



BRIDGING LEADERSHIP *Voices*

Building trust for collective action

Mark Gerzon, Chong-Lim Lee & Shirley Pendlebury (editors)



Bridging Leadership Voices

Bridging Leadership Voices assembles a unique chorus of twenty-three practitioners from fourteen countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas who are leading collaborative change processes to address issues of local, national and even global importance. The book's contributors are drawn from Synergos' expansive, global network of changemakers in philanthropy, business, government and the nonprofit sector. Their voices take the form of curated conversations about bridging leadership in action.

The dialogues are heart-felt, intimate and rich in stories that convey both the depths of the contributors' struggles and their pride in what they have achieved by building collaboration. There are stories of bridging leadership in a broad range of contexts—in the corporate sector, in human rights activism and community development, in strengthening democracy, in youth development, in philanthropy, in agriculture, and more.

Through these conversations and four anchoring chapters, the book offers readers multiple opportunities to gain insights and perspectives for their own lives and work. The contributors share an understanding that solving complex social problems, both globally and locally, requires trust, a shared vision and collaboration among diverse actors. Their stories and examples illustrate how building trust and a shared vision requires action at multiple levels—not just among institutions or groups, but also in the system within which they operate and among individuals within that system and those institutions. This is the heart of bridging leadership.

Advance praise for *Bridging Leadership Voices*

“Thank you, Synergos, this is an inspiring and accessible guide to bridging leadership, told through rich heartfelt personal stories. A must read for all practitioners wishing to learn and understand the balance of heart, head, and action required to be a bridging leader.”

Surita Sandosham, President and CEO, Heifer International

“Three things I found most fascinating in this book. First, bridging leadership is a framework that responds to the complex challenges of our time. The era—if there ever was one—of a few uniquely talented lone rangers capable of solving all organizational and societal challenges through their individual genius is gone. The challenges we are confronting have little or no respect for individual hero leaders. Collective leadership and working across boundaries are the leadership capability of our time. This leads me to the second fascination. Bridging leadership begins from within oneself. I cannot be an effective bridging leader unless I am committed to life-long development of my inner faculties: openness of mind, compassion, and courage, among others. Third, I am fascinated by how bridging leadership is made alive and learnable through the...captivating real life application stories in this book. Although the book consists of contributions from different authors and practitioners, the lucidity with which it is written, the flow and weaving of the stories give the experience of reading one story—how bridging leadership works.”

Martin Kalungu-Banda, Senior Faculty, Presencing Institute; Visiting Fellow, University of Oxford, Said Business School; author of *Leading like Madiba: Leadership Lessons from Nelson Mandela*

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Edited by
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Bridging Leadership Voices: Building trust for collective action is published by Synergos, a global organization that has pioneered the use of bridging leadership to solve complex problems. We've used this inclusive approach with partners around the world for more than 35 years to achieve extraordinary results meeting local and national needs.

Learn more at www.synergos.org.

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Invitation

This book is an invitation for you to engage with a global community of practice.

Scattered around the world is an extensive and diverse community of bridging leaders, and organizations. You may be one of them, using bridging leadership to help to solve complex problems in your community, corporation, country, or region. Perhaps you long to know others who are working in a similar way. If so, we invite you to expand and deepen your engagement and to connect with the larger global community.

Even if you have never heard of bridging leadership, this book may still strike a chord. You yearn to bridge the divides that keep people at loggerheads instead of finding common ground to achieve a shared purpose. You're disenchanted with the idea that leaders are individuals who alone hold the power, authority, and insight to lead. You peek into the book. There's a spark of recognition: "That's it! That's kind of what I'm doing!" We invite you to enter the book in a spirit of exploration. Between its covers you'll find stories and examples to inspire and guide you in your own life and work.

The book's main chapters are conversations between people who are leading collaborative change processes to address issues of local, national, and even global importance. Their 23 voices form a unique chorus from 14 different countries in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe, sharing stories of bridging leadership.

What happens when two people talk together about bridging leadership in a particular context, such as philanthropy or education? And when they speak from two different geographies or cultures? Then what happens when you put all these conversations between the covers of one book?

Over several months in 2021 and 2022, we invited pairs of bridging leaders to take part in online conversations. Recording sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. We, the book's co-editors, served as hosts,

keeping the conversation flowing, with occasional prompts or linking comments. Contributors spoke from their own experiences, knowing they were part of a chorus but not knowing what cadences other voices might bring. The result is polyphonic, full of local pattern and color, but with a strong interwoven strand that showcases the key features of bridging leadership.

Don't expect this book to give you definitive answers or step-by-step instructions. It is neither a textbook, nor a manual, nor a theoretical treatise. *Do* expect it to prompt new insights and questions, to offer rich examples of practice.

There are many ways to read the book. You could start with chapters whose titles catch your attention, or by reading the opening chapter and skimming the two overtures for a bird's-eye view of bridging leadership. You could read the touchstones gathered as thinking points at the end of each conversation. We hope you'll return to the book time and again. Bring your curiosity, hopes, challenges, and experiences to how you read and use it. Whether you're a seasoned bridging leader, a newcomer, or someone hovering on the threshold, come join us as we seek to build trust and connection in the midst of fear and division.

If you'd like to hear the actual voices of the contributors, please visit the *Bridging Leadership Voices* website syngs.info/voices where you'll find the related podcasts and other resources.

Mark Gerzon, Chong-Lim Lee, and Shirley Pendlebury

Introduction







Why Bridging Leadership? Why now?

Peggy Dulany

Peggy Dulany is Chair of Synergos, a global organization building trust and collaboration to dismantle the systems that create the most urgent problems of our time: poverty, social injustice, and climate change. Peggy founded Synergos in 1986 to promote trust among grassroots groups and government or business leaders and organizations so that they can develop long-term relationships for collective action. In 2001, she co-founded Synergos' Global Philanthropists Circle with her father, David Rockefeller, to support philanthropic families in using this approach.

Here Peggy makes a powerful case for bridging leadership and tells her story of how the idea was born and grew into a practice that has helped to overcome problems in many parts of the world.

We only need look at the world today to be able to imagine why new forms of leadership are needed. Conflicts abound, generated by growing gaps in access to skills, resources, and technology. Expanded contact across heterogeneous groups—owing to growing numbers of people, improved communications, increased travel and surges of migration—also generates tension. There's a lot of fear and anger in the world, making people more susceptible to ideologies, more prone to polarization. In country after country, we see trends toward sharper divides between people.

For centuries, human beings have depended on variations of charismatic, authoritarian, or management-oriented leaders to tell them what to do and lead them out of difficulties. With the growing complexities in the types of problem we face, these forms of leadership are increasingly ineffective. A more subtle approach, which brings all affected parties to the table, is needed.

Bridging leadership is such an approach. Very roughly defined, *bridging leadership is a collaborative practice that brings together diverse stakeholders to understand and collectively address a complex social problem*. Of course, there's much more to it than that. Without trust, collaboration is superficial or a sham, and not likely to be sustained. Bridging across the differences between groups is all about building trust.

Robert Putnam's work on social capital offers a way of thinking about how and why bridging strategies are necessary.¹ In Italy, he found that the number of informal associations (like football clubs and choral associations) was the best indicator of high societal functioning. How so? He reasoned that the bonds of respect and trust that develop through people engaging in voluntary activities together enable them to solve problems that confront and potentially divide them. This banking of trust and respect born of voluntary social interaction he called "social capital". He differentiates between *bonding social capital* (between like groups) and *bridging social capital* (across groups that are not alike in ideology, social class, culture). He found that in informal associations, people's common interest in singing or football (or whatever) allowed for stronger social capital that bridged across ideological and social-class divides.

Bridging leadership draws on, and at the same time, creates social capital. In this it is not alone. It belongs to a family of collaborative approaches that places a premium on trust. It also shares with transformational forms of leadership an orientation towards positive social

1 Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

change. Even so, bridging leadership's distinctive combination of features makes it uniquely suited to confronting the challenges we face in today's world. Through dialogue and personal narrative, the contributors to this book illuminate various aspects of bridging leadership, offer examples of practice in a wide range of settings, and reflect on when they first encountered bridging leadership and what it means to them.

“Something was wrong with this picture”

My own ideas about bridging grew from youthful experience as a volunteer in Brazil. During my late teens in the 1960s I spent three summers in Rio de Janeiro. My volunteering work began in a clinic in a favela called Parada de Lucas where I helped to give shots to young children, only to see those same children playing in the open sewers that ran through the muddy paths between shacks. Something was wrong with this picture.

After my first year of college, I joined a group led by an urban anthropologist who was trying to understand how migrants from poor rural communities in other parts of Brazil were coping—or not—in Rio's burgeoning favelas. By then I had recognized that there was a lot more to understand before I could figure out what “helping” might mean.

I moved in with a family in Jacarezinho, a densely populated favela of over 100,000 people. The poorest citizens lived in shacks along a stinking, garbage-filled stream. “Better-off” inhabitants, like Dona Maria and Sr. Orestes, with whom I lived, were adding second floors and toilets to their hillside houses.

Working with the anthropologist and his informal flock of students, I interviewed many families, who were unfailingly hospitable, offering strong *cafezinhos* (little coffees) prepared on smoky indoor stoves while I asked them questions in my not-so-good Portuguese. In our weekly group sessions, the professor and his students (some *favelados* themselves) compared notes on people's survival strategies. These were basic and often innovative, offering hope as well as despair. For example, people moved in near other migrants from their region and joined informal associations to

help each other adapt, find jobs, build houses, and learn the color-coded bus system for illiterate people. They accessed free electricity by tapping into the electric wires surrounding the favelas. Those who found jobs shared their income with other family members who did *biscate* (catch-as-catch-can work, like selling candy or cigarettes on the streets).

Many were thriving because of local collaboration (drawing on their bonding social capital). But these strategies were not dependent on the outside world. There were few services, governmental or otherwise, that provided information about jobs, training, or lobbying for rights. This lack of collaboration and communication across levels and sectors of society made a lasting impression on me. That was why I majored in social studies. I wanted to understand the issues that prevented people from economically poor communities from progressing in their lives.

I had no idea how such a divide could be bridged. Yet I was left with the strong belief that societies could not flourish without closing these gaps which were ubiquitous, as I later came to realize after travels in Mexico, India, the United States, and Southern Africa.

An idea is born

My being able to focus on the concept of bridging had a number of antecedents. In the late 1970s, I wrote a paper called “Making Connections: The case for an integrated approach to human development”, which I sent to the Ford Foundation. They asked me to do a consultancy to try to understand whether the focus on child health or on women’s health was key to improving public health. Through interviews with doctors, health workers, and community activists in several parts of the world, I found that each person was addressing the problem from their own perspective, with almost no interaction across these groups. In rare cases where there was interaction, I was impressed with the resulting more holistic approach. I wanted to understand how being able to work across sectoral and vertical divides might help people from economically poor communities to achieve a better quality of life.

Shortly after writing the “Making Connections” paper, I spent five years working at what was then known as the New York City Partnership. At the time, their intent was to improve the quality of life for New York City residents by bringing labor, government, business, and civil society to work together. Part of my responsibility was to try and create policies and practices to improve youth employment and public-school education. That’s where we encountered a difficulty that made me realize the importance of inclusive participation. Although very able leaders in all those sectors were part of this initiative, there was no inclusion of those who were experiencing the issues we were trying to address. We came up with wonderful solutions. But because there was no ownership at the local school level, because “it was not invented here”, and because some proposals were perhaps not relevant for individual schools, those charged with implanting the program had no investment in or sense of ownership of it. That made clearer than anything else the importance of having a deep process of consultation with those affected by the problems, and not just those in a position either to give money to the initiatives or to shift policy to make the problems go away.

These experiences led me to form an organization, *Synergos* (the Greek root of synergy meaning “working together”), whose purpose was to include people from different sectors and levels of society to work together to solve problems.

Flying by the seat of our pants

One of our first efforts involved an attempt to raise funds for the nascent Roda Viva (“live wheel”) organization formed by Wanda Engel. Her effective work as principal of a high school on the edge of a favela in Rio was virtually obliterated because many of the graduates, unable to find a job, were being drafted as foot soldiers in the growing drug war. Wanda recognized that a different strategy was needed. In 1987, her organization partnered with the just-born Synergos around promoting the rights of children.

Because of my father's connection with Banco Lar, a Brazilian partner of the Chase Manhattan Bank, we were able to convene a group of private wealth clients to meet with the staff of Roda Viva at a cocktail party in a posh nightclub in the famed Ipanema. I'll never forget the glamorous ladies clustering at one end of the room and the staff of Roda Viva, some of whom were favelados, hovering shyly at the other. Only Wanda and I crossed the invisible line, unable to create a viable bridge.

At the time, we neither knew how to facilitate constructive dialogue nor how to convene or structure partnerships that could achieve a common sense of purpose. We were flying by the seat of our pants and the strength of our personalities.

One of our main learnings was through the interactions between Synergos' small staff and the members of Roda Viva around issues of power. Because Synergos was from the US and had some access to funding, they viewed us as powerful, while we felt powerless to access centers of power and money like the World Bank and large foundations that had not yet bought into strategies of inclusive partnerships. We began to recognize that "chains" of access (to those with influence and resources) were needed for the voices of excluded groups to be heard in a meaningful way.

Synergos continued to work in this way, convening and cultivating chains of trust. We came to see community foundations as potential convenors of partners and spent a decade strengthening them to become "bridging" organizations. They supported grassroots initiatives whose boards, and sometimes staff, included people with access to different sectors of power (government, business, religious organizations, and larger civil society institutions) and whose "clients" were organizations at the grassroots. Many of the board and staff leaders were themselves bridging across divides and we, at Synergos, came to call them "bridging leaders."

We became curious about what makes a bridging leader

In a presentation to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Salzburg Seminar in 1997, I proposed that bridging leaders could play a key role in bringing

people together to solve complex problems. We became curious about what made a bridging leader. What were the key qualities? Could these be taught?

The pursuit of these questions took me to the Philippines in 2000 to discuss the idea of bridging leadership with our long-time friend Ernesto Garilao, then Dean of the Asian Institute of Management (AIM), and his colleague Professor Titong Gavino. Ernie's enthusiasm prompted us to form a global task force of people from the Philippines, Ecuador, Brazil, South Africa, Namibia, Mexico, and the US to explore the concept of bridging leadership. The group commissioned case studies of bridging leaders and instances where bridging divides had led to solutions to problems that had not been solvable without such collaboration. We began to see patterns in the qualities needed for success.

In the Philippines, Ernie went on to develop a framework for teaching bridging leadership at AIM and, in 2004, the Mirant Foundation endowed the Center for Bridging Social and Economic Divides at AIM. Over a period of two decades, bridging leadership practice became well-integrated into a number of institutions in the leadership of Filipino government and civil society. Bridging leadership initiatives in the Philippines yielded remarkable results—in reducing maternal and child mortality, in conflict zones, and in addressing poverty. There are many stories to tell about these initiatives and the bridging leaders who facilitated them. Ernie Garilao reflects on some of these in a later chapter.

Here I want to remember the late Corazon Soliman (1953–2021), or Dinky as she was known. Dinky lived the practice of bridging leadership. First and foremost a grassroots activist, during the Ferdinand Marcos regime she came to see that it wasn't enough for activists to protest and try to shift policy themselves. At a time when it was obvious to civil society organizations and increasingly clear to the business sector that the regime was damaging the country, Dinky played a key role in bringing the business community to meet with civil society groups. She told the story of how an association of NGOs and business leaders held a weekend retreat to talk about how they might jointly approach the crisis. The beginnings of trust

built during that time—largely through singing together—led to the People Power Movement and, eventually, helped to end a dictatorial regime.

Apart from her lifelong grassroots movement building, Dinky was named Secretary of Social Welfare and Development under two different presidents, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Benigno Aquino III. She resigned from the first administration because she disagreed with the trend of Macapagal-Arroyo's government. While in government, using her influence as Secretary, Dinky, together with Ernie Garilao, was able to institute bridging leadership practices within her own Ministry, as well as within the military and in the Vice President's office. Integrating bridging leadership practices in branches of government opened the way for advances in peace and development in Mindanao in the early 2000s. The Mindanao region has long been marked by conflict around the right to self-determination of its indigenous Muslim population. Dinky and Ernie collaborated, as leaders from government and civil society respectively, to facilitate talks and other initiatives that, for a time, brought together members of the conflicting sectors and reduced armed combat.

Authenticity was Dinky's particular gift. She electrified audiences when she spoke about the need to collaborate across divides. Differences of language, culture or background were no impediment to her being trusted in processes involving diverse stakeholders. Sadly, news of Dinky's passing reached us a few days before her scheduled interview for this book. My lasting memories are of Dinky's compassion and sense of humor, and her positivity about the potential for change to a more equitable society in the Philippines, and around the world.

Building bridges, inside and out

From 2004 onward, Synergos engaged in multi-year, multisectoral partnerships in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to address such complex issues as child undernutrition, maternal mortality, small farmer productivity, the quality of public schools, and early childhood care and protection. We used a variety of methods to convene and facilitate these

partnerships, including Theory U, which Joseph Jaworski and Adam Kahane of Generon had introduced to us in our work in India and which we employed together with Otto Scharmer's Presencing Institute in Namibia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. This led us to explore "inner work" or personal reflection as a way of getting groups aligned around a common purpose.

