



Co-creative Leadership and Self-Organization: Inclusive Leadership of Development Action

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Abstract

The quest for genuine local participation and ownership in development initiatives has perplexed and bedevilled development discourse for over 40 years. Practical application, despite some genuinely sincere efforts, has remained relatively elusive. New developments in communication technology are often cited as the solution to attain this elusive beneficiary-led development paradigm shift. A lot has been written about communication for development (C4D) and in recent decades information and communication technology for development (ICT4D), yet we still struggle to attain an authentic paradigm shift and genuine local participation or beneficiary-led development praxis. This paper seeks to shift

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the focus from the trendy (not so) new communication technologies and focus instead on human beings and the way we organize ourselves. We argue that emerging trends in organizational development toward, flatter (less hierarchical) organizations, co-creation and self-organization may indicate the way forward to authentic (beneficiary-led) development practice. Rather than the trendy bottom-up paradigm, we advocate an all-round and do-it-yourself leadership structure. C4D and ICT4D remain crucial as tools for communication to facilitate and ease information flow and critical debate, but it is self-organization, trust building, and co-creative process that enable authentic equality and dignity in decision making and design innovation for development.

Introduction

Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one-individual can embrace it.
(African Proverb attributed to the Akan and Ewe peoples of present-day Ghana)

In their aptly entitled book *Moving Targets: Mapping the paths between communication, technology and social change*, editors Servaes and Liu (2007) showcase multidimensional communication models that focus on local communities in the earnest quest for authentic communication for development (C4D). Scanning best practices in the use of communication and technologies for social change, the authors in the book advocate the recognition of context-specific cultural identity and the multidimensionality of communication for social change. There is general acceptance of the need for participatory processes to empower local communities, yet, as Flint and Meyer zu Natrup contend, the provision of development remains an “expert-led enterprise” (Flint and Meyer zu Natrup 2014). Harrison laments the mind gap between policy rhetoric and practice in the relationship between experts and communities at the receiving end of social programs (Harrison 2014).

So if there is acceptance, and even promotion of the “bottom-up” concepts of local ownership, participation, and stakeholder accountability, how is it that we are still struggling with donor-set agendas and expert-led development agency?

With the rapid expansion of the aid industry in recent years, there has been significant push for the professionalization of the development sector in terms of project management and administration. This has been accompanied by an explosion of innovative communication technologies that are increasingly affordable and in widespread use for development agency. Flint and Meyer zu Natrup suggest that the push to professionalize the development sector has, in a sense, eroded emphasis on ownership, participation, and partnership with local beneficiaries in favor of an expert-led culture. They further contend that, while exciting and clearly expanding the scope and speed of communication, recent advances in information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D) have, at times, only served to accentuate the pendulum swing toward expert-led “professionalization” that alienates local communities (Flint and Meyer zu Natrup 2014). Harrison notes that the

“professionalization” pressures have led to an expert-led “superman” approach to practice with accountability reduced to “bean counting” of outcomes (Harrison 2014).

Clearly there is a need for transformation of the work culture in development agency. In principle there is consensus on facets of organizational approaches that hold out promise of an authentic local community-led culture of development agency.

Servaes and Malikhao reiterate the imperative of grassroots participation. The starting point of any communication for development and social change must be the context and specificity of the local community (Moving Targets Ch2). This is the nonnegotiable point of departure. Rather than donor-set agendas, expert-led strategies, or need assessments, it is first of all for the communities to deliberate and define what they *WANT* for themselves. Local communities are, in the end, the recipients and underwriters of any social change that is produced. Development agency and social change must begin with the local community.

Local communities, however, are not homogeneous in themselves. They are a network of diverse perspectives in constant interaction with each other. Neither are they isolated entities sealed off from the rest of the world. All communities are subject to global, national, and other stimuli that kindle and influence change. Recognizing the complexity of ad intra and ad extra interactions, Servaes and Malikhao assert a concept of development that accentuates cultural identity and multidimensionality (Moving Targets Ch2). Social change agency has to embrace the complexity and fluidity of context-specific community identities, including all necessary stakeholders.

