

Subtle Leadership: How Individual and Collective Consciousness Intertwine to Create Change

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Abstract

As society tackles the root causes of the meta-crisis, the development of our internal dimensions presents deep leverage points for outer change. While the concept of consciousness remains contested and lacks a universally accepted definition, it may be broadly understood to encompass the full spectrum of inner human dimensions. To address the complex challenges of global sustainability, society will need a myriad of leaders with the advanced meaning-making capacities that can be gained through consciousness development. This paper presents a study that explored the relationship between consciousness development and leadership performance, from the perspective of changemakers, to inform the design of developmental techniques that can be available to all. It utilised a form of action research called co-operative inquiry to explore changemakers' experiences. The paper outlines the key findings and explores one in greater depth, being the effectiveness of subtle leadership for creating the change needed to engage with the complexity of the meta-crisis.

Keywords

consciousness, leadership, changemakers, co-operative inquiry, action research

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Introduction

The poem ‘Hieroglyphic Stairway’ (Dellinger, 2003) impacted me significantly when I (first author) read it. I became aware that while I knew the Earth was unravelling, I was doing nothing about it. Upon reflection, I realised that, through my leadership development work, I was part of the problem and that meant I could also be part of the solution. This realisation has led me to research how leaders can develop the capability needed to address the meta-crisis. The term meta-crisis indicates that there are multiple intersecting individual crises (environmental, social, psychological, political, economic, etc.), all relating to a deeper crisis (Bendell, 2022). This deeper crisis connects all the crises into a higher-order whole with its own emergent properties. While the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015) are the member states’ response to the Earth’s unravelling, separate goals do not address the interconnectedness and complexity of the meta-crisis.

Wamsler (2019) states that the vast majority of sustainability scholarship has, so far, focused on the external world of ecosystems, wider socioeconomic structures, technology and governance dynamics. This focus on the external world has led to the neglect of the inner dimensions of the mind, which she believes lie at the root of many sustainability challenges. Initiatives, such as the Inner Development Goals framework (2021) and SDG 18 Consciousness Change (2021), have since been launched to advance inner development for sustainability.

By neglecting the development of their inner dimensions, leaders are not gaining the capability needed to cope with the demands of modern life (Kegan, 1994). Leaders are often incapable of working with the level of complexity and non-linearity needed to effectively address our sustainability challenges (Smitsman & Smitsman, 2021). When becoming overwhelmed with complexity, leaders often fall back on their serial thinking processes and become stuck making either/or decisions (Jaques, 1989). Johnson (2023) argues that there is an energy flow that separates these poles and holds them together as a pair. Through the application of polarity thinking, Johnson provides a framework for leaders to engage with both/and solutions, which he believes fosters a greater ability to create systems change.

Adult developmental psychologists assert that aspects of a leader’s consciousness develop through stages (e.g., Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981; Loevinger, 1987; Maslow, 1954), where a higher stage transcends and integrates the content of a lower stage into a more complex model of reality. While each stage model maps the growth of an aspect of our consciousness, they tend to be structured in terms of conventional and post-conventional stages (Pfaffenberger & Marko, 2011). Leaders who have developed to the post-conventional stages tend to demonstrate high levels of leadership agility, characterised by the ability to lead effectively under conditions of rapid change and growing interdependence (Joiner, 2011).

In times of rapid change, a leader’s role is to enable people to make sense of the situation and establish its shared meaning (Karp, 2013). Sensemaking is the process of social construction that occurs when discrepant cues interrupt individuals’ ongoing activity and involves the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalise what people are doing (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick et al., 2005). Brown (2012)

suggests that, if society is to achieve the difficult and complex objectives of global sustainability, we will need a myriad of leaders with advanced meaning-making capacities, which are most evident in leaders who have developed to the post-conventional stages.

