

Other-centredness as a leadership attribute: From *ego* to *eco* centrality

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This paper discusses the significance of the attribute of other-centredness to leadership in an emerging world, signified by the convergence of the natural and social worlds and where the means of production is knowledge. Intangible qualities like other-centredness and mindful approaches to leading ourselves and others are central to leadership literacies appropriate for the knowledge-intensive era we are now experiencing. The discourse of leadership runs parallel to the mindsets that emanated from the industrial era and the mindsets that are emerging in the knowledge era. In the industrial era we can see the 'other' as being commanded and controlled by the heroic, ostensibly ego-centred, leadership figure. Leadership in the post-heroic knowledge era is more about working with people and the environment in a more inclusive way, i.e. an eco-centred approach. This paper will discuss, through a review of the literature and the investigation of the attribute of other-centredness within a PhD study, the changes in the discourse of leadership over time. These changes can be tracked on a centredness continuum ranging from the ego-centric to the eco-centric. It will be argued that as people become more mindful of their own actions and interactions, an expanded, and in some cases new, sense of other-centredness surfaces. Paradoxically, the seemingly selfish act of spending time and energy reflexively seeking to know who we are often leads to growth, not contraction, of our sense of responsibility to others and the environment, allowing us to see the world as the interconnected whole that it has always been.

Key words: leadership, other centredness, complex adaptive systems, ecologies

INTRODUCTION

Every historical era has a distinctive set of characteristics and metaphors as well as a defined organising style, also referred to as organisational signatures (Stamps & Lipnack 2004; Staron et al. 2006). For example, a common metaphor for the industrial era was the machine. After a thorough review of knowledge era literature Staron et al (2006) identified the term *ecologies*, and more specifically *learning ecologies* as metaphors for the knowledge era.

Metaphors emanate from mindsets appropriate for the times within which they were set. However, the speed of change experienced in the last 50 years has added to the complexity already associated with paradigmatic change leaving us with little space to process them. Within the leadership domain, as in everyday life, this has allowed archaic patterns of thought, values and culture to linger and intermingle with those appropriate for the times we are now experiencing. The challenge for

leaders in times of rapid change and super-complexity has never been more complicated. Gibson's¹ aphorism that 'the future is here, it's just unevenly distributed', is a reminder that the world is, and always has been, a place of ambiguity and complexity.

One way of understanding the significant differences in leadership practices in the industrial era versus the knowledge era is to look at these inherent mindsets through the lens of *other-centredness* as a leadership attribute. The discussion section of this paper will focus on why this recognition is an important step in identifying where the underlying values and assumptions that drive our leadership, learning and lives emanate from. To be aware of such diversities of mindsets that inform leadership strategies being enacted in contemporary settings is critical in dealing effectively with the volatility and uncertainty of the 21st century.

This paper will discuss the significance of other-

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¹ This aphorism is attributed to William Gibson (b. 1948), a science-fiction author.

centredness as a leadership attribute in times signified by the convergence of the natural and social worlds and where the means of production is knowledge. It will provide a framework for identifying patterns of organisation and leadership and it will provide examples to show that intangibles such as the attribute of other-centredness should be explicated.

DISCUSSION

Leading, learning and living in a knowledge-intensive era rests with a value driver of other-centredness as well as taking responsibility for knowing ourselves so we can contribute and work with others and the environment more mindfully and productively. The *inconvenient truth* here is that these value drivers cannot be thought about or identified within a worldview of the machine-age era or by neo-liberal models of globalisation and economics.

In a knowledge-intensive economy, leaders have a different set of literacies to absorb that are very different to the command-and-control doctrine of the industrial era. Leadership literacies for the knowledge era focus on people-centred attributes. Leaders are encouraged to see themselves as teachers, enablers and stewards who encourage commitment and responsibility in themselves and their followers by tapping into intangible qualities like trust, values and commitment. Contemporary leadership literacies are closely connected to, and expand upon the notion of learning. In times of paradigmatic change the definition of learning expands to include notions of deep impact learning, re-learning and un-learning (see for example, Bennis 1988; Argyris 1993; Drucker 1993; Jaworski 1998; Drucker 1999; Perkins 2003; Raelin 2003; Bragdon 2006).

