

Interview with Petra Kuenkel, Author of “The Art of Leading Collectively”

Co-Creating a Sustainable, Socially Just Future – A Guide to Collaborative Impact for Leaders in Industry, Government and Social Change Networks.

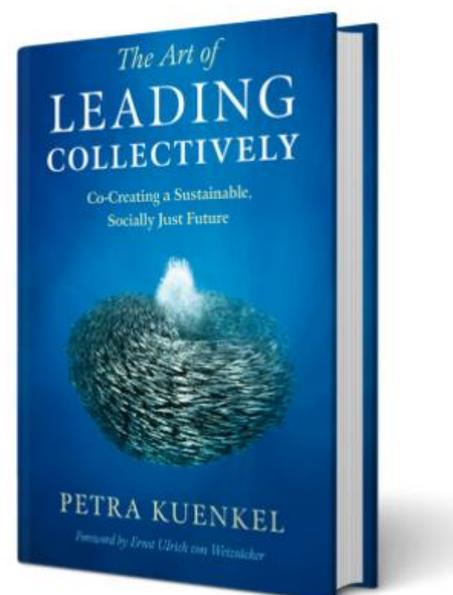
More than ever before, there is a focus on new, collective forms of leadership – and an urgency to get collective change processes underway, all over the world. What’s behind the recent push to move collective leadership to the fore?

Whether we find ourselves in societal or organizational change, it requires collective energy and drive to bring forth the future in a more sustainable way. Yet, much of the institutional world, and its logic of planning and implementation, is still built on a mechanical world view, and as a result so are its approaches to organizational structuring, leadership practice and reward systems. However, many of the large-scale complex system challenges such as climate change, water security, social equity, or resource management are transformation challenges that can only be successfully addressed with a major shift in the way we consciously lead change.

The emphasis here is on the *we*. Rather than viewing leadership as mainly the capacity of an individual who enlists followers, we need to recognize the need to see leadership as the capacity of a collective composed of strong individuals from diverse organizations, equipped with collaborative capacity, and with the intention of making their joint contribution to a world in transition count. Only then will we achieve more sustainable development. The 17 global Sustainable Development Goals adopted by world leaders at an historic United Nations summit in 2015 are testimony to the fact that many people know what needs to be done. But these goals will only become reality with a widespread adoption of a systems view of life. The goals are so intrinsically interlinked and interdependent that we need multi-

actor collaboration across the boundaries of the private sector, public sector, and civil society.

A systems view of life, for example supported by an accessible meta-level guiding model such as the Collective Leadership Compass, can enable people in organizations to shift their thinking away from a mechanistic worldview, with its major focus on the individual leader, and the assumption of reward for performance measured in linear growth, toward the co-creation of more life-enhancing – and hence more effective – patterns of collaboration at scale.



Is this move toward collective leadership working? Where are you seeing results?

We are probably at the beginning of a tremendous shift toward the notion of collective leadership as the core of more conscious systemic change. You can feel this in many different settings: the development of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, with all the sophisticated consultation processes that led to them and the preceding report by the UN-appointed cross-cultural, and cross-institutional High Level Panel are an indication of a growing spirit of collective leadership that needs fostering. The social entrepreneurship movement that has spread globally shows that more and more people are insisting that business goals and working for the common good should not contradict each other. Another example is the shift toward more conscious co-creative processes—for example in the recent rise in the application of

“design thinking” methodologies in corporations and the social sector, or the spread of social-change endeavors that take place in multi-actor settings with the conscious intention to create collective impact.

Collective leadership in collaboration processes is not a new invention, it has always existed in the history of humankind. But we are at a historical cusp where our ability to create the future together moves from a neglected backstage competency to the front stage. The world today, with all its potentials and threats needs the deliberate building of these competencies at scale so that individual, organizational, societal, and complex global change can take place with a systems view of life and the respective responsibility that is derived from it.

In your book, *The Art of Leading Collectively*, you introduce readers to the Collective Leadership Compass—a specific tool for getting leaders at many different levels, and across many different sectors, to identify and work toward common goals, specifically in the area of sustainability. How did you develop the compass, and how does it work?