In developing a framework for analysing the meaning-making structures, [Jordan \(2011\)](#) argues that various aspects of awareness determine the success of complex societal change initiatives. He suggests that individuals with weakly developed awareness of self, context, stakeholder, task and perspective awareness will formulate goals that are few in number, narrow in scope and lack elaboration. In contrast, individuals with strongly developed awareness will construct a broad range of goals and mention strategies and tactics for dealing with aspects of task complexity, context, stakeholders, self and perspectives. As leadership from the post-conventional stages encourages more comprehensive organisational transformation and consideration of greater complexity in environmental management ([Boiral et al., 2009](#)), the development of awareness may be a key capability for changemakers.

As acts of leadership emerge from processes of social interaction and the right to lead is granted by those who choose to follow ([Karp, 2013](#)), leadership is distributed and emergent. While this suggests anyone can be a leader, society needs people who are actively using their leadership to address the meta-crisis. These leaders are often called changemakers ([CEO Magazine, 2022](#)). The term ‘changemaker’ has been used to differentiate from the term ‘change agent’. In business, a change agent initiates a change purely to increase the performance of the organisation. Whereas for a changemaker, the purpose of organisational change is to facilitate societal change.

For a myriad of changemakers to work with the complexity and non-linearity of the meta-crisis, they need to access methods that develop their consciousness to the post-conventional stages. While leadership development programmes can be designed to focus on the development of consciousness, these tend not to be available to changemakers from sectors such as charities and activism. Therefore, it is necessary to identify developmental techniques that are available to all.

This study was my first step in a search for accessible developmental techniques. The findings from this study have been presented in a paper titled ‘The role of consciousness development in coaching for sustainability leadership’, published in ‘The Coaching Psychologist’ ([Sexton, 2025](#)). This paper further explores the key finding of subtle leadership and offers an original contribution to action research by showing how co-operative inquiry not only reveals but actively cultivates subtle leadership capacities through the intertwining of individual and collective consciousness.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm

Materialism assumes that physical matter is the fundamental reality, with consciousness arising from material interactions in our brain ([Brabant, 2016](#)). In contrast, post-materialism views consciousness as being the foundational force that precedes material existence ([Beauregard et al., 2018](#)), potentially as a connecting universal spiritual

force (Taylor, 2018). As materialism has contributed to a sense of alienation from our spiritual self, others, and nature (Heshusius, 1994) by encouraging separations, often cited as the main causes of the meta-crisis (Eisenstein, 2011; Scharmer, 2009; Uhl, 2013), I rejected it as the ontological basis for this research. Instead, I adopted the participatory paradigm (Ferrer, 2002), within a post-materialist perspective, as it provides an epistemology that is aligned with an ontology based on intersubjectivity. Within this paradigm, reality is co-created through dynamic interaction between consciousness and the cosmos (Howell, 2013).

Research Design

Following Tart's (2000 [1983]) argument that state-dependent experiences require a 'state-specific science', I chose to actively participate in the research so that I could enter the state of consciousness being studied. Consequently, I selected co-operative inquiry, as developed by Heron (1996), which provided a suitable framework, enabling integration of first-person, second-person, and third-person perspectives (Bradbury & Reason, 2006). Unlike traditional research, which does research on people, co-operative inquiry fosters a collaborative approach to conducting research with people. As the collaborative nature of co-operative inquiry fosters an intertwining of individual and collective consciousness, it is very aligned with the participatory research paradigm. Guided by Heron's extended epistemology, the study embraced four forms of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical. The research unfolded over eight monthly cycles, each involving planning, action with reflection, and collective dialogue. The inquiry was initiated by exploring our launch statement: To explore the development of consciousness in relation to leadership performance.

Co-Researchers

Being a changemaker was essential for participating in the research as a co-researcher. The co-researchers were gradually recruited through networking to ensure diversity across sectors such as business, social enterprise, education, charities, and activism. To establish a shared understanding of the research's purpose, methodology, and terminology, especially given the varied backgrounds in consciousness, psychology, leadership, and research methods, potential co-researchers attended briefing sessions. Twelve changemakers ultimately joined and were split into afternoon and evening groups based on availability. As the initiating co-researcher, I participated in both. Each received a written guide outlining the process and their role, and optional training in co-operative inquiry was offered. The afternoon group opted to undertake this training midway through the study.