Again, cultural identities are not static constants. Identities are created through a nexus of interactions that continually interrogate individual and collective representations, persistently influenced by external realities. In the closing chapter in *Moving Targets*, Claude-Yves Charron suggests a concept of community beyond the *geographic cognate* (Moving Targets Ch13). A social change project engages a broad sense of community where the various stakeholders participate in the project with the baggage of their particular identity standpoints. In a sense they form a living complex organism of diverse voices, socially organized in search of agreed action. The project, in itself, assumes a work culture identity that is a construct of multiple identities in a dynamic, organic, and continuously transforming social interaction. The multidimensional and complex communication within such organization implies sharing, comparing, and finding out about viewpoints toward the creation of common purpose. Social change is not about reproducing models developed by outside experts; “it is taking the internal dynamics of the community itself, with both its internal and external pressures, with its network of interdependencies” (Moving Targets Ch13). Social change and development is beyond expert-led instruction and model reproductions. It is about here and now, not there and then!

In a social change project, multiple perspectives interact, individuals (women, men, girls, and boys), local community leaders, farmers and traders, political leaders and public servants, donor agents, and NGO representatives. They form organic project or program structures that are essentially social processes. They are complex

processes that are “in essence, the nurturing of knowledge aimed at creating a consensus for action that takes into account the interests, needs and capacities of all concerned” (Moving Targets Ch2). The social change project brings together a diversity of interests, needs, capacities, and levels of power interrelating in the quest for agreed action. It implies that people are capable of agreeing to disagree. Methodologies like Future Search are fitting this purpose.

The process of consensus creation for action is a discussion process (sharing, comparing, worrying through, and finding out), where existing power relations need to be laid bare and deconstructed to enable the construction of common ground purpose. All cultural identities involved in the project must be able to engage the creative process with equal voice. It is “not the technology, not the medium nor the message, but the concept of ‘voice’: voice in the identification of problems and the search for solutions by and for the community’s own stakeholders. . . a multiplicity of voices in constant negotiation with each other” (Claude-Yves Charron – Moving Targets p.253). Social change can only be authentically appropriated through a process of reciprocal listening, learning, and discussing common purpose for action. Authentic ownership of the common action cannot be bestowed by the more powerful and dominant voices; it must be appropriated (taken as their own) by all the separate stakeholder voices through their genuine engagement in the collective exercise of creating the agenda, work process, and desired outcomes.

Once power relations have been laid bare and deconstructed, it is vital that all the diverse perspectives are fully expressed, listened to, and debated in the process of creating the consensus goals to be achieved. In their book *Future Search, Getting the Whole system in Room for Vision, Commitment and Action*, Weisbord and Janoff use the analogy of the ancient Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant (Weisbord and Janoff 2010, p.49) to illustrate the importance of examining all perspectives in search of common ground action. In *Moving Targets*, Charron uses the analogy of Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 film *Rashomon* to illustrate the same point. The standpoint of all stakeholders voiced, debated, and pulled together leads to knowledge aggregation and common ground creation.

The question is how can diverse perspectives be harnessed to bring about sustainable social change? Flint and Meyer zu Natrup propose the concept of beneficiary-led aid (BLA) to harness the collective knowledge of beneficiaries by way of crowdsourcing (Flint and Meyer zu Natrup 2014). Pulling away from expert-led interventions, they draw inspiration from Surowiecki’s *Wisdom of the Crowds*, “. . . under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them. Groups do not need to be dominated by exceptionally intelligent people in order to be smart. Even if most of the people within a group are not especially well-informed or rational, it can still reach a collectively wise decision” (Surowiecki 2005: xiii–xiv).

They further suggest a functional reform where beneficiaries design their own development agenda with agencies and NGO experts assuming the role of facilitators (not designers) of the project (Flint and Meyer zu Natrup 2014). The concept of facilitation is beautifully captured in Weisbord and Janoff’s (2007) book, fittingly entitled *Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There*. Facilitation is to let go of all impulse

to control the content, direction, and outcome of a project. It is, rather, focusing only on the process itself, enabling the co-creative space of communication and trusting all the rest to the community.

Here we propose the concept of co-creative leadership and self-organization, drawn from the work of Hans Begeer and inspired by the works of Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff and the experience of a learning community that Hans set up.