Inner work was central to the Bhavishya Alliance, an initiative to address child undernutrition in India's Maharashtra state. Two prominent moments in the initiative illustrate the interplay of inner work, systems thinking, group learning, and trust in enabling a common sense of purpose in a collaborative effort to solve problems.

The first significant moment was a five-day learning journey. This took thirty participants in the problem-solving group around the state in smaller groups of five or six to look at the nature of the problem. Each group consisted of participants from different parts of the child nutrition ecosystem, each with their own preconceived notions of the problem and its possible solution. Each night they shared what they felt, saw, learned, and understood. Their views shifted over those days, affected by each other's perceptions and because they were looking at the same reality together, although through different lenses. By the end of the week, they had bonded as a group and built trust within their subgroups. They also had a more complete, shared view of child undernutrition as a complex problem that could only be solved in a systemic way.

A second significant moment came with the participants' retreat in the Himalayas. The energy generated from their deep personal reflection during three solitary days and nights in the mountains was a huge factor in the resulting creativity that enabled them to imagine potential solutions. A key was to create a safe setting where these diverse groups could bond and come to trust each other, reflect personally and together, and so shift from being judgmental to being curious. Curiosity opens the imagination. And once the imagination is open, much more creativity in group and individual thinking becomes possible.

These two moments shine a light on the different dimensions of bridging leadership: (i) understanding a complex problem systemically;

(ii) bringing key actors from different parts of the problem's ecosystem together; (iii) facilitating a process where they begin to see the systemic nature of the problem and their own part in it; and (iv) inner work to enable trust-building and a sense of individual and shared purpose.

Holding one's own center

Complex social problems—like undernutrition and other problems related to poverty or inequity—can't be resolved by one person alone or only in one sector of the ecosystem where the problem occurs. This is why inclusive partnerships are so important. But to get to an inclusive partnership, you must identify who the stakeholders are that need to be involved. Chances are they're going to be very diverse. Chances are they will come from different standpoints or perhaps opposing ideologies. Chances are they'll be wary of each other, even distrustful.

In order to bring people together so that they can begin to trust each other and align in common purpose, you need more than one person who has credibility with different sectors, who will have access to all the categories of participants who need to be involved, and to the individual participants from each category. Once you've convened the participants, you have to be able to keep the whole together, while going through the process of facilitating a shared understanding of the problem and the kinds of initiatives that can address it.

Here's where holding one's own center becomes vital. Unless bridging leaders have—to some extent—resolved inner conflicts, whether those be a reaction to traumas or a certain conflict of personality that comes from an anger or a sadness or grief, it will be difficult for them to hold their center while going through the complicated process of bringing people together. To listen deeply, you can't have a lot of static that is dictating your judgment or your reactions. Inner work, which can be done in a variety of ways, cultivates an awareness of static and is a precursor to successful bridging leadership.

With the support of talented guides from many countries, we have been offering group retreats that allow people to reflect deeply on their

life purpose and to identify obstacles that may prevent them from fully living it. Somewhere along the way we began to realize that the attributes of good bridging leaders were strengthened through personal reflective practices. In the context of a group committed to working together to solve a problem, these practices enabled people to develop trust in each other, and so dare to be vulnerable and authentic in front of the others, which enhanced their willingness to listen to and consider one another's views.

Repairing the weave of the social fabric

Society and its many systems are like a tapestry. When the tapestry is torn or worn, bridging leadership helps to draw together the different components of the cross-weave. Without repairing the weave of the social fabric through building trust, and then through building capacity for bridging leadership, we are not going to be able to counter the trend toward polarization.

Ideally, the work of repair has to start at the grassroots. If we don't understand what's happening to those experiencing the problem on the ground, we're going to miss the point and the social weave will remain torn, which is what often happens in social policy. That in itself is enough justification for including people from the grassroots in understanding the problem in question and in thinking through how best to address it.

Grassroots inclusion is essential, but one may not be able to start there, especially if the funding for an initiative mandates the agreement of the government, which generally sees itself as the main actor. When we were invited to work in Ethiopia and Nigeria around improving smallholder farmer livelihoods, we had to work closely with their Ministries of Agriculture first because government sets policy and directs the budget involved. It took some years in each case before the government agencies involved were ready to engage in a more inclusive process. Some work was necessary with senior government officials to allow for bridging leadership ability to develop within the Ministry and to reach a place where they would

be willing to listen to the farmers or pregnant women or whoever was being affected by the problem on the ground.

In the case of bridging across ideological divides, one *has* to start at the grassroots. I think of a group called Braver Angels in the US that works at the grassroots level, training local volunteers to facilitate conversations between people who live in the same community. There you're not dealing with political parties, you're dealing with human beings who have some needs in common, like clean neighborhoods or good schools. When you engage in an ongoing conversation like that, issues that everyone cares about emerge and it makes sense to start with those issues. Building trust across divides requires a safe setting with a good facilitator where the people can get to know each other as human beings and find common cause around issues they care about. This makes coming together easier than in a polarized political situation, where the ends are already staked out.

Why bridging leadership? Why now?

As I have said, we only need to look at the world today to be able to imagine why new forms of leadership are needed. The Covid health crisis and the inequities within and between countries it revealed, the plight of refugees and the fraught situations from which they flee, not to mention climate disasters, call on us more strongly than ever to find ways to build trust and bridge across divides. Bridging leadership answers that call.

Bridging leadership involves systems thinking, inner work or personal reflection that leads to greater compassion, a desire to serve with love, and the ability to listen deeply to opinions different from our own in order to build the trust that enables true collaboration. The chapters that follow illuminate these aspects and reveal the granularity of what it takes to create and be a bridging leader, as well as to practice bridging leadership around complex problems.

Reflecting on the stories in this book, I continue to feel hope that our initiative can and will make a significant difference in how the world is governed and how problems are solved. Even in deeply divided societies

where the gap is enormous, we know that it is possible to solve problems at the more local level through bridging leadership practices that include those usually excluded from the problem solving. We know that bridging leadership can lead to solutions, where healthcare as well as education and agricultural issues can be shifted in a positive direction with sustainable results. This happens through trust-forged partnerships that address these problems in an inclusive and bridging way.

Even though the trend in the world might appear to be toward more conflict and greater polarization, we now have evidence that this alternative approach can find success in small and large ways. This could be the tipping point for a more positive world and a more positive way of addressing and solving problems.

We dedicate this book to the memory of Corazon (Dinky) Soliman, to the many across the world who are already bridging divides, and to those who may find inspiration here for building trust in difficult situations.





Part I
Six Lenses on Bridging Leadership





Bridging Leadership in Context

Overture to Part I

Shirley Pendlebury

Shirley Pendlebury is professor emerita in the School of Education at the University of Cape Town. She is a former director of the University's Children's Institute, a cross-disciplinary research and advocacy group. As a fellow of the Leadership and Innovation Network for the Children's Sector (LINC) in South Africa, Shirley collaborated with Synergos on their social connectedness program in southern Africa.

*And so we lift our gazes, not to what stands between us,
but what stands before us.
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside.*

(Amanda Gorman, from "The Hill We Climb")

Worldwide, the divides of belief, faith, wealth, race, class, caste, language, power, and interest stand between us. Distrust obscures what stands before us, prevents us from finding ways to act in concert to address the pressing problems that face our communities, our countries, the natural environment, and the world at large.

Amanda Gorman’s performance poem, crafted for the inauguration of the 46th President of the USA, resonates far beyond national boundaries. The poem could well be an emblem for this book on bridging leadership. Three lines, especially, come to mind:

*If we’re to live up to our own time,
then victory won’t lie in the blade
but in all the bridges we’ve made.*

In person and performance, Amanda Gorman exemplifies bridging. As “a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother” and, at 22 years, the youngest poet to perform at a presidential inauguration, she bridges the divides of age, race, and circumstance to call—across chasms of hatred, fear, and mistrust—for love and trust, and for courage to answer the call. Her poem is rhetoric crafted for the inaugural occasion. In the year following her performance, many chasms of fear and hatred grew deeper or became more visible.

Even so, rhetoric may inspire, motivate, and invigorate, as we hope this book will do, through its rich array of stories and reflections on bridging leadership in concept and in practice. Part I of the book weaves a conceptual web for the cases of bridging leadership in action in Part II. Each chapter in Part I looks at bridging leadership through a different lens—inner, social, philanthropic, educational, corporate, and political. Beginning with the inner, personal foundations for bridging leadership, Part I ends with a view of bridging leadership in the complex of relations, practices, and systems that encompass the political dimension of human lives.

Each chapter takes the form of a dialogue between two authors. Wherever two minds are at work, they may chime in harmony or discord. Even in harmony their tones and accents may differ, as may the experiences, perspectives, contexts, and values they bring to bear on a topic. Authentic dialogue involves bridging such differences to reach shared understanding. In both parts of the book, the contributors are exemplary bridging leaders who span the global south and global north. In their person and spheres of action, they model the character, competence, and

values of bridging leadership. Several have also helped to build bridging organizations. With the stage thus set, the conversational form of the chapters enacts a kind of bridging.

Leadership as a relational practice

In every part of the world, in every setting, and at every level, leadership is a relational practice—in multinational corporations and non-profits; in schools and hospitals; in governments, political parties, global alliances, and traditional councils; in philanthropic foundations large and small. The relationships may be trusting or toxic; mindful or mindless; respectful or dismissive; caring or careless; democratic or autocratic. And leaders' purposes may be self-serving or directed to a common good. To be sure, relationships are more nuanced than these pairs of opposites suggest. But you get the idea. Leadership is inescapably relational.

What distinguishes bridging leadership is the kind of relationships it nurtures, and its purpose in doing so. Bridging leaders build trusting and trustworthy relationships across the divides that set people in conflict or competition. Loosely defined, bridging leadership is the capacity and will to build trust and tap the fullest contributions of diverse stakeholders, helping them to come together across divides to work in concert for the common good.

Bridging leadership is a trust-building practice honed to address complex problems. Failures of trust underpin many of society's most intractable problems. Building trust is critical in situations of pervasive mistrust, where people have a collective memory of harms they have suffered at the hands of another group, or when group identities involve suspicion of other groups. In such contexts, we tend to blame "the other" for whatever we see as undermining our wellbeing or the wellbeing of our community, society, or planet. Without trusting relationships, authentic collaboration is impossible; without accountable collaboration, urgent social problems languish unsolved, spreading ever more widely, becoming more deeply entrenched.

Troubled times shine a harsh light on the systemic nature and interconnectedness of the disorders plaguing our world. Fire and floods, hunger and privation, systemic racism, sexism, and violence—all exposed more starkly on the stage of a global pandemic—are but a few of the problems that thwart wellbeing. In a later chapter, Emanuel Garza Fishburn says that such ailments have three basic sources: “Our relationship to ourselves; our relationship to others; and our relationship with nature.” Together, the conversations in this book show how bridging leadership can help to nurture better relationships on all three fronts.

Bridging leadership is not confined to any one place, field of activity, or issue. Bridging leaders may be found everywhere, at every level, even if they’ve never heard the term, and whether they call themselves that or not. You can be a bridging leader without any training or qualification, and without taking part in a community of such practice. But the concept of bridging leadership goes beyond individual leaders who can span divides to bring people together to collaborate in a common cause. Bridging leadership is both a practice and the pivotal concept in a theory of change for addressing complex social problems. As a concept, it is universal in form and applicability, yet contextually attuned—to times, places, issues, problems, cultural practices, and social ecosystems.

Recurring themes

Recurring themes in Part I converge to hone a conception of bridging leadership that Synergos and their partners have developed over three decades. All six conversations probe the relationship between trust-building, systems thinking, collaboration, and inner work as elements of an approach to social change. Four broad cross-cutting themes illuminate the characteristics of bridging leadership and its challenges: “bridging within”; “only connect”; “neither wimps nor warriors”; and “continuity and care.” Echoes of these themes resound in Part II in the stories of bridging leadership in action.

Bridging within

The theme “bridging within” weaves through the book, in some chapters as a central motif, in others as a barely noticed but vital thread or—to borrow Mark Gerzon’s metaphor—as the invisible work that makes a bridge span possible. Bridging within is about inner work for more effective outer change.

Early in the book, Manish Srivastava tells how building bridges inside himself integrated his clashing emotions and so enabled him to move away from blaming others to more compassionate relationships in his development work. Later, Emmanuel Gaza speaks of how, when he first encountered bridging leadership by that name, what struck him as unique was the notion that you start from within to bridge between your personal elements and how this internal, transformative process awakens a deeper calling that allows you to connect strongly with others with whom you need to collaborate.

Bridging within nurtures personal integrity and mends disparate or neglected facets of the self. Anxiety, fear, grief, and rage shut people off from one another and from themselves, deadening their sense of purpose and possibility. Inner work is no self-indulgent navel-gazing that averts attention from the world. Quite the contrary, says Marilia Bezerra: it dismantles navel-gazing. Bridging within is a way of being more fully present to yourself so that you can listen and be more open for something to emerge between yourself and others, between your agenda and theirs. Part of being fully present to yourself is recognising your biases and the ways in which your position affects how others perceive and interact with you. For example, in her work on sustainable agriculture, Bambi Semroc (in Part II) is conscious of how different stakeholders might perceive a white woman from Arlington, Virginia facilitating a global dialogue.

Inner work may be uncomfortable. In a cultural lineage where some lives are seen as more valuable than others, bridging leadership requires profound inner work, Mark Gerzon believes. Such a cultural lineage underlies many of the world’s wealthiest economies. It’s evident, too, in histories of oppression and exclusionary social arrangements, like those of apartheid South Africa.

Bridging within begins in self-reflection and then guides you to look holistically at the system in which a social problem arises and at your role in it, given your skills, talents, and assets. It prompts the question: what is this situation asking of me? It awakens a sense of purpose and makes you responsible for recognising the talents and capacities you have for acting according to your purpose and values. Your purpose might be something as broad as working with others towards a more peaceful and equitable world. As Ernesto Garilao reminds us, in bridging leadership, purpose is related to your role in a complex problem within your field of action or concern. It's a purpose that enjoins leaders to embrace their responsibilities to bring about change for the better.

Only connect

A web of connectedness spans the chapters of this book. For Marilia Bezerra, bridging leadership is about reconnection, about overcoming the disconnects that occur when we separate individuals or parts from their connection to a larger whole. For Marlene Ogawa, "Connection comes before content." She means, I think, connection and trust among the people who hope to collaborate in addressing a pressing social problem. But bridging leadership also depends on fine-grained attention to the content of the system in which a complex problem arises. It depends on grasping the facts of the matter, the connections between them, and the different perspectives on them.

Systems thinking, collaboration, trust-building, and inner work all entail making, discovering, cultivating, or extending connections of one sort or another. The interconnection among these four components is vital. Systems thinking, collaboration, and inner work are all integral to bridging leadership, but the converse does not hold. A superb systems thinker may lack the capacity to build trust for collaborative action. A contemplative may spend many daily hours on inner work yet have no appetite for action. A charismatic leader may forge transactional partnerships with multiple stakeholders in self-serving ways.

Ernesto Garilao illustrates this vital connection in his account of how bridging leadership transforms the work of public officials. Bridging leadership helps elected officials to connect to their purpose as public leaders, do a better systems analysis, get different stakeholders to co-own the issue or challenge at stake, and together come up with institutional arrangements to address the challenge. His example from the Philippines encapsulates universal principles. Bridging leadership is a meta-concept, intricately tied to the purpose of bridging to effect change towards a better world, a purpose to adapt to circumstance, place, and issue.

Systems thinking connects the different elements of a system and how they interact. It also connects different perspectives on a complex problem for a fuller picture of its nature, causes, and remedies. Through systems thinking we come to recognise the different resources needed to address a problem. Systems thinking also shows which actors or stakeholders need to be consciously connected to garner the collective knowledge and resources required to see a system holistically and understand how it has given rise to a complex problem.

Collaborative processes craft these connections to bring the necessary people, organizations, and resources into play. Financial capital is not the only or the most crucial resource. Bridging leadership gathers various kinds of capital, starting with the bridging social capital that grows when people and groups connect beyond their own closely bonded communities or sectors.

Much as it entails collaboration, bridging leadership is not reducible to multistakeholder processes. These can be merely transactional or utilitarian, as Neville Gabriel points out (in Part II). He sees bridging leadership as “a much deeper life skill and ought to be transformative . . . being transformed yourself in the process.” Bridging within is intricately entwined with how bridging leaders approach collaboration, and why they do.

Collusion, disguised as collaboration, is also not bridging leadership. Collusion connects people and groups in self-serving and often deceitful ways. Adewale Ajadi’s story of a “collaboration” between the Nigerian elite and the oil companies to exploit Nigeria’s oil for their own benefit is a stark illustration on the difference between bridging leadership and collusion.

Collusion occurs, says Adewale, “when you do not allow the space for truth to emerge, where you pretend” so as to serve your own interests, rather than the greater good.