Data Collection and Interpretation

Each group held eight 90-min inquiry sessions via MS Teams, with meetings recorded, transcribed, and cross-checked for accuracy. Guided by narrative inquiry principles (Michael Connelly & Jean Clandinin, 1990), we collaboratively interpreted the emerging

story from the data. A mid-study review revealed four central questions shaping our inquiry: what is consciousness, what is consciousness development, and what is the nature of the relationship between consciousness development and leadership performance? I organised transcript data around these questions to develop an initial interpretation, which was then refined through group dialogue. We all then critically reviewed the findings, adopting a ‘devil’s advocate’ stance in our discussions to surface assumptions and challenge potential biases. For example, in the evening group, we had assumed that our subjective experience of significant life trauma was shared across the group. However, the critical review revealed that this was not the case with one co-researcher sharing that she could not recall experiencing a significant life trauma. These discussions strengthened the validity of our interpretations through critical intersubjectivity, which is important as it facilitates the third-person application of action research. After completing all sessions, we repeated the interpretive process to construct the overall narrative and created diagrams to illustrate key conceptual relationships. Additionally, we produced diagrams to represent the relationships between the key concepts. Each group subsequently presented their findings to the other, followed by a cross-group critique designed to strengthen the validity of the key insights through critical peer evaluation.

Personal Reflections

While dividing into afternoon and evening groups raised concerns about potential impacts on group dynamics, the structure ultimately supported meaningful engagement across both groups. However, I noticed that the two groups exhibited very different personalities. Upon reflection, I believe this difference stemmed from the backgrounds of the changemakers. The afternoon group was more academically oriented, whereas the evening group leaned more towards activism.

The afternoon group quickly became concerned about applying the method correctly and generating the required quality of insights. Consequently, they tried to encourage me to assume more control of the inquiry meetings. I was reluctant to do this because I did not want to undermine the co-operative nature of the research. In contrast, the evening group felt very comfortable with the methodology. However, as the other co-researchers began to take ownership of the process, I grew concerned that we were not sufficiently adhering to the co-operative inquiry methods. To gently guide both groups to remain aligned with the method and the study’s purpose, I intervened with some key phrases. While this approach worked for the evening group, some members of the afternoon group continued to worry about adhering to the method, and we agreed to participate in additional training.

I recognised that research within the participatory paradigm would allow the co-researchers to explore various paths as their minds interact with the cosmos to create individual versions of reality. However, I worried that this might lead to a relativist perspective on consciousness development. Relativism, as a postmodernist viewpoint, creates and accepts a pluralistic society, allowing each of us to perceive and understand the world in different ways. While postmodernism aligns with the participatory paradigm, I was concerned that it leads to societal fragmentation and separation, contributing to multiple eco-social challenges. By employing co-operative inquiry, I hoped the co-researchers would adopt a metamodernist perspective (Freinacht, 2017), which utilises

the energy of difference to stimulate change through listening and dialogue. This perspective encourages Johnson's (2023) both/and thinking to unite polarities. During the research, I noticed that when we clung to our relativist postmodern perspectives, we became stuck in our dialogues. Conversely, when we adopted metamodernist perspectives and articulated what emerged in the spaces between us, we succeeded in generating new knowledge. It was at these points in the study that our individual consciousness became intertwined with the collective, allowing us to co-create a new reality. The emergence of metaphors was highly effective in facilitating this collective insight.