An Emerging Leadership Culture Shift

Despite the continued dominance of an aggressive, immediate-profit-margin-focused business culture today, there is a perceptible emerging desire for more meaningful corporate practice. A “market” is developing of enterprises seeking to fulfill existential meaning beyond the precept of maximizing profit. Profit making is still at the helm of enterprise, but there is an intensifying thirst for meaning that transcends profit margins. Research shows that it is possible to work on both profit and meaning successfully! (Begeer 2018).

In our quick-paced and shifting global culture, enterprises (private, public, and civil society) find themselves increasingly reliant on the ingenuity of their human resources to remain competitive and even to simply survive. This emerging need is providing a new significance to the concept of return on investment (sustainable livelihood in enterprise), a meaning that necessarily focuses on the human person(s).

Only a work force that is inspired, enthusiastic, and motivated can meet the challenges and opportunities emerging from the pace of change today. For this to happen, each individual and the organization as a whole need to find authentic and profound sense in their work, their relationships, and their lives. Organizations seek to achieve meaningful livelihoods, as institutions and for each individual within their structures.

There is also increasing recognition that top-down management structures cannot meet this need. Developing and maintaining a sharp, quick-paced, and innovative work force requires a radical overhaul of the command and control culture and concept of leadership. A new kind of management leadership is emerging. One that is inclusive, where the creative energies of human beings are harnessed and where open systems develop a work force/management relationship in which all are inspired to be CO-CREATIVE LEADERS.

The concept of co-creative leadership and collective management is not really new, Charron alludes to the Japanese management by consultation culture of *nemawashi* (Moving Targets p.254), and other examples can be found in our human history. What is emergent is the renewed enthusiasm for more horizontal, human-centered organizational management process today. See also *Productive Workplaces: Dignity, Community and Meaning in the 21st Century* (Weisbord 2012).

Frederic Laloux’s *Reinventing Organizations* has generated increasing fellowship in search of evolutionary organizations, horizontal management practices that focus on people and enterprises that are “soulful and purposeful” (Laloux 2014). The Corporate Rebels (<https://corporate-rebels.com/>) are a small group of former

corporate employees who now travel the globe to gather stories of inspiring organizations that have successfully created more engaging and meaningful workplaces and unleashed the potential of their employees. Begeer has created a learning platform on self-organization, where people from different organizations meet to exchange best practices on self-organization. In his new book (2018), he presents 16 cases from this platform.

There are numerous organizational development (OD) tools and methods that pursue this swelling demand for innovative and inspired organizations, yet there is NO ONE magic tool or method. Each venture (or social change project) must find its own “way,” using the insights and knowledge presented in the various methodologies, but ultimately designing its own pathway, drawing from its specific history, culture, and especially its people. Begeer warns, however, that the conditions for co-creation and self-organizations should be right, and attention to these conditions should not be underestimated (2018).

Co-creation in Social Action

The use of co-creative leadership and self-organization in development and social change enterprise is also not new. Outlining his memoirs of development work in his self-published book *My Development Experiences in Asia, Africa, and the Americas*, Christopher Roesel recounts the frustrations he faced with donor-set agendas and expert-led processes. His discovery of *Future Search*, and its transformative power in application, is inspiring, although the reversion to donor agendas, in some cases, is regretful (Roesel 2016).

Mark Harrison aligns co-creation with the principles of social action in *Social Action – co-creating social change: A Companion for Practitioners*. He also redefines the role of the development-expert away from directive leadership to that of facilitator who is “now responsible for the process, for asking questions, for enabling the group to set and realise its own goals. In traditional practice the practitioner is seen as the agent of change and community members/service users are, more or less, passive participants. In Social Action the facilitator is the catalyst for change and the agents of change are the community members/service users” (Harrison p.13).

Co-creative Leadership Concept

Co-creative leadership can be described as an inclusive leadership attitude that harnesses the creative capacities of individuals within organizations (viewed as living complex systems) toward collectively agreed goals while synchronously allowing for the divergence and ingenuity of individual viewpoints to consistently challenge and reinvigorate these same goals.