Genuine, respectful collaboration depends on trust. We expect a bridge to be dependable, not prone to collapse. Bridge-building requires trust, and trustworthiness, on both sides. Kgotso Schoeman and Marlene Ogawa speak of the difficulty of establishing trust in places where a history of oppression has left a legacy of pervasive mistrust. Trust-building is not a matter of denying the moral outrage the legacy invokes in those who have suffered oppression; only when people have been given a safe space to tell their stories and voice their pain can compassion and genuine trust-building begin. Remaining silent produces a false consensus that will surely collapse in the undercurrents of mistrust.

Mistrust contracts the space of connection. Hope and well-founded trust enable collective agency. Where there is no hope that a complex problem can be addressed, where there’s a deep sense of despair or resignation, collective agency flounders. So, too, when collective nostalgia cleaves to a lost past. Reflecting on the industrial and economic changes that wreaked havoc in the community where she grew up, Bambi Semroc (in Part II) observes that if you don’t enable people to have hope for the future or to think about what a transition is going to look like, they wallow in what is lost instead of thinking about what can be gained through change.

Connecting the present and the future is a critical point of bridging. “What is the future we want to create and what does this imply for our choices and actions today?” Marina Feffer asks. Her question embeds a defining feature of bridging leadership: the bridge from present to future connects purpose and vision to action. Marina has a sober take on possible futures, grounded in realistic hope, and bolstered by attention to concrete data.

Hope is the deeply felt conviction that the future is not entirely settled. Hope appeals to the possibility of transformation; it is audacious and inspiring, seeking to cross bridges not yet built. But uncritical hope is naïve, forlorn. The Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, who propounded a

pedagogy of hope, tells us that the language of hope and possibility is the restrained language of those who refuse to lose their grip on reality.

Neville Gabriel (in Part II) reflects both the restrained and audacious facets of hope. His grip on the current realities in South Africa prompts him to caution against hope. Yet his work across the SADC (Southern African Development Community) region has been inspiring, anchored in a refusal to accept social injustices and in an unwavering commitment to the possibility of transformation. This interplay of restraint and audacity runs through many of the stories in this book. It is one of the polarities that bridging leaders hold in creative tension.

Neither wimps nor warriors

A striking pattern of contrasts emerges in Part I. In chapter after chapter, authors allude to the polarities of bridging leadership—compassion and rigor; kindness and accountability; patience and urgency; safety and risk; humility and audacity. The stories of bridging leadership in action in Part II show a similar interplay.

Bridging leaders are neither wimps nor warriors. While bridging leadership calls for a kind of fierceness, a dash of the warrior's courage and resolve, it is not about battlegrounds, nor about victors and the vanquished. Humility and compassion temper a bridging leader's courage and resolve. Kgotso Schoeman stresses the hard qualities: bridging leadership isn't about being nice; leaders must be tough enough to hold themselves and others to account. For Marina Feffer and Marilia Bezerra, bridging leadership is both about being compassionate and about bringing rigor to philanthropy to ensure it serves the world's needs before it serves the donor's ego.

Serving the greater good is a beacon across all fields of bridging. Its light fades without conscious kindling through reflection, listening to different perspectives, and paying attention to evidence about areas of real need. Bridging leadership isn't simply a matter of leading a cause that touches your heart or may stroke your pride. "Systems thinking, solid information, and the hard-earned wisdom of different stakeholders bring rigor to philanthropy," says Marina Feffer. So, too, for other domains.

Such wisdom is hard-earned because it's not instant like ersatz coffee. Garnering collective wisdom takes time and trust. Patience is a virtue here. But the problems that call for bridging are urgent. The people and communities who suffer them want solutions, now. The donors who support initiatives for social impact want evidence of results. This expectation of quick results scuppers the groundwork needed for reliable bridges and real change. Deep systemic transformation, says Gretchen Steidel, "doesn't come ... in the timing demanded." Nili Gilbert's plea for a patience premium for long-termism resonates far beyond the corporate context of her work.

Bridging leaders have a good sense of timing, they listen to the pauses, pitches, and rhythms of engagement to judge when the time is right to accelerate or slow down, to change course, or forge ahead, or start afresh. Bambi Semroc (in Part II) speaks of how this reflective listening sharpens her sense of when to push a collective agenda forward.

The power of attentive, receptive listening—to oneself and others—is a motif of leadership in these conversations. Deep listening goes beyond attending to what people say. Bridging leaders listen respectfully to each individual contribution, as well as for the metamessages in multi-stakeholder engagements, as Adewale Ajadi reminds us in his story of how he and his colleagues were able to anticipate a conflict between herders and pastoralists across the Horn of Africa. Listening for metamessages offers insights into how a collaborative venture is faring.

Curiosity is another attribute of bridging leaders. Curiosity is not a nosy parker, poking its nose into none of its business. It is a wondering about the way things are and about what better ways might be possible. It stokes the imagination of "what if?" Curiosity fuels genuine inquiry and is satisfied through patient attention, sometimes systematic, often serendipitous. In a bridging leader, curiosity is not the rapt wonder that holds your gaze but fails to motivate action. Bridging leadership is purposive, so a bridging leader's curiosity has purpose, directed towards understanding and addressing a systemic problem, and co-creating a collaborative approach that will begin to effect change. In reflective practice, collective action is itself a kind of inquiry.

When diverse groups convene to address a pressing and complex problem, they may be at odds with one another. Rather than assuming they know the answer, a bridging leader tries to stay curious, to stay in a place of not knowing for as long as possible until the different ideas and perspectives begin to connect to form a whole picture. This doesn't mean that a bridging leader is simply a conduit for the ideas of others. What leaders bring to the table, humbly and with respect for what others bring, is part of the poly capital that collaborative ventures draw from to be effective at scale.

Being willing to stay in a space of unknowing is one of the risks and necessary discomforts of bridging. The dogged pursuit of certainty leads to dogmatic thinking and to authoritarian, divisive styles of leadership. Bridging leaders are not and do not try to be omniscient. They are not and do not pretend to be all-knowing saviours or heroes who will lead their followers to paradise or utopia.

Continuity and care

A bridge once built needs ongoing care to ensure safe passage. Its reliability depends upon the trustworthiness of the bridge builder, their materials, tools and skills, and the design and maintenance of the bridge. A bridge depends, too, on respectful use by those who pass across it, and on protection against sabotage in conflict zones where political leaders posture towards diplomacy, all the while planning attack. Even with ongoing care, new bridges need to be built from time to time, because the existing ones have not worn well, or because there are still chasms where a bridge may be vital for wellbeing.

In their overture to Part II, Len le Roux and Chong-Lim Lee sketch four pieces that make up bridging leadership in action: individual leaders, who have the inherent and learned attributes that enable them to play a bridging role; bridging organizations to initiate or support the work; the architecture or design of each intervention or programme of change; and the approach, tools, and methods to be used. This four-piece framing helps us think about the concept of bridging leadership *as a practice*.

So, what is a practice? For a start, it's about a community of practitioners with shared values, standards, and ways of doing. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre conceptualizes a practice as a coherent and complex form of cooperative human activity that is defined by its distinctive values, intentions, skills, and forms of attention, which he refers to as its internal goods and standards.² Internal goods are related to the ultimate purpose of a practice. To give a simple example, the defining purpose of the practice of teaching is to enable learning. Its values, intentions, and so on are the internal goods and standards that honour and advance this purpose.

Individuals acquire and hone the attributes and capacities that the practice requires through their participation in it, while also delving more deeply into their own values and sense of purpose. At the same time, they shape the practice and help to nurture newcomers. A fully fledged practice involves creating and caring for a community of practice.

Practices need supporting organizations. A practice's chances of survival may be bleak without an institutional home and the nurturing conditions to sustain and grow the practice from one generation to the next. Yet practices are vulnerable to the corrupting influence of the very institutions that support them, MacIntyre argues. This happens when institutions or their leaders strive to amass external goods like money, power, fame, or status at the expense of the practice's internal goods. Compromising a practice's integrity undermines its ideals and creativity, as well as its cooperative care for common goods. Competition for external goods sabotages cooperation.

To illustrate these points and link them to some themes in this book, I turn to MacIntyre's ideal of politics as a practice. He believes that politics should be a practice whose internal goods lead towards the public good (or good for the community as a whole). Instead, the institutions of representative democracy pursue external goods, where some win and others lose, where cheating, collusion, and exploitation may be rife and

2 Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

so harm the commons. This resonates with the conversation between Adewale Ajadi and Mark Gerzon in the chapter on Defending Democracy. Contemporary politics eschews bridging, Adewale Ajadi believes, because it presents politics as a winner-takes-all system. Adewale makes a strong case for democracy as a dialogue leading toward excellence, a practice where “people don’t reduce themselves to warring tribes every time there’s an issue in front of them.”

Bridging leadership guards against the siren calls of power and money through inner work, conscious collaboration, co-ownership, and collective knowledge to ensure that bridging leaders serve the greater good before they serve their own interests. But going through the motions of bridging leadership is a masquerade unless it fulfils its purpose. Without this, the processes associated with bridging leadership are pointless. “You can do the interior work, you can get different sectors together, but for what?” asks Ernesto Garilao in the chapter on Raising a Generation of Bridging Leaders.

Practices have a history, reflected in the lives of individuals, in exemplary figures and achievements from within the practice and from the wider traditions that underpin and inspire it, in debates about the nature of the practice and its central concepts, and about its relevant reach and prospects. Bridging leadership is still a young practice. Yet throughout history and across geographies, there have been leaders who shine as exemplary bridging figures. They are emblems for the practice. In my country, South Africa, the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu stands out as an exemplary bridging figure.

This book captures part of the history of bridging leadership. It extends and enriches existing historical artefacts—from early case studies that formed a foundation for a grounded theory of practice, through the bridging leadership framework developed by Ernesto Garilao and his colleagues at the Asian Institute of Management (AIM), to the 2020 case studies on Inner Work for Social Change. The book’s main chapters record oral histories, where individual leaders tell their stories through conversation. They tell how they first encountered bridging leadership

and what happened next, they tell of achievements and challenges in the bridging initiatives they've experienced or co-created. Through their interactive reflections, they highlight ongoing debates about bridging leadership, its prospects, and its place in the world today. Speaking online from different geographies about different issues, their stories are historical vignettes of situated practice.

Every now and then a practice makes a breakthrough, renewing its sense of purpose, attracting a new generation of practitioners, spreading its reach, perhaps entering the mainstream. The conversations here invigorate the practice, marking a turning point in its maturity, bringing in new voices and critical perspectives, as well as those of seasoned old-timers who helped to form and refine the practice and its core concepts. This augurs well for bridging leadership.



Building the Bridges Within

The Inner Lens

Manish Srivastava and Gretchen Ki Steidle

Bridging leadership starts with the inner self. Manish Srivastava and Gretchen Ki Steidle explore the connections between our inner selves, our relationships with others, and our work in the world.

Manish is a life coach, facilitator, and artist who collaborates with leaders across business, government, UN agencies, and NGO sectors to solve complex challenges. As a senior practitioner at the Presencing Institute, he is part of the core faculty of the Social Presencing Theatre. Manish is the author of *Trading Armour for a Flower: Rise of New Masculine*.

Gretchen is the founder and president of Global Grassroots. She is a producer of the award-winning documentary film, *The Devil Came on Horseback*, co-author of the related memoir, and the author of *Leading from Within: Conscious Social Change and Mindfulness for Social Innovation*.

Their conversation illuminates how inner and outer work can enrich and direct each other, bringing leaders to a deeper awareness of themselves, their actions, and the social ecosystems they may help to co-create. Two ideas especially, stand out. One is that bridging leadership is an invitation to begin from a place of deep human connection and move together towards a common purpose. The other is that bridging leadership begins with building the bridges within, coming to see others in ourselves and ourselves in others. The spirit of this heart-centered approach animates Manish's story of personal transformation during his work on child under-nutrition in India. It shines through Gretchen's story of how a simple practice of three mindful breaths led a woman in Rwanda to change her ways of doing, at home and at work. From their stories, we see how inner work may help to cultivate compassion, curiosity, and quiet, non-judgmental attentiveness.

Chong-Lim Lee and Mark Gerzon hosted this conversation.

MARK

As a way of grounding this conversation, perhaps just say a couple of words that flash through your mind when you someone says, “Let’s talk about bridging leadership.”

GRETCHEN

I’d say: trust, collaboration, and empathy.

MANISH

And for me: building the bridges within.

CHONG-LIM

Great. Gretchen, I’ll start with you. When did you first encounter bridging leadership, and what impact did it have on you?

GRETCHEN

I first encountered bridging leadership when I joined the Inner Work for Social Change project, an initiative of Synergos and the Fetzer Institute. I was really impressed with the project’s case studies. The bridging leadership approach enabled people to reach across diverse, multi-sector sets of stakeholders and put themselves in the shoes of others. They built trust through this experience, which allowed them to be vulnerable with each other. Through that sense of trust, they could find the motivation to work towards the positive change they hadn’t been able to achieve without the motivation and centered purpose to do so. Through that initiative I could go much deeper into understanding what bridging leadership looks like when it’s applied.

MANISH

I’ve had a couple of micro encounters. After the first phase of the malnutrition project, the Bhavishya Alliance, in the state of Maharashtra, India, I was back in my job in Unilever. It was a wonderful job, heading Learning and Development. That’s when I used to have dreams of children suffering from malnutrition. My heart cried whenever I crossed a traffic light where I would see children begging. My heart would cry out because of the exposure I’d had during Bhavishya’s Change Lab process, where Unilever

was a partner. One night I had a powerful dream where an unborn child spoke to me—and that became a poem.

The next day I went to Surita Sandosham, who was director of the Bhavishya Alliance, and told her that I wanted to jump off my corporate career, that I was at the end of the jumping board. She listened to me. In the end she said, “Consider being a bridge instead of a board.” That was my first encounter with bridging leadership, without knowing what it was. I realized that I had to first build the bridges inside me, to embrace both the entrepreneurial and the social service drives within me.

A few years later, I was seconded full time to the Bhavishya Alliance. Surita enabled me to meet Ernesto Garilao at the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) in Manila. I joined the second cohort in AIM’s Bridging Leadership program, where I met some amazing bridging leaders. One was Mayor Sonia Lorenzo. I shadowed her for a day, looking at how she built bridges and partnerships in her district in the Philippines. She told me one precious thing: “People come to me for money, and I give them partnership. That’s how I’m successful.” When I asked, “How do you do that?” she said, “Always start from the position of not knowing. When you don’t know, then you seek others, you pay attention to your own blind spots, and you invite others to eliminate them. That’s how networks are built.” That has been my guiding force in my own journey.

GRETCHEN

Manish, what do you mean by building the bridges inside you?

MANISH

The first part of becoming a bridging leader is ownership. I remember Ernesto Garilao talking about owning your divide. A recent example in my country India is when, within the pandemic, twenty-three million migrant laborers were displaced. They had no place to live in the cities, and they walked one thousand kilometers to their villages because the whole country was locked down. When I saw them on the road, I wanted to do a lot. So, I gathered people and we started a project called Dignity of Labor.

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“ Integrating these parts within me allowed me to build better, more compassionate relationships.”

I was angry, so angry with the administration. At one stage, we did some contemplative theater to understand the reality of migrant labor. That's when I realized that I am envious of the migrant laborers' courage to walk back from the capitalist system. I realized that the migrant laborer lives within me through that longing for freedom. That shifted my relationship with migrant laborers from a place of coming to help to seeing that they can guide us on what we can do because of their strength and courage. That's also when I became compassionate to the policymaker, and to the government in their helplessness. So, when I was speaking to them, they were able to see me as an ally more than as an activist judge. Integrating these parts within me allowed me to build better, more compassionate relationships, rather than coming across with a blaming kind of rhetoric.

GRETCHEN

What is fascinating are the many pathways to finding alignment with another, that experience of interconnection, a sense of the other—whom we've never seen before—who we find common ground with. How did that realization come to you? I'd love to hear more about the modalities you use to work towards understanding and personal transformation.

MANISH

It's different at various stages. The trigger is often external, when we see the divide in the world, when we see people in pain, and we become aware of our own privilege, our blind spots. But it takes time to turn the camera inward, as Otto Scharmer says, to reflect—what is this asking from me; what is it illuminating that's broken in me? Through poetry or theater, you embody the role of the migrant, you are encoding the role of suffering. That's when you become aware of what it feels like. Gretchen, how do you experience this trigger for inner work towards social change?

GRETCHEN

I think it takes giving yourself space to have that form of reflection. And that requires practice. Your story reminds me of one that I experienced with some change agents I work with in East Africa.

My organization, Global Grassroots, helps support women survivors of war in designing their own social change organizations. We use mindfulness as a design tool, but also as a process of self-awareness, because we've found that building self-awareness begins to change the way you relate to others and understand and connect with others. That leads us towards a shift in how we understand the problems and devise solutions. For example, we teach a simple mindfulness practice of taking three breaths and building an awareness of what's happening to you on a mind, body, and heart level, so that we're no longer on automatic pilot. Then, we have the space to recognize when we're getting triggered, we have time to inquire what in ourselves might need some attention, and we can decide how to respond with wisdom versus reactivity. In each moment, we can draw upon that inner wisdom to inform how we relate to other people.

A Rwandan woman in part of our program had learned the practice of taking three breaths. The next day she shared her experience. She said that when she left our class and went home, her children had totally messed up her house, and she was angry. She said she might usually scream at them or even hit them to get them to clean up the house. But at that moment, she remembered to take three breaths and, in so doing, realized that she didn't want to harm her children. From a more collected place, in a more reasonable way, she was able to get them to collaborate and clean up the house.