As I participated in the research study, I found my consciousness evolving in two ways during the inquiry process. Firstly, I discovered that my state of consciousness was unstable; it varied according to numerous influences, including my consumption, emotional and cognitive biases, societal conditioning, the roles I played, and my past traumas. For example, I observed that after consuming a single caffeinated coffee in the morning, I experienced a heightened sense of positivity and perceived my reality as rich with opportunity, which in turn fostered feelings of energy and enthusiasm. However, when I consumed additional coffee in an effort to sustain that elevated state of consciousness, I noticed I became increasingly irritable and began to perceive my reality as frustrating and full of problems. As I came to realise that caffeine has a significant influence on my consciousness, I reflected on the influence of other substances I consume in my diet, such as sugar and salt. As a result, I came to understand that my perception resembles a hallucination more than an objective reality. This led me to become more questioning and critical of how I perceived the world around me, thereby moving on to identifying my biases and conditioning. Secondly, as I explored my consciousness, I struggled to locate my 'self'. It proved to be an elusive concept, resulting in a quietening of my ego. It was evident that the co-researchers were also experiencing their consciousness developing from their inquiries. They frequently expressed becoming more consciously aware and, as a result, seeing how their lifestyle, work, colleagues and organisation often inadvertently contributed to the meta-crisis. They recognised that this caused them unease, and they felt a desire to return to semi-consciousness. These developments in our consciousness tended to be the results of key insights gained from our inquiries and subsequent dialogue. I found the co-operative inquiry's capacity to develop consciousness while simultaneously generating new knowledge to be the most inspiring aspect of the research.

As the study progressed, I learned to trust the emergent and non-linear nature of the co-operative inquiry process. Having spent my formative adult years in the construction industry and then as a strategic planner, I had been trained to implement linear strategies and plans to achieve goals. Such as producing Gantt Charts (Bianconi, 2024) using serial processing for my thinking (Jaques, 1989). Consequently, my natural tendency is to create structure and control in my work and leadership to yield predictable outcomes. The co-operative inquiry method taught me to create space for new knowledge to emerge. Using our leadership to foster emergence was also a key theme in the findings of this research. Throughout the inquiry, I took steps to create space for emergence through my leadership and reflected on the experience. I found this challenging, as the ensuing uncertainty and chaos triggered my anxiety. I have now learned the importance of timing, allowing sufficient space for new patterns of change to emerge before intervening to impose some structure.

Summary of Findings

A detailed presentation of the findings from this study can be found in a previously published paper (Sexton, 2025).

What is Leadership Performance for Changemakers?

As changemakers, we found we enact a wide range of leadership interventions from the subtle to the direct and from emergence to emergency (Figure 1).

What is Consciousness?

Although our definitions differed, we tended to define consciousness in terms of three aspects: awareness, multiple intelligences (ability to respond), and sense of self (ego).

What is Consciousness Development?

We experienced consciousness development as the process by which we increase our ability to be aware of and respond to societal problems. This was achieved through deconditioning, healing and quieting our ego. Having a quieter ego enabled us to develop all our senses and multiple intelligences.

What is the Nature of the Relationship Between Consciousness Development and Leadership Performance?

The research found that at work we tend to experience three states of consciousness: conditioned, authentic and flow. We drew on the metaphor of the growth of a dandelion to describe these states. When we entered a flow state of consciousness, we found that we experienced a quietening of our ego and were better able to sense and connect with other people and the situation (Figure 2).