It is an approach that perceives leadership as collective, harvesting divergent (even conflicting) perspectives within an enterprise to creatively chart common action pathways in constantly changing environments. It enables the ingenuity of

self-motivated individuals, who source their energy from the diversity of perspectives. It is a leadership attitude that inspires entrepreneurial flexibility in work environments and gives existential meaning (sense of collective purpose and motivation) to an enterprise. Co-creative Leadership allows individuals to collectively inspire each other to personally steer enduring processes of resourcefulness to meet opportunities and challenges through self-leadership. It fashions organizational values of trust, transparency, and accountability that nurture talent and craft work systems that are durable. But the individual stakeholders need to pull their acts together through flexible self-steering teams!

Co-creation and Self-Management

Co-creative leadership sounds promising and attractive but, for some, maybe somewhat mythical or unrealistic. Beyond the hype of inspiring concepts is co-creation credibly feasible? Inspired, by the work of Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff in the *Future Search Network* (<http://futuresearch.net/>), and his own consulting experience, Hans Begeer coauthored the book *Co-creation. . . 13 Myths Debunked*. Co-creation, he demonstrates, is practicable, but it requires meticulous preparation and planning and rests on setting the groundwork based on some fundamental principles.

Principles and Prerequisites

Six principles of co-creation	Conceptual framework
Get the whole system in the room	System perspective on organizing
Explore the whole elephant before fixing any parts	
Control what you can, let go of what you cannot control	Self-determination theory
Let people be responsible	Open dialogue
Search for common ground to base action upon	
Use differences in opinion to allow fresh and new ideas	

Getting the whole system in the room reflects Servaes and Milakhao's concern for ensuring that the needs, capacities, interests, and knowledge of *all* concerned with the social change project participate in creating consensus action. Weisbord and Janoff use the AREIN criteria to ensure that all voices in the system are included in a Future Search meeting.

- A-Those who have *Authority* to act on their own (make decisions).
- R-Those who have *Resources* in terms of time, money, access, and influence.
- E-Those who have *Expertise*, social, economic, technical, etc. in the topic.
- I-Those who have *Information* that others need.
- N-Those who have *Need*, which are people who will be affected by the outcome.

Explore the whole elephant before fixing the parts refers back to the parable of the blind men and the elephant (or Kurosawa's Rashomon). The point is to ensure that all perspectives on the subject are listened to, discussed, and seen for what they are before diving into structures and work processes. Openly identifying alternative perceptions and deconstructing power relations enables constructive listening, debating, and learning.

The third principle of co-creation is learning to control what you can and let go of what you cannot control. The axiom points to two fundamental attitudes behind co-creative leadership. It underlies the need for meticulous planning and preparation of the co-creative space and process, but it also highlights the need to trust the *Wisdom of the Crowds* and let go of control of content and objectives. This is sometimes the hard part, trusting that the collective intelligence of the community will lead to the most beneficial outcomes. Arriving at this level of trust often entails a steep culture shift, which should not be undervalued.

Letting people be responsible is about actively entrusting self-organization and self-management. It is crucial for any co-creative project. When conducting Future Search meetings, Weisbord and Janoff purposely use self-managing groups where "everybody shares information, interprets it and decides on action steps" allowing "every person to share leadership" (Weisbord and Weisbord and Janoff 2010).

By listening to distinctive opinions and expressing their own points of view, individual identities, together, draw out their disparities and synergies. The separate interpretations can then be drawn together to search for common ground. The enterprise, or project, becomes a social organization where common ground purpose for collective action is discussed and discovered through difference.

Differences of opinion, even conflicting opinions (as distinct from interests!), are the kernel of innovation and creativity; "it is not a desire for harmony or constant agreement that underlies co-creative leadership. On the contrary, differences are recognised as being something positive, since within them lies the potential for change" (Schieffer 2006, p.12). Managed constructively, differences lead to new perspectives and growth. There are many ways of mitigating difference and conflict, but essential to all is a clear distinction between opinion and interest. The discussion of common ground purpose goes a long way to mitigating the distinction. A transparent identification and deconstruction of power relations, along with enthusiastically appropriated discovery of common ground purpose, allows for a clear and open differentiation of opinion from interest by sharing, comparing, and finding out.

Levels of Self-organization

Begeer delineates three system levels to self-organization. The overarching level is where the entire social organization allows for maximum autonomous growth and horizontal functioning. Within the overarching project are self-steering teams, flexible working groups with enough space to manage their own workflows and processes. They are able to set their own goals and define the members of their community and their individual roles. Central to the entire process is self-leadership

which Begeer describes as “the individual will and capacity to question and develop oneself” (Begeer 2018). It implies the desire to grow through giving and receiving critical feedback, inquisitive exploration, and the ability to correct and innovate.

