are “one thread in the web of life,” intricately connected to the plants, animals, air, water, and earth that make our existence possible. By adopting ecocentric language, we redefine success not in terms of domination, but in terms of harmony and balance. For instance, happiness is not equated with acquiring more but with thriving alongside other species and nurturing the ecosystems upon which we depend. The framing of human development is based on our ecological reality of being one species in a biosphere of many species.

In much of the world, particularly in highly industrialised capitalistic nations, the “Newtonian paradigm” has had a disproportionate impact on the metaphors people choose, and therefore the ways in which people think. It goes like this. The philosopher-mathematician Sir Isaac Newton made it easy for people to call upon the workings of gears, clocks, switches, and levers to communicate how we interact with the world. This multiplied to the tools of war, and those of the Internet environment. Highly desirable results are often described as “working like clockwork” or “driving the engines of war.” We say we “flipped the switch” as we move to a new perspective. We report that we “applied leverage” when we gained a competitive advantage. “Light bulbs going on,” “finely meshed gears,” “keeping things on the back burner,” and a “perfectly tuned engine” have come to represent how our minds work. Failure is characterised by concepts such as “a wrench in the works,” “short circuits,” and “blown fuses.” The human mind is a computer; our planetary home is “spaceship Earth.”

These and many other mechanical metaphors have become common in the vocabulary we use to describe the world. Mechanical metaphors require a source of external energy. They depend on maintenance from outside sources. Clocks do not wind themselves, computers

need electricity or some other power source, a spaceship needs mechanics and fuel, and weapons of war need instructions in order to be deployed.

Mechanical ways of thinking promote mechanical approaches to solving problems — whether one is thinking about oneself, relationships with others, participation in institutions, or conflicts in the global environment. When issues arise, we look for bigger hammers and more powerful weapons.

Biological metaphors, in contrast, have inherent within them the capacity for life. They are regenerative, and they do not require external intervention from humans, nor external maintenance, as do machines. Biological metaphors tend to be healing. They are nourishing, made of the stuff of life itself.

Biological metaphors are alive. They hold the power to self-regulate. Mechanical metaphors are dead. They require external force and energy in order to have any effect.

Here is a comparison of some of the dominant characteristics of each type of metaphor.

MECHANICAL METAPHORS	NATURE-BASED METAPHORS
Nonorganic	Organic
Inanimate	Animate
Nonliving	Living
Static	Dynamic
Nonrenewable	Renewable
Non-regenerative	Regenerative
Externally powered	Internally powered
Externally regulated	Self regulated
Limited options	Numerous options
Finite	Infinite

The metaphors we choose have more impact than is commonly recognised. They carry the meaning beyond the meaning. They define what we can imagine and choose in our daily life. If I perceive the world as a machine, I will respond to it accordingly. If I perceive the environment in which I exist as alive, I am stepping into an open system with the capacity for continuing life. I have many more options

if I choose the living world as my source of inspiration and the medium through which I choose to communicate. Metaphors are our medium. They influence who we are, how we think, and the ways in which we affect all others. Metaphors matter.

Ecocentric framing and nature-based metaphors are the foundation for a form of leadership that is sustainable and transformative. Our language shapes our desires and aspirations; when we choose metaphors that reflect care, interdependence, and connection with nature, we establish pathways for a healthier, more resilient world. This approach nurtures human environments in which people recognise that each of us is part of an ecosystem, with all of us having contributions to make.

The results are collaborative, respectful, resilient, and effective. That's in terms of human to human relationships. Applying this shift in consciousness to human relationships with the rest of nature provides the nutrients for regenerative, healing, healthy ecosystems and is what is needed to re-right the balance between humans and the rest of nature. This shift is possible, and within our reach.

ACTIVITY

My metaphors

1. Use your journal to keep track of all the metaphors you use during a one-hour period. Keep a list in two columns — one for biological/natural systems metaphors and the other for cultural/mechanical metaphors.
2. Check the tendency to use one kind of metaphor more than another. Reflect on your results within your journal. Which do you tend to use most?
3. Write a page of observations in your journal about the differences in the effectiveness of the metaphors you choose.
4. If you found that you used no metaphors in that one-hour period, make a change. In your next conversation, try using a few of each kind of metaphor. Then reflect on and write about the results.