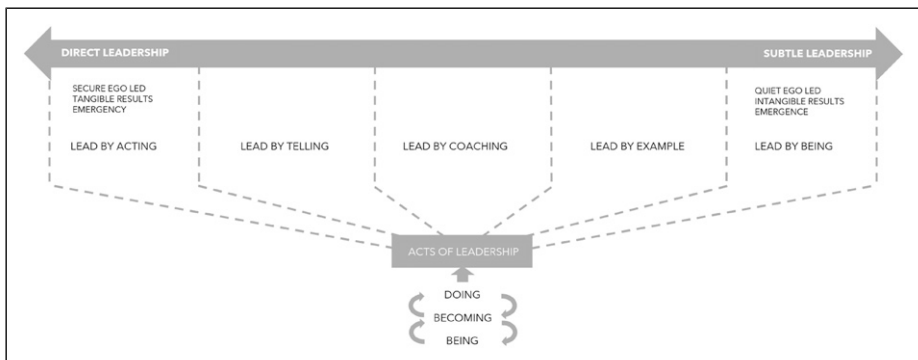


Figure 1. Range of Leadership

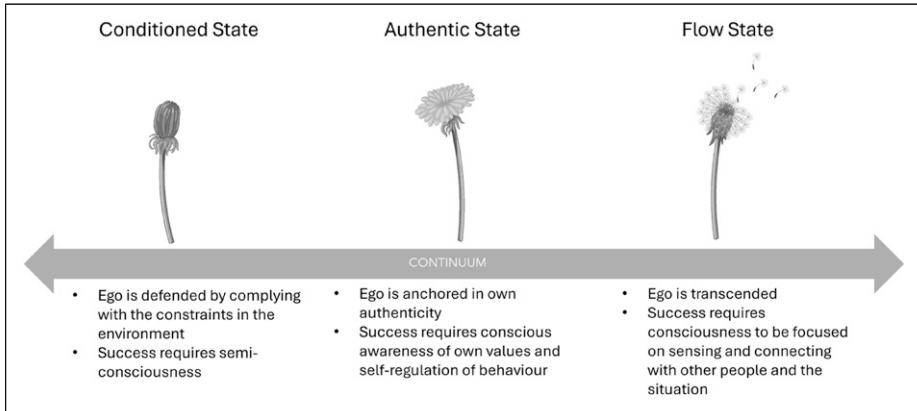


Figure 2. States of Consciousness

Leadership as an Intertwining of Individual and Collective Consciousness

Subtle Leadership

As changemakers, we found much of our leadership work was carried out behind the scenes and delivered unseen and intangible results. This was termed subtle leadership. We drew on the metaphor of a cherry tree to describe how some cherries are harvested for tangible results (direct leadership), while others fall to fertilise the ground to enable future growth (subtle leadership). We experienced that sometimes just our presence, energy, emotions and thoughts can have an impact, without us having to act. We recognised that subtle acts of leadership can influence people and have an impact on the culture of an organisation.

“When I’m working with an organisation, I’m really working with the consciousness of the system. So, I’m working with the culture of the organisation. How do I do that? It’s almost like the Gandhi quote: Be the change you want to see in the world.”

Co-Researcher G

Subtle leadership (Quiñones-González, 2022) represents a paradigm shift as it has not featured to any significant degree in traditional leadership theories. Subtle leadership is akin to the concept of humble leadership (Schein & Schein, 2018), which emphasises situational humility characterised by openness, acceptance and empathetic relationships. This non-egoic and humble nature of subtle leadership was evident in the research findings. We found that subtle leadership requires us to have a quiet ego. This was in contrast to a confident ego, which enabled the co-researchers to demonstrate tangible acts of leadership that are visible and open to evaluation. The quiet ego was experienced as not needing any external recognition and reinforcement. Therefore, when our ego was quiet, we found we were more able to perform subtle acts of leadership not seen by others. Some

of the co-researchers reported experiencing the quietening of the ego due to their participation in the co-operative inquiry, which increased their ability to engage in the more subtle forms of leadership.

Karp (2013) also found that emergent acts of leadership are rare and subtle. Building on Karp's research, Quiñones-González (2022) argues that subtle leadership is passive, indirect, or even silent, accompanied by a high level of referent power. This suggests that subtle leadership is not related to the formal or positional power of the leader and is granted to the leader by the followers. Therefore, subtle leadership can be emergent and distributed across a group of people. Quiñones-González goes further to argue that subtle leadership is not publicly rewarded or acknowledged. Rather, subtle leadership can be perceived as a state of servanthood. While as changemakers we experienced these subtle acts of leadership to be valuable, we were also concerned that they may be seen as unproductive by others.

We considered that our most subtle forms of leadership may be working through a universal field of consciousness. This view is supported by research into subtle activism (Nicol, 2015), which tends to support the efficacy of more subtle forms of leadership. Subtle activism is an umbrella term that incorporates a range of spiritual or consciousness-based practices intended to support collective transformation. It works from the principle that the processes of individual and collective consciousness transformation are intertwined. Empirical evidence supporting this view can be found in parapsychological research (Radin, 2006), studies into the Maharishi Effect (Orme-Johnson et al., 2003) and the Global Consciousness Project (Nelson & Bancel, 2011).