The decision and desire to allow self-organization for a project must be explicit, and the facilitation of the process requires meticulous preparation and attention. Usually this is done by a so-called Planning Group, which, in itself, includes many different stakeholders and is self-steering. There is no need for a formal leader as group members will shift roles. It does, however, require professional facilitation, the art of which can be learnt.

Over a 2-year period, Begeer and his team helped a Brussels public service intuition for unemployment learn to work more horizontally and apply co-creation. The organization structure was typical bureaucratic with many different hierarchical levels and subdepartments all functioning from their islands. A tasting workshop co-creation was organized with 30 participants. Through “facilitation” guidance, 20 internal facilitators were trained. The mixed groups of facilitators were coached in organizing large-scale interventions, like World Cafés in which up to 400 participants worked together to develop actions for improvement. The participants included external shareholders and, especially, their clients (unemployed people). This resulted in a first step of cultural change: more cooperation, transparency, and self-initiative. Although the hierarchical structures still exist, people now work more horizontally and apply the six principles of co-creation where ever they can (Begeer 2018).

Five Learning Phases

Begeer proposes five learning phases on the path to self-organization. He expressly notes, however, that the path is a dynamic depiction to assist praxis and NOT a miracle prototype toolkit for application.

Step 1 Mobilize – This is a required phase in every change project – particular to self-organization is the fact that people often cannot imagine what it feels like or conceive its practical application. Therefore it is important to offer the group **tangible** experiences of self-organization to enable them to perceive and internalize its real possibilities, for example, with some short “taster” workshops, where they learn by doing.

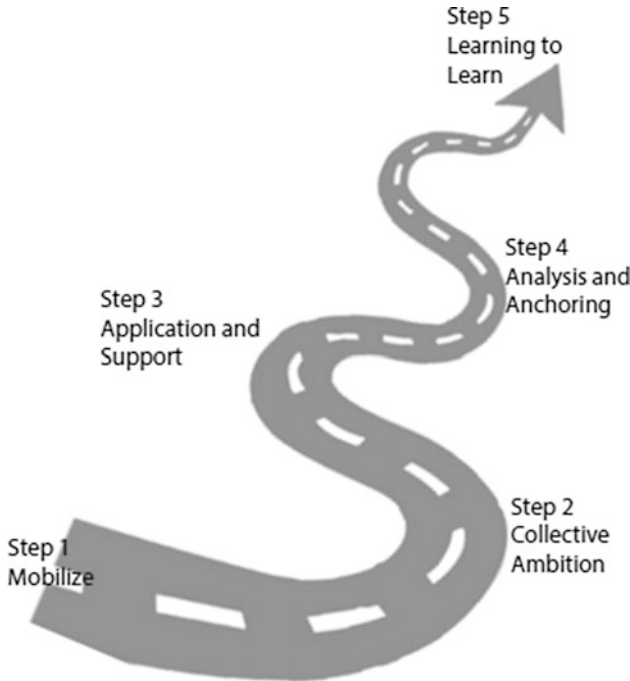
Step 2 Collective Ambition – Ideally this is a phase in which all stakeholders are involved to develop **together** a shared vision with a collective ambition toward self-organization. Large-Scale Intervention methods like Future Search or Appreciative Inquiry can be applied here. It is imperative that the community engaged in the social change project have a shared vision of how they want to work together.

Step 3 Application and Support – The kernel of the social change project is application of the common ground action(s) agreed upon through self-organization. How do we operate here? Implementation requires a conducive environment for change. This is principally about **culture and values** and to a lesser degree about structure. Without shared values like **trust, transparency, and support**, self-

organization cannot function. Working on this cultural change and the development of shared values should precede work on organizational structures. This often takes a long time and asks for repeating actions (routines) of explicating beliefs and values which drive our behavior.

Step 4 Analysis and Anchoring – This is the phase in which the **structure** of the work processes is analyzed. **Together** stakeholders discuss work streams, processes, and roles needed **to make it work**. It is a moment of action, action review, and (if necessary) path reorientation, visualizing the ideal situation to compare with the present reality. The GAP analysis results in choices for different ways of self-organizing to achieve the shared outcome. What do we want to achieve? The shared values described in step 3 play an important role in how this is done.

