

# Leadership for Environmental Sustainability

Edited by  
Benjamin W. Redekop



Routledge Studies in Business Ethics

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*To Katarina, and children like her everywhere: may the world  
you grew up in endure and flourish in ways that your parents  
could only imagine.*

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# Introduction

## Connecting Leadership and Sustainability

*Benjamin W. Redekop*

Achieving environmental sustainability is quickly becoming one of the great leadership challenges of our time. This book is for all those who want to better understand this challenge and are looking for insights, research findings, and stories that will help them to address it. It is becoming painfully clear that there are no “easy” solutions to the environmental problems that we face, and consequently it is going to take deep and sustained reflection, from all viewpoints—technical, biological, social, economic, cultural, historical, and spiritual, among others—if progress is going to be made. This book makes a contribution to the emerging conversation about leadership and sustainability and to the larger discussion about how we are going to ensure our continued flourishing on this planet, not to mention the survival of all the other plant and animal species that we are quickly forcing out of existence.

Rather than spending time cataloging and bemoaning the myriad environmental problems that we face, the authors of this volume seek to understand the leadership dimensions of achieving sustainability. We take it as given that anthropogenic climate change is real, that species are disappearing at such an alarming rate that talk of a “sixth great extinction” is not at all far-fetched, that oceans are becoming acidified garbage dumps increasingly devoid of fish, that ancient forests are disappearing and weather patterns are changing, and that unprecedented population growth is rapidly making everything worse (see Diamond, 2005, pp. 486–496, for a comprehensive accounting of our current planetary ills). We further assume that “sustainability” is a relatively straightforward concept that does not need extensive elaboration. Following the definition provided by the World Commission on the Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Commission), we take the term to mean “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987). Put somewhat more starkly, sustainability entails *living in a way that does not make things worse for future generations, whether they be future generations of polar bears or humans or orchids*. We thus assume that there is a clearly defined problem and a desired future state; what is less clear is how we are going to get there from here.<sup>1</sup>

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# Introduction

## Connecting Leadership and Sustainability

*Benjamin W. Redekop*

Achieving environmental sustainability is quickly becoming one of the great leadership challenges of our time. This book is for all those who want to better understand this challenge and are looking for insights, research findings, and stories that will help them to address it. It is becoming painfully clear that there are no “easy” solutions to the environmental problems that we face, and consequently it is going to take deep and sustained reflection, from all viewpoints—technical, biological, social, economic, cultural, historical, and spiritual, among others—if progress is going to be made. This book makes a contribution to the emerging conversation about leadership and sustainability and to the larger discussion about how we are going to ensure our continued flourishing on this planet, not to mention the survival of all the other plant and animal species that we are quickly forcing out of existence.

Rather than spending time cataloging and bemoaning the myriad environmental problems that we face, the authors of this volume seek to understand the leadership dimensions of achieving sustainability. We take it as given that anthropogenic climate change is real, that species are disappearing at such an alarming rate that talk of a “sixth great extinction” is not at all far-fetched, that oceans are becoming acidified garbage dumps increasingly devoid of fish, that ancient forests are disappearing and weather patterns are changing, and that unprecedented population growth is rapidly making everything worse (see Diamond, 2005, pp. 486–496, for a comprehensive accounting of our current planetary ills). We further assume that “sustainability” is a relatively straightforward concept that does not need extensive elaboration. Following the definition provided by the World Commission on the Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Commission), we take the term to mean “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987). Put somewhat more starkly, sustainability entails *living in a way that does not make things worse for future generations, whether they be future generations of polar bears or humans or orchids*. We thus assume that there is a clearly defined problem and a desired future state; what is less clear is how we are going to get there from here.<sup>1</sup>

