

Leadership Field White Paper

Introduction – The need for a different perspective

The world is changing faster than our prevailing images of leadership. In times of increasing complexity, systemic pressure, and cultural shifts, many organizations are running up against the limits of classical leadership thinking. We continue to search for better leaders, yet we rarely examine the conditions under which leadership can emerge in the first place.

Under the right conditions, a leadership field can arise: a space in which something larger than individual competence becomes operative. Leadership is then no longer understood primarily as a personal trait, but as a living process that unfolds between people, contexts, and layers of meaning. It is a field in which alignment, resonance, and energy become tangible, all of which are conditions that enable development not only of leaders, but of organizations as a whole (see Kellerman, 2012; Scharmer, 2009).

After nearly twenty years of working within what Barbara Kellerman has called the “leadership industry,” I recognize a persistent tension between intention and reality. We train leaders to act with greater awareness, but we rarely take into account the context in which their actions are continuously shaped and constrained. Once someone returns to the organizational hustle on Monday after a reflective retreat or training program, they are often immediately pulled back into a force field that proves stronger than the individual. This is not a personal shortcoming, but a structural phenomenon.

Leadership therefore calls for a different kind of attention: a systemic awareness that focuses on the relationships between parts of the whole. Rather than viewing leaders as the primary carriers of change, we can explore which conditions within organizations make change possible at all. In doing so, the focus shifts from the individual to the field in which leadership can take root and flourish.

The leadership industry and its limits

More than a decade ago, Barbara Kellerman (2012) described how the “leadership industry” has grown into a substantial economic and cultural phenomenon. It is an industry that trains, coaches, and certifies millions of people, yet rarely brings about fundamental change in how organizations actually function. The many programs, retreats, and masterclasses appeal to the often genuine desire of leaders to grow, but they frequently do so without truly acknowledging the contextual complexity in which leadership unfolds.

I recognize this paradox from my own experience. In countless leadership programs, we try to help participants develop new perspectives, yet we seldom succeed in meaningfully addressing the structural forces that shape their daily actions. Once the program ends, people return to the same environment: meeting overload, unclear responsibilities, unspoken power relations, and performance indicators. The system absorbs the intention.

Here lies a critical blind spot in many development trajectories. They focus on the individual, while leadership manifests in the space between people. We attempt to “strengthen” individuals or make them more “resilient,” even though the real leverage lies in the relationships, structures, and underlying assumptions that constitute the organizational field.

Pierre Bourdieu (1992) used the concept of field precisely to describe this interplay of positions, interests, and forces. Every field, he argued, has its own logic: a set of rules that determines what is possible and what is not. Leadership in organizations follows the same dynamic. It is constrained and shaped by invisible forces such as culture, hierarchy, language, and history.

When these field dynamics remain unexplored, leaders are held accountable for outcomes over which they have limited control. The result is that many experience a sense of failure, while in reality they are caught in patterns that are collectively produced and sustained.

From culture to field

In many organizations, leadership is still approached primarily through the lens of culture change. Culture is then treated as something that leaders can “influence” or “manage,” an object that can be measured, controlled, and improved. This approach, however, often overlooks the fact that culture itself is a living system. It is, in many ways, an expression of deeper patterns in how people make meaning, relate to one another, and engage with their environment.

Gregory Bateson (1972) already distinguished between different levels of learning and change. He showed that most interventions focus on the level of behavior or beliefs, while genuine transformation takes place at a deeper level: that of identity, context, and relationship. Applied to organizations, this suggests that culture is only the visible layer of something far more fundamental. Beneath it lie fields of intention, identity, and meaning that often remain largely unconscious, yet are decisive in shaping what becomes possible.

The concept of field opens up a richer way of seeing. Where culture emphasizes stability, the field draws attention to movement. A field is not something one possesses, but a dynamic space of interaction, charged with energy, tension, and potential. Within a field, patterns can emerge, dissolve, and reconfigure over time.

I find that this metaphor helps me think less in terms of cause and effect, and more in terms of conditions. Not: how do we change this culture, but: under what conditions can a new field of collaboration, trust, or renewal arise? In this shift, attention moves from control to receptivity, and from acting to observing.

Seen through the lens of field thinking, leadership is no longer an individual skill, but a form of collective attunement. It becomes a process of listening to what seeks to unfold, rather than directing toward what has been predefined (see Scharmer, 2009; Wheatley, 1992).

The leadership field: a space of relation

When I speak of a leadership field, I am referring to the space in which leadership as a phenomenon can emerge. Not the individual leader as such, but the interplay of relationships, meanings, and energy that makes leadership possible. For me, a field is not primarily a poetic metaphor, but a workable image that helps explain how something invisible can nonetheless be real: a force field of mutual influence.

Within this field, multiple layers operate simultaneously. There is a visible layer of behavior and decision-making, but beneath it flow more subtle forms of attunement: how people sense one another, create space, or impose limits. A leadership field is oriented by intention, nourished by trust, and shaped through language, rhythm, and ritual. It comes into being when people are willing to consciously connect their actions to something larger than their individual interests.

Margaret Wheatley (1992) already showed how concepts from physics, such as field, resonance, and self-organization, can offer new insights into leadership. In classical mechanics, a field was understood as a force extending through space. In modern physics, fields have become more fundamental than matter itself: particles are seen as local disturbances in an underlying energy field. This idea resonates with me, because it points to how leadership manifests: not as a possession, but as an expression of deeper dynamics.

In organizational contexts, this means that leadership cannot be reduced to a single person or role. It is a collective quality that comes alive where relationships are balanced and where mutual resonance is strong enough to provide direction to the whole. Under the right conditions, a field emerges in which leadership can flourish broadly: a field of connection, holding, and energy (see Scharmer & Senge, 2005).