This seems like a simple example of a moment of self-awareness. What was powerful is that she was also working on a social venture addressing gender-based violence and domestic violence. In that single moment of taking three simple breaths, she realized the challenge a perpetrator of violence faces in being able to change their behavior. She realized that to create real transformation, it would require more than just punitive measures or training programs. Instead, there needed to be a process of recognition, of self-awareness, and an understanding from the inside out. She could then shift the whole orientation of her own organization to work not only between couples but also in parenting and how to raise the next generation from that perspective.

“ To create real change, there needs to be a process of self-awareness, an understanding from the inside out.

A simple practice and a little space can facilitate those moments of compassion and understanding that come from the inside out. And the long-term personal transformation and resulting social impact can be profound.

MARK

Your stories made me feel they were pointing a light at the value of bridging leadership. What do you think makes bridging leadership unique? Or, if it's not particularly different, what does it bring that you value? Both of you have ties to lots of different leadership models. I'm curious about what contribution you think bridging leadership makes to that ecology of understanding.

GRETCHEN

Bridging leadership is powerful because it's an invitation, naming the ways in which we are invited to express our leadership through understanding and compassion. Building trust and creating opportunities for a diverse range of stakeholders, who might not normally collaborate, is an essential piece. Starting with curiosity, listening, and trusting then leads to the capacity to understand and be vulnerable with each other. From that place of deep human connection, we can begin to identify a common purpose and what each of our unique contributions mean in moving towards that purpose.

We often come from a very mind-centered place in problem solving, with an objective and a sense of "I know what's best, and I need to get everyone on board." Bridging leadership offers a heart-centered approach, which invites people to move into this intention of understanding and connection inherent in its name. This provides a pathway for what possibilities can emerge that you wouldn't have conceived of by going in from just an individual mind perspective.

“Bridging leaders invest in creating safe spaces where real collaboration can occur.”

MANISH

I resonate with what you have named "the heart-space." In a lot of my work, there is an intentionality and investment in building relationships and

creating a safe space for collaborations to occur. Bringing in diverse voices in building those relationships creates the field where the forest grows. The end is a beautiful outcome which stays the test of time. As an industrial society, we have advanced technologically, but we have also become very fragmented. We struggle to come together. The poet Rumi wrote: “Out beyond our wrongdoings and right doings, there is a field, I will meet you there.” When we try to bring people onto the existing field, it doesn’t really happen because people have their institutional agendas.

Currently, I’m working with the UN to bring all the UN agencies together at the country level, under the resident coordination system. Each agency has their mandate, their agendas, their fears. It’s only when we go deeper into the heart-space, when we start seeing each other as human, that we can really come together. Whether you are a migrant laborer or a UN agent, or a funder, or an agency, we all are human, we all have families, we have children, and we long for a future together. At that level, we are not into hierarchies or agendas, we are here in our common purpose of creating a better future.

A village woman told me, “A tree can’t be happy if the forest is not.” Even if I have a big corporation, if villagers are not safe and happy, then I cannot have a future. That kind of realization only happens in a safe heart-space.

GRETCHEN

Adding to that is the ability to move beyond our particular identities to recognize that every individual has a unique contribution to the whole. Whether you’re a street child or business executive or migrant worker or academic expert or student, you have a valuable perspective if we are looking to create change at a systemic level. We may not recognize and honor that unique wisdom until we drop into that heart-space, until we’re willing to listen; we’re given space to listen, and we’re open to the learning that can come through that process. Bridging leadership invites just that kind of perfect ecosystem to be able to do so.

“ Every individual has a unique contribution to make towards systemic change.

MARK

You've both painted beautiful word pictures. Now can you tell a story to bring them to life, to show what inner work and bridging leadership look like in an actual situation?

GRETCHEN

In the work that my organization has been doing in Rwanda, I had a calling to work with grassroots level social entrepreneurs. I was aware of some of the issues that were facing women post-conflict in Rwanda after the 1994 Genocide. But I wasn't an expert and I wanted to be of service where women wanted to improve their society. It came to my attention that clean water access was a critical issue affecting women. Many large institutions might say, "You need water, so we'll engineer what that looks like, we'll install water infrastructure in your village and hand it over to the leadership. and they can decide how to operate it."

Our approach was different. Without any training in bridging leadership, we talked with the women in this rural village about their circumstances. In the process of deep listening, we learned that they were facing so much more than just a lack of access to clean water. A critical issue for them was the sexual exploitation of disabled women, who couldn't collect water for themselves, especially where it involved walking several hours down a hillside.

Water is already rife with violence. Women leave early in the morning before dawn, so they can get home in time to have enough water for tea. That puts them at risk of sexual violence along the way. Those who are disabled might have to hire someone to deliver it for them. If they can't afford to pay for it, they are often forced to trade sex for water to meet their family's daily needs. Or they would send their girls through that same treacherous journey, which meant their girls were not going to school and had little time to attend to the other economic needs of their family. So, this issue of simply accessing clean water was much more than eliminating waterborne disease. It was violence. It was economics. It was girls' education.

When we could sit and listen, to understand the lives of these women, as well as their wisdom about what needed to be done, we were able to facilitate their endeavors. What was created was an organization, designed and led by these women (many with only about one year of primary school) where they built the water infrastructure. They sell water to those who can afford to pay for it and use the proceeds to reinvest in the other social needs of their community. After they solved water issues, they started providing health insurance, and then school fees for orphans, and then funds to support a microcredit revolving loan fund. Today, after 12 years of operation, they're reaching over 12,000 people with clean water, they are on the forefront of COVID protection, providing hand-washing support and free water and food for those with food security issues.

Those many ripples of impact would never have happened if we, who knew nothing about these multifaceted issues, had tried to design the solution. Through listening to community wisdom and finding our unique role in supporting what was wanting to happen locally, there was an incredible impact and ripple effects. For me, it was a profound learning experience of how important listening and trust are in moving towards a solution.

MANISH

An inspiring story, Gretchen. My story is related to my own journey.

When the first Change Lab for the Bhavishya Alliance happened, I was working with Unilever. We went on a learning journey and stayed in a tribal village in the north of Maharashtra state. I will never forget visiting a hut of a farmer named Mohan. He and I spoke different languages, so we could not talk. But I could witness, and feel, the poverty and the difference between us, but also the similarities. He was about my age and already had three kids. As I was sitting there, sunbeams shone through his thatched roof, making little dots of sun between us. He shared his bread with me. The sunbeams passed to me and came onto my body. Through all this time, I was absorbing something with the sun. When I walked back, I felt something had shifted in me. I could almost see my father in him. My father had been a villager too.

“ Through listening, we discover what needs to happen locally and it can have many ripples throughout a society.

And then I felt terribly unwell. I had diarrhea. There were no toilets in the village, so I had to go to the bush. I felt that I would die there. I fainted once on my way back. I had to go, I don't know how many times, from the top of the hill to the bush. In the evening, the villagers gathered, and danced a tribal dance with me. A young village woman training as a medical practitioner had given me some medicine. But what healed me really—what transformed me—was when they danced with me in circles. I was jumping with joy by the end. Something integrated within me. Here I am a corporate guy, where just a couple of hundred kilometers away from this village, we talk about India's GDP growth. Then there is this village where more than 50% of the children are undernourished, and their economy is suffering from the barter system. Those things are difficult to integrate.

A year or so later, during my secondment to Bhavishya, when I returned from meeting Ernesto Garilao, we asked the district commissioner to give us two villages for a pilot project. The woman who had given me medicine was in one of the villages. So, I had an opportunity to work back and build the connections.

I realized that as businesses we have expertise in designing solutions, and then there are villages where a woman is not getting vitamin A and other important medicines when she is pregnant. And so, an idea was born. At Unilever, part of my responsibility was grooming management trainees. I asked a colleague to suggest that we have management trainees from these villages, so they could bring their youthfulness and expertise to solve this problem. We needed to build bridges at the grassroots, but also to bring an institutional project so that the resources would flow. We decided to engage the District Health Officer of Nasik district and the head of supply chain in Unilever.

That's when I designed my first ever bridging leadership learning journey—for my boss, the head of supply chain, without him knowing (what I call the groundhog method). I told him, "The District Health Officer has a beautiful institution, and they want you, you have been trained in supply chain at Howard University. Can you facilitate that training for them?" He agreed. He came from a village and wanted to give back. So, I took him to

Nasik. On the way, I said, “Why don’t we stop at a village and have a look at what is happening with a primary health center?” He agreed, so that was a sensing journey. I asked him, “What is this asking from you? What is this asking from me?” Other Unilever executives were there, too. He said, “If just a couple of hundred kilometers away there are villages which are 100 years back, it’s a shame if I cannot transfer my knowledge.” I said if we could have management trainees doing their six-month stint in the villages to solve the problem, supervised by him and the District Health Officer, then his whole competence would come into power.

Together with the District Health Officer, we decided to take twenty primary health centers and increase the availability of medicine by looking into the whole supply chain. So, we got working together and involved top government officers. Then management trainees started working together. Of course, it was complex. Management trainees were not yet ready to work. But somewhere the bridges started building, the inner transformation started happening through giving space and facilitating reflection. Fast forward to the result—a 40% increase in the availability of medicines in seventeen primary health centers, through simple shifts in process, and partnership. That project led to a policy change, at the cabinet level, for the automation of primary health centers.

These are just some pieces of a journey, first, of me getting in touch with my own desires, and then engaging other people within the system to take that journey with me.

GRETCHEN

Using an inner lens, I want to explore that story you just shared, Manish. Beyond awareness and empathy, what is the essence of it? How would you describe the path of inner work to inner transformation and then to societal transformation?

MANISH

Let me dive into it in a fresh way. When I used to cross the Mumbai traffic in a company car, air-conditioned, with glass windows rolled up, these children would come to beg, and I would put my blinders on. But

“ Seeing the other in ourselves enables much deeper understanding.”

something in me cried. Every time something in me cried I put up a glass so as not to attend to it. That created a restlessness to do more and to keep saying, “One day I will...” Then slowly I forget, and I am nothing but a person in a race. But in a process of slowing down and of walking on the edge of my own world, I feel this other human could be me. Then I feel the love and the pride of not just talking about poverty. Those were some of the critical journeys inside my heart, when the glass is broken, and the children come and sit on your lap, and they come into your dreams. Then you see that you are no different.

Even now, I don’t want to go there, because it is painful. You need that meeting of the other within you, the breaking of the windows to let the world *come in*.

GRETCHEN

When I teach mindfulness with university students and self-awareness starts extending beyond them, there’s often a level of anxiety, “What do I do with all of these choices I now need to make when I’m no longer blind? I’m seeing the man with no home sitting on the curb, I’m realizing where my clothing comes from and what’s happening to my food.” It can be overwhelming, this sense of awareness expanding, and trying to come to terms with our responsibility and our sense of connection. When we can see the other in ourselves, it creates this space of understanding at a much deeper human level.

I also think that when we are open, with curiosity, to our own experience and that of others, allowing ourselves space for greater self-knowledge, we start recognizing things about ourselves that we might not be proud of or that may need a little adjusting. Because we’re no longer on automatic pilot, we become a student of change from the inside out. We start working on ourselves and realize that change is hard. So, we’re less inclined to demand change of others. Instead, we try to come to a deeper understanding of how they’re going through their own journeys. We develop compassion for what it might take, and we desire, through connection, to go part of that path together.

It's not easy to go deeper within yourself through self-awareness and self-knowledge. But science is showing that as we do, we develop a greater level of self-regulation and a deeper level of understanding, compassion, less bias, more willingness to be open and listen; we start to feel that connection and want to benefit the greater good beyond ourselves. That kind of transformation begins first within us. It may be facilitated through powerful bridging leadership experiences. It may happen because we look someone in the eye and really see them for the first time, or we allow ourselves to have that one vulnerable conversation. Then change starts to take place. And it changes the soul.

MANISH

I see that one of the beginning journeys is a sense of being overwhelmed. Recently, I was facilitating a workshop on the digital divide, and most of the people in the room had digital access. One thing I noticed is when that awareness hits, there is a sense of helplessness, a sense of "What do I do?" and, also, "I am a part of this uneven field." I'm curious about how that overwhelming helplessness translates into action. Where does inner work inspire social change? What is the journey there?

GRETCHEN

I think that if we become committed to our own self-awareness and self-knowledge, we come with an orientation of curiosity. If we want to get around the ego, we must be willing to ask ourselves hard questions, willing to be vulnerable to the answers, and willing to move through the places that are afraid and wounded, where we normally want to protect ourselves. As we do that, there's a parallel journey of desiring to live in alignment with our values, to find a sense of meaning and purpose. So, curiosity leads us in the direction of "What is my unique contribution or my unique calling?"

Next, it brings us to a place of deeper compassion and empathy, for ourselves and others. Because of that inner curiosity, we're more willing to look across difference and diversity to understand more. I think we're humbled by the challenge of our own personal growth work. We become more aware of social inequity and the need for justice. Looking from the

“An orientation of curiosity leads us to ask, “What is my unique contribution or calling?”

perspective of others' experiences opens us up to seeing things we may never have seen before. We connect and relate better because it's on a deeper human level. That motivates us to care and to want positive shifts. This process also helps us move across divides.

We all want to feel we belong. So, we may initially seek out groups that are like ourselves. But when you go through that deeper process of self-awareness and interconnection with others, the boundaries start disappearing. We connect on a deeper human level when we see ourselves in others and others in ourselves. We see that we suffer anger, resentment, embarrassment, and fear. From that perspective, the capacity for emotional connection leads us to wanting to see positive change for ourselves and others. We end up becoming more altruistic, more charitable, more concerned. That motivates us towards collaboration and positive social change.

It's a natural process. But it does also require some skillfulness, and a safe space so that you can move through the overwhelm and the fear and the discomfort, knowing you're not in it alone and that you can work together towards something. Manish, what do you think is happening on an inner level as someone goes through this process with others?

MANISH

Recently, societal breakdowns and environmental breakdowns are huge. They're in our faces. So, there is awareness of them at a cognitive level. There is also an awareness at the heart level, where I start. As my teacher Peter Senge says, you can change the world only when you see your handprint in it, because until you see your own handprint, you are a victim. And victims have no power. If you start seeing that "I created this climate crisis in some way, by engaging or not engaging, and if I have power to create a problem, then I possibly have power to create a solution if I act differently."

The clue here is to get in touch with my own agency because this overwhelming awareness can be disempowering, or lead to escapism or spiritual bypassing. I engage with communities who say, "There is a flood in Mumbai, let's sit." I can't. Buddha would have gone out. Gandhi

was always out. Somewhere there's a struggle within me of activism and mindful awareness. If I do not go deep enough in my own inner being and I just go to action, then that is reaction. That doesn't help because it's only restless action. Sometimes when I've worked with some Ashoka social entrepreneurs as a coach, I see how though their own journey was inner work based, it gets caught up in that action reaction, which becomes exhausting, and they suffer burnout. There is a reaction that comes from going too deep and getting overwhelmed and there's restless action. Somewhere between, there is a space where I am in touch with overwhelm, but also with my own sense of agency to take micro action that shifts my engagement with the world.

The other challenge is that the world is asking for big results. The development sector is not patient. It wants outcomes. That creates a level of anxiety that gets in the way of inner work. You're sitting on your chair for a 10-minute meditation and a cell phone demands, what about the outcomes?

GRETCHEN

One of the challenges in the social impact sector is this expectation of quick results, and that most funding comes on an annual basis. So, things must be achieved quickly. But transformation—deep, systemic, holistic transformation—doesn't come in the timing demanded. It requires time for individuals and communities, structures and systems to open themselves to transformation to achieve those results.

We have to be able to bring perspective to the questions, "What is my stake? What is my contribution? How am I contributing to the status quo? Where am I called to act?" We have to be mindful in that action. We can't fix everything. Sometimes it's not our role to step in, but to ask more questions and to invite the agency of others. Inner work reinforces this more mindful, conscious approach, which can attune you to what is the wisest response in each moment, as opposed to going back to the ego to try to figure it out. It's really about a feeling into and engaging a collaborative orientation that knows we can't do it alone.

“ Instead of imposing solutions, our role is to ask questions and harness the agency of others.

CHONG-LIM

You've both raised very thorny challenges. If we can look forward, what would be your vision for how the inner work dimension of bridging leadership may address the challenges that, in our current situation, we are feeling overwhelmed by?

MANISH

I am reminded of the work I'm doing on collective trauma healing, learning from Thomas Hübl. Of course, there are divides and struggles, and there are structures which lead to climate change or poverty, for example. We need to work with the structures that create these results. But below the structure is the trauma. That trauma is very deep and personal. Even in climate change, my relationship with nature has that deeper trauma.

Each structural change requires a certain activist energy. Healing requires a different energy, at personal and collective levels, the energy of integration, accepting, feeling the divine within, and witnessing it creating space. From there comes a new identity, which engages with a structure differently. Moving to activist action too quickly may not solve things because it ignores the blind spot of the collective trauma we may be experiencing, not feeling into our wounds enough, not staying with our brokenness long enough for a new identity, a new resolve and a new kind of higher action to emerge.