Readers will find a diverse array of chapters written by scholars and practitioners of leadership who approach the topic of leadership for environmental sustainability from a variety of perspectives. While this book makes a contribution to the scholarly literature on leadership—indeed, it is the first multidisciplinary treatment of environmental leadership—it has been edited for readability and will be of interest to anyone who is concerned about this issue. Chapters are relatively short, and the editor has worked closely with authors to craft rich, thoughtful, and yet accessible treatments of this important topic. Authors approach their subjects from a number of disciplinary backgrounds, including history, philosophy, literature, religion and spirituality, psychology, communication, business, sociology, political science, and the arts. All chapters begin with an introduction that outlines the content of the chapter, and each chapter is also briefly described at the end of this introductory essay. We highly recommend reading all chapters in sequence—readers who do so will find unexpected insights and intriguing parallels, along with diverse approaches and perspectives. The cumulative result is a rich and remarkably coherent set of ideas that helps us to think more deeply not only about leadership for sustainability, but also about the nature and requirements of leadership itself, as we move into the new millennium.

## WHY LEADERSHIP FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY?

To answer this question, one might begin with the fact that very little work has been done on this topic in the field of leadership studies. A fairly comprehensive review of recent literature on public leadership, for example, contains only the most fleeting references to sustainability or the natural environment (Kellerman & Webster, 2001). Recent scholarly textbooks on leadership contain scant—if any—mention of the natural environment as a significant context for leadership, or as an “emerging issue” of interest (e.g., Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004; Gill, 2006). Books on business leadership that purport to be about meeting future challenges typically contain neither a substantive analysis of the psychology of future orientation nor a sense of the larger systemic constraints on future activities that must be taken into account by leaders. The physical environment, the ultimate constraint on business, is entirely ignored (e.g., James, 1996; Essex & Kusy, 1999; Corbin, 2000). Even prominent works that claim to be “the definitive text” on future leadership, such *The Leader of the Future* (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996), contain little substantive reflection on the larger systemic constraints on future activity. To be fair, the recently updated edition of this text, *The Leader of the Future 2* (2006), is somewhat improved on this score—Peter Senge’s chapter discusses the need for leaders to be involved in systemic change in the face of global constraints, including the constraints posed by the natural environment and global

warming (Senge, 2006). In the same collection, Ronald Heifetz's discussion of leadership as a response to "adaptive challenges" goes to the brink of the current environmental abyss, suggesting, "Some realities threaten not only a set of values beyond survival but also the very existence of a society if these realities are not discovered and met early on." Yet although environmental problems like global warming are obviously supreme examples of adaptive challenges, Heifetz seems unwilling to explicitly draw that conclusion, or to clearly identify himself with the "many environmentalists [who believe] our focus on the production of wealth rather than coexistence with nature has led us to neglect fragile factors in our ecosystem" (Heifetz, 2006, pp.82–83). Nevertheless, as will become apparent in a number of chapters in this collection, Heifetz's (1994) theory of "adaptive leadership" provides an important starting point for thinking about leadership for environmental sustainability (this point will be elaborated further in the Conclusion to this volume).

The deficit in taking a serious, long-term perspective on the future—and the looming environmental crisis in particular—in the field of leadership studies reflects both the field's orientation toward the limited time horizons of Anglo/U.S. capitalism, and the general worldview of the first industrial revolution, in which the future was seen to be limitless and constraints on economic and industrial activity were either ignored (as in the case of air and water pollution) or strongly opposed (as in the emergence of organized labor). We are now becoming increasingly aware of the way in which modern industry has been built on the externalization of costs: early on the costs were more social and ethical—slavery and child labor were bound up with early industrialization (Williams, 1961; Mathias, 1969)—but increasingly the environmental costs of industry have taken center stage. The tendency among students of American business leadership to ignore or discount the larger social and environmental contexts in which leadership occurs is simply a reflection of some of the main tenets of American capitalism, as well as the lineaments of the American dream, which stresses the idea that human beings (and by extension, leaders) are free agents who can succeed at whatever they wish to do, if only they work hard enough. Critics have argued for some time that placing too much emphasis on leaders as free agents ignores the fact that "the leader is embedded in a social system, which constrains behavior" (Pfeffer, 1977, p. 107). Three decades later, we must add that leaders are also embedded in a global *environmental* system that also presents a serious constraint on behavior.