To be leadership literate for the knowledge era, leaders need to develop a deep understanding of themselves and their world and acknowledge that they are part of their world. This goes deeper than simply learning a particular set of functional skills or being able to demonstrate a series of competencies by rote. Leadership literacies for the knowledge era require an awareness of and responsibility for the interconnected world of the enterprise to its stakeholders and the environment. Leaders also need to be able to surface underlying values, assumptions and ideologies that are in play in order to understand how leadership practices affect production in a knowledge-intensive economy.

Hames (2007) reflects on why it is that the knowledge era calls for different literacies than

those that served in the past:

Cartesian approaches to organisational development and the leadership of change were predicated on the assumption that it was possible to predict, design and control reality. Network science unlocks us from such deceptions, letting us see the world as a living system of dynamic flows and interconnections rather than a banal clockwork mechanism...The incessant, chaotic, essentially unknowable, interaction of all individual components ensures that living systems are in a constant process of renewal—and emergence (Hames, 2007 p. 55).

Our current and emerging worlds are very different from the industrial era from where much of the current thinking about globalisation, economic imperatives and leadership hegemony is drawn. We are now in a world which is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, and it is therefore more fitting to think about harnessing the strength of this messy world than to spend our energy trying to tame it or order it. This calls for mindsets amenable to working with the mess based on models of ecologies, complex adaptive systems (CAS) or quantum theory, for example, rather than the Newtonian mechanistic mindset grounded in stability and order that worked for the industrial era.

Before continuing to the research section of this paper the terms *other-centredness*, *knowledge era* and *leadership literacies* will be expanded upon.

OTHER-CENTREDNESS

The attribute of other-centredness is not easy to define. It is at once personal and yet, in a spiritual sense, it's about being part of something bigger than ourselves. It is bound to an understanding of our intricate interconnectness to others and the environment in the world. One way to describe the attribute of other-centredness is through a South African term 'Ubuntu':

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed...(Tutu 1999).

Other-centredness presents us with a paradox

OTHER-CENTREDNESS IN LEADERSHIP

because the insight we gain from spending time in the seemingly selfish act of knowing ourselves more deeply, expands our personal concerns for the world and others, as Gandhi expresses here:

You and I are the same thing. I cannot hurt you without harming myself. (Mahatma Gandhi, 1869-1948)

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (2000) presents an excellent framework to track centredness as a disposition. Other-centredness is a vital attribute of self-actualisation, the final phase in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The turn from ego-centredness to other-centredness is directly related to the maturing outlook of the individual that begins after an expansion of concern just for the self (biological and physiological and safety needs). Centredness then develops to take in concern for others in close relations with the self (belongingness and love needs); then to concern as to how others may see them (esteem needs) and finally to concern for others (self actualisation). Other-centredness occurs after the esteem needs stage and is apparent by the time self-actualisation is reached.

Eco-centric centredness is named here at one end of an arbitrary centredness continuum with ego-centric centredness named at the other. 'Eco' has been used as a shortened version of the word 'ecologies' to tie in with the metaphor for the knowledge era by Staron et al (2006 p. 22). Ecologies also suggests the recognition of the interdependent, social and people-centred nature of our relationships and concern for others and the environment that are so important in the knowledge era. Staron et al (2006) expands this notion of ecology further as:

Ecology meets the criteria for an effective metaphor, it is both complex and familiar and it aligns with and reinforces the theme of embracing 'opposites in co-existence' which characterises the knowledge era. These opposites include: competition and cooperation, mutation and extinction, growth and decay, replenishment and exhaustion, wholes and parts, individual and collective, order and chaos, flexibility and balance, stability and unpredictability (Staron et al, 2006, p 25).