Developing a tool, even if it functions as a meta-level guiding structure, usually involves many stages of origination and is inspired by many encounters and experiences. My work in high-level leadership development for large corporations, as well as my in-depth experience in development cooperation from the grass-roots to the international level, led me to the conclusion that we need a much more systemic approach to global and local change. I also noticed – as probably many others have – the blatantly obvious: it is people who drive change collectively.

The many structures we have created – be they institutions, laws, regulations, economic models, or democratic governance systems – are supposed to support how we can manage the delicate balance between individual interest and the common good. But, as we all know, we tend to get lost in structures that do not serve us – as a whole and as individuals. Yet they develop their own dynamic

that we can't easily escape. Our current economic model is probably the most prominent example of a structure we invented that enslaves the whole of humankind. If we want to find solutions to global problems that cannot be solved within the existing structures or with the existing ways of operating, we need to enter into unknown territories and do things differently. One such approach was – and is – finding solutions by working with people across institutional boundaries, and – equally important – across the sectors of society.

There are many collaboration initiatives today that draw on resources, experiences, and expertise from the public sector, private sector and civil society. For almost 20 years, I've had the privilege to be involved in a number of these pioneering cross-sector collaboration initiatives. What I learned was that they held a huge potential for humankind's evolution, because they are pioneering a form of collective responsibility, resilience, and vitality that

the world needs. I also observed that multi-stakeholder collaboration worked best when it was possible to invigorate essentially human competencies. Put simply, I noticed that people created the future jointly and in a constructive way, when they all saw that there was a future at stake, had developed a minimum degree of trust, were excited about something new, had respect for each other (even in disagreement), could build on each other's ideas, and wanted to contribute to something bigger and really important.

I dug deeper, observed more, did quite a lot of research and explored the growing knowledge in living-systems theory. The result was a tool that was simple enough to work with to improve collaboration, yet complex enough to link the practical and the theoretical, the individual and the complex global level. The *Collective Leadership Compass* identifies six dimensions that, consciously attended to, lead to more constructive and reliable

collaboration efforts and can be applied by individuals and groups of leaders. The six dimensions are not new, but what is new is paying specific attention to their *joint* presence. This has a positive effect on the quality of collaboration and subsequently on the quality and relevance of outcomes. Using the compass enables leaders to design and implement the building and maintenance of a constructive collaborative field by keeping the six dimensions in an appropriately balanced composition. Although it does not prevent conflicts, misunderstandings, or any other typical collaboration obstacles, it enables the identification of interventions that bring actors back into a collaborative field. The compass can be used to strengthen individual leadership skills toward collaboration, enhance the leadership capacity of a group of actors, and shift systems of collaborating institutions towards better co-creation.

What are those six dimensions?

Different group members will have different core strengths, or competencies, and they tend fall into these six categories: the ability to see future possibilities, to engage others, to innovate ways of bringing about change, to connect to the humanity in any given situation, to bolster collective intelligence, or to see the whole, big picture of the situation. All of these represent major points on the compass; there are subcategories within each of these competencies as well. The goal, though, to use the tool as a way to match these core competencies to roles in the change process so that it can move forward by working with people's natural strengths—and also by interlinking them so the that the group can function as a complete whole. When you have all these strengths present, and your group is attending to each of these dimensions in any given issue, you have an excellent framework for potential success.

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP COMPASS



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You've put the compass to work in many different settings. Can you tell us about some cases where you've seen it work?

In the way the compass has worked, I have seen different scenarios. One is the explicit use of the compass and the other is a more implicit

application. Not everyone in a group of multi-stakeholder collaborators in complex change initiatives around climate change, resource

efficiency, sustainable agriculture, or any other of such challenge is willing to understand a tool like the Collective Leadership Compass, particularly as they may be convinced they do not need to learn new approaches. Usually these actors are only concerned with the issue at hand and with the continuous negotiation between their interest, the interest of their institutions, and the agreed upon goal. In such a case it is perfectly alright, if a neutral broker or a core group that supports the initiative, in the form of a secretariat perhaps, simply applies the compass in their process planning, status diagnosis, or event planning.