Flow State of Consciousness

It was evident from the research findings that subtle leadership is facilitated by having a quiet ego. Definitions of the ego found in research literature can be grouped into five sets (Bauer & Wayment, 2008): evaluations of self (self-esteem, self-worth, and self-image); self in relation to others; that which constructs the self-concept; the arbiter of internal impulses; and self-motivation to egotism. Throughout the research, we drew on all of these definitions of the ego at different times.

As changemakers, we found that the societal and organisational conditioning of our ego reduced our ability to be aware of eco-social problems and respond. Yet, when our ego quietened, we found ourselves entering a flow state of consciousness where we worked with higher levels of awareness and response. The term 'flow' used to describe a state of consciousness was first coined by Csikszentmihalyi (2002). Those experiencing flow often report experiencing high levels of efficacy, performance and perfection (Kotler, 2021).

As individuals grow through the post-conventional stages, research has found that their ego tends to quieten (Bauer, 2008). A louder ego interprets the self in more individualistic, immediate, concrete and external terms. In contrast, the quieter ego interprets the self in more interdependent, long-term, abstract and internal terms. Taylor (2018) argues that the psychological structures of the mind consume a flow of universal consciousness as psychological energy. The psychological structures that consume psychological energy are our psychological attachments, such as our ambitions, hopes, beliefs, status,

relationships, etc. These form our ego identity, which we use to navigate the separation we feel from the outside world (Washburn, 1994). However, when we experience the ego quietening, more psychological energy is enabled to flow through to our multiple intelligences. We are then able to experience greater interconnectedness, radiance and harmony. These characteristics were reflected in the flow experiences of several changemakers in this study, suggesting a dynamic interplay between individual and collective consciousness.

“When you’re in flow, it’s an energetic connection. You’re connected to the audience, you will be saying amazing words, and you won’t remember everything that’s happened because it’s an unconscious connection and you’re sensing what’s in the room.”

Co-Researcher E

While ego quietening has been a feature of research into the stage models of adult developmental psychology, it has not featured in the research into the inner transformation needed to create a more conscious society (Wamsler, 2019). In both stage model and inner transformation research, an exploration of the need for leaders to overcome the organisational and societal conditioning or their ego appears to be absent. Wilber (2016) argues that human development requires waking up (transcending the egoic mind and connecting with higher states of awareness), growing up (maturing human capacities and multiple intelligences) and cleaning up (healing past traumas). While Wilber recognises the need to heal and transcend the ego, he does not explicitly explore the need for its deconditioning from organisational and societal psychological influences. As changemakers, we experienced that when we were able to quieten our ego, we were better able to transcend our societal conditioning. However, we recognised that for this to happen, we first needed to heal from our trauma. We explored the enduring impact of traumatic life events on both mind and body (van der Kolk, 2014). While not all co-researchers recalled experiencing significant trauma, those who did described healing as an ongoing process of regeneration that is deeply rooted in reconnecting with their core values and what they considered sacred.

Emergence: Sensing into the Relational Field and Co-Regulating

As changemakers, we found that quietening our ego enabled us to be more proficient in sensing into the relational field to determine what is emerging. We termed this process as emergence leadership, which we explored by drawing on the metaphor of trying to ride a horse backwards. We also drew on cellular biology to create a metaphor describing a porous membrane between our inner and outer worlds, just like a membrane surrounding a cell. Across this membrane, we explored how we ‘sense in’ to what is happening in our outer world, and transform it with our inner world, before ‘giving out’ acts of leadership (Figure 3).