My vision is that we create spaces in many areas where people from different sectors come together, to attend to what is broken within and outside, and just sit with that long enough, letting the tears flow. Running too fast creates new violence. Unless we grieve enough, the soil doesn't have moisture to grow anything. So today is to grieve about climate change, about Black Lives Matter, about the migrant crisis. When I grieve with others, then we are at the same field, the soil is moist, and we can create something different, and not put patches over what is broken.

GRETCHEN

That's a beautiful analogy. I think we've all experienced how the quality of our attention affects the quality of our relationships with others. Our inner

“ Activist energy is not enough. Moving too fast can create a new violence.”

landscape is responsible for our capacity to listen, understand, and see clearly what's happening underneath the surface. Our ability to connect on a deep human level allows us to work collaboratively towards a much broader set of possibilities than we could ever have conceived of alone.

Inner work plays a critical role in enabling us to simply be with each other, to see and hear each other, and then to work together towards any form of shift. If we don't start to work with ourselves, we can't understand with the same level of depth, humility, and compassion; then we go on thinking we know all the answers. What you call building bridges from within, I think, is necessary for us to have traction on the massive issues that overwhelm any one of us alone.

MARK

I love the way you've circled back some, Gretchen. Do either of you want to say a few words as we close? I feel you've laid a foundation for the conversations that follow. But I welcome any last comments.

GRETCHEN

I want to extend gratitude to you, Manish, for your beautiful stories and wisdom. I'm also grateful for the power of the breath. If we invite ourselves to simply take a few intentional breaths this leads us back within to that place where we can see, connect, and listen again.

MANISH

Thank you, Gretchen, for reminding us that inner work is not complex work you have to do in caves of the Himalayas, but something that can start in your living room or in the middle of a conflict, just by taking three breaths. Thanks for bringing simplicity and accessibility to this journey of inner work.

“ Our inner landscape determines our capacity to listen and our ability to see clearly what is really happening.

Touchstones

- Bridging leadership starts by building bridges inside ourselves. To create real change, there needs to be understanding from the inside out. From inner healing a new identity arises which engages with social structures differently.
- Bridging leadership offers a heart-centered approach. It is an invitation to begin from a place of deep human connection and move together towards a common purpose.
- Bridging leaders invest in creating safe spaces where real collaboration can occur. Instead of stepping in and imposing solutions, they listen deeply and harness the agency of others.
- Bridging leadership addresses the thorny challenges in our world by creating spaces where people from different sectors come together to attend to what is broken within themselves and outside. Running too fast creates new violence.
- Connecting on a deep human level allows us to collaborate towards a much broader set of possibilities than we can conceive of alone.



Weaving Ubuntu Through Community

The Social Lens

Marlene Ogawa and Kgotso Schoeman

The African concept of Ubuntu honours our interconnectivity. Marlene Ogawa and Kgotso Schoeman consider the social conditions of bridging leadership. Both are notable spinners of collaborative webs in South Africa, where a collective memory of apartheid still fuels mistrust. Marlene is acting country director for Synergos, South Africa. Her work focuses on bridging leadership for personal reflection and collaborative systems change. She helped to launch social connectedness programs in southern Africa and is a co-author of several papers on this topic. Kgotso is the CEO of Kagiso Capital and former CEO of Kagiso Trust, a non-partisan organization that addresses development and poverty alleviation in South Africa and seeks to improve the quality of life of the poor and marginalized. Kgotso is a Synergos Senior Fellow.

Their brave conversation confronts the difficult realities of achieving South Africa's ideal as a model of reconciliation and diversity. They paint a bleak picture of the impediments to collective agency in a society where many people carry the pain inflicted through generations of systemic racism and social injustice. Rather than inducing despair, the picture becomes an emblem for exploring the grounds for clear-sighted hope and action.

Contrasting qualities interweave their stories—soft and hard; safe and brave; kind and stringent. Much as bridging leadership requires compassion, it also means calling people out, holding them accountable when their actions, or inaction, compromise the common good. Trust-building may spark difficult conversations. But avoiding hard talk is too comfortable a choice, even if it speeds up apparent agreement on values and action plans. Hastily built “consensus” is fragile, vulnerable to the ravages of mistrust, indifference, and powerplay. This conversation reminds us that, in divided societies, bridging leaders face the daunting task of dealing with pain, rage, and grief.

Mark Gerzon and Chong-Lim Lee hosted this conversation.

CHONG-LIM

To start, Kgotso, I'll ask you the first question. This is a conversation from the perspective of social connectedness and the community. But we'll start at an individual, personal level. When did you first encounter bridging leadership, and what impact did it have on you?

KGOTSO

I don't remember the year, Synergos was facilitating a workshop and I had a conversation with Peggy Dulany. She brought up the term "bridging leadership." I said that bridging organizations were more important. This was the time when I was beginning to get involved with the Kagiso Trust's investments and people were asking me to sit on the board of the investment company. I said to Peggy, "I think the intention to sit on this board is to learn how we, as civil society leaders, can engage with business leaders in their own language and so they can learn our language and start to understand how we deal with communities, how we believe we can make this world a better world."

Then, as a Synergos Senior Fellow, I participated in a retreat in Montana. That really sparked in me an idea of creating spaces for leaders to go through self-reflection processes. What I experienced in Montana was deep, and challenged me as a person, asking myself, "Is there an opportunity to bring this idea to the sector that I work in and start convening people around the work they do, and how that work impacts the people they serve?" From there on, the idea of bridging leadership became quite a deep concept in me.

For me, bridging leaders build bridging organizations. And they build within their own teams people who identify with the responsibility of being bridging leaders. Bridging leaders never put themselves first. It is about the people we serve.

I remember the first retreat we had with teachers involved in the Schools' Development Programme that the Kagiso Trust initiated. We said that the teachers should form a chain (a bridge). We had one young student who was part of the retreat. I said, "This young kid must climb onto the

“Bridging leadership is about the people we serve.”

backs of the teachers and walk across to the other side. But let's break the bridge in the middle. This kid then has two options: Either he goes back and does not climb over the bridge but stays where he is or he tries to jump to the other side of the bridge, and the danger is that he's going to fall. And, when he falls, that's probably the last time we will see this young kid. The only way he can go to the other side is when you teachers make yourself a bridge for these young kids to be able to get out of poverty, and to see the other side of how they can change their own lives."

MARLENE

Kgotso, that's a nice image to show why strong bridge-building is so important.

I first encountered bridging leadership when I walked into a LINC gathering for the first time. LINC is the Leadership and Innovation Network for Collaboration in the Children's Sector in South Africa. I was working at the National Youth Development Agency at the time and had been invited to join a new cohort of LINC Fellows. I was a bit starstruck because I saw leaders from different organizations, including government and business, coming together as LINC, as they had done since the founding gathering convened a few years earlier through a partnership between Synergos, Convene, and South Africa's Department of Social Development.

At the time I became involved, the biggest debate was around child participation within LINC, around whether, if we are representing children, children should be in the room. A lighted candle in the room was meant to symbolize the children that the LINC fellows represented. It was a tough debate. Some people felt that child participation was about the voices of children in that space. Many were strong child rights activists and at one point, I thought the fellowship was going to split in half. So, it was just magical to see how they slowly bridged, through honest conversation, to come to a shared understanding of why bringing children into the space would be tokenism and not real participation; that as leaders they were responsible for speaking on behalf of the children they represented, and

that they needed to work on how to ensure that the voices of children were truly represented through the adults in the room.

Then just watching the model of bridging over time in LINC, watching the navigating and negotiating from having the Department of Social Development, the Child Law Center, and many other organizations all in the room, I witnessed how they finally converged around some of the legal frameworks for children and children's rights. In LINC, I was seeing bridging leadership both at an individual level (leaders' passion and commitment) and at a level of collaborative practice. I saw how leaders in that space came together in terms of being accountable, knowing policy and regulation, and being competent to advocate for what is in children's best interests. So, I saw bridging leadership both at an individual passion level, as well as in a system frame. For me, bridging leaders have a sense of compassion and commitment to what they are called to do, and love what they do.

CHONG-LIM

In this chapter, we're looking at bridging leadership through the lens of social connectedness. Could you say a bit more about how bridging leadership plays out for you in that respect?

MARLENE

The magic happens when we truly represent the people that we are there to represent. I remember the experience of navigating the space when we started the Social Connectedness Program in South Africa. This was a partnership between the Samuel Family Foundation, Synergos, and OPHI (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative). Many LINC fellows played important roles in the program, helping to build bridges to participating communities, giving collaborative input into the ideas, the research, the theories around why relationships are important for children.

We also saw how leaders themselves modelled the need for relationships, for support for their own psychosocial well-being. What came out from LINC was the level of burnout among leaders, of not feeling resilient enough to navigate the HIV AIDS space with the hardships and

“ Magic happens when leaders truly represent who they are there to represent. ”

trauma that vulnerable communities had experienced. LINC helped to nurture the relationships that leaders needed to support one another. Even now, we see how they engage with each other and support each other through hard times, for example when someone is sick or is struggling in their organization and with leadership. They support each other on a personal and professional level. For me, that is social connectedness. They continue to work together to understand the importance of their collaboration, collective agency, and the application, amplification, and advocacy that are needed in the children and youth sector.

KGOTSO

When I engaged with the educators in schools, what really sparked my interest was the question: How do we make our schools become places where teachers feel they can fulfill their purpose, why they went into the profession?

In South Africa we have a peculiar situation: when things don't work and schools have bad results, the problem is always the teachers; and when things go well and schools improve their results, the people who get the credit are the politicians. But there is no way we can make education a dream that every young person can realize when they are taught by people who are so demotivated, because when things go wrong, people think it's the teachers who make the system not to function.

For the Schools' Development Programme, it was important to facilitate conversations amongst teachers themselves, to affirm them truly identifying with their calling as teachers. In facilitating these conversations, I would say to teachers, "If your schools are dysfunctional, there is no politician—be it the president of this country or the Minister of Education—who can make the school a place of learning and teaching. You, the teachers, are the only people that can make it a place of learning and teaching." I remember a conversation where people wanted to point fingers at one another, and at the politicians, or at the education department. Before the conversations begin, we ask teachers to write a few dreams they have for their own children. They write passionately about what they

wish their children could achieve. We turn that question around to remind them that the dreams they have for their children are the dreams that other parents have for theirs and that in sending their children to school, parents are entrusting *them*, the teachers, with the responsibility of enabling their children to realize those dreams.

We also bring in the provincial education department. We say to the department officials, “You can’t expect your schools to be places of learning and teaching when you have teachers who feel unappreciated, when you have teachers who feel not affirmed.” The provincial education department (in South Africa’s Free State province) became interested in the Schools’ Development Program because they realized it could reignite excitement amongst teachers around the profession of teaching.

Bridging leaders bring together different players in a school community and help to ignite teachers’ excitement for their calling and their responsibility for the children in their schools.

MARK

As you look at the world around you, locally and beyond, do you feel that bridging leadership is taking hold? Is it having much impact in your country?

MARLENE

No, we are becoming more and more divisive, and more competitive. There’s a notion that individualism and standing on your own is more important. So, people are building ladders, instead of bridges. The important thing we tend to forget when it comes to bridging leadership, when it comes to collaboration, is that it’s all about relationships. If people don’t have basic decent relationships with each other, then there is this disconnect, then we’re not going to talk and listen to each other. It’s as simple as that, and as complex is that.

There needs to be intentional effort to build those relationships. Connection comes before content. Before you can do the work that you need to do, you need to connect with each other. When we are not visible to each other, we don’t respect each other. Our invisibility makes us not

“Collaboration is all about relationships. “Connection comes before content.”

to want to speak to each other. Our invisibility to each other threatens us. We're reluctant to be vulnerable with each other, to be open to each other and say, "I don't understand, I don't know, please help, let's do this together."

Those are the tensions pulling us further and further apart. We see it across different sectors. Even in the sectors that used to come together to fight against apartheid, to challenge a part of the system, it's not happening anymore.

KGOTSO

Leadership as we know it today has not been able to make societies transform. It has not been able to bring societies together but has been far more divisive, to echo Marlene's sentiment. Introducing the idea of bridging leadership may enable people to know that they're in this position, because there is an expectation for them to connect things. Although, for me, bridging leadership is an infant concept, it provides a huge opportunity to redefine leadership. Because you bring in the word "bridging," it can make people who have leadership responsibilities aware that they are in a position to facilitate and connect people around opportunities.

People who lead as bridging leaders may have no idea that they are bridging leaders, because there's no theory, no academic write-up to make them identify as bridging leaders. My concern is that everyone is now lumped together as being leaders. It's good that an organization like Synergos is developing the idea that particular kinds of leaders bring change in societies. Leadership as we know it today, globally, has not been able to make societies respond to the challenges they face. There is a need for us to start engaging with the very idea of leadership, and what bridging leadership means.

MARK

Both of you have said that bridging leadership is not penetrating deeply or successfully into the way we think of leadership. This chapter is about looking through the social lens, so could you each talk a bit more about what's the obstacle socially? What's going on at the social level that's

“ Leadership as it is commonly practiced has not been able to transform society.

“ To move forward as a society, we need high-trust relationships.

preventing bridging leadership from having the positive effect you would like to see?

MARLENE

What I see, especially through community work, is how the level of trust is linked to relationship-building and to how people connect. I see the gift of when people actually do connect, to trust each other, and help each other out. Trusting relationships lead to the social capital and social cohesion needed to move the collective forward. We don't see enough of that. We've become so caught up in our own little circles, not spreading who we connect to and how we connect. This becomes a barrier to relationships for broader support for each other and help within communities.

In our social connectedness work, we speak to people about isolation, and they tell their stories, "I just stay in my home. I don't really mix. I feel lonely. When I suffer or struggle, I struggle on my own. Sometimes I don't even ask my children, I don't ask the neighbor." This is a very different context to how it used to be, when Ubuntu was a lived reality. There's a disconnect between relationship and a relationship of trust. If I trust, I become vulnerable; if I'm vulnerable and open, I take the risk that I need to take care of myself and others. A lot of that is not happening anymore.

KGOTSO

I'm not sure if the obstacle is a problem of leaders or a problem of communities having given up the responsibility that they have to do things for themselves. In my township in Alex, we used to have a youth club. Our local authority was bad at collecting refuse, and we took responsibility as a community. We decided that we were not going to wait for local government to come and clean up our streets. We were going to clean up our streets ourselves. Now, in the current dispensation of a democratic South Africa, people talk about how it's in the best interest of politicians to make our communities dysfunctional, because communities must then rely on politicians.

It is also about where we come from as a civil society in South Africa. One of the biggest mistakes we made during the transition to a new

democracy was to demobilize civil society voices because we thought when we had a democratic government, there would be no need to build strong civil society voices. If we were to say that the strong voices of civil society represented bridging leadership, I would then say that we, as people who drove the ideas of bridging leadership, gave up the responsibility of mobilizing our communities around taking responsibility for their own lives and what they could change.

That's why you have a huge challenge in a country like South Africa, where there's currently a conversation about how the majority of people, particularly Black people, voted for the ANC but are not getting what they voted for. I think it is because when we went into a democratic South Africa, we were really demobilized, where I thought we had a strong culture of bridging around and among civil society organizations.

It's a huge lesson: we should never disempower communities so that they become completely reliant on the private sector, completely reliant on government. Civil society leaders need to go back and rekindle the spirit of community, connecting with our communities.

MARLENE

Kgotso, what you say links also to the importance of ownership, a sense of belonging. In South Africa currently, there's no sense of a leadership that's enticing the sense of belonging, of being part of South Africa. When it comes to mobilizing each other, having a sense of collective agency, there's less and less that's pulling us together. We stay in our separate ways.

What's the individual and collective ownership and agency that we each have, for our country, to do the right thing to lead in a particular way?

A gift of my work is working within communities and seeing cohorts of community care workers working with their communities in the most demanding situations and contexts, taking care of families and children. You see leadership emanating from them, how they solve the problems of care in communities, how they are the voice of community. More especially amongst the younger people, that's where leadership is really emerging. For me, that's the new leadership. The challenge is how to

support and lift it into the realm of the structures and to elevate the voices of future leaders.

KGOTSO

Marlene, you and I often debate the issue of bridging and the concept of bridging leadership. Sometimes we seem to think that bridging leaders can't be tough leaders, we link bridging leadership with being nice. That's exactly where the problem is. Bridging leaders *can* and *should* be tough and be able to make tough decisions.

“Bridging leaders can and should be tough.”

As a bridging leader, you don't have to create an environment where you don't want people to be confrontational. Bridging leaders should be able to enable people to have difficult, sometimes confrontational conversations and to make choices of what is best for society. In those difficult conversations, unfortunately, some people may become “victims” if their interest is not in the best interest of society. I think bridging leaders must go beyond creating harmony. What the society needs is for them to be very tough leaders, who will be able to hold other leaders accountable, who will be able to hold society accountable.

For example, in South Africa we have this huge challenge, where communities destroy infrastructure as a form of protest. As a bridging leader, I should be able to call people to order and to say what they do is not acceptable. You're supposed to create harmony, yes, but also have a responsibility to instill a sense of responsibility in other people. So, bridging leaders must be tough; they don't have to be nice people.