The compass ensures that they attend to the six dimensions. It becomes a guardian of the way they help bring about change. For example: often, in multi-stakeholder collaboration initiatives in sustainability, people tend to forget the importance of innovation, because, particularly in a highly politicized environment, they would not render anything that has to do with creativity as important. Yet, when working with the compass

Your book shows how everyone from students to corporate leaders to government officials can make use of the compass. What are the elements that make it so universally applicable?

First, the simplicity of the compass does not mean that it simplifies a change process or inappropriately reduces complexity. The six dimensions are mutually reinforcing and essentially human competencies – competencies that we all know and have all experienced, but that we often do not bring into consciousness – particularly not in relation to their *joint* presence. We may jump on one or the other of these competencies, because we think they are more important or because we feel comfortable in a certain dimension; subsequently our change processes will have a heavy bias informed by that particular dimension. The compass, however, gives us a structure to discover, retrieve, or invigorate our competencies in *all* of the dimensions – in support of each other. It guides our attention and helps us not to neglect any of them. I therefore call the compass a meta-level guiding structure. What does this mean? Future is co-created by people, no matter if in a very private situation or in a global political environment. Paying attention to human

forces a core group to consider how and when one could bring in innovative elements in thinking and acting, it shifts mindsets, inspires new ways of thinking, and opens up new learning avenues. I have seen inspirations that people did not believe could happen!

But some groups of course use the compass explicitly. For example, on an organizational level, I have seen an incredible shift in the leadership team of a Ministry in an African country when they had identified their individual pattern of competencies and subsequently realized how the different patterns were distributed in the team – how complementary they were and which competencies were missing. It led them to not only acknowledge each other's strength, but they intensified their collaboration by utilizing each other's strength – and they discussed how they could bring in the missing competencies. The result was a change in the way they addressed the biggest challenges – overcoming a silo-approach to managing water issues - the ministry was facing.

competencies always has a positive effect – no matter where and in which situation. It helps shift human interaction into constructive co-creation.

Second, the compass, is a collaboration pattern in itself. It is composed of dimensions that – together – mirror essential features of living systems, for example the creation of ever more life, the need for both containing and dissipative structure, the emergence of novelty, communicative and multiple feedback-loops, and a dynamic balance between the part and the whole. In addition, the dimension of humanity brings in the fact that – as human beings – we are conscious of our consciousness. This enables us to observe as we do, reflect as we think, and change our actions based on insight.

These two aspects, the simplicity that makes it actionable and the deeper connection to life's features makes it an *organizing principle* - rather than a tool that can only be applied in certain circumstances. Whether student, corporate leader, initiator of a multi-stakeholder initiative, or

government official, each participant needs to invigorate a co-creative spirit and enhance people's ability to jointly find solutions to challenges. This is where the compass comes in to help. Developing a tool, even if it functions as a meta-level guiding structure, usually involves many stages of

origination and is inspired by many encounters and experiences. My work in high-level leadership development for large corporations, as well as my in-depth experience in development cooperation from the grass-roots to the international level, let me come to the conclusion

Your book also goes into how to effectively build networks for change that involve actors and stakeholders with different worldviews, competing interests, and different motivations for meeting certain goals. Can you walk us through this new world of network building?

If we look at the history of evolution we will inevitably find that no life exists without a thorough embeddedness in multiple networks that are in constant communication with each other. As humans, we tend to separate ourselves from life's evolutionary process as if we were observers instead of participants and partners. In doing so, we have created an "as-if" world – as if we and our humanly created institutions and intervention strategies were separate from a "world-out-there" that we observe and change. By taking a systems view of life, and also by simply looking at the facts of events and developments in the world, we see a vast complexity and interdependency. Factually we all – the whole of humankind – operate in a vast network of which each of us only knows a tiny fraction. So what we can learn from life is to accept complexity and leverage it into collaborative strength, and acknowledge interdependency by driving change in networks of action.

