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*Prof Steyn Heckroodt & Dr. Waddah Ghanem Al Hashmi*

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This paper explores the leadership skills required to progress through the five identified stages of leadership growth, specific to the PCLF. The five stages of development and progression has its genesis in leading self, and then progress to team, organizational, societal and world leadership.

The article argues that the aligned leadership skills, specifically appropriate to each stage of development and progress, are the most probable to bring about success, leading to development from one stage to the other. As a requirement to master each developmental stage of leadership, the article positions Thought, Learning, Acting/doing and Inspiring others, as the four pillar behaviours and disciplines required by individuals to truly master the PCLF.

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# The Platform for Connectedness Leadership Framework Validation

Prof Steyn Heckroodt<sup>α</sup> & Dr. Waddah Ghanem Al Hashmi<sup>σ</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the leadership skills required to progress through the five identified stages of leadership growth, specific to the PCLF. The five stages of development and progression has its genesis in leading self, and then progress to team, organizational, societal and world leadership.*

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## I. PURPOSE

The article suggests that we, as the human species, have become disconnected from one another and from nature, contributing to our seemingly inability to overcome challenges ranging from individual levels, to global scale phenomena. An example would be challenges concerning environmental sustainability, the continuance of separatist and nationalist superiority by belief and culture, and our inability and unwillingness to learn from one another. Disconnectedness leads to not caring about the larger society, not wanting to share global wealth and resources and on an organisational level, inappropriately managing and leading ourselves and others.

The purpose of the article is to suggest a validated framework which can, if applied correctly and adequately, assist us to overcome some of the highest-level challenges in leadership of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and fundamentally in an age of rapid change.

The framework aims to connect systems of a much higher complex nature. These are systems in which our ability to connect are impaired by our inability to learn from one another, be that by choice (cognitive decision-making), or by default (unconsciously incompetent). The systems' higher order complexity refers to the ingrained systemic cultural differences amongst them and their ideologies advocating their own belief of superiority over other systems. As such, this value of being culturally different has become institutionalised in our belief systems. The framework tries to find ways of overcoming the outcome of such institutionalisation in cases where this leads to separatism, otherwise referred to as disconnectedness.

## II. DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

The article allows for the inclusion of the differences in the ethnographic approach, which carries more of an anthropological foundation and is more internal by dimension, and that of an outside observant dimension, which carries more of a sociologist foundation. This leads to the article having an auto-ethnographic approach by design as it contains both elements of self-reflection and ontological observation, captured and defined by the author. The methodology takes the form of qualitative research in which the author uses self-reflection from which subjective and personal experiences

are explored. The aim is to connect these autobiographical components of the narrative to a wider and cross-cultural understanding.

The author takes cognisance of the possible disagreement of non-social constructionist epistemologists on this methodology of validation, and therefore include a purist secondary validation of the constructs piecing the framework together.

### III. A STORY OF YOU, ME, AND EVERYONE ELSE

“Not until I had my own personal *volta* did I realise how arrogance has crept into my being, my presence in the room, and robbed me from the world’s gift of diversity and learning.”

*Steyn Heckroodt - 2009*

It was supposed to be a contract like any other. Instead it became the start of a journey that literally changed the author’s life and taught him the value of being a learner – not a teacher – a learner!

Asked to lead a start-up in Khartoum, the capital of North Sudan in 2009, the author embarked on implementing the near-exact same methodology that made him so successful in other parts of the world – telling people how it’s done – whatever “it” was. Blinded by his success and unbeknown to himself, he had become arrogant, thinking he has all the answers and knows it all, in fact, knows most in the room.

And then it happened – he failed – Miserably – badly – to the point of being ashamed

None of his previous successes followed him this time around. He found himself blaming the semi-militant Sudanese government for the failure, the culture (Arab world – this was his first introduction to it), the language, the international sanctions imposed on the country. He blamed all and everyone, except himself.