As well as Maslow's lens of self-actualisation (Maslow 2000), the attribute of other-centredness presents in some of the leadership literature. Servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977), distributed leadership (Gronn 2002; Spillane 2006), systems thinking (Fuller 1969; Senge 1990), complex adaptive systems (Fuller 1969; Waldrop 1992) and

are all examples of thinking and acting in a holistic manner centred on others.

Where people might situate themselves within a centredness continuum, ranging from the ego-centric to the eco-centric, depends very much on their assumptions and values. Other-centredness features in leadership literature that is concerned with seeing wholeness and interconnections and in leadership theory that promotes relationships, diversity and a post-heroic mindset. On the other hand ego-centredness presents in leadership literature within the discourse of 'great man' theory (Borgatta et al. 1954; Bass 1990) and trait theory (Kirkpatrick & Locke 1991) where contestation and heroic leadership are privileged. There are many ways to describe this dichotomy and many people have done so, for example, *power over* and *power through*, as theorised by Mary Parker Follett in the 1920s (Mendenhall et al. 2000; O'Connor 2000; Graham c1995) or the more recent *dominator/partnership* model (Eisler & Garrick 2008).

THE KNOWLEDGE ERA

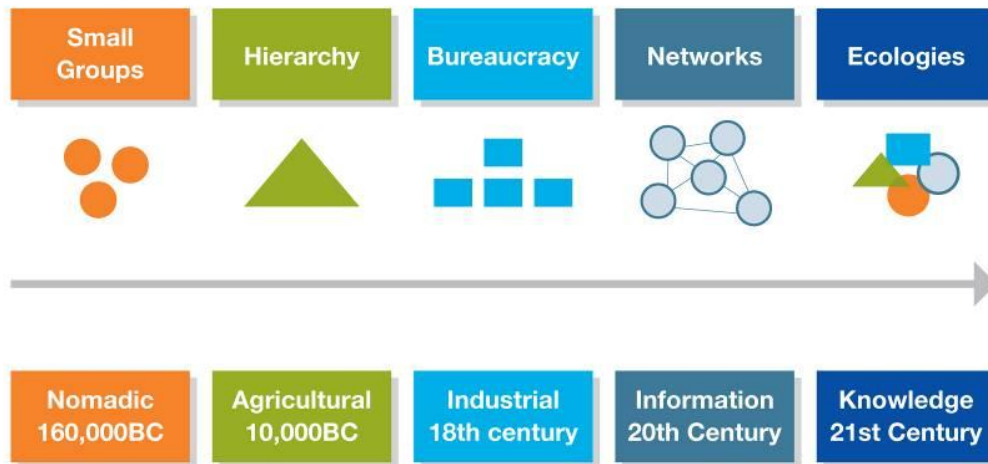
Drucker (1993) theorised that in a knowledge-intensive economy much hinged on being able to increase productivity of knowledge work in much the same way as Taylor (1856-1915) dramatically improved work processes and output of manual labour in the industrial era. Drucker makes the point that the means of exponential improvement will lie, not in the breaking down of tasks to gain efficiencies as Taylor advocated (and Henry Ford applied), but rather in the harnessing of intangible assets held by and within knowledge workers. This can only be done by acknowledging that people bring their whole selves to work and by finding ways to economically and humanely capture and manage their knowledge and energy for competitive advantage.

Staron (2006) provides an overview of organisational signatures from the Nomadic Era (160,000 BC) to the knowledge era of today (see Figure 1) and provides a thoughtful definition of the knowledge era:

...characterised by impermanence, turbulence, multiple competing agendas and priorities, diversity in ideologies, ambiguity, multiple roles, irritations, uncertainty and contradictions and a great amount of energy and creativity. It is also the 'intangible era', where instead of goods and services the growing economic commodity is knowledge itself (Staron, et

al., 2006, p. 23).