“It just feels like constantly sensing what’s happening in the various places and spaces I’m in. What wants to happen here? Then I can come with my past expectations, the habitual responses,

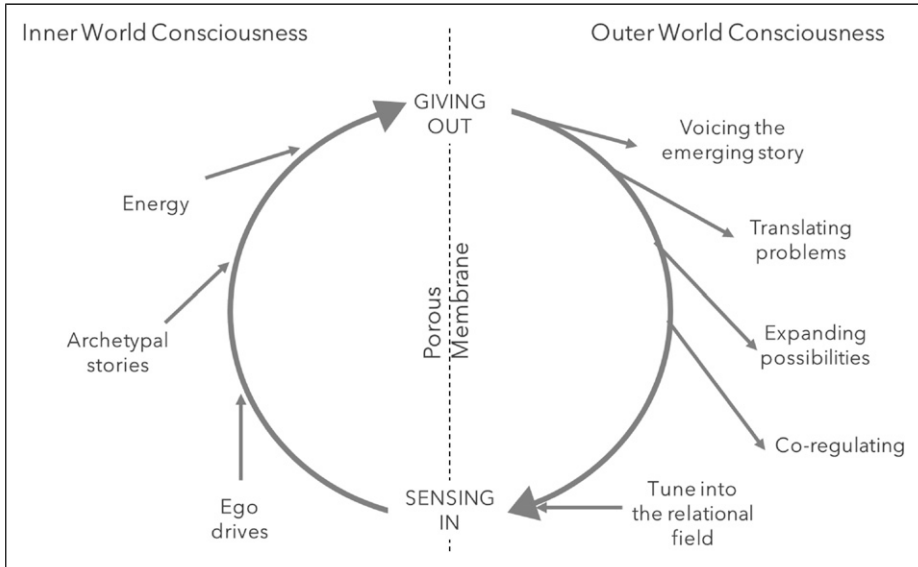


Figure 3. Emergence Leadership

and react in a particular way. Or I can try and let that be in the background and respond to what's immediately in the space in the relational field.”

Co-Researcher H

This finding is supported by research into presencing (Senge et al., 2005). The term presencing combines sensing (feeling into possibilities) and presence (being in the present moment) (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 19) and is an integral part of Theory U (Scharmer, 2009). From their interviews with twenty-five thinkers on knowledge and leadership, Scharmer et al. (2002) found that leadership power comes from sensing and recognising emerging patterns of change. This enables leaders to position themselves as part of a generative force to reshape the world.

Once we had ‘sensed into’ the relational field and transformed what we had sensed with our individual consciousness, we explored how we ‘give out’ acts of leadership. This involved giving voice to the emerging stories and translating problems into possibilities to provide hope. We found that this tends to be done collectively through a process of co-regulation. Ramamoorthi et al. (2021) have termed this co-regulating process as being co-shaping, which they describe as a process involving the synthesis of the conceptualisations of common purpose, commitment, envisioning, framing and reframing, the promotion of self-leadership and the willingness to share power.

Co-sensing and co-regulating have been explored by Sandra and Nandram (2013), who argue that if leaders intentionally integrate spiritual techniques and values, they are then able to intentionally foster the harmonisation of their consciousness. By harmonising their

consciousness, Sandra and Nandam argue that this enables leaders to better be able to perceive and attune to rhythms in their external environment. By interacting with these external rhythms, they argue that group resonance entails, through which collective consciousness emerges, resulting in higher organisational output. The perceiving, attuning and interacting with external rhythms to engender the level of group coherence that results in higher organisational output is a key aim of the subtle leadership we explored in the research as co-researchers.

Organisational Coherence

When raised to the level of the organisation, group resonance could be described as organisational coherence. Through her phenomenological study into the beingness of group performance, [Guenther \(2022\)](#) found that coherence is a phenomenon that appears to occur between and among groups of people through a sense of being instead of centring on a group goal, activity, or project. Guenther identified that coherence has key components such as a sense of connection, inclusivity, acceptance and best selves; sensing the energy in the intersubjective field; drawing on multiple intelligences to sense and understand what is in the field; and a sense of trust. As changemakers, we found that we were better able to experience these components of coherence when we quietened the ego, as posited by [Taylor \(2018\)](#), and entered a flow state of consciousness.

