



Collective Leadership Institute

Briefing: From Collaboration to Transformation Literacy

The case for change

This year signals a dramatic milestone: 50 years have passed since the first publication of the Club of Rome’s “Limits to Growth”. This milestone coincides with the sense of urgency transmitted by the 2021 IPCC report contrasted by COP26 results which are a far cry from the action that is needed to transform our societies, our economies, and even our thinking to the degree needed for regenerating our planet. It is high time for us to start stewarding together a future we can enjoy living in.



This briefing looks into the strategies that enable transformations and make collaboration across institutions, cultures and countries more effective. It is time to bring human beings back to where they belong: into the centre of attention as transformation agents towards a sustainable interdependent world.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration and networked collective action is the core element of transformative change, because **collaboration literacy is a pathway to transformation literacy**. We all need to steward transformative change collectively across the boundaries of institutions, nations, sectors and cultures.

No single actor has all the solutions, but each actor may essentially contribute a parcel of knowledge, a puzzle piece that counts. Partnering and networks of multi-stakeholder collaboration between business, NGOs, government, the UN, and communities are essential to achieve the SDGs, regenerate our planet and stay within the socially and environmentally safe operating space. Practitioners and committed groups of change-makers across the world are already at work on different toolkits, ideas, platforms, and projects to make transformations a reality.

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OFFICE GERMANY
Kurfürstenstraße 1
14467 Potsdam
Tel.: +49 (0) 331.5816 596-0
germany@collectiveleadership.com

OFFICE SOUTH AFRICA
11 Abelia Street
Mont Claire
7785 Cape Town
Phone: +27 83 772 0958
southafrica@collectiveleadership.com

www.collectiveleadership.com
www.compass-tool.net
www.petrakuenkel.com
www.transformationliteracy.net

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Transformation literacy

Transformation literacy is a skill that – given the current distance to the goal of a world that works for 100% of humanity and the planet – is not a ‘nice to have’ option, but a must. We need to build our collective ability to consciously change behavior, so as to stay within the ‘safe operating space’ of the planetary boundaries and create a safe social space. This suggests that designing and implementing transformative change is a skill requiring widespread distribution. It needs to become the day-to-day management approach of governments, communities, civil society activists and companies.

Transformation literacy is the skill to steward transformative change collectively across the boundaries of institutions, nations, sectors and cultures.



Petra Kuenkel, Founder
Collective Leadership Institute,
Member of the Club of Rome

The challenge in front of us is a monumental one, but we know that with the right approach we can act collectively to create a future where humankind is in balance with itself and the planet. To confront such a challenge, we need tools that are not only grounded in science and practice but also available to everyone: we all need to become masters in the language of transformation.

What is meant by sustainability transformation?

Descriptions of sustainability range from the balance of people, planet and profit to the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development goals; and from managing more than 10 billion people within planetary boundaries to planetary thriving or to a mutually supportive harmony of people and planet. Transformation to sustainability is the pathway to co-creating a world that works for 100% of

humanity and the planet. It needs to take place at all levels of the (global) society and requires a fundamental change in the way we operate with each other and the planet. Transformation has a range of meanings, but the term broadly captures the following characteristics:

- Deeply innovative approach towards thinking, acting, power structures and relationships.
- Both radical and incremental change in the global operating system.
- An evolution of structures and systems into better functionality benefitting all of humanity and the planet.
- A co-creative process of mutual learning towards increasing vitality of an integrated planetary life.
- A re-purposing of institutions and economic structures so humankind operates with each other and the planet in a responsible way.

The ultimate goal is not only to stop climate change and maintain a safe operating space for humankind and the planet, but also invigorate the human competencies to co-create multiple forms of responsible citizenship in the era of the Anthropocene¹ - the evolutionary period, in which the behavior of human beings determines the future of the planet.

What needs to happen together to enable transformations

This briefing explores six mutually supportive **Transformation Enablers**. Each of them is a necessary component to develop transformation strategies that become successful. Their mutually supportive character means that we need to combine them to be able to strategize the path together that leads to tangible transformative change. Together, they function as a **stewardship architecture** for planning and implementing transformative change.

