

IJPLC | INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PRESENCING LEADERSHIP & COACHING

Leadership In and As the Emergent Field

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Abstract: This article explores leadership as an emergent and co-participatory process arising within collective presencing fields. Drawing on nearly two decades of experience facilitating transformative individual and collective development through Pacific Integral's *Generating Transformative Change* (GTC) program, coaching, and practice-based leadership initiatives, the authors examine how leadership unfolds through shared participation in presencing processes. Moving beyond conventional distinctions between leader and follower, self and other, the article proposes an interpenetrative understanding of individual and collective development in which transformation and emergence co-arise through relational and field-based participation. Grounded in Theory U and informed by developmental and transpersonal perspectives, the article explores how emergent leadership develops through practices that deepen collective awareness, relational trust, embodied participation, and openness to future possibility. Particular attention is given to the role of collective presencing, developmental maturity, and field-based emergence in cultivating new forms of leadership capable of responding to complex individual, organizational, and societal challenges. The article concludes by reflecting on leadership as a living movement of participation within an unfolding field of collective emergence.

Keywords: presencing, collective leadership, emergent leadership, Theory U, collective emergence, transpersonal development, participatory leadership, coaching field, collective presencing

I. Introduction

How do we conceive of and support leadership in an emergent practice field where notions of self, other, leader, and follower become more complex and recognized as interpenetrative? In this article, we explore our experience with collective leadership informed by and embedded in a presencing process. We draw on our work teaching and facilitating individual and collective presencing in Pacific Integral's *Generating Transformative Change* (GTC) 9-month program, *Leading Through Emergence*, a 9-week online practice-based course, coaching, and other programs.

Over the past 22 years of experimenting with and developing approaches to holistic and integral development, we have arrived at a framework that views individual and collective development and leadership as co-emergent. Our approach has presencing as a core model and practice for transformative change. In this essay, we explore how leadership emerges as a movement towards awakened wholeness (the fulfillment of wisdom and care). This emergent leadership can take form in individual and collective action, is fluid and contextual, and centered in a sense of a higher future. It cultivates and is supported by an orientation to the I, We, and the domain of care being in a continual process of presencing. We discuss the qualities, practices, and design approaches to maturing leadership in collective spaces. We reflect on presencing and its implications for future conceptions of leadership.

We draw on Scharmer's Theory U (2018) as a map for the depth of change individuals and groups can go through in a transformative process. Theory U and presencing are integrated throughout our work, as the foundational structure of the curriculum, in the arc of a workshop or retreat, and as a set of practices for individual and collective development and leadership. Presencing refers to the deepest and most profound form of change, where novelty emerges from source or ground of being. It involves sensing into and sourcing our ideas and actions from a deeper ground beyond the ideas and intuitions of the ordinary self, and "learning together from the emerging future by collectively sensing into and intuiting not yet embodied or known possibilities" (Gunnlaugson, 2011, p. 3).

The way we work with Theory U is interpenetrative, meaning interdependent and co-arising (Fitch & Lynam, 2019). An interpenetrative approach arises out of the view that a deeper wholeness exists, a process beyond our mapping, with which we are participating. From this perspective, we hold the tensions and paradoxes that exist in and between our models, and our perspectives on them, as generative and central to the process of emergence. Sensemaking is contextual, provisional, and often paradoxical, and is coincident with witnessing. This supports an openness that allows novelty to emerge, and mastery of the different aspects of the U.

II. The Co-Evolution of Individuals and Collectives

To address the topic of collective leadership, we expand on our understanding of the emergence of collectives and leadership through this interpenetrative view. Working in intimate settings with small groups over extended periods of time, we came to understand individuals and

collectives, and their unfolding, as co-emergent and co-evolving.

“Interpenetration” refers to a movement beyond both/and toward a recognition of “one within the other,” and applies equally to the dimensions of individual and collective life. Because no one is fully independent of the collectives in which they participate, transformation in individuals also involves transformation in relationship. In a similar way, social systems transform through changes occurring within the individuals involved (Fitch & Lynam, 2019).

We distinguish individual and collective emergence because doing so reveals the capacities within each that support development. At the same time, individuals and collectives remain in a continuous process of co-evolving with, for, and as each other. They interpenetrate and co-emerge through a prior unity: a whole in which individuals and collectives occupy the same participatory space (Smith & Berg, 1997; Kesler, 2014).

This orientation points toward a deeper sense of participatory wholeness expressed in the following reflection: “We are not outside observers of the world. Neither are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity... knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part” (Barad, 2007).