In the months that followed the Board wanted to make official what he knew for a long time before

– they were going to let him go. However, three days before the scheduled meeting, he fell ill and ended up sharing a waiting room of a general practitioner with a local Sudanese patient. And there, that afternoon, his life changed and without knowing it at the time, the *Platform for Connected Leadership Framework* was born. In a mesmerising afternoon of storytelling and casual conversation, this patient; a young man, told him of a region in Sudan where there are trees that age to a thousand years. At this age the trees break in half, with the top part breaking loose from the bottom part. At about eight feet high, the bottom remains intact and is hollow on the inside. In the rainy season, this forms a natural water storing pond, keeping water fresh for prolonged periods of time. “At this age the circumference of the tree is like that of ten grown men holding hands with outstretched arms”, he continued telling and explaining.

And then the young man parted with words that broke the author into acknowledging his arrogance. Words that made him realise that he was wrong, a fool who have become self-indulged and one who has lost connection with himself, those in the room, the society around him and the world at large. “Often, Westerners get lost in the desert and their skeletons are found against these hollow water-carrying tree trunks. Upon looking closer, the spore in the sand indicated how the person was moving around the trunk, trying to keep out of the sun; not knowing there is water on the inside...”, he said.

This is the author’s story and the insights that followed that fateful day, delivering this leadership framework – almost 10 years later.

### IV. WHY THIS FRAMEWORK AND WHY NOW?

Of the two questions given above, the second is the easier to answer. This framework is needed now because too many things that are wrong in this world have a human fingerprint on it. If you disagree with this statement as an answer, then maybe this article is not for you.

The answer as to the ‘why’ requires a bit more detail and convincing and follows below.

The framework has its genesis in the need to find a way in which multi-cultural dimensions and epistemological views can be fused in order to create a more holistic leadership and organizing framework (Ulrich, et al., 2008) for the leader in today's globalized world of work. This need was exacerbated through the interactions of the author with people from vastly different cultures and industries in working with them during Leadership Development Programs. The need was further enhanced by the gap left when applying a participative facilitation methodology of teaching whereby the goal was to reach higher levels of knowledge and understanding of leadership. The gap refers to the unspoken objection and limitation for equal participation whenever a preconceived framework with a particular ontological premise was used to provide structure to such a program. As most leadership organizing frameworks, used by the leading business schools globally, stems from a particular ontological premise, the author uncovered and experienced the lack of and need for a more inclusive framework. Hence the construction of the Platform for Connected Leadership Framework, for which this article provides the construct composition, validation and story of its evolution.

The framework fuses the main components required to lead self, team, organization, society, and the world at large, successfully, within the context of evolving industrial revolutions and globalized cultural workforce- and customer diversity. Breaking from the known linear evolution of Leadership Theory (Nohria & Khurana, 2010) over time, the framework encapsulates the morphing of human thought paradigms through time and space, incorporates our leadership intelligence competencies (Palaima, 2010) and highlights the required behavioral dimensions to progress from self-leadership to changing/impacting the world.

Through the framework, this article argues that leaders need to connect with themselves, their people and the larger environment with the aim of changing a way of being (Ulrich, et al., 2008). In connecting on multi-dimensional levels, leaders get to understand themselves, others and the environment better, enabling them to lead better

(Garbarro & Kaftan, 2011). As the incremental changes of the evolving industrial revolutions become steeper, resulting in more intense and faster external disruptive forces constantly, leaders need to think differently about the leadership frameworks and thought paradigms that they have become accustomed to (Kanter, 2005).

Upon first reflecting on his awakening, the author found that his thoughts which outlined the leadership framework, were indeed aligned with that of what others before him have themed in some shape or form. He discovered that the sequence of behaviours necessary to bring the suggested Platform for Connected Leadership Framework, at the time, to life, was to think differently, learn continuously, act and inspire greatness in those he connected with.

Hence, the first of the leadership clusters identified in the framework is to think differently (Kanter, 2005). Equally as important is the need to continuously learn from one's own experiences and those of others in order to bring about better performance than before (Andersen, 2016). Issues related to the historical impact of leadership practices on individuals and the world at large need to be analyzed as to prepare for a better tomorrow. The emphasis on experiential and reflective learning, as a mode of learning, is critical. The value thereof is only optimised when done as a continual process.