The six transformation enablers stem from 20 years extensive experience in complex multi-stakeholder initiatives, scientific deep dives into system theory and a review of the global discourses on sustainability transformations². They form a stewarding architecture for large systems change that invigorates human competencies for collaboration and transformative change. As actors are busy combining the interests of multiple institutions and aligning representatives behind change agendas, all too often, the connection between the individual actor and the large system gets obscured. But small patterns of transformation in many different places aggregate to large systems change. The transformation enablers connect us as individuals who strategize transformative change with the large systems that require transformation. As transformative patterns of action connect, we begin to steward transformations in large systems. Each of us can become Transformation Literacy masters and in so doing create a change-maker who knows how to collaborate across institutions and societal sectors for

¹ See: Crutzen, P. J. 2002. Geology of mankind: the Anthropocene. *Nature*, 415 (6867), 23-23.

² for more details, see Kuenkel P. 2019, *Stewarding Sustainability Transformations*, Springer Nature; Kuenkel, P., Kuehn, E., Stucker, D., Williamson, D.F., 2020, *Leading Transformative Change Collectively*, Routledge

transformative change. It is by bringing together the six enablers that we can steward change together and make transformation possible.



Narratives:

What are the stories that inspire transformative change?



Structures:

How do we organize collective stewardship of change?



Innovation:

How do we guide innovations towards regenerative futures?



Metrics:

How do we measure progress?



Governance:

How do we learn collectively and navigate differences?



Regulations:

How do we safeguard the commons and planetary life-support systems?



Narratives

What are the stories that inspire transformative change?

Emergency narratives are important, yet new thinking and collective action work best with narratives that encourage, inspire, and show pathways to future possibilities. We need a dose of a 'Yes We Can' mentality to design and implement collaborative transformative change processes. Sustainability transformations are difficult and long, thus we need emotionally compelling goals and roadmaps with a clear narrative to create resonance and commitment to drive change together.

We humans organize around stories. Whoever owns a society's defining story, owns its future

David Korten, author of *Change the Story, Change the Future*



Stories on how we can envision and move toward a thriving future invigorate our capability to collectively shape a future worth living in. Narratives can inspire us to take responsibility in protecting human and planetary wellbeing, they can spring us into action to safeguard life support systems, and can help us realize our ideas for operating within the planetary boundaries. Further, narratives can inspire ingenuity and care for social and ecological systems vitality.

Transformation Literacy fosters the change in the mental models, mind-sets, and stories enabling us to understand how our planet works in interdependency, thus encouraging us to care for future generations and to take responsibility to drive transformative change today.

How can narratives of future possibilities become powerful enough to get us active, collaborate, and organize around transformative change?

Powerful narratives

- connect us with an image of a future that we want to become a part of;
- help us experience the possibility of achieving change, even if in small steps;
- make us realize that our contribution counts – no matter how small or big.

Such enlivening narratives might take different forms and formats, ranging from scientific literature to the arts, always anchored in the world's historic and cultural differences. Good narratives can easily adapt and translate into the “language” of different societal groups, creating resonance for transformative change and becoming inspiration for planning and acting differently.





Structures

How do we organize collective stewardship of change?

To bring out the best in people, invigorate the human spirit, and create tangible results in complex collaborations we must build well-organized engagement processes. We might regenerate organizations, improving their governance mechanisms, or foster local and global transformation networks. It is by bringing stakeholders together in a structure that enables a culture of collective action and by fostering result-oriented partnerships that we transform what seemed impossible into reality. How can we leverage the potential of networks for dynamic change?

What sets transformation networks apart from other types of networks is that they bring together multi-stakeholder initiatives, partnerships, existing platforms and communities in a transformation system that develops strategic networked action.



Elisabeth Kühn, author of *Small Scale and Large Scale – Why Networks are the Cornerstone of Transformations*

Around the world, people work in structures ranging from hierarchical and administrative to egalitarian and collaborative. For transformations to a thriving world to happen, we must empower those structures that enhance transformations and devise new structures that enable us to work together in a more effective way. Cross-institutional alliances and collaborations between governments, businesses and NGOs are a novel answer to the challenges we face.

Transformation literacy enables us to organize networks across sectors and institutions to drive tangible changes – locally, nationally, and globally. It helps us understand how transformation networks can become successful so that they truly help us make a difference together.

When do networks help us steward transformative change?

Networks serve as enabling structures that help us overcome silo-thinking. They support our ability to steward transformative change collectively if we acknowledge plural approaches, respect different expertise, yet develop mutually supportive strategies. In transformation networks the pro-active engagement for a thriving future is everybody's task.