Photo credit: Adobe Stock

Applying nature-based leadership to IUCN'S culture and commissions

It's a natural for the International Union for Conservation of Nature to take a leading role in modeling, sharing, teaching and facilitating the use of principles of nature-based leadership. What better organisation to embody this approach given its role as the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it.

We suggest combining application of the natural guides with use of learning styles as a design process, accompanied by insights about personal motivations, the power of words and intercultural communications. The IUCN Commission on Education and Communication offers guides and facilitated training experiences to assist the IUCN Secretariat and Commissions in leading the way with this nature-based solution to positive and transformative leadership at a critically important time.

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RESOURCES

Centre for Environment Education. www.ceeindia.org

Children & Nature Network. www.childrenandnature.org

IUCN Commission on Education and Communication. www.iucn/cec

Organisation for Environmental Education and Protection, OpEPA. www.opepa.org

Project Learning Tree. www.plt.org

Project WILD. www.fishwildlife.org/projectwild

APPENDICES

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Nature-based leadership exercise

Nature-based leadership is an ecological leadership style that embodies principles from nature as a guide to human relationships.

One of the natural guides is the **diversity principle**: There are different ways to be a leader. Each has value. And we all have within us some aspects of each of these styles. Try each one, and see which one you think you manifest most often, and in what circumstances.

Dandelion

Bending, flexing in the wind. Laughing and playful, humorous. Moves beyond the rules and norms of social structure. Spreads ideas, gets into the cracks and sees what germinates and takes root. **Feet shoulder width, knees flexing, hips loose, arms swaying. Relaxed with a rooted core.**

Jaguar

Getting the details in order, linear and left brained. Starting and finishing. Driven and focused. **Warrior pose. Feet strong, balanced, hands in front and shoulders squared. No wobbling, solid core.**

Geese

Adventurous and visionary, exploring the unknown and open to new ideas, inclusion, diversity and complexity. Dreams and imagination. Right brained. Open Heart. Perspective from 3000 feet, 1500 miles a day, 40 mph. **Arms open, heart open, feet shoulder width apart. Peripheral vision engaged.**

Oak Tree

Serving courageously and empathetically, includes the human and more than human species. Providing stability and safety for all by caring for self, others and the earth. **Arms to the side, feet planted into the earth. Strong back, soft front.**

*Note: This exercise is inspired by Bill Plotkin's work from his book **Wild Mind**.*

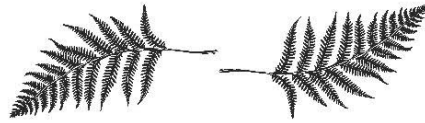
*For more information, contact: Cheryl Charles,
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Nature-based Leadership



Ten Guides to Healthy Relationships for People and the Planet



Niche is when every organism has a contribution to make to a living system.

Optimization happens when nature keeps energy in reserve.

Regeneration is the process of natural systems inherently renewing, generating continuing life.

Resilience is a characteristic of a diverse and healthy ecosystem that is able to adapt and survive.

Self-regulation is when we can self-organize and regulate, optimizing energy and minimizing negative effects of conflicts and change.



Adaptation allows organisms to make changes in their relationships to their environment over time in order to enhance the likelihood of success.

Community in nature is one in which all the individuals and groups of organisms interact with each other in a shared environment.

Connectedness is a characteristic of organisms in living communities. Organisms live in relationship to others.

Cooperation is a dominant life force within communities among and between species, as prevalent or more so than competition.

Diversity is an indicator of a healthy ecosystem, enhancing resilience and long-term success. Diversity favors survival.

**created by Dr. Cheryl Charles*

Nature-based leadership

Sample three day workshop



Activity	Activity description	Objective	Notes
DAY ONE			
Welcome and Statement of Purpose	Getting Started: - We are all leaders because we each impact and influence others. - Nature is a guide, an inspiration and teacher. - Nature nourishes our relationships with ourselves, others, and the natural world. - Meaningful experiences in nature lead to action to care for the natural world. - Nature-based leadership is inherently collaborative and generative.	Provide brief introductory orientation to our purpose: learning and practicing the skills and art of nature-based leadership.	Provide refreshments and create a welcoming setting. Seat participants in a circle so that everyone can see and hear one another. Pay attention to aesthetics including local fabrics and natural materials, including flowers if available. Provide markers and natural materials for people to create their own name tags, like “tree cookies” hung with strings.
Introductions and Why Care?	Introductions and getting to know the group.	Create a sense of community where every person is acknowledged and each voice is heard.	Seated in a circle, each person takes two to three minutes to introduce themselves offering what attracted them to this workshop, what concepts most resonate, what they want to learn, and what they hope to accomplish as a result.