III. Perspectives on Leadership

Our exploration of this interpenetrative view of individual and collective life, as well as the application of Theory U, has also been deeply informed by theories of adult development (O’Fallon, 2020, etc.). This gave rise to an exploration of how leadership can be understood through a developmental lens (Lynam, Fitch, & O’Fallon, 2022). As individuals deepen in practice and in their own developmental unfolding, they may begin to experience leadership as a new way of being and acting in the world, grounded in increasingly mature subtle states and stages of consciousness. We came to refer to this orientation as Emergent Leadership (originally causal leadership) (Ramirez, Fitch, & O’Fallon, 2013). Development is not leadership, but development informs how we conceive of leadership and the actors in a system who are leading.

The word “leadership” carries different meanings for different people. One researcher identified more than fifteen hundred definitions of leadership and over forty theories of leadership (Kellerman, 2012). As we look toward the essence of leadership beyond the distinctions of “I” and “We,” beyond leaders and followers, and beyond capacities, behavior, being, and doing, we join with the understanding of leadership as a movement called forth by an emergent future.

Leadership, in this sense, has three essential qualities. First, it is value oriented. The emergent future carries the possibility of a more whole, more just, more effective, and more beneficial state. It is involutory in that it involves the integration and manifestation of a deeper reality, including greater wisdom and a more encompassing sense of wholeness, into the present moment. Second, leadership involves an energetic movement toward this future potential. It expresses through action, participation, organization, and the collective movement toward what is seeking to emerge. Third, it is evolutionary in that the integration of involutory insight and energetic engagement moves the present toward a “transcendence of the limits and realization of what is manifest or unconsciously predictable” (Ramirez, Fitch, & O’Fallon, 2013).

Emergent Leadership, then, is both a commitment to and a realization of a more just and whole future for all of life, arising from a potential beyond the current limitations of individuals and collectives. This understanding coincides with the transpersonal view of the concrete and subtle interpenetration of the I and We, leading toward an understanding of leadership as emergent within the field as a whole. By transpersonal, we refer to states of awareness and stages of development grounded in awareness beyond the ordinary self (subtle ego), including, for example, the 5th- and 6th-person perspectives from the STAGES model of adult development (O’Fallon, 2020). This transpersonal orientation begins to open toward a collective of collectives that includes all of life, from cells to the cosmos.

Where does this movement of leadership come from? From you? From me? From us? From Source itself? As these questions deepen, familiar distinctions between leading and following, being and doing, become increasingly fluid and participatory. The movement toward a greater future may be experienced as emerging through us, taking hold of us, and guiding us as we participate in bringing it into form. Leadership, in this sense, is often experienced as a resonance with the emergent future and a free flow of energy toward its realization.

Emergent leadership is an enactment that is continually energized towards the emergent future through a process that is itself emergent in the collective. In practice this means the collective is continually in touch with the flow of presencing, crystallizing, and enacting both the subject and object of its leadership.

IV. How the Collective U process works in GTC

To support development and transformation within GTC, we begin with the principle that

individuals grow and develop in the context of relationships and groups, and vice versa. By integrating intrapersonal, interpersonal, and collective development, each dimension can be reciprocally deepened. We support the development of both the individual and the collective through engaging multiple U-processes that presence the future for individuals and for the collective as a whole.

Structurally, GTC includes four residential retreats of five days each, with individual and collective learning, coaching, and exploration taking place between retreats. Cohorts typically consist of 12–15 participants with 2–3 faculty members supporting each cohort. The collective U process unfolds across the full arc of GTC and, in one sense, begins for the cohort when the program officially ends. By this, we mean that the program supports the development of capacities within the individuals and the cohort to engage in collective emergence together. The fuller realization of that emergence often occurs as facilitators step back and the cohort begins to own and source its future collectively.

During the early phases of GTC, we focus on building relationships and cultivating a collective field of trust, connection, and truthfulness. At the same time, we support the development of capacities for deepening over the course of the nine months. We work with the polarities and paradoxes present in group life, attend to habit patterns within the group, and engage individual and collective shadow processes that support both a deepening of trust and the liberation of the group and its members. As the field, and the relationships within it, deepen and mature, the orientation shifts more fully toward a collective presencing process.

Prior to presencing, the process involves examining, encountering, and letting go of what has been. Through willingness and surrender into a deeper source and ground of being, the collective becomes more capable of sensing the future seeking to emerge in and through them, including the healing and growth possible for both the individuals and the group. Enactment begins as individuals and the collective enter into a process of sensing and bringing this future into form in the world.

We work to cultivate the capacities to open toward a greater wholeness through developmental unfolding; to source ourselves from awareness itself while learning to sustain these capacities personally, interpersonally, and collectively; to engage conflict and contraction as opportunities for deeper growth and integration; and to engage with the broader systems and contexts within which our individual and collective lives are embedded.