Networks become impactful

- when their purpose is shared by all and creates collective value;
- when the structures are dynamic and ensure dialogic exchange;
- when they contribute to novel pathways and achieve contextual impact.

It is at this point that networks become more than the sum of its members – together we leverage the network for influence and practical collective action across sectors and institutions.



Innovation

How do we guide innovations towards regenerative futures?

Human inventiveness is unlimited, and we need to learn how to tap into this infinite potential. We can do this by connecting transformative change with emerging innovation because it is through technological, social, digital, and scientific breakthroughs that we create and strengthen pathways to sustainability. By putting innovation at the core of transformative change processes we not only nurture emerging ideas and amplify pioneering approaches but we make it possible to integrate collaboration and input from various stakeholders, thus moving innovation from being an isolated improvement or a brilliant invention into a tool at the service of the future of humankind.

Innovation doesn't happen out of the blue. It is an evolving process that requires learning, challenging existing knowledge, and understanding something new.

Ultimately, innovation leads to change and to creating new wisdom.



Bettina Stamm, author of *The Future of Innovation*

Innovation is a key driver for shifting humankind out of the current dangerous path – but it can do so only if we are able to focus innovation on life-enhancement for all. A regenerative future has driving principles that need to guide technological and social innovations. This is not about confining inventiveness, but it is about setting the right parameters, and asking how can technological, social, digital, and scientific innovation strengthen life-enhancing actions? Innovation needs to be contextualized, anchored in continual knowledge exchange, and integrated in informal, indigenous, and traditional knowledge systems.

Transformation literacy empowers social entrepreneurs and encourages both private and public sector to incentivize those innovations that help us live well within the planetary boundaries.

How do we nurture pioneering approaches?

Life-enhancing innovation is a mix between individual genius, perseverance, collaborative inspiration and learning together. Inventiveness, if guided towards life-enhancing innovation, reframes reality, helps us understand something new and helps the world to become a better place. Making this individual and collective process more conscious is a cornerstone in creating a sustainable future.

Innovation and pioneering approaches emerge

- when we create the space for creativity around transformative ideas;
- when we encourage exchange of good practices and expert knowledge;
- when we nurture risk-taking and self-responsibility.

The guidance innovations need is an irrevocable commitment to life-enhancement by all actors. We need business to reinvent the purpose of business, NGOs to invent new ways to care for social and ecological integrity, and governments to guide and finance innovations that serve people and planet.



Metrics

How do we measure progress?

There is one rule that always applies: what gets measured gets improved. Metrics are not an end in itself, but they focus our attention and generate awareness. Yet facts and figures, even well-grounded in science and evidence, are not enough to generate change by themselves: they need to resonate with people and emotionally connect with our humanity. Appropriate metrics can empower us at multiple levels to shift our own thinking and behavior, and to see and measure progress happening. In transformative change metrics function as feedback systems for iterative learning.

Human consciousness, must be holistic and encompassing, bridging the gap between thought and action, linking the past to the present and the future, democratizing access to resources, eliminating waste and fostering regeneration.



Ndidi Nnoli-Edozien, Sustainability expert and investor

The way we currently measure societal progress, most importantly the GDP indicator, do not reflect neither wellbeing nor a healthy planet. At the heart of how we measure progress is the question about what societies truly value and how human presence can live in harmony with nature. Monitoring progress, both qualitatively and quantitatively, creates awareness of how our transformative change efforts lead to sustainable pathways. Therefore, it is not only important to ask what gets measured, but also who gives input to the monitoring of progress.

Transformation literacy enables us to create metrics that reflect sustainability criteria and also to engage people into co-developing such criteria.

How do we monitor not only progress but also process?

Empowering metrics are an entry point to awareness – about the quality of change we achieve, but also about the quality of our collaboration. The purpose of monitoring transformation processes is to keep track of the quality of collaboration in transformative change – because the better we work together the more effective the outcomes will be. How do we make sense together of a situation and how do we all contribute to it? How do we find collective assessments that help us learn together faster?

Both progress and process monitoring help us into effectiveness

- when they foster awareness of the current situation and create transparency;
- when they become feedback systems that inspire action;
- when they enhance our responsibility to improve a situation together.

Monitoring done well contributes to building and maintaining an enlivening learning culture among those who aspire to steward transformative change together – in partnerships, alliances, and networks.