Look at social media, open source software development, or Wikipedia: we enjoy networks on a daily basis. Yet in global change efforts, such as those aimed at reaching the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, we tend to often

fall back into trying to find solutions in the silo approaches we so intensely cultivated in the last few hundred years. But in view of the urgency of change needed in the world, it makes much more sense to partner with evolution and actually model evolution by creating networks for action and impact. Many such networks already exist, from the local to global level. Not all are effective (and could become more effective by applying the compass), but at least, they are a step in the right direction, if we breathe life into them.

There are two different reasons to create or join a network. The first is reason is for mutual strengthening of like-minded spirits. In other words, we look for a community we wish to align with in thinking and action. The second is relevant when we cannot address a challenge alone or need to radically change the way we are operating in order to solve a problem. In this case we need to create networks of people who are different, because it is the difference in expertise or world-view that will help us progress. We need both types, but without the latter – even with the hard work of negotiating pathways into the future – we can't change the world.

What hope do you hold for getting collaborative action, and impact, to scale up in the coming years – quickly enough to address some of our major looming challenges?

Scaling-up global collaboration competence for a more sustainable world is certainly a collective learning journey without easy answers. It will be a path where we inevitably hit obstacles or discover

that a solution we thought we had found turns into the next problem. We will at times be desperate because the task is so daunting. This means we not only need to keep learning, reduce the blaming,

and foster joined action, but also encourage a culture of mutual support. We need to set goals like the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and break them down into tangible action points. But we also need to accept that – at times - goals might get lost when we are in the midst of turmoil, have become victims of our own efforts, or fall back into thinking we know the only right way to do things.

It helps to keep in mind that we learn to partner with evolution better than ever before by creating collaborative patterns that not only work but find even more appropriate ways of negotiating between the interest of the individual and the interest of the whole - because, in fact, they may be the same.

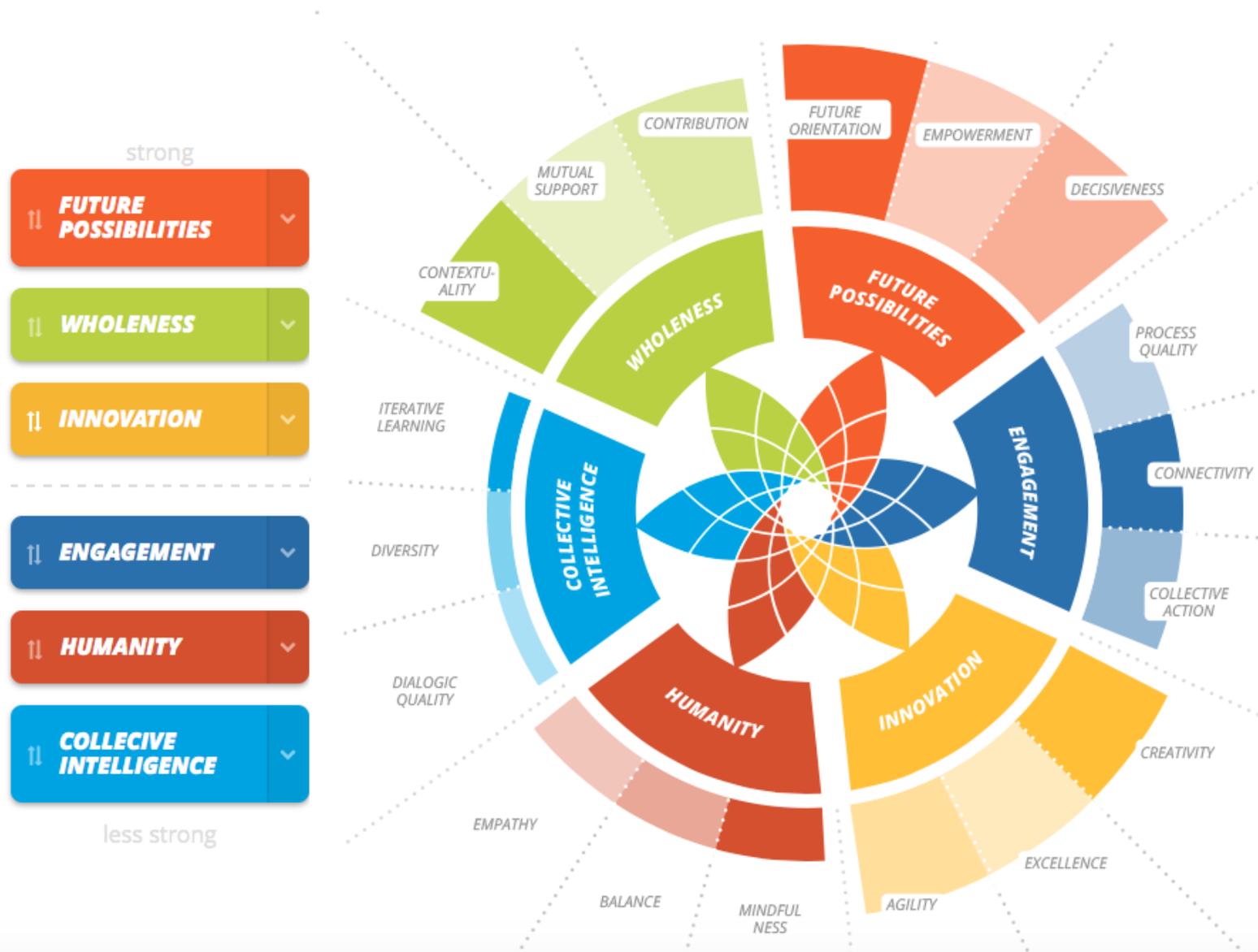
Scaling up collaboration skills globally is an important contribution to helping us partner with evolution. In my view it is a vital stepping stone for our agility in dealing with the challenges the world faces. None of us is perfect and will never be (because life isn't perfect!), but it may help to remember a few principles that are at the cornerstone of scaling-up global collaboration skills:

- *Taking collaboration seriously* means to avoid sliding back into competition while we think we collaborate.
- *Shifting the focus from events to collaborative change processes* means that we learn how to really take care of a system of collaborating actors so that they develop the cohesiveness the aspired change requires.
- *Combining regulations, plans, and governance systems with high-quality dialogic conversations that foster the human spirit* creates an appropriate balance between the human need for mutual recognition and the safety of structures and procedures.
- *Designing change approaches that attend to individual and collective needs for fulfillment as much as to measurable outcomes* helps us stay on track.
- Reminding us that we need to *take the path with heart helps us* discover and revive the passion for collaborative change.

The Interview was conducted by Joni Praded.

The Diagnose and Action Tool

Empowering People to Harness the Potential of Collaboration for Sustainability - Easy to use, encouraging a community for more constructive co-creation



Levels of application

The compass strengthens individual leadership, enhances the leadership capacity of a collective and shifts organizations or systems of collaborating actors towards better co-creation. This leads to increasing the impact for sustainability by getting things done faster, coming to better decisions, saving money, and being more content while achieving results jointly.

Level	Application	Purpose
Individual: <i>Strengthening individual Leadership competence</i>	<i>Self-assessment, identification of development areas, personal development plans, coaching guide</i>	<i>Enhance individual holistic leadership capabilities and capacity to lead in conjunction with others, increase self- efficacy in sustainability leadership</i>
Team: <i>Empowering collaborative action groups</i>	<i>Group-assessment, identification of improvement areas, team reflection, definition of focus areas, action plans, team coaching guide, meeting planning</i>	<i>Enhance collaborative group/team efficacy, refocus team on sustainability issues, increase awareness of the interface between hard and soft skills, improve impact of action plans</i>
System: <i>Building communities for change</i>	<i>Assessment and self-assessment of collaboration systems, joint action planning, planning of meetings, workshops and collaboration events; monitoring quality of collaboration; progress reviews, Diagnose and exploration of thinking and action patterns regarding sustainability issues, evidence-based decision-making with attention to the six dimensions, strategic and action planning</i>	<i>Engage organization/ department or cross-sector network for sustainability goals, improve collaboration results, strengthen collective action, increase collaborative impact, enhance system's vitality and resilience, invigorate constructively co-creative narratives.</i>