Figure 1. Organisational signatures through the eras



Adapted from Cooperrider, 2004

Source: Staron, M., Jasinski, M., & Weatherley, R. 2006. *Life based learning: a strength based approach for capability development in vocational and technical education: a report on the research project 'Designing professional development for the knowledge era'*. Sydney, TAFE NSW ICVET, p 23.

These organisational signatures illustrate the affinities of each era in relation to the organisation of society, organisation of action (from survival to the means of economic production) and effective leadership. These definitions surface the reasons, for example, why command-and-control leadership practices of the industrial era were appropriate for their time but not for others. Command and control leadership practices do not work in the knowledge era where knowledge, innovation, creativity are the drivers of economic prosperity. In the knowledge era the means of production and prosperity are often intangible and lie inside people's heads. People cannot be commanded or controlled in the same manner as widgets on an assembly line.

A shift from an ego-centric perspective toward an eco-centric one can also be tracked through the organisation signatures depicted in Figure 1 and becomes mainstream in the information era in the late 20th century as depicted by the network organisation mode and continues through to the knowledge era.

LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP LITERACIES

Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth (Burns 1978). There are many definitions of leadership and the term itself has multiple meanings depending largely on the subjective worldview of the particular

individual, group or organisation and their wider environs and the times they are situated within.

The command/control leadership model from the bureaucratic industrial era is bound to models of heroic and ego-centric leadership, whereas the knowledge era is experiencing an epistemological turn towards post-heroic and eco-centric leadership imperatives. References to the post-heroic leadership period are emerging in the literature as Sinclair discusses:

Joyce Fletcher, among others, has pointed to the importance of 'post-heroic' leadership, a 'less individualistic', more relational concept of leadership. It recognises leadership as a shared or distributed practice; a dynamic and multi-directional social process (not necessarily hierarchical); and an activity aimed at collective outcomes such as learning. A growing body of writing documents the ordinary and extraordinary situations where people lead not as heroic individuals but as part of a cooperative group (Sinclair, 2007, p. 31).

There is also a significant body of literature that can be defined as eco-centric leadership as illustrated by Bragdon's notion of living asset stewardship (Bragdon 2006, 2009):

Managing a company as if it were a living

organism, which it is, creates a radically different, and more beneficial, set of relationships. Firms that operate this way place a higher value on people and nature (living assets) than they do on non-living capital assets. They understand at a fundamental level that living assets are the source of capital assets, and that capital assets can't function without direction from people or inputs from nature.

Companies that model themselves on living systems typically practice what I call living asset stewardship (LAS). To them, profit is not so much a goal in itself as the means to a higher end of service. When such ends are condensed into a compelling vision—one that calls forth the life affirming instincts and future hopes of employees—the firm becomes a profoundly inspirational workplace (Bragdon, 2009, p. 2).

The definition of leadership that resonates best with my own study of leadership set within a knowledge-intensive era is that 'leaders are in the business of energy management' (Kets de Vries 2003, p. 111). This notion of leadership strips away complexity and points to the quintessential element of leadership for the knowledge era, and recognises that leadership is deeply tied to the sustainable use of our energies and is an eco-centric view of leadership. It elevates the judicious governance of energy of self, others and the environment alongside financial governance and thus situates leadership for the knowledge era within a multiple bottom line governance approach. Multiple bottom line governance approaches are described variously as balanced scorecard (Kaplan & Norton 1992); triple bottom line (Elkington 1998); quadruple bottom line—adding spirituality to profit, social and environmental governance (Inayatullah nd); and living asset stewardship (Bragdon 2006, 2009). It is within this reading of leadership that other-centredness as a leadership literacy will be taken up in the research section of this paper.

Another way to think about leadership appropriate for the knowledge era is to expand upon the notion of 'literacy' and add leadership literacies to the leadership lexicon. The term literacy denotes more than just the ability to read and write. To be literate also implies a deeper understanding of the particular phenomenon under review and an ability to make sense of, embody, interpret, analyse, respond, and interact with complex sources of information and experiences within that domain.