Following on thinking differently and continuous learning, leaders need to set the example and act through behavior, leading from the front (Garton, 2017). Then, in the final instance, leadership can only progress and evolve if the baton of leadership skills and abilities are passed onto the next generation leaders (Nohria & Khurana, 2010). Hence the last cluster identified in the framework is to inspire others to discover their own inner greatness. This act of inspiring might be through the actions of leaders, not necessarily being conscious of it. It is argued that, specifically organisational leaders should be actively aware of the possibility that they might inspire others from different angles and dimensions. Leaders should

strive to influence those in the organization to change and become better, holistically. By being tasked with inspiring others, leaders become more self-aware and focus on being a “good role model”. As leaders are shaped to self-improve, they become more aware of the fact that they also have an outward responsibility to help others improve. This can assist in leaders being less potentially hypocritical in our views and actions.

## V. THE FRAMEWORK, THE FIRED CEO, AND THE SECOND CHANCE

When working in so many different parts of the world (over 42 countries in the case of the author), one can easily become disconnected from the people and environment you work within. It becomes part of the ontological reality that you stand ‘outside’ of, almost as an observer and in some cases, even just a visitor, passing by. The

author ended up talking about the places he visited and worked in, about the people he came across, about the societies, countries and governments he encountered. He would discuss it, and them, almost as parts and subjects of a study, but not someone or something that he connected with, or even considered wanting to connect with. He would talk about it/them, but not to, or with. He did not dare to connect.

It should be appreciated that it is not just the author who stumbled upon the power, need and role of connectedness. Other authors such as Sartain (2019), also refers to the positive correlation connectedness has with leadership performance. But to the author it is much more. It what the *axis medio* is to earth – the absolute center axis of the framework, surrounded by those leadership traits necessary to connect to better deal with the challenges of evolving systems and a culturally globalized world of work.

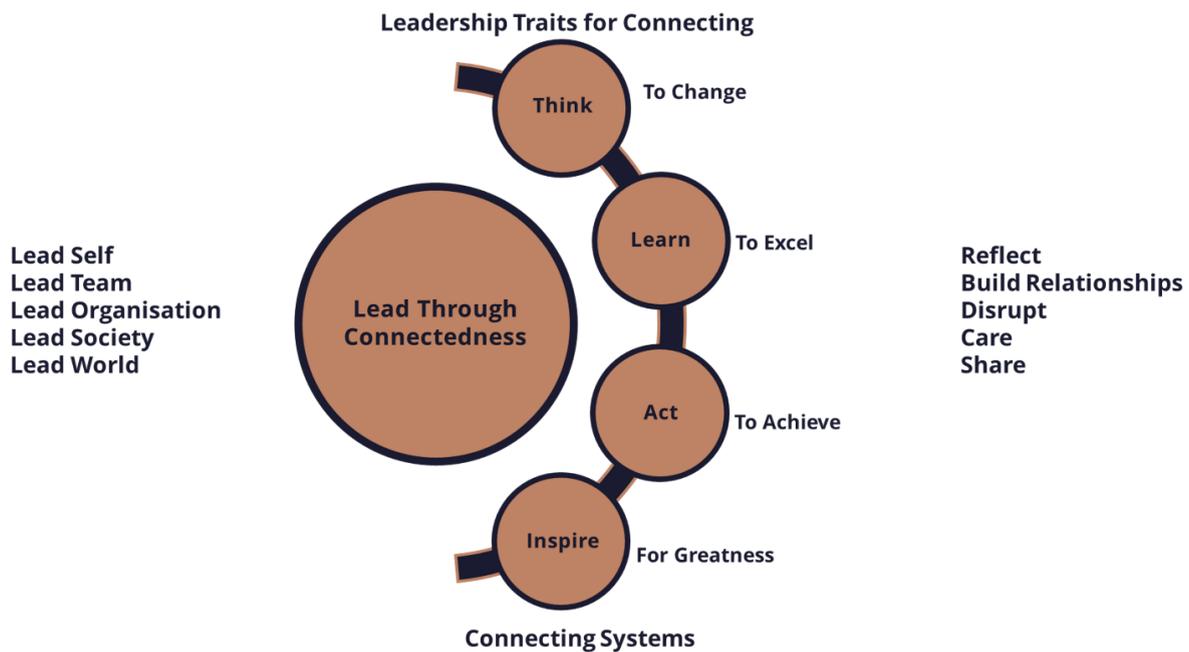


Figure 1: The Platform for Connectedness Leadership Framework®™ (Reference: M. van Zyl)