Activity: A Tree	Lead participants through visualisation of a favorite tree. Invite the use of all the senses. Use tree metaphors, for example, Heartwood. Move into pairs for discussion, about four minutes in total for each pair.	Inspiration - Create a group mind and a way for participants to relax and become present. Become familiar with nature metaphors. Sensing, Observing, Sharing.	If possible, go outdoors to a natural area. People may spread out, as long as they can hear the facilitator clearly for the guided visualisation. Pair up outdoors to share their experiences.
Activity: Hard Eyes, Soft Eyes	If not outdoors already, go outside in nature and invite participants to walk around and choose a spot from which to stand or sit and look around. Once in the spot, participants should: 1). Slowly look around with hard eyes – identifying details. 2). Look around with soft eyes – feeling the landscape. The participants pair up to share their experience, about two minutes per person. Each person chooses another to tell their story again, however this time they bring awareness to the story's details. They switch again and tell their stories for the third time, however, they will bring awareness to the soft eyes, the feelings, and the general sensations evoked by the story. Everyone comes back together in a circle and popcorn style shares some of their observations	This activity's purpose is to situate the participant in an outdoor setting to begin to see it from different perspectives, in detail and holistically.	Through this activity, participants start to nourish a sense of intimacy, care, and connection with the other participants.

Presentation: Natural Guides to Nature-based Leadership	and insights about the experiences, noting the differences between hard eyes and soft eyes. The facilitator uses a linear presentation style, with powerpoint or an easel, to provide a substantive overview of the underlying content. As an introduction to the presentation, guide the group through a series of initial premises: • Human health and well-being are inextricably linked to the planet's health. • Direct experiences in nature nourish health, hope, creativity, and compassion. • Solutions to a healthy future can be found and applied through an integrated ecological approach with mind, heart, body and spirit in balance. • Nature-based leadership, which is inherently collaborative and generative, differs significantly from most current mechanistic and hierarchical leadership models.	The purpose is to provide a concise summary of the underlying principles and attributes of the natural guides to nature-based leadership.	Having been outdoors, up, active and largely in conversation with each other and members of the whole group, this is the time for the facilitator to concisely share foundational information with all participants at once. The concepts are the guiding principles for the entire workshop, and form the ecological framework for nature-based leadership.
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LUNCH BREAK Activity: Sit Spot	Present the Natural Guides to Nature-based Leadership. <i>Change:</i> Change is a natural part of the evolutionary process. <i>Connectedness:</i> Connectedness is a characteristic of organisms in living communities. <i>Cooperation:</i> Cooperation is a dominant life force within communities, among and between species, as prevalent or more so than competition. <i>Diversity:</i> Diversity indicates a healthy ecosystem, enhancing resilience and long-term success. <i>Niche:</i> In nature, every organism has a contribution to make, a job, and role to play. <i>Optimisation:</i> Nature keeps energy in reserve. <i>Self-regulation:</i> Natural systems tend to self-organise and self-regulate, optimising energy and minimising the adverse effects of conflicts and change. Participants are introduced to the idea of the sit spot and are informed about the story of the place to enhance a sense of belonging and respect for the land.	This exercise aims to integrate the slide show with experiential learning. By being in nature and thinking about the natural guides,	
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	Ask participants to choose a Sit Spot. The spot is to be a place of reflection and connection with nature throughout the workshop. At the spot, they are to reflect on the space, actively engage with what is around, and find time to rest the mind. While there, ask them to find examples of one or more of the natural guides to share as reflections with the group on their return.	participants will have the opportunity to embody and experience the principles firsthand.	
Discussion: How Natural Guides Apply Professionally	Count off participants to arrange them in groups of three. Ask them to share examples of the natural guides they found in their sit spots, and how those guides might apply to their work situations. Each person shares initially, and then the group discusses.	After reflection at their sit spot, this is now the first time to begin to explicitly talk about how the natural guides make sense to them when applied to their own life situations, beginning with their work environment.	
Activity: Kinesthetic Experience with Leadership Styles	Introduce four different leadership styles: Dandelion, Jaguar, Geese, Oak Lead the participants through physically demonstrating the style of each. Sample Introduction: Nature-based leadership is an ecological leadership	The purpose is to engage the whole body in a somewhat playful but illustrative exploration of diverse leadership styles.	A few additional insights: The dandelion has deep roots and airy seeds. This leadership type spreads ideas and germinates with brightness and ease. The jaguar is focused and detail-oriented; when it is set on a task, it follows it from start to finish. This leadership type