I'll give another example. Suppose we are facilitating a conversation in a local municipality that is completely dysfunctional. They can't collect rates. The community is filthy. The sewage system is not working. So, we have a conversation with the mayor, and the mayor has a senior official, whom we call the city manager. I say to the mayor, “Look, this thing is dysfunctional, so why are you not holding people, like the city manager, accountable?” And the mayor says, “If I hold people accountable, I'm not seen as building harmony within the organization.” But that's not what it means to be a leader. You should be able to hold people accountable.

Even as a bridging leader, I need to say to my officials, “Which of you don’t want to be held accountable. If you don’t want to be held accountable, you can’t work here, right?” I should be able to decide to dismiss a person who doesn’t live up to the expectations of the position.

I once listened to an advert where Thabo Mbeki, a former president of SA, was interviewed. Thabo Mbeki said that one of the biggest challenges facing African leaders was not calling each other out because as African leaders they had to be seen to be working in harmony and trying to connect with one another, at the expense of calling out each other when some of them do wrong things.

MARLENE

One of the processes you follow, Kgotso, is confronting realities. It’s about outing each other and naming the harms inflicted on society. I think it’s a heart-deep process where people become vulnerable, hold themselves accountable, hold each other accountable, and name some of the things that people have done that, for example, have brought a dysfunctional municipality or school to the point where it is.

I appreciate the process, but I feel that there’s a way of taking people through that naming, and how they come out on the other side. It’s important to hold each other in that process. There is inherent risk that with some people once they become vulnerable and open, it changes the relationship with their colleagues. How you fix those relationships among colleagues must be part of the process.

I do know that, if we’re going to trust each other, I have to know that you are capable and competent, and you have to know that I am, and that I’m going to do my work. So, there’s absolutely a need to become tough. And, also, to get the right people in, appointing people who have the capacity and not just because they are politically aligned.

It’s a whole system that needs to shift, shifting attitudes, shifting paradigms of how people operate as well, which is really hard to do. Sometimes we feel that we know—even with race work, work around racism—we know all the problems, we know how people discriminate.

When we open up those vulnerabilities, how do we hold a process so that people are able to emerge on the other side? When I think about the whole, taking people through a learning journey is one way of reflecting the system back to them. For me, it's important for the process to serve the whole.

KGOTSO

If I remember the bridging leadership framework, the first objective is about ownership, which for me makes sense. But I have a view that you lead people to ownership only by making them confront and have the difficult conversations on the realities they face. Sometimes we jump through tough conversations and move into people *having* to own, as they should, but we should create the space for them to have this difficult conversation first.

In our discussions, Marlene often makes the point that we want to take people through a process for them to see individually the pain that they inflict on society, and to deal with that pain, and then to move on to own their responsibility as leaders for having inflicted this on society. Sometimes we move ahead too quickly, and people carry the baggage of “I've never been provided an opportunity to say what I really wanted to say, but I had to move on.” While some may say, “We have to own what we want to create,” others say, “Let's deal with the tough issues before we even talk about the owning.”

We assume that the people we convene are aligned around values and that's why we go into the conversation of ownership. But when you convene people who are completely not aligned on values, it is important to have the conversation around that, so that when we all move forward, we know we are deeply aligned in our values and in the resources that we commit to a common purpose. It's difficult to break a relationship built on deep commitment to shared values.

MARK

I'm wondering what you think the world could learn from your experience. For many years, people would invoke South Africa as an example of a country of bridging leadership, going back to the end of apartheid when Mandela received the Nobel Prize. Could each of you say a couple of

“ You lead people to ownership only by making them confront ... the realities they face.

lessons you've learned that might be useful for other countries wrestling with division or conflict?

KGOTSO


For me, a big lesson is being able to have the conversation amongst ourselves as a country, as a people, around our pain. We tried it with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but there is a deep sense now that we didn't deal with the pain. We wanted to make the world see that we were getting this thing right. For me, it's a big lesson of being able to deal with the bad, but also of being able to say we can't continue being in a pathology of not moving forward and creating a society that we want. I think the most important lesson is to create space to talk about the pain and talk honestly about it.

In a microcosm space, in the processes we facilitate in the Schools' Development Program, we go into this deep, honest conversation, and it's always a non-negotiable that the space is sacred, the space is safe. It's a conversation that nobody would tell others about. Whoever says something about you remains here, and it can't be taken to a departmental disciplinary hearing, for example. When we bring government ministers into our schools' development conversations, we say, "Minister, you're not the minister here, you're a colleague, we're going to have the conversations, we're going to ask you questions that we are going to ask the teachers."

It is important to create a safe space. But, for me, it's to learn to talk about the pain, and then to use the pain to assist us to create a better future for all of us.

MARLENE

From personal and professional experience, I've learned the importance of allowing people the space to speak their truth, to tell their stories. I find that when people tell their stories with someone else to witness them, it really makes a difference in terms of people opening up. Often hearing people's stories may bring a sense of guilt or shame. When we speak our truth, we have a lot of anger within us. We carry so much hurt and anger with us.

 We have to learn to have a conversation about our pain.

For me, the next phase is to reach the level of forgiveness, so that we can find our strength and resilience, and not this continued heaviness of being the victim of anger, because it doesn't serve any of us. Then we can move forward. There's something about the shame, the guilt, of what we carry—either because of what we've inflicted on others, or because of what we've experienced—that breeds internalized oppression, and we blame ourselves for the experiences that we've had.

So, when we start having those truthful, honest conversations, how do we hold and support that process, and within that vulnerability, how do we move forward to forgiving? For as long as we carry that hurt, we're not going to forgive. That is also where relationships and trust-building come in. That helps to build our resilience to move forward and move forward together.

KGOTSO

There's this framework in Peggy's book, *Building Trust Works*, where she talks about serving with love and she has this spiral diagram that leads upwards to serving with love. That spiral diagram resonates so deeply with me, particularly the bottom part about a safe container, and about pain, fear, rage. For me, that's what we need to make bridging leadership.

You're not going to deal with the upper spiral, and of serving with love, if you don't create the safe container, to deal with the pain, the fear, the rage, and the grief. That may be the biggest responsibility or challenge for bridging leaders, to assist their communities to deal with their pain and rage as a path towards building a better future.

MARLENE

We've been focusing on the social dimensions of bridging leadership. And for me, it's really around how we each become agents of change, how we each within our spaces begin to have conversations based on our hurts, our traumas, and from there, move forward.

When I think about South Africa, what has been prominent a long while but is really showing up front and center now is how divided we are. If we each commit to being bridges, agents of change, our role is about

“As a path to a better future, bridging leaders must deal with the pain, fear, rage, and grief.”

how we touch bridging leaders in a way that they recognize their role in the system, but also recognize their role within society. So, no matter where you go, and how you interact, you interact from a place of compassion. It's that kind of ripple that we want to see across our society, at various levels, in different shapes and forms.

“Bridging leaders are only as good as the people around them.”

KGOTSO

My last thought around this is that bridging leaders must know they are only as good as the people around them. For me, that is a fundamental principle for leaders. If you have groomed people who must always agree with you, even when you don't make sense, you will reap the results of the type of people that you lead. Successful leaders consciously know they need to build bridging leaders around them, and the bridge must be strong on both sides.

Touchstones

- Bridging leadership begins in self-reflection and is about the people we serve and represent.
- Bridging leaders have a sense of compassion and commitment to what they are called to do but are also tough enough to hold themselves and others accountable.
- Bridging leaders understand their role and purpose in the social ecosystems in which they work.
- To move society forward, we need high-trust relationships that build social cohesion.
- In bridging leadership, connection comes before content.
- In competitive environments that stress individualism, people build ladders, instead of bridges.
- Bridging leaders' biggest challenge in divided societies is to deal with the pain, rage, and grief, as a path towards building a better future.

- If we each commit to being bridges, our role is to touch others in a way that helps them to recognize their part in shaping society.
- Bridging leaders know they need to build bridging leaders around them, and the bridge must be strong on both sides.



Supporting the Bridge Builders

The Philanthropic Lens

Marilia Bezerra and Marina Feffer

Marilia Bezerra and Marina Feffer explore bridging leadership as a response to the challenge of giving away money well. Marilia is Chief Programmes Officer, IKEA Foundation. She was previously a co-executive director at Synergos, where she managed the Global Philanthropists Circle (GPC), a community of philanthropists and social investors using their time, influence, and resources to fight poverty and social injustice. Marina is based in Brazil and is co-founder of Generation Pledge, a global community of inheritors committed to using their resources to unlock funds to support solutions to the world's greatest challenges. Marina is a member of the GPC.

For Marilia and Marina, philanthropy is not just about being warm-hearted. It requires rigor, evidence, and accountability if it is to serve the world's needs before it strokes a donor's ego. Personal introspection and collaborative reflection help philanthropists to identify their own biases and gaps in understanding and lay the ground for more attuned decisions about what to support and how. Marilia believes a paradigm of separation underpins the world's multiple, overlapping crises. A pervading narrative of individualism elevates leaders to heroes or saviors. By contrast, a bridging leadership approach pauses us long enough to recognize that we are interconnected.

Change has a long time horizon; intended change may not happen during a philanthropist's lifetime. Bridging to a desired future is hazardous. Even a well-planned program may lead to undesirable consequences. To improve the chances of contributing to a better future, Marina believes investments of time must precede investments of capital—time to ask the right questions, to think collectively about “making an orchestra of the instruments of change.” The orchestra is made by connecting different capitals (knowledge, networks, and political influence, as well as money) to form the poly capital for effecting change.

Mark Gerzon and Chong-Lim Lee hosted this conversation.

CHONG-LIM

Marina, I'll start with you. This is a conversation from the perspective of philanthropy, which is such a deep part of your life. At an individual, personal level, when did you first encounter bridging leadership? And what effect did it have on you?

MARINA

The first person who comes to mind is my grandmother, my father's mother, because she has many elements of a bridging leader. She had a huge capacity for navigating many different spheres and making sense of them all, acknowledging how important each was, and being able to circulate those ideas within a family that was very much inside a bubble. She brought a lot of new wear inside our family system. Being a bit subversive, she was able to challenge the status quo.

The second person is Peggy Dulany. When we met, maybe 10 years ago, I remember having that feeling of, "She's got something that speaks to who I am and what I believe in." A lot happened in my life after I started to connect to the idea of bridging leadership. When I think of bridging leadership, the qualities of courage and humility come to mind.

MARILIA

I first noticed bridging leadership by noticing its absence. The disconnect was present to me when I did political organizing work in Brazil and later when working at the Clinton Global Initiative, across sectors with businesses, government and nonprofits. I noticed how people didn't share a language.

Then I started noticing how some people were able to stay in curiosity, even if they didn't understand the other person. Someone who comes to mind is Mickey Bergman. He and I shared the desk at the Clinton Global Initiative office, where he was the vice chair of the Peace and Conflict Resolution track. I remember his devotion, as an Israeli, to listening to the other side of his aisle, his recognition that we are all on the same side. He's grown into doing great things with North Korea in conflict resolution.

Then a person and place where I found bridging leadership codified and personified was here at Synergos, with Peggy Dulany.

When I think of bridging leadership, the first word that comes to me is “separation,” and an acknowledgement of how separate we are from ourselves and each other in the natural world. The second word is “reconnection.”

CHONG-LIM

Marina, you started with a description of your grandmother. I’m curious what you think, having heard Marilia’s description of what it looked like when there was no bridging leadership, and then what it looked like when she started to notice it in certain colleagues.

MARINA

I heard you mention devotion. This really makes sense to me. I see how bridging leaders find ways to keep fueling themselves with energy. I see their capacity to go very deep into their own shadows and vulnerabilities. And something on a positive note comes out, of feeling able to bridge into something with more hope. Not a naive hope, but a purposive hope of being proactive in shaping the future. In my opinion, this comes from devotion. Maybe the source is really love.

MARILIA

At the core of what Synergos represents is the idea that bridging leadership starts with oneself. It starts with your ability to quieten your own fears, anxieties, and biases to actually listen. The word I go back to is “curiosity.” How can I stay curious in this situation and then hold myself in the not-knowing for as long as possible so we can come together to a direction, instead of me stepping into the conversation and I already know the answer?

One of my teachers says, “You can’t get full from an empty cup.” As bridging leaders, we keep checking in with ourselves and filling our own cups so we can be open for something different to emerge between you and me, or between my agenda and your agenda.

MARK

Marilia, you spoke of separation and reconnection. I think about the world today, about Brazil, about the US. If bridging leadership is present, what

“Bridging leaders go deep into their own shadows and, from there, bridge into a sense of purposive hope.”

difference does it make? And if it's absent? Going back to your words, "separation" and "reconnection", what relevance does bridging leadership have in the world today?

MARILIA

In our dominant culture, narratives built around the self, the individual, elevate the great hero, the champion, social entrepreneur, business leaders, great politicians, the savior. I think our economic systems are designed to elevate the individual and the few. That's built on a paradigm of separation, where I am different than you, I care for me and mine, and you care for you and yours. I really think that is the base paradigm that is creating all the symptoms we are experiencing.

Climate change is a result of our separation from nature, inequality is a result of our separation from one another. That's the fundamental challenge we face as humans on the planet today. The aggravation of all these multiple, overlapping crises is a pulling apart, more and more. The more you feel separate from another, the more you have a need for belonging. You'll try to belong to anything around you, even a radical, white supremacist agenda or a radical, suicide bomber agenda.

Until we begin working at a paradigm shift, addressing that root cause and start building a sense of connection and belonging, we'll keep solving some problems but recreating them in another way. It's like that "Whack a Mole" game—we resolve this here and another one pops up over there. I think bridging leadership as an approach can hold enough space for us to pause and look at one another in curiosity. Rather than trying to figure out *how to connect*, it's about pausing long enough to recognize that *we are connected*.

Let me link that to philanthropy, which is at a huge inflection point right now. There's a lot of pressure on philanthropy as a field to do better, to become more proximate to issues, and people experiencing the issues we're seeking to resolve. Often, there's a tension between "us and them", coming both from the side seeking to make things better and from some philanthropists feeling attacked by the challenge to make it better. Yet I know everyone's intention is to grow together.

“Inequality results from our separation from one another. Bridging leadership ... is about pausing long enough to recognize that *we are connected*.”

I'm really curious as to how we recognize the places where the practice of philanthropy hasn't been transformative and where it has been, so we can build from here, together. How do we build that sense of proximity so philanthropic strategies can be designed in response to people's experience of the issues we're looking to resolve? To me, that is potentially a very generative place to be. It's where we can hold inquiry in an open-ended way while we're helping, or imagining what philanthropy will be in the next two decades.

MARINA

So many ideas come to mind; I'll try to intertwine some ideas here. When we talk about philanthropy through the lens of bridging leadership, I think there is a space of really looking inside before we do whatever we want in the field, before we start deploying capital. This is looking inwards and identifying values, not in a blunt way but in a real way. Which values guide us? What does it mean to apply them to real life? What would some practices be that are guided by our values? And, together with that, how do we acknowledge the biases that we all have?

To do good philanthropic work, this is fundamental. The work has to start here, even if we're going to spend more time investing in questioning ourselves and preparing ourselves to be the best philanthropists we can be. I don't care if we stay three years doing this to become better philanthropists for the next 30 years. Patience at the beginning with longer pauses—if that means doing better work, I fully support it. With this deep dive, I feel we will get to a point that we acknowledge that others matter. This is who we are, we open space for others to have an effect on us. When you declare that this is true for yourself, others matter. When this happens, all the work that comes after is so much easier. This is the first point of bridging.

The second point, which is less natural maybe, is about how to connect the present with the future. In my opinion, people have more ease in thinking about the present, about today, than about the future. This is another inquiry I strongly believe we should do as philanthropists because

“As philanthropists, we must ask: What is the future that we seek to create?”

“If we’re talking about systems change, scale, and collaboration, we must be able to plan beyond our own resources.”

it asks the question, “What is the future you want to create?” And then prompts the reverse logic: “If that is where you want to be, what does it imply for your actions today, your choices today?”

Marilia, you spoke about philanthropy being at a point of inflection. I hadn’t thought about it in these terms but it resonates. At this point in the philanthropic field there’s a leap we must be able to make. If we are all saying we have to work with systems change, if we’re talking about scale, if we’re talking about collaboration, we must be able to plan beyond our own resources. This is the equation for which we don’t have a solution yet.

When we think about what’s possible, we think within our personal resources, but we have to think collectively about making the orchestra out of each instrument. We have to change the way we think in order to do strategic planning, for example. This is one of the places where I think we’re stuck. The problems are complex, they’re overwhelming. We must try to think differently in order to draft solutions.

MARILIA

Collaboration is one of the main tenets of bridging leadership. We talk about it so much, there’s so much interest from everyone to do it. Yet, it is hard. Every single person who comes into the space of philanthropy comes with a deep passion and commitment to a certain focus area, thematic area, or geographic area. So how do you hold that, while looking around you, seeing what others are doing, and realizing that someone might be working next to you but very far from where you are? What bridge can be built between you and others, where you can truly meet and align? It is about aligning more than your financial assets or your programs. Where do you align in vision, so you have that orchestra effect Marina was talking about, where you go from being two instruments to an orchestra of, say, twenty? I think the more we can articulate that vision, the easier it is for others to see themselves in it in the future horizon.