These leadership traits include:

- Think differently to change
- Learn to excel
- Acting to achieve
- Inspire for greatness

These traits are linked systemically and is required for leaders to truly connect. The author

had to start thinking differently about the environment that he found himself in at the time. Not to judge, but to stand outside to make sense of things and rasonalise, to learn from others, their habits and cultures, their beliefs, hopes, dreams and fears. This was only possible through connecting with people. To go their homes and sit on the floor around a shared large plate of food,

eating by hand and offering one another the prime pieces of the slaughtered goat in front of them, cooked to perfection. The author started to act and do things that would place him in a zone of discomfort, a zone where leaders learn best to trust and rely on others for advice and wisdom. To open-up, to be humbled and ask for help, to create a psychologically safe space (Gratton & Erickson, 2007).

After acknowledging his mistake and the role he played in the failure of the start-up in Sudan, the author asked the Board for one more chance. He explained to them that he now knows where the problem lies. He believed he was best positioned to fix it, ironic as it seemed. By the grace of one Board member who convinced the others, he found himself back in the driving seat a couple of days later.

He went back to the classroom in the days that followed and started focusing not on the content of knowledge he brought, but on the greatness that lies within each individual in the room. He became one of them, a learner, not a teacher. He connected and what followed was much more than success and performance of a company. What followed was a changed man. What followed, was a modern time “Dances with Wolves”.

The rest of the *Platform for Connectedness Leadership Framework* came into being through the steps the author took to bring about the required change in the organization he was leading at the time. It started with his own reflection, then leading his team and eventually the larger organization. He became engaged in the larger society he found himself in. He came to realise that there is a role that he could play in impacting/changing the world, or at least part of it. No matter how big. No matter how small. He came to realise how many of us are kept from connecting with others through the confines of our own culture and upbringing, limited media exposure and make-believe worlds of those in power.

This leads to the damaging loss, maybe unintended by some, of not delivering holistic conceptualised frameworks to represent the psychological, physiological and biological dimensions of us as people. In practice, it prevented the author from learning from others, believing that he was there to teach his ‘way of seeing the world’, and as such always leaving behind a lesson, unfinished...

Like a Rodin, he chipped away further to get to the sculpture within and aligned the DNA necessary to progress from leading self to leading world and positioned them on both sides of the framework.

- For leading self, reflection is required (Ibarra, 2015)
- For leading teams, relationship building is required (Garbarro & Kaftan, 2011)
- For leading organizations, disruption is required (Shih, et al., 2009)
- For leading society, caring is required (Bouldin, 2019)
- For leading world, sharing is required (Martin & Kemper, 2012)

The validation of the framework constructs follows later in the article.

## VI. FROM SUDAN TO THE FORTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

As the years evolved since the author’s time in Sudan, and the role of evolving systemic complexity increased in playing their part in disrupting our worlds, the idea of connecting systems has been added to the framework. As can be seen from Figure 1, this is positioned at the bottom of the framework. Mentioned towards the end of the framework explanation, the concept of connecting systems is of pivotal importance. It contributes to the construct design of the framework as it aims to provide structure to a more cohesive leadership framework for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Industrial Revolution and business landscape changes confront our ability to integrate digital, physical and biological systems. In this sense, the framework is of use for those leaders whom require specific advice, more so in the strategy space (Palaima, 2010). Leaders need

to integrate and manage these in such a way as to get in front, lead, and not always feel like they are playing catch-up in the world of competitiveness (Haas & Mortensen, 2016).