While a few very useful books have been written on environmental leadership from the perspective of natural resource management or the management of environmental organizations (e.g., Snow, 1992; Berry & Gordon, 1993; Gordon & Berry, 2006), none has placed the relationship between leadership—as a general construct—and the natural environment at center stage and examined it from diverse viewpoints, as this volume does. Russo (2008) provides an important, comprehensive set of readings

on environmental management that touches on nearly every aspect of sustainability, but the leadership angle is left unexplored. Avery (2005) presents a helpful comparison between the leadership model of sustainable “Rhineland/stakeholder capitalism” and unsustainable “Anglo/US shareholder capitalism,” while Steinberg (2001) examines how conservation and political leaders in Costa Rica and Bolivia have been able to enact environmental protections and move their nations toward sustainability. Without explicitly mentioning “leadership,” Moser and Dilling (2007) provide a comprehensive look at the communication challenges presented by climate change. In a similar fashion, Gunderson, Light, and Holling (1995) provide insights for leaders and managers trying to solve natural resource and other environmental problems. Although not about leadership *per se*, their analysis contains cautionary lessons for those who may think that “managing” nature in a sustainable fashion is a simple proposition; in their view, “sustainable development” is something of an oxymoron.

Books on “responsible leadership” typically contain minimal treatment of the natural environment (e.g., Doh & Stumpf, 2005; Maak & Pless, 2006<sup>2</sup>), as do books on “moral leadership” (e.g., Hoivik, 2002; Ciulla, Price, & Murphy, 2006). Surprisingly, Dunning’s landmark collection, *Making Globalization Good: The Moral Challenges of Global Capitalism* (2003) contains very little discussion of the natural environment. On the other hand, Crosby’s pathbreaking *Leadership for Global Citizenship* (1999) contains discussion of the natural environment as one pertinent issue among others. Gerzon’s *Leading through Conflict* (2006) mentions the natural environment at only a few points, but he tellingly ends his book with a discussion of the looming challenge of achieving sustainability (pp. 233–234).

An important exception to the general lack of attention to this issue in leadership studies is what Simon Western (2008) has characterized as an emerging “eco-leader discourse.” Still in its infancy, this discourse (or paradigm) is characterized by “a growing interest in systems thinking, complexity theory, narrative approaches, and also the environment as metaphors for leadership and organizing company structures” (p. 184). Taking an ecological perspective on leadership, the emerging paradigm emphasizes holism, connectivity, spirituality, interdependence, and sustainability as fundamental leadership values. It conceives of leadership as being dispersed, emergent, ethical, and adaptive—able to help groups and organizations adapt themselves to external contingencies like environmental change. Contributions to this discourse, in the form of academic journal articles, include Bolman and Deal (1994), Carlopio (1994), Shrivastava (1994), Allen, Stelzner, and Wielkiewicz (1998), and Egri and Herman (2000). Many of the chapters in the present volume make contributions to this discourse, including the chapter by Western (Chapter 2) that describes the contours of the emerging eco-leader discourse in contrast to previous leadership discourses.

One of the most forceful recent statements on the connection between leadership and sustainability has come from Jim MacNeill, Chair Emeritus of the International Institute for Sustainable Development. MacNeill (2007) argues that powerful individuals in top governmental and private-sector leadership positions will be crucial linchpins in achieving sustainable development: "Institutionalizing sustainable development . . . will not happen, certainly not in any significant way, if the person at the top is not determined to make it happen" (p. 21). In a similar fashion, Thomas Friedman (2008) suggests that in a world that is increasingly becoming "hot, flat, and crowded," leadership from the highest reaches of power down to the state and local levels is essential: "We need leaders who can shape the issues so that people understand why ignoring them is such a threat and *why rising to them is such an opportunity*. We also need leaders who not only understand the importance of dealing with this problem in a systemic way, but who can actually generate the vision and authority to pull that system together" (p. 405; emphasis in original).