The collective presencing dimension of the process is chaotic, not in the ordinary sense of being confusing or disordered, but in the original sense of “the primordial state that precedes Creation. Chaos is an emptiness, but a fertile emptiness, a nothingness that contains the mysterious seeds of all that is, a vast and formless potential capable of bringing forth all form into expression” (Golabuk, 2012). This space of presencing is unpredictable and often gives rise to insight, sensing, and a calling toward an emergent and transformative future.

This process of presencing occurs both individually and collectively. The world seeking to emerge is a world of both I and We. We can engage deliberately in presencing for the self and the collective by becoming receptive to their futures and giving them voice. Ultimately, these futures are deeply interconnected, so within the complexity emerging through presencing, it becomes important to hold these emergent futures sincerely and lightly as they gradually take shape and cohere.

Within the evolution of transformative change in the field, this phase gradually matures into a more coherent system that begins to live and act from a newly emerging order. We co-enact the emerging ontology by taking seriously the future seeking to emerge through us: speaking, thinking, feeling, and working from it. This calls for a sincere and vulnerable care for that nascent future while remaining in relationship with the realities of the present. We practice sustaining a connection to the ground of being from which this future is emerging while continuing to engage it creatively and responsibly.

V. Practices that support emergent leadership

Practices that support the emergence of leadership from the field can be understood through four lenses: the differentiation and integration of the individual; the differentiation and integration of the collective; the development of MetAware capacities of awareness and sensemaking; and the cultivation of a welcoming field grounded in awareness.

The emergence of the I and We can be supported through processes of differentiation and integration (Lynam, Fitch, Androsoff, & Wood, 2022). An essential movement in opening emergent leadership involves the differentiation of the individual toward an identification with a deeper ground and a sense of self that is authentic and ultimately transpersonal. This differentiation is psychological and spiritual and includes coming into a sense of self that is more true and free. From this place, speaking and action can emerge more freely from source and remain connected to a larger whole. In this way, what is spoken or enacted becomes increasingly attuned to a larger movement

unfolding in concert with others and with the future that is emerging.

This realization is supported through a range of practices including nervous system regulation, shadow work, authentic communication, awareness practices, play, experimentation, somatic awareness, reflexive awareness, and intimacy and relationship that allow a deeper sense of “I” to emerge and take expression within the collective. This expression is sourced in a practice of individual presencing and experimentation that supports participants in engaging the process as an ongoing emergence into selfhood. In the language of Theory U, we open the mind, heart, and will in order to drop into a deeper ground and source of being, while prototyping what is emerging and allowing feedback from the field. This includes “failing early and often” and continually returning to Source.

The U process is dynamic, iterative, and interpenetrative in that all points on the U remain available within any moment, while the process itself continues to move fluidly. Within this process emerges the discovery and enactment of a self that is more at home and whole, more awake, more attuned, more truthful, and more free. At the same time, participants often become less constrained, less self-referential, less polarized, and less shaped by triggers, contractions, projections, and introjections.

The emergence of the collective is supported through a coincident process of collective differentiation and integration. This begins through the cultivation of foundational collective capacities and skills, followed by a phase of the work in which the collective engages in a presencing process designed to support the emergence of a transpersonal we-space that becomes increasingly self-guided and self-transforming.

Practices that support collective emergence include navigating generative conflict, deepening intimacy and truthfulness, engaging collective challenges, collective sensemaking, play, improvisation, dance, collective shadow work, engagement in each other’s lives, navigating polarities and paradoxes, giving voice to the collective, collective reflexive awareness, and collective presencing. We also attend to patterns and habits within the collective, noticing what supports the collective’s evolution and what creates limitations or recursive dynamics, while engaging these patterns as catalysts for further growth and development.

The emergence of the I and We is further complemented by the cultivation of transpersonal states and perspectives described within the STAGES model’s MetAware stages (O’Fallon, 2020). These capacities include access to forms of awareness beyond the ordinary self and therefore less

identified with the concrete and subtle ego. This also includes awareness of the collective beyond concrete collectives, such as families, neighborhoods, or organizations, and beyond subtle collectives, including contexts shaped by shared principles and practices that create a particular quality and depth within the relational field.

These capacities also include 5th-person perspectives that are construct-aware and transpersonal in nature, recognizing that concrete and subtle boundaries and definitions are constructed and therefore malleable. In addition, 6th-person perspectives open toward the recognition that our larger sense of self participates within something even greater, including the whole of the Kosmos itself and a broader sense of boundlessness and wholeness.

These capacities form an open ground through which leadership can emerge from the larger field, transcending familiar notions of “I” and “We.” Conceptually, we could say that when we “let go and let come,” the movement of emergence can no longer be located solely within you, me, or us, even though we may still describe it in those terms. This openness allows for a more fluid and enlivened unfolding of what we call leadership.