Maybe right now you’re not quite able to connect the bridges, the space is a little too far. But that calls for us to keep showing up and joining with communities in being part of programming, connecting with people

and connecting people to people. Persistence takes us to a place where things can happen. My experience is, and this is something I struggle with, is that it takes time. And it takes trust-building, and commitment and persistence. If you stick with it long enough, it becomes clear, it calls you in. Yet it's urgent that we get really good at this collaborative action business, because every challenge we're facing today is urgent.

We need the persistence and the long-term stickiness of it. So, how do we marry patience, persistence, and urgency?

MARINA

I'd like to bring in two ideas that speak about doing philanthropy with the touch of bridging leadership, ideas that speak about going beyond your own self.

One idea is about choosing which cause areas to support. This is one of the biggest decisions we make as philanthropists, so it is especially important to be honest and bold in acknowledging that we don't know what we don't know. If you're passionate, it's probable that you will also be intoxicated with your passion and closed to other ideas. How can we make sure we are first equipped with the best information possible before we commit to action? Being a bridging leader, in philanthropic work, not only speaks about being gentle and warmhearted, but also making sure that whatever you commit to will serve the world's needs before your own. This is the first idea.

The second idea is about how we decide how we will do the work. How are we going to think about collaboration? We may have strong opinions and preferences on how to go about the work, but are we able to give space, to listen to something that makes more sense to a variety of actors, stakeholders, and to find solutions that serve the system better than they serve only us? Then it gets a little bit more nuanced.

Being a bridging leader and doing philanthropy combine many voices, but it's not that we're only going to bring the sum of voices and be a channel for them. We also bring our own beliefs. So, how do we take care of the beliefs we have, making sure they are based on good values and that they speak to the world's needs, and not our specific needs?

“ Being a bridging leader in philanthropy means serving the world's needs before your own.

“ Bridging leadership helps you figure out how to optimize the impact you can have with the resources available to you.

MARILIA

I couldn't agree more. Passion should be the igniter and not all that keeps the fire burning. A pet peeve I have with the entire system—and that's true not just for philanthropy, but for corporate social responsibility, impact investment for the entire field of international development—is how much involves starting from scratch, without recognition of preexisting work that your passion and actions could add to or learn from. The next time a corporate head calls me and says I want to do a study on how many women-owned businesses there are in Africa, I'm going to tell them to retire. Although there are hundreds of those studies, some leaders feel they need to own one, to have their name on it.

Bridging leadership is a great instrument to dismantle that sort of navel-gazing, because it starts with self-reflection and understanding your own passions, fears, and biases, and then guides you into looking at the system to figure out what is the optimum intervention you can create with the assets available to you. Bridging leadership involves looking around you, asking, "Who can I collaborate with to get to the most desirable, optimum outcomes, to the largest scale possible?"

Bridging leadership also has the potential to open questions around power. Philanthropists hold the power to decide what, and how, things get addressed. That has been so historically, but to the point you made so eloquently, Marina, if you're just following your own passion and not looking outside, you might end up creating something that marginally helps the world and makes you feel really good. How do we flip that, to create things that make you feel good, but fully meet the needs of the world?

MARINA

If I may add to that, how do we challenge ourselves to expand what makes us feel good? Are we willing to be nurtured by new things? When we learn new information, when we aspire to doing good in ways we couldn't imagine before, is this enough for us to understand it as a reward, to feel it as a reward? What do we need to understand the work we do as rewarding?

Consider how much risk we are willing to take with philanthropic efforts. If we say that we're willing to take a lot of risk, it might imply never seeing the result of whatever we choose to do. If we say we are focusing on 50 years from now, some causes are so complex that we may not see the results in our lifetime. But if we are successful, it might mean that the future has a different shape because of our support, although we may never see it. Is that rewarding enough? How do we work on ourselves so that we are energized by things that are not material?

MARILIA

Yes, changing systems takes time. Another polarity that would be really good for us to be able to hold, alongside patience and urgency, is nurture versus comfort. I believe in creating from joy and a sense of fulfillment, and from love and connection. Yet if all we do is seek that comfort, if all the actions we take tend towards risk aversion, we fall into doing the same things and expecting different results.

So, what sits beyond comfort? Can we be in discomfort, taking risks and feeling vulnerable, so that we can understand what's on the other side?

In my own experience, when I can sit in that place of not knowing and vulnerability, and sometimes discomfort, there's something really interesting to find out on the other side. And that thing ends up being rewarding and soul nurturing. I am curious about how philanthropists, and those of us supporting the field, can bring that idea to the front of the conversation. As we must live with some level of discomfort, how can we find our joy in it?

MARINA

If we were to get different types of capitals—looking at politics as a capital, business as another type of capital, philanthropy as a capital, career as a capital, and so on—if we were to put a value on them, what would be the value for each type of capital? For me, philanthropic capital can do things that no other capital can. It can go into places where we have no market-based solutions, it can be extremely bold, it can also look into the future and take risks in a way that no other capital can afford.

If we acknowledge that philanthropy has this preciousness and this value, would we make different choices? I think we would, and I think we're at this pivotal moment, to see what happens if we work with the value of curiosity, shaping our mindsets and decision-making processes.

“Bridging leadership can bring people together to make big system shifts.”

MARILIA

Philanthropic capital—because it can be deployed quickly, because it is not tied to heavy infrastructure, because it's so nimble—can be the pioneer to open doors and test assumptions and directions. The trillions and trillions of dollars that circulate in the economy every day can find its way into the capillaries that philanthropic capital can open for impact.

Yet, I have found that the infrastructure of philanthropy is still very safe. Thinking about the conversations around foundations and endowments and the 5% investment every year (the idea of preservation of capital), I ask myself, “Who is that serving?” Some of these systems are set in, we've stopped questioning them, and it becomes normal. They feel like hard walls, but they are just agreements, and can we change them? Changing the agreements on how philanthropy works is easier to do collectively than alone. Bridging leadership can be the glue that brings the conversation, self-reflection, the people together to make some of these big system shifts.

MARK

Let me jump in there for a minute. Imagine that Chong-Lim is a leading philanthropist in Singapore and I'm a leading philanthropist in Frankfurt and we're on a call and you're telling us why we should be thinking about bridging leadership. We are really good at what we do and we've been doing it for several years, but we've heard about bridging leadership. What do you want to say to us? Why should philanthropists get more involved in bridging leadership?

MARILIA

I think it starts with the recognition that philanthropy is at an inflection point. We recognize that there are extreme pressures on all of us, whether

we are a business leader, a nonprofit leader, philanthropist, politician. The world is going through quite an intense moment of fragmentation and disorientation. Some of the institutions we have taken for granted are being undone. In philanthropy, it's not different.

Before it was enough for you to say, "I am going to invest this amount of assets in the orphanage next door to my company. I'll do that consistently, a little over a few years and that will be my contribution." With a lot of practice, in that approach to philanthropy, we have learned that we are getting at symptoms, but not at the root causes. For us to question and elevate the quality of the results we are creating—because of the sense of urgency we have around climate change, inequality, polarization, and so on—we need to look at our ourselves and our practice differently.

Bridging leadership is a cohesive way of doing that. It is both a way of inquiry and a practice. It is a process of coming to yourself, understanding what makes your heart beat faster, what your fears and biases are. Then from a grounded place in yourself, you can step outside and look at a system you're looking to transform and, with your self-knowledge, identify the power and assets you possess, the kinds of interventions available to you to create transformation, as opposed to palliative care. But you recognize that you don't want to go it alone.

Bridging leadership has the framework for building effective, meaningful collaboration that goes beyond the transactional level, where I give a check to someone and they give me a report. The depth of these collaborations and recognition of what others are doing around you matters a lot when you're looking to create extraordinary results in the world.

So, bridging leadership is an inquiry, a practice, a coming together. And it's that curiosity and search for connection that are part of what the world has lost.

MARINA

Let's look at the profiles of philanthropists with no judgment at all. One is that I want to do good now, and I want to make sure that it has very high-

“Bridging builds effective, meaningful collaboration, which can help us see beyond symptoms and identify root causes.”

“ The more we invite philanthropists into self-reflective practices, systems thinking and collaboration, the more they will make intentional choices about their philanthropic capital.

cost benefit results. Let’s pick a charity that does fantastic work today, say, the Against Malaria Foundation. They are super effective. They do what they have to do, they deliver results, and they are remarkably high at cost benefits. The philanthropists could get \$100 million and transfer it to Against Malaria Foundation. I think that’s great.

But that is not the bridging leader. The bridging leader will be looking into collaboration and into the use of different types of capital. Bridging leadership has shaped a lot of my professional trajectory. Within Generation Pledge, an organization I co-founded, we forged the concept of “poly capital” to refer to all your different capitals (careers, social, political, and financial) to use in bringing change. Bridging leadership speaks to more than transferring a big chunk of money into one, two or three organizations.

I want to reiterate that I value very much big chunks of money being transferred into effective charities. I don’t believe that all philanthropists have the profile of bridging leaders, and I don’t think that they should. This is something that speaks to some. For those who have this identity or leaning, they should explore this and learn to do it properly.

MARILIA

Marina, that’s a really powerful point about how people show up in different ways to create a more loving, just, regenerative world for us. Like you, I want to recognize and value wherever a philanthropist chooses to be in that journey. What I’ve witnessed in my many years in this field is that you start practicing in one way and within a few years you discover other ways to practice philanthropy.

Here’s where I reveal my bias: I think that the more people we can invite into the inquiry about philanthropy from a bridging leadership perspective the better. If you’ve never heard about bridging leadership, and you’re doing philanthropy in isolation, maybe it’s because that’s what you choose, or maybe it’s because you don’t know of other ways to connect with people. The more we invite people into the inquiry of self-reflective practices, systems thinking and collaboration, the more people will make intentional choices about how they deploy their philanthropic capital.

Let me give an example of how a bridging leadership approach to philanthropy can bring about notable change.

Pete Seligman is the philanthropist who founded Conservation International, a highly respected, well-structured, large nonprofit organization. As a philanthropist, he was a part of the life of Conservation International until just a few years ago. In his work through Conservation International, Pete had started building a perspective around what actually was working and where would he want to innovate. He founded another organization, Nia Tero, that directly, and without international mediation, funds indigenous organizations in the Amazon and South Pacific. I've been really curious to watch his evolution as a philanthropist, ensuring that Conservation International's ethos was one of doing partnerships well and then, through knowing himself and deep listening, recognizing where he wanted to be, and building a foundation centered around the proximity to the communities.

To me, bridging leadership and what results from the journey is the ability to track, recognize, and connect to things that might not be closest to you geographically, and building bridges to recognize where need is and then building infrastructure around this in a generous way.

MARINA

May I share my personal story? The organization I co-founded with Sid Efromovich is a collaboration built on the premises of bridging leadership. Together, we understood that there was a huge gap in the system of how we offer space for inheritors. We're going to go through the biggest wealth transfer in history in the next 50 years, with a transfer up from \$30 to \$70 trillion. We know who will inherit this money, this poly capital and this power, we know who these people are, we know their names. And what we understood is that today we are not ready to give a step into the future that we want to build.

So, Sid and I, together, created the space and a platform to learn how to answer this challenge collectively, as a generation, to learn how to capitalize on poly capital, and how to change the ecosystem of

“ The best hope we have for building a future we want is to build it through bridging leadership.

philanthropy through a bridging leadership approach. We don't use the term "bridging leadership" inside Generation Pledge, but we live it.

The conventional approach, we feel, won't be enough to take us where we have to go. Our best hope for building the future we would like to live in has to be through a bridging leadership approach. So, Generation Pledge is a community completely based on collaboration, system change, a poly-capital approach, and using evidence to back our choices whenever we have evidence. And when we don't, at least making our best conscious bets.

We're doing research, in collaboration with other organizations. One research strand is on how we map our values, how this influences our decision-making processes, and how we nudge people with certain values into more effective choices.

In the second research strand, we created a "cause area" tool, where we ask people to pick their preferences; the next step shows them how much money has been invested in each of these cause areas. At the next step, the literature tells us about how effective these cause areas are. Finally, they play around with building a portfolio based on what they learned. We're looking for people able to strengthen their intellectual humility. When you're exposed to good information, are you willing to change your mind? When you learn something new, do you change positions? Or are you completely stuck to your biases? How do we support people in moving towards what seems to be better opportunities?

We're planning a third strand of research in collaboration with another organization that has accumulated a lot of experience with social and political capital, which we know much less about than we know about financial capital. We're going to do research on how to use these types of capital. What would the guidelines be if we are willing to use these capitals?

MARILIA

For the younger generation, especially, the desire to make change happen is strong. There's a sense of urgency that might lead people to bypass the systems thinking piece of bridging leadership. What Generation Pledge does so well is holding the pause button and offering really solid

information. But not just the information, also the hard-earned wisdom around these types of intervention that enable people to have that moment of realization, “Maybe my initial assumption about what I need to do is not the most effective one.”

The beautiful thing is that it’s done in community, so it removes the shame of thinking I’m the only person here who had gotten it wrong. Doing hard things in community is much nicer than doing it alone, and doing philanthropy is not easy.

MARK

Wonderful. Can you each talk about your vision for what it might look like in five or ten years, if bridging leadership really infused philanthropy? What might we see that’s inspiring, that’s uplifting, transformative? I’m asking you to paint a picture of what that looks like. It can be a small picture, somewhere in a small place, or a global picture of your vision for the impact bridging leadership could have in philanthropy.

MARILIA

At the highest level, we will have difficult conversations about all the things we know already are not working. We will have done self-reflective practices and come together in collaboration and spoken out loud about the places where philanthropy is yet to be effective. To give you one example, we’ve had some serious conversations about how much philanthropic strategies still get done from the ivory tower without bringing in the voices of the people we are seeking to serve. My vision is that five years from now, it’s not just that we have brought these voices to the table, we are sitting around a completely different table, working together. And we are building strategies that are close to the people we’ve recognized as fellow humans, who have the lived experience of the massive issues and are bearing the burden of them, and that these strategies become that much more effective.

MARINA

If bridging leadership really comes into the field of philanthropy in an effective way, I believe there will be a big difference from how the economic

“ My vision for bridging philanthropy is that it enables us to have the difficult conversations about what we already know is not working.

elite functions today. We will have looked into problems and envisioned a different form of the future. People from the economic elite will know they have assets that are beyond financial, that their voices are heard. We will have learned to use their voices to make change happen in a way we're not doing yet, using social and political capital in a much bolder way. As a result, we would live with a lot more flourishing than we do today, looking to the future with much less risk—less existential risk, environmental and social risk. I'd sign up for that future.

MARILIA

On a personal note, I know I'm living my life the way I want to live it in moments like this conversation, when there's such a deep level of connection between two people. We happen to come from the same country but could as well come from different countries, with me from the northeast and you, Marina, from the southeast of Brazil, such a big, big country. It's in the recognition of a common vision and a shared desire to create more love and connection that I feel alive. And it's in looking inside and trying to bridge what is in my heart to what's in someone else's heart. That's an ethereal but very real aspect of bridging leadership. There is an aliveness to it, and that aliveness moves me.

MARINA

Talking in the environment of the Global Philanthropies Circle (GPC), the work that I personally do with Generation Pledge, and the family that I come from, we're tying together a style of leadership with the environment of wealth. Whether we like it or not, or think it's right or not, in my opinion, wealth holders play a fundamental role in shaping the future. They might be the ones who will make things harder, or be a fundamental piece in building the future.