An ecological understanding of leadership

As I continue to reflect on the concept of field, an ecological perspective naturally emerges. In an ecosystem, everything continuously influences everything else: soil, air, water, light, and life form an interconnected whole in which every movement reverberates through the system. Organizations function in a similar way. What we call “leadership” is not the cause of change, but one of its many expressions.

Gregory Bateson (1972) spoke of an *ecology of mind*, pointing to the insight that thinking, feeling, and acting are embedded in larger systems of meaning. From this perspective, leadership cannot be separated from the network of relationships in which it arises. A leader is not an isolated source, but a conduit: someone who opens themselves to connection with a larger whole and, from that position, enables further connections through which new patterns can form.

In this sense, leadership is not something a person *does*, but something that *emerges*. It is an emergent process that depends on the quality of attention within the system. When people genuinely attune to one another and to their context, a field of reciprocity arises that can provide direction without requiring domination.

This calls for a different kind of awareness, one that does not primarily seek control, but resonance. As in an ecosystem, stability here is not a matter of rigidity, but of dynamic balance. Leaders who understand this do not act from power, but from coherence. They invite listening, slowing down, and noticing subtle shifts in the field, signals that are often more precise than our plans (see Wheatley, 1992; Capra, 1996).

The conditions of a living leadership field

If leadership is no longer understood solely as the sum of individual qualities, but as a field that emerges between people, the central question shifts. It moves from “how do I become a better leader?” to: how can we collectively create the conditions in which leadership can unfold? Otto Scharmer (2009) describes this distinction as the difference between downloading, acting from existing patterns, and presencing, being present to what seeks to emerge. It is this latter stance that offers a key to understanding leadership fields. It calls for a quality of attention that is not oriented toward control or prediction but toward listening to what is not yet visible.

A living leadership field is characterized by three fundamental conditions. The first is safety, a psychological space in which people feel free to speak, to doubt, and to experiment without immediate correction. The second is slowing down, the capacity to occasionally interrupt the pace of production and decision-making so that reflection and meaning-making can take place. The third is resonance, the subtle sense of attunement between people, and the feeling that what is happening collectively “fits.”

In my experience, it is precisely these conditions that make the difference between superficial collaboration and genuine co-creation. They form the ecological climate in which leadership can thrive. When safety is absent, the field withers. When resonance disappears, it fragments into disconnected parts.

From this perspective, leadership means caring for the quality of the space that carries the field. Not by intervening forcefully, but by observing, attuning, and making small interventions that vitalize the field. It is a stance that draws equally on head and heart, requiring a balance between insight, intuition, and intention (see Torbert, 2004; Wilber, 2000).

The leadership field as collective consciousness

When leadership is understood as being carried by a field, it becomes clear that the quality of that field depends not only on structure or strategy, but on consciousness. Not only the individual consciousness of a single leader, but just as much, and perhaps even more, the collective consciousness of the group or organization. This consciousness is tangible. It can be sensed in the tone of conversations, in the pace at which decisions are made, and in the degree of attention people give one another.

An organization with a clear field feels different. There is direction without coercion, space without chaos, and clarity without harshness. People experience meaning in what they do,

not because it has been imposed on them, but because they feel connected to something larger than themselves. This sense of connection is not an abstract ideal, but a real force that organizes the system and generates energy.

Ken Wilber (2000) describes this as a shift from I to We, from individual to collective consciousness. When this shift occurs, leadership becomes a shared practice: an ongoing dialogue between inner world and outer world, between personal intention and collective direction. The leadership field then functions as a mirror. It reveals where consciousness narrows and where it expands.

In such fields, a different kind of conversation emerges. Not a debate of positions, but a dialogue in which listening becomes more important than persuading. Here, the insights of David Bohm (1980) connect directly to leadership practice: dialogue as a way of inquiring into thinking itself. Leadership within this mode of consciousness is therefore not primarily about making decisions, but about enabling clarity, a process in which meaning unfolds through relationship.

I find that in these kinds of fields, another and more subtle dimension becomes perceptible. It shows itself as presence, as silence between words, and as the realization that we are not working in a field but are part of it.

An open inquiry: an invitation to dialogue

What fascinates me most about thinking in terms of a leadership field is that it does not result in a fixed model, but in an open space for shared inquiry. It invites questions rather than answers. What allows some fields to radiate vitality while others become rigid? How do personal intentions relate to collective movements? What does this mean for the many leadership programs that focus primarily on the individual? And how might we, as facilitators, researchers, and leaders, learn to observe these processes rather than attempt to control them?

With this website, I aim to create a place where this inquiry can unfold in public: a field of exchange in which insights from science, practice, and indigenous knowledge can meet. Not to arrive at a single truth, but to make visible the patterns that help us understand what truly sets leadership in motion.

Dialogue plays a central role in this space. Not debate, where positions collide, but listening, through which something new can emerge. As Bohm (1980) described it, dialogue is a form of conversation in which meaning itself is set in motion. Such dialogue does not ask for winning an argument, but for thinking together, for taking the risk that one's understanding may change while listening.

I therefore see the leadership field as a living laboratory. A place where knowledge and experience are continuously renewed. Where systemic, phenomenological, and experiential approaches do not exclude one another, but complement each other. And where leadership development is no longer seen as an individual trajectory, but as a collective practice of awareness.

Alongside my own work in various organizations, I hope to nourish this space by writing blogs, inviting guest contributions, and organizing interviews. Those who feel called are warmly invited to think along, to write, and to inquire together. The field grows stronger as more perspectives are able to resonate within it.

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