The concept of leadership literacies has been defined in the literature (Rosen 2000; Hames 2007; Renesch 2007).

The term literacy also underscores the power of language and metaphor and how they are used to manage and govern (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). This flags the relationship between language and literacies and how metaphorical and literal meanings of words and actions may be comprehended differently through the lenses of an industrial era or knowledge era worldview. It also surfaces the need for some degree of translation to uncover what is actually meant within each worldview's context, just as it is necessary to make such translations for foreign languages. For example, displays of humanity such as vulnerability, empathy or concern for others could be viewed as signs of weakness or strength depending on our underlying worldview.

Introducing the term *literacies* as the overarching description of leadership factors also allows for the accommodation of variant terminologies associated with leadership. Terms such as characteristics, skills, attributes, capabilities, abilities, competencies, capacities and expertise have been used interchangeably and often ambiguously in the literature and in practice. An overarching placeholder such as *leadership literacies* may be a valuable contribution to research and practice.

The attribute of other-centredness as a leadership literacy was identified in the literature and discussed in this section. The next section of this paper will focus on researching this attribute.

INVESTIGATING THE ATTRIBUTE OF OTHER-CENTEREDNESS

Other-centredness is one specific leadership attribute of interest in a current doctoral study which is investigating whether leadership literacies for the knowledge era are being practised in universities in Australia (Davis 2008b). Preliminary analysis indicates that there is a strong sense of other-centredness being enacted by university leaders in Australia. The reason for including the preliminary results in this paper is to demonstrate that an intangible attribute like other-centredness can, and indeed should, be investigated (Davis 2008a).

During the literature review stage of this study, it was discovered that servant leadership theory based on the work of Greenleaf (1977) was, by proxy, close to what the author had previously named as *leadership literacies* appropriate for the

knowledge era. The work of Dr Sen Sendjaya from Monash University who had developed and validated a model for testing Servant Leader Behaviour in his own PhD was identified and subsequent permission to use and modify the Sendjaya Servant Leadership Behavioural Scale (SLBS) was given. Consequently the SLBS was expanded to include the attribute of other-centredness and several other leadership literacies for the knowledge era. The 35 questions and five themes from the original SLBS questions were kept intact and the author also used many of the 35 questions to populate her own emergent themes. This approach allowed for further opportunities for thematic analysis and a degree of parsimony by using, for more than one purpose, the questions that were included in the original SLBS. The instrument for this inquiry was developed as a qualitative survey (Knox 2004; Galasinski & Kozłowska 2010; Jansen 2010; Maxwell 2010).

Whereas leadership research is usually focussed on asking leaders about their own leadership, this inquiry makes a contribution to the considerable body of leadership literature by adding something different. The research question ‘are leadership literacies for the knowledge era being practised in higher education in Australia?’ was addressed by

asking professional staff employed in Australian universities about their leaders. In the wider discourse of higher education, in Australia and elsewhere, the views of professional staff are virtually absent and therefore these voices are under-represented in the higher education literature. By asking a group usually seen as followers about their lived experience (i.e. what they observed and how they experienced leadership in universities as well as the depth of distributed, self leadership, processes of leadership and working conditions in universities today) the data collected and analysed will also add a different perspective to the leadership literature.