In practice, this movement of emergence from the groundless ground can appear tentative, surprising, or even unnoticed. Developing the capacity and confidence to recognize and trust this ground, and the process of emergence itself, takes time. Participants often need to surface, examine, and release subtle and sometimes unconscious assumptions, expectations, and identities that shape the way they relate to themselves and the collective.

The transpersonal ground rests upon a developed foundation within the concrete and subtle dimensions of experience, requiring a degree of agility and capacity. Collectives gradually learn to recognize and make sense of trauma reactions, projections, habitual roles and responses, and limiting communal patterns, while also cultivating deeper states of awareness together. In this process, participants begin to inhabit perspectives that include and transcend the I and the We while continuing to weave individual and collective identities into the larger unfolding process.

An essential aspect of this work involves cultivating a loving, open, and playful field within which the work can unfold. These qualities are central to supporting the movement of Open Heart and Open Will. A sustained atmosphere of welcoming and mutual embrace supports the cultivation of sincerity and trust. Many participants enter these spaces carrying defenses rooted in painful collective experiences. Questions often arise such as: “Will I fit in?” “Is this a place for me?” As trust and connection deepen, a stronger bond often forms among participants. Over time, further

questions emerge: “Can I express my full self?” “What happens when I reveal the parts of myself I normally hide?” Through the risk of greater truthfulness and courageous honesty, including collective shadow work, the collective deepens in trust and expands to include fuller expressions of each individual.

Part of the journey into leadership involves a movement toward essential self-acceptance. As this develops, layers of judgment, cynicism, and fear that shape defensive patterns begin to soften. A central support for this movement is the space holding of the program itself, grounded in a deep recognition of essential wholeness that excludes nothing. What is, is received as part of the sacred ground of the work. This also expresses itself through play, humor, movement, dance, and the enjoyment of one another.

This space becomes both a deep acknowledgment of ourselves and a mirror reflecting places of self-rejection that remain unresolved. Through this process, a greater wholeness gradually becomes available for both the individuals and the collective. Facilitators ground themselves and hold the program from this deeper ground of being while participating in the emergence and supporting participants, and their collective, in developing the capacity to do the same.

In this process, we discover together the future seeking to emerge through the particular group of individuals and their collective life, including how they will engage with one another, what they may offer each other and the world, the practices that may support their ongoing evolution and presencing, and the next steps in prototyping their future.

VI. Conclusions

In the 9-month program, GTC, we do not know where cohorts will ultimately arrive, nor what forms their work together may take, because we are engaging a process of collective emergence while cultivating capacities for emergent leadership through presencing. The process unfolds differently within each cohort and cannot be fully predicted or designed in advance. What gradually emerges depends upon the unique constellation of individuals, the quality of participation within the field, and the capacities that develop through the collective journey itself.

One graduate shared that GTC truly began when the program ended, because that was when the cohort started to manifest and experiment with its own individual and collective future. This reflects an important aspect of the work. The deeper purpose of the program is not simply the completion of a curriculum, but the cultivation of capacities that continue to unfold beyond the

formal structure of the program itself. In many cases, cohorts continue together after the completion of GTC, practicing collective emergence and serving as communities of practice, friendship, inquiry, and mutual support.

For participants who continue to engage these practices, the capacity to cultivate and participate in emergent processes becomes increasingly tangible. Leadership, creativity, action, and collective intelligence begin to arise more naturally from this deeper ground of participation. Over time, participants often develop a greater sensitivity to the movement of emergence itself, including the ways insight, direction, relationship, and action can arise through the collective field.

This work also points toward broader implications for leadership and transformative change within organizations, communities, and society. Many contemporary approaches to leadership continue to emphasize the capacities, behaviors, and competencies of individuals. The work explored here suggests that leadership can also be understood as a relational and participatory phenomenon emerging through the field as a whole. From this perspective, leadership involves cultivating the conditions through which greater wisdom, care, creativity, and collective responsiveness can emerge within groups and systems.

Presencing, in this sense, offers more than a method or facilitation process. It opens a way of participating in collective life that supports deeper listening, relational sensitivity, developmental unfolding, and openness to futures seeking to emerge through individuals and collectives together. As individuals and groups learn to inhabit these processes with greater maturity and trust, new possibilities for collective leadership become available.

Ultimately, we see this work as part of a larger unfolding of our collective capacity to manifest greater wisdom and care. This unfolding arises within a paradoxical recognition of the profound needs and challenges present in the world at this moment in history, alongside an awareness of reality as an expression of an underlying wholeness that is already, in some deeper sense, complete. Within this tension, presencing becomes both a practice of transformation and a participation in the ongoing emergence of individual and collective life.

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