	style that embodies principles from nature as a guide to human relationships. One of the natural guides is the diversity principle: There are different ways to be a leader. Each has value. And we all have within us some aspects of each of these styles. Try each one, and see which one you think you manifest most often, and in what circumstances. Dandelion Bending, flexing in the wind. Laughing and playful, humorous. Moves beyond the rules and norms of social structure. Spreads ideas, gets into the cracks and sees what germinates and takes root. Feet shoulder width, knees flexing, hips loose, arms swaying. Relaxed with a rooted core. Jaguar Getting the details in order, linear and left brained. Starting and finishing. Driven and focused. Warrior pose. Feet strong, balanced, hands in front and shoulders squared. No wobbling, solid core. Geese Adventurous and visionary, exploring the unknown and open to new ideas,	Participants will have the opportunity to embody and experience the principles firsthand.	is always ready to go and solid all through. The geese have a panoramic vision of all the possibilities. They fly with an open heart and ever-seeing. The oak is the elder. This leadership type takes care of and provides food and shelter to all.
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Activity: Bringing the Concepts to Life	inclusion, diversity and complexity. Dreams and imagination. Right brained. Open Heart. Perspective from 3000 feet, 1500 miles a day, 40 mph. Arms open, heart open, feet shoulder width apart. Peripheral vision engaged. Oak Tree Serving courageously and empathetically, includes the human and more than human species. Providing stability and safety for all by caring for self, others and the earth. Arms to the side, feet planted into the earth. Strong back, soft front. Ask the participants their preferences. Do they favor one more than another? Possible discussion topics might include: In which leadership types do we seek refuge? In which do we stand most of our time? How can we move intentionally and shift styles when needed? Note: This exercise is inspired by Bill Plotkin's work from his book <i>Wild Mind</i>. Ask participants to group in threes and briefly describe a real problem each individual is dealing with in their work environment. Once described, each participant is to go find natural materials in their environment	The purpose of this activity is to combine self-awareness of a real problem, active listening on the part of other group members, and then tactile illustration of a metaphoric solution to a problem. Discussion helps to internalise the learnings.	As the participants share their problems with the other two individuals, the groups are building ecosystems of reciprocity and care, niche and cooperation.
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Closing Circle	(without doing harm to the environment itself) to build a nest or some other natural artifact to symbolise their challenges. Explain what they have built and get ideas for how to solve the problem. Conclude with a group conversation on this topic: “Diversity in nature is a source of evolution in nature, while diversity in humanity has become a problem and a challenge.” – How can we flip it and make diversity and diverse viewpoints and opinions an opportunity? Bring everyone together in a circle again, as in the beginning of the day. Take a moment of silence for everyone to quiet themselves and reflect on the day. Have a natural object of some beauty in the hands of the lead facilitator. Begin with an instruction: Think of something you learned or felt today for which you feel gratitude. Share it with us. Pass the object to the left. The first person starts with their statement of gratitude. People may choose not to share a statement but rather keep passing the object. When it comes back to the facilitator, that person offers their own statement.	The purpose of this activity is to bring closure to a full day, and a transition in preparation for day two.	As always in circle, make sure everyone can see and hear one another.
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	resources – or build something else of practical value you can do in a hands-on way to demonstrate something useful. • Invent a way to market and share tools for community problem-solving – or invent some other way to stretch the edges of people’s thinking about how to solve problems with a community that matters to you. In discussion after people have self-identified which activity they would prefer, offer more content related to learning styles. The choices in the sequence above relate to the following learning style preferences: • Poet: Why is this important? – This learning style requires a meaningful engagement and a reason to be involved. The poet will seek a sense of purpose. • Scholar: What? – This learning style needs facts and data to support it. The scholar needs to deliver information and evidence.		
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	• Engineer: How can we build something? This learning style seeks tangible solutions to particular problems. How can something be solved? • Entrepreneur: What if? The entrepreneur will take it all in and ask, what can I do with this? What can I create, and how can I transform it? Discuss the implications and applications.		
Linking Learning Preferences and Leadership Styles	How might the learning style preferences correspond to yesterday's exploration of leadership styles? Perhaps: • The poet was the geese. • The scholar was the oak. • The engineer was the jaguar. • The entrepreneur was the dandelion. Discuss the possibilities and implications.	The purpose of this activity is to connect today's learning preferences to yesterday's kinesthetic and metaphoric exploration of leadership styles.	One point to emphasise is that we can be a combination of learning style preferences, where one is typically preferred but others can be useful as well. And, as with leadership styles, each also has value. Some occasions call for one approach over another. Be flexible and adaptable.
Personal Leadership Style	Ask participants to go to their sit spots to reflect on their leadership style: • What are your strengths as a leader?	The purpose of this activity is to bring potentially abstract concepts to real-life applications in one's own life.	Recognizing your own strengths and preferences, and areas for potential growth, is useful.