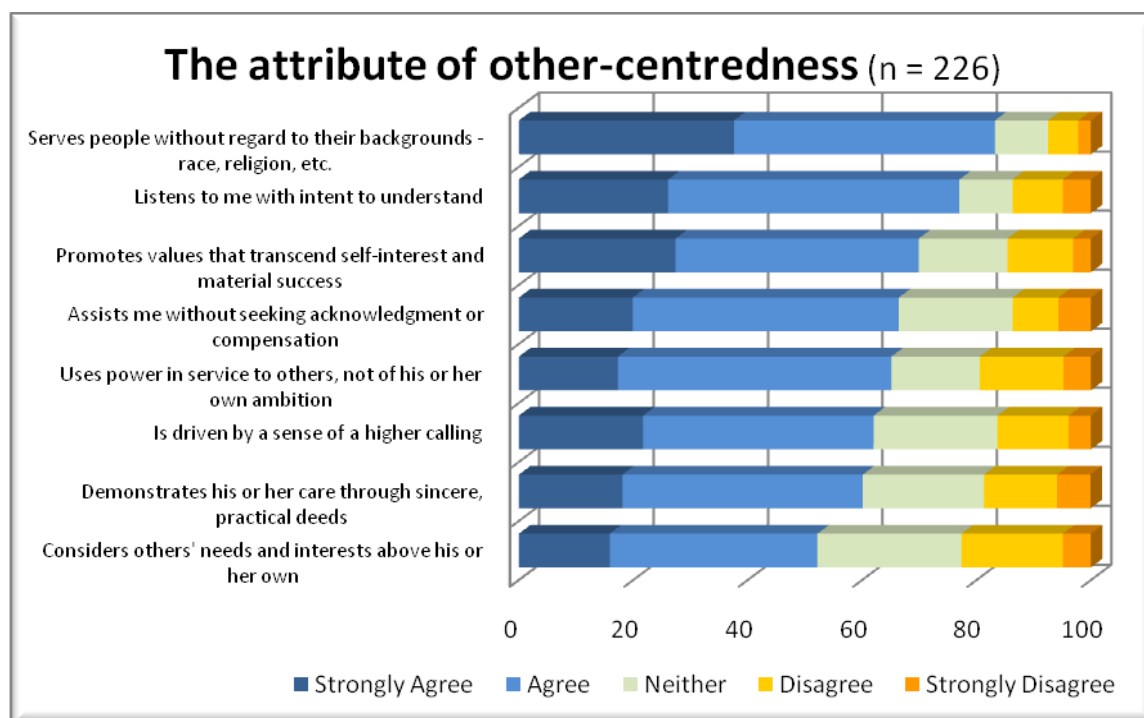
This research also tested whether or not the attribute of other-centredness was being enacted by leaders in universities in Australia. The research is now in the preliminary analysis stage and the research data was collected between November 2009 and February 2010. It took the form of an online survey of 226 professional staff working in universities in Australia who were also members of their professional association, the Association for Tertiary Education Management Inc. The attribute of other-centredness was analysed by using a selection of questions from the SLBS as already discussed in this paper and shown here in Table 1.

Table 1. Questions to test the attribute of other-centredness

<i>Testing whether the attribute of other-centredness was evident in the practice of university leaders in Australia</i>	
In your mind, please identify your direct leader, and evaluate your direct leader with regard to their leadership behaviours by selecting the most appropriate response on the scale. My leader:	SLBS Theme from where these questions emanated from:
Considers others' needs and interests above his or her own	Voluntary subordination
Demonstrates his or her care through sincere, practical deeds	Voluntary subordination
Is driven by a sense of a higher calling	Transcendental spirituality
Uses power in service to others, not of his or her own ambition	Voluntary subordination
Assists me without seeking acknowledgment or compensation	Voluntary subordination
Promotes values that transcend self-interest and material success	Transcendental spirituality
Listens to me with intent to understand	Voluntary subordination
Serves people without regard to their backgrounds – race, religion, etc.	Voluntary subordination

Figure 2 displays the preliminary results for this particular theme. Even at this early stage of analysis it is clear that the attribute of other-centredness is present and there is agreement or strong agreement that leaders in universities in Australia are enacting the attribute of other-centredness to a meaningful degree. Final results will be part of a thesis due for examination in March 2011.