Governance

How do we learn collectively and negotiate differences?

The purpose of governance in stewarding sustainability transformations is to leverage collective intelligence and accelerate collective sense-making that furthers behavior change. Governance refers to the multiple ways in which we collectively steward transformative change in our societies, local communities, and global issues allowing us to move towards agreed-upon goals or away from danger. To overcome complex societal or global challenges we need therefore a governance structure that factors prominently multi-stakeholder collaboration and structured dialogue among the various groups that compose our societies.

Which resource is most important for our future? Not oil. Not even the money (anymore). Not even attention, the artificial currency of the hypermedia age. It's trust. Trust reduces the interaction costs of a society.



Mathias Horx, Futurist and bestselling author

Governance mechanisms have come into existence as a pathway to human wellbeing, as a check on power concentration, and to arrive at solutions in a negotiated balance between the interests of the individual and the interests of the whole. The concept of governance is complementary to the role of government. The participation of various societal groups in policy development, city development, renewable energy strategies, nature conservation, or water management has become increasingly common. We have learned that to best solve complex societal and global challenges we need to integrate different perspectives. We need to establish result-oriented and structured dialogues to negotiate future pathways successfully.

Transformation literacy fosters our understanding of how stakeholder participation creates trust and legitimacy.

How do we leverage multiple perspectives and expertise?

Multi-stakeholder governance is in its essence a mechanism that helps us learn faster together and creates a sense of ownership, which in turn, accelerates active transformative change. Plans that we have not participated in developing, or decisions that we did not help to agree on, are subject to skepticism and resistance. On the other hand, we happily help to implement what we have contributed to co-created.

Governance mechanisms done well help us to:

- integrate perspectives and expertise of different stakeholders;
- develop appropriate strategies across societal sectors and institutions;
- establish peer reviews and effective formats collective learning cultures.

Well-organized dialogues, transparently managed and reliably documented, create the level of trust that is needed to overcome challenges together.



Regulations

How do we safeguard the commons, and planetary life-support systems?

The role of guiding regulations and resource allocations is to safeguard life's wholeness and integrity at all levels. Without setting rules, transformations to sustainability do not move forward. Guiding regulations are as powerful as deliberate interventions in our hands to decide the way resources are allocated, access is managed, taxes are distributed, or investments are focused. But, as important, are voluntary frameworks and peer-reviewed standards that guide the change in our collective behavior. To enable transformative change, we must learn how to combine voluntary and binding agreements.

Ecocide is extensive loss, damage or destruction of ecosystems of a given territory, such that the peaceful enjoyment of the inhabitants has been or will be severely diminished.



Polly Higgins, Visionary advocate for ecocide law, author of *Dare to be Great*

Safeguarding the commons for human and planetary health is crucial for our future: the air we breathe, the forests that support our climate, the water we need to drink, and the communities that support us. Stewarding transformative change goes together with reviewing, reforming, abolishing, or strengthening regulatory frameworks - from environmental regulations to carbon tax, from incentives for renewable energy to penalties for environmental damage. We have learned a lot about the positive impact of voluntary standards which, if developed together with stakeholders, have made many supply chains more responsible. But will what we have be enough to keep humankind's action within the safe operating space?

Transformation literacy fosters a deeply rooted attitude towards contribution of all to the commons and the beauty of our life-support systems.

How do we co-develop and agree on behavioral guidance?

Guiding regulations and resource allocations are often perceived as top-down measures which restrict behavior. But looked at from the perspective of future generations they are testimonials of our collective responsibility for the future. They influence collective behavior change and represent powerful interventions into our way of negotiating individual and collective interest. Some regulations are solid and difficult to change: states have negotiated constitutions; business laws have developed over time. Still, all need to be continuously monitored to understand what their contribution to a sustainable future is. Further, many more regulations have yet to be fully co-developed: development policies, agricultural practices, social equity measures, or nature conservation measures.

Guiding regulations work best

- when they are anchored in our willingness to contribute to the commons and collective wellbeing;
- when they balance binding agreements and voluntary contributions in the best possible way;
- when they are regularly reviewed and their impact and usefulness are regularly assessed.

Binding regulations and voluntary agreements contribute to our ability to steward wellbeing and the commons.



How to strategize transformative change with the six transformation enablers?