Life Cycles in Nature	• What are your challenges as a leader? • How can you use nature-based leadership (natural guides, learning preferences, leadership styles) to build on your strengths and overcome challenges? After some time at the sit spot, come back to circle where participants share their reflections. Get participants into three small groups. Each group is to pick a species to demonstrate a portion of their life cycles kinesthetically, without words. Each group presents their piece to the other two groups. As each group completes their portrayal of their species' life cycle, applaud their efforts. Observer participants are to guess what was being portrayed. They may ask questions and seek clues before ultimately guessing what species and portion of the life cycle was being portrayed.	The purpose of this active is to reinforce one or more of the natural guides while internalising concepts through physical dramatisation.	The activity is a good change of pace, introducing some play, creativity, and physical movement. It is a fun activity in which members are able to act and work as teams. There is typically humor and good will in the process. It also serves as a demonstration of the diversity principle from a design perspective—using physical and non-verbal means to portray a concept. Participants have to decide what a specific life cycle looks like, the different roles each would play, and embody collaboration and cooperation, one of the natural guides to nature-based leadership.
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Natural Guides in Action: A Case Study

The purpose of this activity is to show how nature-based leadership can be applied successfully to people, programs, and places in communities and organisations.

Find an example where you will be able to see the principles of nature-based leadership in action. It might be a business where indoors and outdoors are integrated applying green architecture and biophilic design, the organisation itself has shared leadership, with every staff person having a role and sometimes changing roles, and it is not hierarchical. A community garden, nature-based preschool, local non-profit, and food cooperative might be examples.

Once again, have everyone gather in a circle. Place a small part of nature into the hands of each person such as a pebble or acorn.

Ask each person to choose one experience or feeling, represented by the “golden nugget,” that stood out as a special moment or idea from the day’s experiences, and share that memory in a few words to convey gratitude for the day.

As each person speaks, they return the physical symbol to the center of the circle.

The facilitator speaks last, with gratitude, closing the circle until tomorrow’s opening circle.

The purpose of this activity is to provide a sense of completion to the day, expressed in a positive way that combines the physical kinesthetic with the verbal.

The closing verbal golden nugget may be intellectual, or, quite frequently, might relate to the essence of nature-based leadership with its heart-connection to nature as well as its underlying logic.

DAY THREE Before the Circle	As participants start to arrive on the last day of the workshop, ask them to look around the land for precious and beautiful natural objects from nature (feathers, leaves, seeds, etc.) without doing harm to the environment. Ask them each to use their collected items to contribute to making a mandala or other circular art in the center of what will be the circle once formed.	The purpose is to assemble a shared artwork as a physical and mindful expression of the time together learning the principles of nature-based leadership.	
Opening Circle: Leading from the Heart of Nature	Many peoples and cultural traditions include a way of sitting in circle with intention to listen, share, and, find clarity about a subject. Sometimes this leads to action individually and as a group. Such practices typically have known rules of conduct. For example, in the centre of the circle there is often an object that is brought to the group as an icon and its symbolism briefly explained. The circle may be opened with a statement of dedication, for example, “We are gathering here today with dedication to improving the lives of children in our community.”	The purposes of this activity are multiple: To practice speaking with intention, using as few words as possible to convey the essence of an idea; to practice listening with intention to the insights of others; and to deepen one’s own understanding of nature-based leadership through personal stories.	