The framework aims to connect systems of a much higher complex nature. These are systems in which our ability to connect are impaired by our inability to learn from one another, be that by choice (cognitive decision-making), or by default (unconsciously incompetent). The systems' higher order complexity refers to the ingrained systemic cultural differences amongst them and their ideologies advocating their own belief of superiority over other systems. As such, this value of being culturally different has become institutionalised in our belief systems. The framework tries to find ways of overcoming the outcome of such institutionalisation in cases where this leads to separatism, otherwise referred to as disconnectedness.

Therefore, to validate and ground this framework on the author's own story alone would be defying everything he hoped to have learnt and become. As to avoid such contradiction in argument, the author draws on the wisdom, research, knowledge and expertise of others in this discipline. In this sense, the framework is validated through secondary research and the autoethnographic methodology displayed through the sharing of the author's story. The secondary research validation follows a method of deductive reasoning. The logic of the clusters in the leadership framework and the constructs linked to it are formulated by applying the known facts stipulated in the identified secondary resources to the argument.

## VII. SECONDARY RESEARCH VALIDATING OF THE FRAMEWORK CONSTRUCTS

The secondary research validation follows below with a summative description of each construct co-contributing to the essential leadership traits of the *Platform for Connectedness Leadership Framework*.

The framework validation is presented in four main parts.

First; the leadership traits, depicted in the center

of the framework, argued to be those traits required to bring the framework to life. Second; the leadership stages of progression, depicted to the left-hand side of the framework, argued as those required to holistically developing leaders. Third; those leadership skills that is considered most essential to successfully progress through each of the leadership stages of progression. These are depicted on the right-hand side of the framework and is aligned per leadership developmental stage. Forth, the principle of integrating biological, technological and physiological systems as part of the evolving industrial status of the globe and world economy is added as a dimension and context of application. This is mentioned as 'connecting systems' at the bottom of the framework.

### 7.1 First: The Leadership Traits

Think differently about things in order to initiate change. The starting point of our behavior lies in how we view things and respond accordingly (Thomke, et al., 2018). How we view things is based on what we have been taught to see and the underlying assumptions that informs such a view (Klapper, 2013).

Learning for the sake of excelling. Life-long learning is something that's achieved through a growth mindset displaying the character of self-awareness, curiosity, vulnerability and aspiration (Andersen, 2016).

Acting for the sake of achieving things (Sucher, 2010). Great leaders are the ones who do not just think and strategize, but also the doers – those who think and take action. In the literature, there are references to this as authentic leadership whereby leaders aim to espouse values through consistency of behaviors.

Inspire to help others achieve their inner greatness (Garton, 2017).

### 7.2 Second and Third: The leadership Stages of Progression and Aligned Leadership Skills

- For leading self, reflection is required (Ibarra, 2015)
- For leading teams, relationship building is required (Garbarro & Kaftan, 2011)

- For leading organizations, disruption is required (Shih, et al., 2009)
- For leading society, caring is required (Bouldin, 2019)
- For leading world, sharing is required (Martin & Kemper, 2012)

The secondary research validation continues a summative description of each construct and the above-mentioned alignment.

- *Leading Self and Reflection*

The ability to reflect is the starting point of leadership development with the focus being the ability to lead self (Goleman, 2000). The framework has five levels of progression from self, to team, to organization, to society and ultimately to world. The context of the framework is primarily within that of a working environment whereby the individual leader is part of a team, an organization that functions within a societal context and one which is by default part of the world. The starting point of connectedness is to connect with the self (Ibarra, 2015). Only from this point of connectedness is it possible to connect with the environments within which the individual is emerged .

- *Leading Teams and Relationship Building*

A connectedness with self helps to foster an emotional intelligence (EQ) required for leading teams (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Individual effectiveness depends as much on emotional intelligence as on the strength of IQ. Within a team context, structure and direction is helpful to achieve great teamwork, but in terms of connectedness, a shared mindset and supportive context is pivotal (Haas & Mortensen, 2016). In the connected leadership framework, the characteristic and leadership ability that is required for leading teams is the ability to build relationships.