The six transformation enablers are more than drivers or factors to be taken into account. They create a pattern of deliberate strategic elements, supporting each other. Any of the transformation enablers can become an entry point for stewarding transformative change collectively, but it is their combination that makes a transformative change design impactful. They strengthen transformative change-makers to understand the current situation and the opportunities for complementary intervention. These are three ways to apply the transformation enablers:

- **Diagnosing a situation that needs to change:**

What is the current situation? Who is knowledgeable, interested or on board? What is already happening? What is missing?

- **Planning transformative change strategies:**

Which strategic elements do we need to bring together to accelerate transformative change? Who needs to work together? How can we leverage pioneering approaches? How can we make use of conducive conditions?

- **Assessing transformative change strategies:**

Is our strategy holistic enough? Have we considered all important elements?

1. How to diagnose a current situation with the transformation enablers?

Every transformative change endeavour requires a thorough context analysis, in-depth understanding and most often feasibility studies or expert assessments around the issue, no matter if the transformative change is about regional climate adaptation, the widespread introduction of renewable energy, accelerating regenerative agriculture adoption, or climate neutral mobility concepts. But in addition to the necessary technical and scientific expertise, it is evenly important to understand the landscape of actors, the communities of engaged citizens, as well as fears, hopes and aspirations. After all, it is people who will make a difference together. Diagnosing a current situation with the transformation enablers means bringing knowledge, information, expertise and perspectives together to find answers to these overarching questions:



Narratives

How much resonance for transformative change exists? Which hopes or fears exist? Which future do people see regarding the issue?



Structures

What is the landscape of actors and institutions who need to work together to accelerate transformative change? Which networks exist? Which administrative structures help or prevent change?



Innovation

Which actors, institutions and procedures are pioneering transformative change? Which expertise and knowledge exist? What form of knowledge exchange exists?



Metrics

Which data exist about the situation and the challenges? Who knows about the urgency for transformative change? How is progress being measured and communicated?



Governance

Which stakeholder consultation around the issue take place? Who is involved? Which coordinating bodies are established? Which result-oriented dialogues take place?



Regulations

Which regulations regarding the issue exist? Which administrative procedures are in support of transformative change? Which resources can be (re) allocated to support transformative change?

2. How to plan transformative change strategies with the transformation enablers?

Most often, transformative change starts with a small group of actors, or collaborating institutions that not only see the urgency for change, but have confidence in the possibility of change. This committed group of actors either has an official mandate or gains its mandate by engaging more and more stakeholders in the vision of the future around an issue. Successful engagement of relevant actors is as much a pathway to success as the actual achievement of results. People stay engaged when they see that collaborating leads to tangible outcomes. Based on a thorough context analysis and a good diagnosis of the current situation, joint planning is paramount. The more holistic such plans are, the more likely the transformative change will happen. Planning transformative change with the transformation enablers means designing strategies in response to these questions:



Narratives

Which stories of possibilities would resonate with actors, institutions or citizens? Which emotionally compelling goals would engage stakeholders? How can we build confidence in the feasibility of transformative change?



Structures

Who needs to work together to steward transformative change? Which networks for collective action do we need to build? How can we anchor the ambition for transformative change in institutions and organizations?



Innovation

How can we amplify pioneering approaches? Which space and opportunities can we create to develop innovative solutions? How can we enhance the knowledge and expertise of all stakeholders?



Metrics

How can we support the urgency of change with data and information? Which measurements of progress would resonate with stakeholders? How could we obtain feedback from actors, stakeholders and citizens about progress?



Governance

How can we ensure consultation and authentic participation of all relevant stakeholders? Which result-oriented dialogues do we need to organize? Which coordinating bodies do we need to establish?



Regulations

How can we best make use of existing regulations or advocate for the adjustments of policies and regulations? Which voluntary agreements can we foster that accelerate transformative change? Which resources do we need to gather or re-direct?

3. Assessing transformative change strategies

Transformative change strategies need to be reviewed from time to time. Ideally this involves relevant stakeholders and leads to a continuous adjustment of strategies. This way, collaborating stakeholders learn fast, gain trust, and build credibility. People, stakeholders and engaged change-makers gain confidence, if they learn together. Exchanging about the diversity of perspectives leads to much better results. The more strategies are composed of all six transformation enablers and consider them in the way transformative change is implemented, the more likely is success. The mutually supportive enablers guide strategic reviews and foster improvement of implementation. An assessment is available [here](#).