Step 5 Learning to Learn – Essential to a co-creative process is the development of the collective capacity to learn. As Begeer points out, people learn, not organizations, however organizations can create the conditions that stimulate learning. A **safe space** needs to be developed where people are at ease to learn to develop themselves, to ask for feedback, and to provide feedback, inspiring a learning culture where people together **continuously learn to learn**, without ever finishing.



The two concepts of co-creation and self-organization are intimately intertwined feeding off each other to build flexible and innovative organizations with meaningful outcomes. Co-creation enables all stakeholders to engage in designing a social change project; create, together, the work processes required; and apportion individual roles in line with abilities. All appropriate the common purpose and goals

through self-leadership and manage the project more horizontally. Self-organized teams commit to action, evaluate progress, and estimate capacity development needs toward self-organization.

Attitude and Culture

The co-creative leadership is an attitude that implies acceptance of a radical shift in working culture. It goes beyond technologies, mediums, and even message content. It also goes beyond project management methodologies and structures. Co-creative leadership is a process of continuous learning and growing. It will have its high points and moments of reckoning, yet its main objective is that all stakeholders grow in their co-creative leadership and self-leadership abilities.

This implies intentionally deconstructing power relations and cultivating open dialogue for active listening and learning. It entails nourishing a culture of authentic trust through transparency in communication with reciprocal accountability for action. It requires a working environment that is safe space for critical feedback and co-creative dialogue. It entails commitment and intentionality of purpose. It also necessitates meticulous preparation and planning in facilitation, as we mentioned earlier by a Planning Group. Ultimately, it is an attitude and a cultural mind-set shift that needs to be nurtured and maintained.

Co-creative leadership and self-organization does not happen just because it is desired. Maintaining the co-creative space requires painstaking planning and attentive oversight from committed facilitators, possibly from a select team specifically trained and dedicated to sustaining the co-creative space and supporting self-organization (see Begeer 2018).

Conclusion: Not Top-Down, Not Bottom-Up, but 360° Co-creation

Clearly the starting point of all social change agencies must be the specific context of the local community. Before any examination of a needs analysis, a social change project should start with an intentional dialogue on what the local community wants and a transparent discovery of common purpose, through a Large-Scale Intervention method (Begeer and Vanleke 2016).

Co-creation must be intentional, meticulously prepared, and facilitation planned to create a working culture of transparency and trust. Openly deconstructing power relations, the perspectives of all stakeholders should be engaged on an equal basis and from the competencies of each participant and in search of common ground. “It is not about finding the single correct solution to a problem. Indeed, it is even assumed that this cannot be found at all since it does not exist. It is much more about delivering a solution that members of an organisation can collectively agree upon, following a thorough examination of the various perspectives” (Schieffer 2006, pp. 608–609).

Co-creation is about facilitating the processes and environment for transparent communication. “We understand leadership as the continuous formation of creative and communicative contexts that facilitate a cooperative process for developing solutions for the organisation as a whole. We call this understanding of leadership co-creative leadership” (Schieffer 2006, p.615).

Co-creative leadership and self-organization goes hand in hand. We distinguish three levels: self-leadership, self-steering teams, and self-organization (Begeer 2018). They are founded on developing a culture based on trust. Without values like trust, support, and transparency, self-organization cannot function. A common identity and working culture based on these values must be developed through intentionality and persistent facilitation. “Supported by modern leadership methods (dialogue, World Café, and semantic mapping, etc.), co-creative leadership allows for the initiation of continual solution-finding processes and the decisive strengthening and maintenance of the capacity for action and success of the organisation as a whole. On the basis of co-creative leadership, organisations can develop a shared identity that serves as a guide for action and allows for the focussed action of the whole organisation” (Schieffer 2006, p.622).

Co-creative leadership and self-organization authentically engages community voice in the co-creation of *their* social change. Local communities are not on the periphery of social change design; they are at the very core of co-creative leadership of the change. Ultimately co-creative leadership is not about top-down control; neither is it really about bottom-up direction, but rather 360° inclusive leadership for development agency.

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