- *Leading Organizations and Disruption*

Leading organisations in the quest to do things in a differentiated way is becoming more important daily (Reeves, 2015). This trend for increased differentiation requires organisations to go through more changes more frequently than before, resulting in the need to embrace a flexible

and adaptive strategic mindset. Focus currently weighs heavy on digitization, but in essence, this is just another chance mindset with regards to strategic thinking.

- *Leading Society and Caring and Leading World and Sharing*

The *Platform for Connectedness Leadership Framework* expands on the typical organizational leadership progression of leading self, team and organization, by extending it to leading society and leading world. When people feel a sense of community, they are more comfortable reaching out to others and more likely to share knowledge (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). The assumption is that for one to lead in society, one needs to care about those around you. The scale and scope of this care can vary, but the principle driver remains the same.

The final stage of leadership progression is that of leading world. In this stage, 'world' is meant as your world – the individual's world of influence. This is not 'world' in the sense of global rule through super powers, but the world the individual finds him or herself in, but with a specific dimension of world and the green environment. The argument articulated through the article is that, as humans, we have grown disconnected from nature as we have migrated to industrialised concrete-style living. Such is the nature of this disconnectedness that we do not regard the human species as one, but keep it segregated through nationalist actions of protectionism and separatism. This impacts on our willingness to share the globe in all its glory, leading to extreme imbalances of wealth, education, healthcare and several other global sustainability issues.

In the final instance, the *Platform for Connectedness Leadership Framework* is constructed on the argument of connectedness, founded in the self-reflective experience of the author and substantiated through the literature in terms of the constructs selected. The theory that drives the framework is that leaders need to connect through self-reflection, relationships, disruption, caring and sharing in order to progress through the stages of leadership

development. For this, a fundamental change and/or cognitive decision needs to embed the notions of thinking differently, learning, acting and inspiring as part of the DNA and character of those who truly wants to lead.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Most leadership frameworks provide leaders with an organizing framework within which they can contextualize and understand the components of current leadership requirements. What makes the Connected Leadership Framework different is primarily two things.

Connectedness allows for the framework to be very generic and therefore possible to be relevant in almost all current realities we can think of. If you do not connect with staff, you will struggle to lead them; if you do not connect with technology, you will struggle more and more as industries evolve and morph; if you do not connect with the environment, you will remain stuck in second industrial revolution thinking and maintain causing damage to the globe; and so on. Literally everything can be related back to connectedness.

Related to its flexibility described above, the framework does not only provide an organizing framework for understanding the current reality, but also a framework to plan for the future. This is done by assisting leaders to understand the lucid nature of leadership requirements and help bringing about a mindset of adaptiveness and absorption (Edmondson, 2008). Leaders can absorb current challenges of evolving Industrial Revolutions and be open (agile) regarding future requirements.

### *Epilogue - Reflections from the Editor*

The author provides in this article a very purposeful discussion on connected thinking and leadership work. Founded on his personal experiential knowledge and through his autoethnographic account, analysis and discourse we find the development of a truly interesting approach to leadership thinking.

The Connected “Leadership Traits” are very powerful and significant especially in the work on

agility leadership today and tomorrow which needs a framework of thinking which revolves around the leaders as continual learners, as engagers and he emphasizes on the very importance for leaders to be able to connect with all the living and non-living parts of the ecosystem they exist in and influence.

The Connected Leadership Framework© provides us with a structure of leadership at every level from self, right through to social levels and as such in effect a multi-level and compounded with the leadership traits also a multi-dimensional approach which is critical in a world which is very dynamic and fast changing. The drive towards the leaders becoming more self-reflective in their personal development is very important.

As such, he provides an excellent explanation to the approaches required for leading self, teams, organizations, society and the world. Many leaders whom I have personally known were proficient and effective in leading in only particular levels and perhaps the augmentation of the research around the multi-level leadership can provide a better holistic approach to leadership development and in (the near) future. The work has exciting promise.

The paper attempts to provide secondary and primary validation to the components that collectively construct the Platform for Connected Leadership Framework (PCLF). Platform for Connected Leadership is a registered company operating in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), providing leadership development to individuals across various dimensions.

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