Leading for the Planet:

Introducing a Course on Leadership, Climate Change and Energy Evolution into the Management Curriculum

Abstract

How are organizational and societal leaders addressing climate change and energy evolution? I describe the framework for a management course on leading for the planet that I have been developing in various classroom settings for several years. This course is interdisciplinary, with foundational theories in psychology, anthropology and systems theory, and it has spawned the development of many materials for classroom use. Participants will share their insights and challenges teaching material at the interface of leadership, climate and energy in business schools and elsewhere in the university. Participants with little experience teaching in this area are especially invited to attend.

Key Words: Leadership, climate change, renewable energy

**Introduction**. In this discussion session the author describes a framework for a course on leading for the planet that has been developed over six years of classroom practice and development, and invites participants to share their insights and challenges teaching similar material. The session is directed at professors who are looking for ideas about how to introduce leadership for climate and energy into the management curriculum. Participants will come away with a case example of how this has been done successfully both in terms of meeting curricular needs and identifying appropriate social science.

**Teaching Implications**. We hear a lot these days about the *what* and the *why* of planetary change. Yes, climate change is happening and humans are creating it by burning fossil fuels. Yes, it’s melting the Arctic and causing disruptions across the globe. And, yes, it’s accelerating. We hear a lot less about the *who* and the *how* – about the leaders and organizations that are addressing the climate and energy challenges. Until now, discussion about how humanity can organize to deal with disruptive climate change has taken a backseat to the grand project of convincing the world that the change is real. Today most of the world already understands that reality, and scholars and world leaders alike are beginning to think systematically about who is leading and organizing and how humanity is going to get this thing done.

So while they continue to follow climate and energy realities, concerned citizens are also asking questions about how humanity is addressing them, questions like: What do leaders know now? What more must they know? And, how can an understanding of human behavior and systems help leaders craft the best possible decisions and interventions? These questions all address the same fundamental issue: Will Team Humanity step up to save the planet?

Leading as if the planet matters means protecting people and the natural systems we all depend on by sensibly managing environmental challenges. Many social scientists have written about how leaders in organizations and societies make decisions under challenging circumstances. In this session we will discuss how to bring that social science, and apply the lenses of societal systems and power, to examine what climate leaders in organizations and societies are doing now and how they might make better decisions going forward.

I will first invite participants to share their experiences with teaching in this general area, with an eye to identifying key questions they would like to address. (10 minutes) I will briefly introduce my own course framework that is based on five practices of leaders for climate change. This framework integrates an interdisciplinary set of theories, ranging from systems theory to the psychology of adaptation to anthropological theory on societal extinction, with practical information that leaders also need. (20 minutes). Participants will be invited to react to this framework. We will then discuss together related curricular concerns and future course and material development for management and interdisciplinary settings. (30 minutes).

**Theoretical Foundations.** The purpose of this session is to further the conversation about how to address climate change among leaders and potential leaders. Some of this conversation will take place in classrooms, and, indeed, the fundamental structure of my class has been forged during several years of conversations that started there. Some of it will take place in businesses, nonprofits, and governments. Leaders need to have a better idea about how to enter this conversation and drive sound decisions for the planet.

In a world that is changing quickly and perhaps drastically, it seems self-evident that leaders need to emphasize systemic analysis and determined action. Yet, in recent decades, our leadership conversation has been dominated by competency theory, an approach which emphasizes the study of individual traits and skills. The competency approach was developed in the United States during the 20th century to promote leadership within organizations, especially business organizations, and it has been adapted globally. Its main application has been to help companies identify and train high potential individuals. Today, the theory dominates classrooms, corporate training, and popular media. However, when leaders must address complex challenges facing world society, its application is limited.

Since its inception, the competency approach has been criticized for being preoccupied with individuals and their past performance, and for ignoring how leaders think and act in real time and in groups.[[1]](#endnote-1) More recently, researchers working in the field of leadership for environmental sustainability have criticized it on two additional counts. First, its focus on static traits and behaviors downplays moral stewardship. It gives short shrift to the notion that morality in organizations emerges in conversations among their members and to the idea that morality is subject to societal influences. Second, its focus on individuals at times downplays, and sometimes precludes, the study of the emotional connections and relationship-building that help human beings work together in systems. [[2]](#endnote-2)

Leaders for the planet need a different conversation, one that clarifies how people can solve problems together across all levels of society. I refer to this as the theory of *systemic leadership*. This approach subsumes the theory of “leadership practice,” which examines how people both act and influence each other in a perpetual loop of action and feedback.[[3]](#endnote-3) Leadership practice emphasizes that the nature of a problem and the details of its context both matter. For example, when one ponders how leaders should talk to their followers about science, one needs to understand both how their audiences perceive truth and how society influences those perceptions. When one analyzes the conflict between the fossil fuel and renewable energy sectors, understanding the stakes for each sector and the essentials of the broader system we call economics are both salient.

Systemic leaders are predisposed to think beyond individual psychology to the design of human systems. They want to know not only how individuals are motivated, but how social systems are designed, who society’s powerful actors are, and how societal sectors wield influence. They plan and implement interventions based on their knowledge of both individual psychology and human systems.

Systemic leadership is grounded in three main principles. The first is that individuals are embedded within social systems. Much like Russian nesting dolls, we all exist within our families and our work organizations and our national and international institutions, and all of these systems are embedded in the natural world. Climate change and energy evolution are system-wide issues that need system-wide solutions. Our leaders must undertake not only individual change and organizational change, but systems change.

Second, working within social systems requires understanding and practicing power. To some extent, leading for the planet must be a collective, cooperative effort. At the same time, a major challenge is to unleash competition and innovation. Effective systems leaders seek the moral compass shared by these perspectives. For example, it is well known that in the climate and energy sphere, stakeholders like the energy sectors compete and conflict. In these power struggles, leadership of and by societal sectors – particularly the business sector and the government sector – comes to the foreground. Climate leaders must understand how conflict and cooperation operate in our economic and social systems.

Finally, the systemic leadership approach assumes that effective decisions are based on moral principle. A shared morality is the social glue that binds a civilized society. It is a core reason why we humans are sensitive to the ethical practices of our companies and our societies, and why we care about climate change even when it is not affecting us personally. Indeed, maintaining our dignity as human beings depends in large part on our common instinct to share a moral universe. No matter how hard we--including the “we” who work in business organizations that assert moral “neutrality”--pretend to the contrary, human beings do not exist in an amoral universe. Our personal experience confirms the importance of the moral dimension: We know intuitively that, when we are choosing whether to follow a leader, what he or she believes matters a great deal. It follows that, as leaders make hard choices about climate and energy, they will integrate moral reflection and guidance.

In sum, to promote global sustainability, climate leaders must focus on building ethically-driven practices for individuals, organizations, and societies. Introducing these concepts in the classroom via the five practices is both an invigorating and a challenging teaching experience.

1. Richard Bolden & Jonathan Gosling (2006). Leadership competencies: Time to change the tune? *Leadership, 2*(2), 147-163. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Bolden & Jonathan Gosling (2006). Leadership competencies: Time to change the tune? *Leadership, 2*(2), 147-163; Brigid Carroll, Ester Levy & David Richmond (2008). Leadership as practice: Challenging the competency paradigm. *Leadership, 4*(4), 363-379*;* Ellen Van Velsor & Laura Quinn. Leadership and environmental sustainability. *Managing Human Resources for Environmental Sustainability,* 241 – 261. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Whittington (2003). The work of strategizing and organizing: for a practice perspective. *Strategic Organization,* 1(1), 117-125. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)