Figure 2. Attributes of other-centredness



DISCUSSION

Paradoxically, the seemingly selfish act of spending time and energy reflexively seeking to know who we are often leads to growth, not contraction, of our sense of responsibility to others and the environment, allowing us to see the world as the interconnected whole that it has always been. This paradox helps to deepen our understanding of the notion of other-centredness and its importance to leading, learning and life in the knowledge-intensive era. To comprehend the paradox is to recognise that before we can truly understand our interdependence with others, people and the environment, we must first know ourselves in a way that transcends our own ego and in a way that is not fearful of difference and diversity of viewpoints (O'Brien 1998; Hames 2007; Nanschild & Davis 2007; Sinclair 2007; Wilber 2008; Bragdon 2009; Johansen 2009).

The eco-centric metaphor outlined earlier also addresses the interrelated and interconnected nature of our world as well as the deep interdependence between ourselves, the environment and the economy. An ecological model illustrates that there are no 'externalities' and that everything is in play and should be taken into account when determining economic value, costs, benefits and policies, as Bragdon (2006) illustrates:

Edward O. Wilson (2002, p.23) notes that

the accounting systems we use to compute GDP largely ignore Earth's biotic balance sheet and therefore give us a false sense of security. Ecosystems that determine climate and thereby much resource availability, such as the great rainforests and oceans, are being overharvested, polluted, run down. He describes the convergence of Earth's declining carrying capacity with the rapid growth of population as a bottleneck...

With this as a base assumption, projected increases in consumption around the globe on top of estimated population increases, would seem likely to demand the resources of seven or more planet Earths within the next half century. This, of course, is impossible. Thus, we are compelled to make better use of the resources we now have and to stop running down the biosphere that makes these resources available to us (Bragdon, 2006, p. 2).

In summing up, an eco-centric mindset encourages us to think about working with the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity that has been discussed, rather than against it. Indeed the growing interest in combining design science (Martin 2009) and leadership appropriate for the 21st century (see for example, Senge & Carstedt 2001; Bragdon 2006; Hames 2007; Sattmann-Frese

& Hill 2008; Gilbert et al. 2009; Sosik & Jung 2010) is accommodated by the ecological metaphor and turn towards eco-centredness. An example can be seen in the work of Johansen (2009) who encourages leaders to actively make their own futures:

Leaders must learn how to make the future in the midst of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The discipline of foresight can help leaders make better decisions today. We need not passively accept the future. Leaders can and must make a better future (p.1).

Leaders in the future will need to have vision, understanding, clarity and agility. The negative aspects of VUCA (i.e. volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) can be turned around with effective leadership that follows these principles:

- Volatility yields to vision
- Uncertainty yields to understanding
- Complexity yields to clarity
- Ambiguity yields to agility. (Johansen, 2009, p. 6)

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the significance of other-centredness and appropriate leadership literacies for an emerging world signified by the convergence of the natural and social worlds and where the means of production is knowledge. Through discussion of the literature and by reporting on data analysed in a PhD study, investigating appropriate leadership literacies for the knowledge era, this paper explicated the intangible attribute of other-centredness.

It outlined the paradigmatic shifts occurring in society framed by the interrelationships between knowledge production as the main driver of growth and wealth creation, globalisation and deepening concerns about our world's environmental sustainability.

It also argued that oppositional language and the pitting of one deeply held worldview against another will not resolve the underlying problems of the world or the workplace. It called for recognition of the interdependence and interconnectedness between leadership, learning, life and living assets – that is, people and the environment – by seeing the world as the interconnected whole that it has always been.



Heather's research investigates 'leadership literacies for the knowledge era in the higher education sector in Australia' and emanates from her practice, current PhD scholarship studies (RMIT) and a Masters in Professional Education and Training (Deakin). Heather is a practice-led researcher and Association Secretary for the Association of Tertiary Education Management Inc. Prior to taking up a full-time PhD scholarship in 2008 Heather spent ten years working as a Research Manager with a Faculty of Education. Heather can be reached by email at heather.davis@rmit.edu.au.

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