By reflecting on Guenther's paper, [Bockler \(2022\)](#) shone a light on the power of group coherence to capture glimpses of its potential and how it may be abused for ill purposes. She contends that group coherence holds transformative potential in addressing the global meta-crisis, making its cultivation a key concern for changemakers. However, Bockler also cautions that coherence is inherently amoral, citing the Nazi regime's use of mass rallies to incite hatred, bigotry, and violence. This duality suggests that coherence can serve as a mechanism for social and organisational conditioning of the ego. Consequently, it can be argued that both the dynamics of group coherence and its effects are shaped by the interplay between individual and collective consciousness. Therefore, the influence flows bidirectionally, with changemakers both shaping and being shaped by the change they seek to enact.

To avoid the negative effects of group coherence, Bockler stresses the need for people to put their 'best selves' forward, one of the key components identified by [Guenther \(2022\)](#). For us to put our best selves forward, Bockler argues that we need to dwell in and integrate our shadows. She says this requires us to attend to othering and suffering in ways that honour the experiences and perspectives of those we disagree with, bearing witness to the shadows of humankind. To put our best selves forward suggests that we need to engage in individual and collective psychological healing. This aligns with one of the findings in this study, which found that we worked on healing our ego, it became quieter, and then we were better able to transcend our societal and organisational conditioning. This is due to us having less need to defend a vulnerable ego by complying with the conditions imposed by our organisation or societal expectations.

Conclusion

The research has found that changemakers experience subtle leadership as effective in creating change to address the meta-crisis that society is facing. The most subtle form is when a changemaker works with the intertwining of individual and collective consciousness. As the changemakers experienced this being facilitated through the quietening of their ego, subtle leadership challenges the dominance of the loud ego in leadership theory and practice. The changemakers experienced participating in a co-operative inquiry to be facilitative in quietening the ego. Therefore, it can be concluded that co-operative inquiry not only reveals but actively cultivates subtle leadership capacities.

As a quieter ego is one of the characteristics of those who can lead from the post-conventional stages of adult psychological development, this indicates that practices that quieten the ego may be conducive to leaders developing to those stages. At these post-conventional stages, the research suggests leaders are better able to work with the complexity and non-linearity associated with the meta-crisis.

The changemakers found that when they were able to quieten their ego, they were better able to transcend their organisational and societal conditioning, increasing their ability to be aware of and respond to societal problems. However, this is facilitated by the healing of their trauma. While the research literature recognised the need to heal and transcend the ego, transcending our social conditioning appears to be absent. This will inevitably require changemakers to engage in a process of unlearning (Hislop et al., 2014). By quietening their ego, the changemakers found they can enter a flow state of consciousness where they work with higher levels of awareness and response as they engage with the meta-crisis. With a quieter ego, changemakers are better able to sense into the relational field and recognise emerging patterns of change. This sensing into the relational field is again a process of intertwining of individual and collective consciousness, which enables the changemakers to select the most appropriate leadership interventions.

The intertwining of individual and collective consciousness enabled the changemakers to create change co-sensing and co-regulating, giving voice to what is emerging. The changemakers described this process as emergence leadership. The literature suggests this process harmonises the collective consciousness to create group resonance and coherence, resulting in higher organisational output. However, we have argued that coherence could further the societal conditioning of changemakers and/or be used by leaders for ill purposes.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that effective engagement with the meta-crisis requires changemakers to adopt leadership practices that intertwine individual and collective consciousness. The findings highlight that subtle forms of leadership, enabled by quieting, healing, and deconditioning of the ego, are particularly potent in facilitating this integration. By quieting, healing, and deconditioning the ego, changemakers are more likely to enter a flow state of consciousness, which enhances their capacity to perceive, respond to, and influence complex systemic dynamics of the meta-crisis, thereby positioning themselves to lead transformative change with greater depth and coherence.

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Ethical Consideration

UREC opinion: Favourable ethical opinion. UREC reference: 23/PSY/005. Research Governance Assessment: Approved – the study may commence.

Consent to Participate

Written consent to participate was received from all the co-researchers.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The data will be shared by the author upon reasonable request to facilitate further research exploring the relationship between consciousness development and leadership performance.

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