Paul Hawken (2007) provides a different view on the role of leadership in confronting ecological crisis. Hawken highlights the "bottom-up" movement for social and environmental justice that, by his estimation, is constituted by over a million local groups and organizations worldwide that have no central leader or ideology. In Hawken's analysis, powerful, ideological leaders have gotten us into this mess, and it is going to take a pragmatic, grassroots approach to get us out of it. Yet he acknowledges the potential lack of "connection, cooperation, and effectiveness" of the diverse, leaderless movement that he describes (Hawken, 2007, p. 19). The tension between Hawken's and Friedman's perspectives on the role of leadership in solving environmental problems highlights an underlying tension within the environmental movement as a whole, between mainstream and more radical approaches. The latter tend to emphasize the role of power and hierarchy in the creation of social and environmental injustice: authoritarian structures have produced the "system" that degrades women, minorities, the poor, and the Earth itself. Consequently, every effort is made to avoid reproducing the offending structures of power and hierarchy in movements and organizations that seek to right the wrongs of the past, and "leadership" itself becomes suspect. While such a view has the merit of logical consistency, in practice it is very difficult to sustain a "leaderless culture," and indeed most environmental groups eventually succumb to some sort of leadership structure, despite their best efforts to the contrary (Chapter 12 in this volume provides a good example of this phenomenon; see also Purkis, 2001; Tranter, 2009).

Despite all of the constraints, limitations, abuses, and diverse understandings of leadership, it is endemic to human (and other primate) societies and unlikely to disappear any time soon (Bass, 1990, pp. 3–20). To say this is not to underestimate the importance of the many grassroots groups and organizations that have led the way in environmental protection, only



to acknowledge that even the most antiauthoritarian organizations are dependent, at some level, on leaders and acts of leadership in their formation and effective functioning. The present volume approaches the issue of environmental leadership from all directions and at all levels—we do not assume that leadership necessarily resides in a person or position, but rather is a quality that can be expressed and shared in myriad ways, times, and places. Leaders are both born and made, and leadership positions enable both good and bad leadership; but in itself, leadership is an emergent quality that helps organize and focus groups on achieving substantive goals—such as sustainability—that might otherwise remain elusive.

## LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT

The larger case to be made for the approach taken in this book is a more philosophical one: in a world swiftly heading towards environmental catastrophe, leadership *by definition* entails environmental concern. Why is this so? Because leadership takes place in—and is conditioned by—the two fundamental dimensions of space and time. As to the former, it seems elementary to suggest that context matters when it comes to defining leadership. What counts as “leadership” in any one situation is going to depend at least in part on the needs and constraints presented by that situation. Leader behaviors, values, and tasks will inevitably be shaped by the environment in which leadership is enacted. As stated by Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002), “[Leadership] is socially constructed in and from the context where patterns over time must be considered and where history matters . . . Change the context and leadership changes as does what is sought and whether specific leadership patterns are considered effective” (pp. 797–798). A hunter-gatherer community attempting to find and capture wild game will doubtless require a different form of leadership—and a different skill set—than a modern corporation seeking to shrink its carbon footprint or a local city council that wants to encourage the use of alternative energy in its community.

To make this suggestion is not to argue that there are no fundamental leadership qualities that are widely shared; it is merely to suggest that context—and indeed, culture—matters when it comes to how leadership is understood and practiced (see, for example, Lewis, 2006; Hofstede, 2005; Den Hartog & Dickson, 2004). If our hunter-gatherer community finds itself in a situation in which it is consuming its own food supply faster than it is being regenerated, what counts as leadership will entail a new and likely more complex set of understandings and behaviors. Likewise, the type of leadership shown by western industrial titans of the past few hundred years, premised on the ability to leverage resources regardless of social and environmental consequences, is no longer salient in a world that recognizes universal human rights and is running out of “commons” to