Opening Circle: Leading from the Heart of Nature

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The purposes of this activity are multiple: To practice speaking with intention, using as few words as possible to convey the essence of an idea; to practice listening with intention to the insights of others; and to deepen one's own understanding of nature-based leadership through personal stories.

	Characteristics of such circles include respect for one another's stories, vulnerability as people share moments that touch their hearts, varying perspectives, and diverse voices. Share the ground rules: • Speak from the heart (authentically and vulnerably). • Listen from the heart (free of judgment, listen to understand and not to respond, be empathic, do not try to solve or diagnose). • Be spontaneous. • Be lean of expression (that is, get to the essence of the story; share stories before facts and opinions; do not process or think out loud; be centred on the intention or the essence of the prompt). Additionally, participants are to agree: • What is shared stays, and what is learned leaves. • To speak in a way that serves one's self, the circle, and the greater good.		
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	Begin by placing a symbolic item of some kind in the center of the circle. Many traditional cultures use a “talking stick. The first person who is moved to speak goes to the center of the circle, picks up the item, and returns to their seat to sit with intention before speaking. The prompt for the purpose of the circle is: Tell about a time when you felt supported by a mentor or a leader, or a time when you did not feel supported by a mentor or a leader. What did you learn from that experience that others may learn from as well? How does this story connect you to the natural guides to nature-based leadership? The person who holds the talking object tells their story and then passes the object to the person on their left. A person may choose to tell a story in response to the prompt, or not to do so and to simply pass the object on to the next person. This process continues around the circle. When all have had the opportunity to speak, the facilitator may continue the circle with additional prompts, or bring the stories to a close with a brief summary		
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Seed Beds for Nature-based Leadership	of the major learnings, and how they connect with nature-based leadership. During this activity, facilitators and members of the group share conceptual influences from related fields that inform and inspire the emerging field of nature-based leadership. Examples include spiritual ecology, ecological leadership, biomimicry, conservation psychology, complexity theory, ecopsychology, ecology, environmental studies, place-based education, nature-based education, permaculture, traditional ecological knowledge, and systems theory.	The purpose of this activity is to share information about related fields that can serve as resources for applying nature-based leadership in their lives.	This activity is a circled lecture structure through which facilitators and members reference relevant sources, theories, case studies, and authors relevant to nature-based leadership
LUNCH BREAK Personal Action Plan for Nature-based Leadership	Invite participants to write an action plan to reflect how they will incorporate each of the natural guides into their lives, both professionally and personally. This is preliminary. Once completed, refer to the plan each season to reflect and refine areas in which progress has been made or areas in which helpful modifications may be made.	This activity is designed so that each participant leaves the workshop with a practical and purposeful way to incorporate the natural guides to nature-based leadership in their daily lives, at work, at home, and where ever they are.	

Fish Pond	Facilitators identify three affinity groups throughout the workshop and present them to the participants. For example: • People who work primarily at a local level. • People who work at a managerial and mentoring level. • People who work at a global scale. Participants choose their affinity group and ask themselves: How can this affinity group better incorporate nature-based leadership into their everyday activities, planning strategies, and working spaces? Following discussion among themselves, each affinity group sits in a circle within the larger circle while members of the other two groups sit outside the inner circle of the “pond” to listen to their summary, ask clarifying questions, and help summarise the action steps recommended by the affinity group. Alternate until each group has been in the center. Return to the full circle for everyone to have an opportunity to reflect and comment on the exercise and its implications for their lives.	The purpose of this activity is to share and coalesce thinking about how to embody nature-based leadership and the natural guides within the real-world settings in which the participants work.	
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Closing Circle	Ask everyone to go to their personal sit spot on the land to reflect individually on this three-day experience. Call everyone to return to the circle for closing reflections. Once again, put the talking object in the center of the circle. The first person who feels moved to begin will pick up the object, return to their spot in the circle, and offer thoughts in the form of a few words or sentences about what they are grateful for through this shared experience. Once finished, pass the object to the left until everyone has had the opportunity to speak. Close the circle of gratitude.	The purpose of this activity is to engage every participant in personal reflection and shared gratitude.	
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