What I see today is that we have a huge, untapped potential. If we are thinking about structural change, what seems to be the biggest value for us, as philanthropists, is holding space to understand the right questions to ask ourselves and having the courage to look into challenges and complexities, trying to envision more robustly how things could be different. To feel

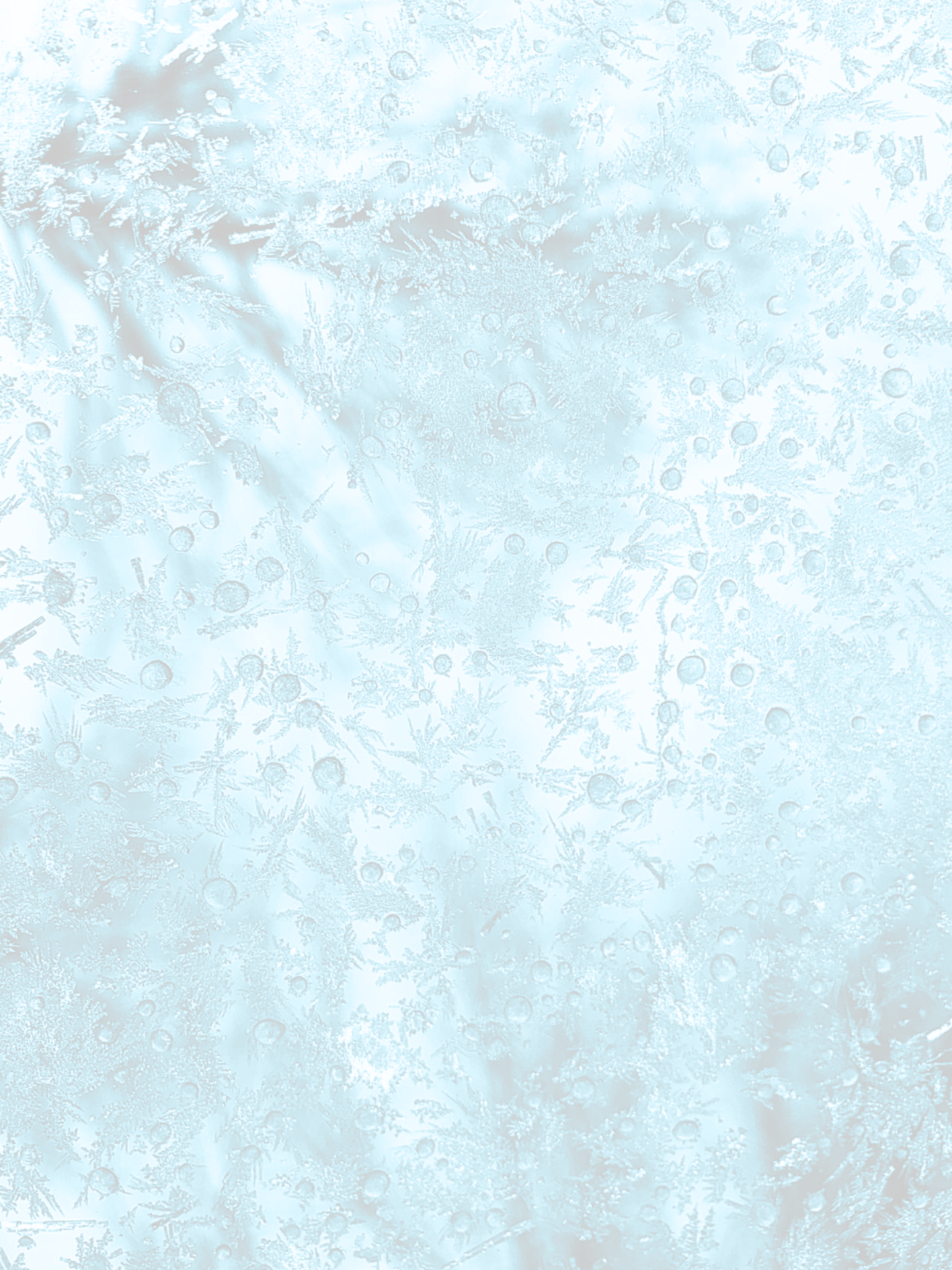
“ The biggest value for us, as philanthropists, is holding space to understand the right questions to ask ourselves.

optimistic about the future, I must feel that we have some concrete ideas on how to go further in a different way. How do we envision a different future to increase our level of hope, based on things that have higher chances of being true?

This moment of flux in the philanthropic field may be the first time in history that, as a collective of wealth inheritors and bridging leaders, we are looking into the problems and asking, “What are we talking about? How do we envision something different?” I’d rather have us, as a collective, spending a lot of time here, rather than having a huge number of people deploying resources in a way that doesn’t take us where we want to go.

Touchstones

- Bridging leadership starts with quietening your own fears, anxieties, and biases, so you can listen in curiosity, open to new ideas.
- A bridging leadership approach to philanthropy helps to ensure that you commit your resources to serve the world’s needs before your own.
- Until we move away from a paradigm of separation and begin building a sense of connection, we’re going to keep on solving some problems but recreating them in another way.
- In the field of philanthropy, if we want to work with systems change, and at scale, then we must plan beyond our own resources. We have to think and act collectively.
- The more we invite people into the inquiry of self-reflective practices, systems thinking and collaboration, the more people will make intentional choices about how they deploy their philanthropic capital.
- If bridging leadership comes into the field of philanthropy in an effective way, there will be a big difference from how the economic elite functions today.





Raising a Generation of Bridging Leaders

The Educational Lens

Ernesto Garilao and Emanuel Garza Fishburn

Ernesto Garilao and Emanuel Garza Fishburn have played central roles in educating bridging leaders and building a global community of practice. Their conversation offers insights into why we should educate bridging leaders and on ways of doing so.

Ernesto is chairperson of the Zuellig Family Foundation (ZFF), whose mission is to reduce health inequities in order to improve the health outcomes of the poor in the Philippines. He was the founding executive director at the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) Team Energy Center for Bridging Societal Divides. In 2018, Ernesto received the David Rockefeller Bridging Leadership Award for outstanding global leadership. Emanuel is the president of Universidad Carolina, Mexico, and an educator with a special interest in education for democratic citizenship and corporate social responsibility, as well as in participatory approaches to community development. He is a Synergos Senior Fellow.

Ernesto and Emanuel approach bridging leadership education from two vantage points. One keeps a sharp eye on public service, the other heeds a calling for a more connected world.

For Ernesto, bridging leadership must lead to better outcomes for a population. He and his colleagues have developed a learning program for public leaders like municipal mayors. Inducting these experienced leaders into bridging leadership involves facilitating a process that enables them to connect with their purpose as public leaders and to own their part in the systems that result in poor development indicators for their constituencies.

For Emanuel, education is a calling to build awareness of how each of us is part of a whole and of the responsibilities this brings. As a university leader, he looks outwards to building bridges between the university and its neighbouring communities. His stories illustrate how the bridging initiative involves students in community engagement. He reflects, too, on building the foundations for bridging leadership from an early age.

Mark Gerzon and Chong-Lim Lee hosted this conversation.

CHONG-LIM

Ernie, I'd like to ask you first, when did you first encounter bridging leadership and what impact did it have on you?

ERNESTO

Synergos invited the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) to join the Bridging Leadership Global Research Group in 2001. Synergos director of programs at that time was David Winder and he visited AIM with Steven Pierce. They discussed the global research project, about getting people together to discuss and address intractable problems. The AIM president Phil Alfonso assigned the task to me. I accepted readily since I thought it was something our country needed, and it was something I really wanted to do. This was what I was searching for. That was my "aha!" moment.

CHONG-LIM

And you, Emanuel, when did you first encounter bridging leadership?

EMANUEL

I'm thinking of three moments of encounter. The first was the international development that I was nurtured into. When I was a young boy, my grandmother was involved with an organization called Outreach International, who were trying to ignite civic engagement in rural communities around the world. It dawned on me very early that a key element of community development has to do with people in dire straits connecting to people from other sectors.

A second moment was when I was doing my master's degree, I had the privilege of having a course with Bob Putnam, a leading scholar in the field of social capital. Here I learned about two distinct kinds of social capital. One is bonding social capital, for strengthening the bonds between those who share the same culture or ideology or socioeconomic status. The other is bridging social capital, which crosses the divides between those who are similar and those who are different.

The first time I saw the idea coined as bridging leadership is when I became a Synergos Senior Fellow. This was a challenging time in my life.

We were facing the drug war here in Mexico and I was trying to find new ways of understanding my world. That was my third moment of connecting with this idea of bridging leadership. And I found a brave space to start new endeavors in Mexico.

MARK

Both of you have had distinguished careers and distinguished learning experiences long before you heard about bridging leadership. And yet something about bridging leadership has brought you here to this conversation today. Something stuck. What was that new thing that bridging leadership meant to each of you?

ERNESTO

In 1998 I had just finished a six-year term as the cabinet secretary for agrarian reform. I thought I did a decent job in managing the reform program. But when I reflected on what I had done, and where the country was in 1998 in relation to our Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) neighbors, I had a sense of disappointment. When you looked at the Philippines in relation to our neighbors in 1998, our country's progress was not at par with our neighbors. We still had challenges of insurgency, of extreme poverty, of stunting, of great divisions.

What was missing was we could not as a country get our act together. Other countries had a unified vision, continuity of policies. In our case, the question was how you get different factions at the same table on the same page, going towards a unified future and vision. So, when Synergos talked about getting people together to address intractable challenges, I thought I would take a shot at it. Synergos global research participation also gave me the opportunity to look at what was happening elsewhere and what we could learn from other countries. It was a new field and I thought that what I would get out of it is what I put into it. From the start, I had personal commitment and ownership of the question "How do you take this new idea and operationalize it?" Earlier I referred to an "aha!" moment—this was it. It was clear what I was to do.

“Bridging leadership gave me the opportunity to deepen my experience of social transformation.”

EMANUEL

In my case, the most fundamental impact of bridging leadership was the opportunity to deepen my experience of social transformation and embark on a journey from the more mind-privileged or transactional elements of building community to the deeper connections at the level of the heart. That had not been present in my previous work as I tried to promote participatory community development or education through focusing on collaboration that was useful to get the results we needed.

What was new in bridging leadership was this notion that you have to start from within, to bridge between your personal elements, and how a deeper connection, a deeper calling, and deeper transformation come from that personal process that then enables you to connect strongly with others you need to collaborate with. That was the fundamental element that struck me as being new and relevant to my work in the social field.

ERNESTO

During the two-year global research on bridging leadership, we were introduced to Otto Scharmer’s Theory U. At the bottom of the U, you start asking yourself, in relation to the challenge at hand: “What does all this mean to me? What is my part or role in this challenge? What is my response to this challenge?” It really hits the core. It struck a chord with some verses in the Bible: “To whom much is given, much will be required.” You can add the parable of the talents: “What talent was given to you and what did you do with that talent?” When you are at the bottom of the U, you get to question whether you are true to your purpose. When you do that, you’ll say, “All right, this is the challenge given to me, these are the gifts given to me—my social capital, my leadership capital, and so on—and what do I do with these, as I move to the right side of the U, to help in transforming inequitable structures and systems so we can move towards an equitable preferred reality?” Those two years with Synergos were a personal transformation process for me. I connected to the passion and commitment to do what I had to do as I moved towards the right side of the U.

CHONG-LIM

I wondered whether the two of you might want to touch on the importance of values and how they might have influenced the way that you think about bridging leadership and the impact that you want to have in the world.

EMANUEL

I am in this work because of profound influences in my life, especially from family who have been living testimony to the kind of commitment and transformation that we want to see in this world. My grandparents, my parents, did so in line with their religious traditions and their values. Through a little bit of genealogy, I've found eight generations in the educational field. There's a deep connection between how we live within our communities, how we live within our families and how that takes you—in my case—to the brave space of trying to be connected and contributing to this world.

ERNESTO

My first job in 1968 was understanding violence in a Catholic school in a Muslim province of Sulu. I came from a lower middle-class family. My parents provided our basic needs. Early on, I was exposed to the situation of the other side. I did a lot of immersion trips and volunteer work, mostly with poor communities. I came to ask myself, "Why are communities poor? Why don't they have the opportunities that I have?" If you relate that to the spiritual value of loving your neighbor, then you start asking, "What can I do for my neighbor?"

I was always drawn to the issue of inequities and why there are inequities. In a sense, if you don't do something about it, then you're condoning it. So, my values move me to action to address inequities. I also felt the reason inequities persist is that the structure and systems are full of inequity, put there by people, by the leaders. My thinking was that I should work with leaders and change their mindsets. Since they are responsible for inequitable structures, what interventions could be provided so they can reform their own systems, leading to better human development indicators?

“Inequities exist because leaders put in the structures that created them. So, we need to change leaders' mindsets.”

The challenge to me was how to help public leaders go through a transformational process where they looked at their values and purpose, and realized they were the ones who created the systems that result in poor development indicators for their constituencies. That was another “aha!” moment. I said, “Maybe my purpose is to work with these leaders.” I had social capital to influence them to move in another direction.

MARK

Could each of you just continue right from where you left off and pivot to talk more directly about education?

EMANUEL

I was thinking about another angle on the question about values—in my case, about how through the years, you begin to build upon an awareness that you are part of the whole, and that being part of a whole is a privilege, but also a responsibility. When you acquire that awareness, it’s a beautiful moment of finding your place in the universe. The call to become much more engaged is urgent, and there’s no going backwards.

I’ll connect that thought to education. From my perspective, education is one of the best spaces where you can talk about and act towards building community. When you identify the potential of educational fields and institutions as the platform for community-building, it’s all inclusive. Take the term “university”—it’s about bringing the universal to this space. A first calling of education is to build upon that awareness. That’s the first contribution we can make as educational institutions and also as educators, and I would say that every human being is an educator by nature. If we embrace that calling, one of the first building blocks for bridging leadership would be to build an awareness of how and where we all take part in this environment and this system, in this wholeness that we all hold. Let that be the foundation for the transformation we want to see in the world.

ERNESTO

After government, I was a faculty member at the AIM which trained post-college graduates to be business and development executives. When

“When you become aware that you are part of the whole, the call to become more engaged becomes urgent.”

the Synergos global research ended in 2002, together with a colleague, Professor Jacinto Gavino, who was with me in the global research project, we offered short seminars on bridging leadership from 2002 to 2004. We used cases developed by the global research program and the six case studies that we developed in the Philippines. We were able to get funding from a former Synergos senior fellow, Bobby Calingo, for the initial workshops. From those workshops we developed the bridging leadership framework of ownership, co-ownership, and co-creation.

Later, bridging leadership was offered as a one-week leadership module in the Master's in Management program. Then, in 2006, Mirant Foundation endowed the AIM Center for Bridging Leadership, which did research and faculty training on bridging leadership, and so, the concept took a foothold in an educational institution. Later on, the approach was used in the Master's in Development Executive Education program. Feedback from the students was good. When they returned to their home countries, they found the bridging leadership concept useful, especially in getting people together to address a particular challenge.

So, the concept has added value in addressing the question of how you enable different sectors with different views on dialogue in relation to a particular challenge and what can they do collaboratively to address that challenge. I left AIM in 2008 but I'm happy bridging leadership was mainstreamed there.

Bridging leadership was mainstreamed at AIM because it had value. I think it has a great future in the Philippines, where local governments will be getting more funds from the national government and will be responsible for more devolved human development services. Local chief executives—mayors and governors—need a leadership handle to use these added resources for programs that result in better human development indicators. Bridging leadership helps them connect to their purpose as public leaders, do a better systems analysis of problems, get different stakeholders to co-own the issue, and together come up with institutional arrangements to address the challenge.

For me, the question is “Bridging leadership for what?” You can do the interior work, you can get different sectors together, but for what? In my work with elected political leaders, I always challenge them whether their constituents are better off than they were before: “Alright, we do this but are the conditions of your constituents much better now than they were before?”

EMANUEL

I’ll share a story from the Universidad Carolina, a university founded in 2014. Because we’ve been so inspired by bridging leadership, we launched the bridging impact initiative within the university. It’s a foundational initiative where we’re asking all the educators involved in the university to use bridging leadership principles to expand the educational opportunities of their students by reaching out to organizations and leaders and communities outside the university.

Many beautiful experiences have come from that. One is the Lead Lab, where engineering students connect and engage with impoverished communities within our region. Through a process of dialogue with the local population, the students try to find a basic community need, and using their engineering skills and learning, find a way of supporting a community-led solution.

In their first initiative, the students found that a particular community’s strongest vocation was goat-herding and selling their milk in the cities. The supply chain began with the herder milking their goats, taking the milk in a bucket to the dirt road near their community, asking for a ride to the highway, where they tried to get another ride into the city with their bucket full of goat milk. In dialogue with the community, our engineering students helped to set up a strategy to strengthen the supply chain and commercial capacities. The students also discovered that for more than 30 years there had been no coordinated vaccination campaign for the region’s goat herds. Eight students ignited a vaccination campaign for the state, involving all three levels of government. Local, state, and federal level officials finally got together to do something about the goat

“Through the bridging initiative at our university, all the students use bridging leadership principles to engage with communities.”

herds. That's just one example of what can happen when you connect people and communities to identify common problems and co-create solutions.

ERNESTO

The story from my end was not students but what academic faculty did with bridging leadership. In 2008, I joined the Zuellig Family Foundation in promoting better health for marginalized communities. In 2013, the Philippine government asked us, "Can you move the health leadership and governance approach, which is bridging leadership based, to priority municipalities identified by government?" I said we could, but we would have to transfer the bridging leadership training methodology to regional academic universities to do the training nationwide. We did this and developed a regional capacity to do the training. Eventually we were able to train around 144 faculty from eleven different institutions.

Their story was that you cannot teach bridging leadership without being a bridging leader yourself. So, you really saw the mind shift in the academics from downloading content to becoming facilitators of the learning process. The trainees were mayors, who are adult learners. They have the content and experience. They get bored with straight lectures. The challenge to the academics was how to facilitate the transformation process of the mayors. How do they get connected to their purpose and their values? How do they do interior work so they can reform their systems?

An interesting thing that faculty said is, "We have to transform ourselves before we can transform the mayors." It also got them connected to their purpose as educators: "What is it that I have to do? What kind of content should I give them? What kind of processes should I use to do that?" That was interesting—how you can spread the bridging leadership concept and the teaching of the concept to develop local capacities in various parts of the country. I think that bridging leadership will be mainstreamed in other universities over time.

“ To teach bridging leadership, one needs to be a bridging leader—not downloading information but facilitating learning.

MARK

Imagine you are talking to a university president, or to somebody who's in charge of the leadership program at a university and they ask, "Should we teach a course about bridging leadership at our university?" What would you say? What's the case to make for why a university should have a bridging leadership course?

ERNESTO

I would look at the university's context and ask the university president, "Take a look at the population your university serves, and what is happening to them." A bridging leadership course makes sense at universities in developing countries because of the many human development challenges in those areas.

I would ask, "What is the university's role in improving those human development indicators? Is the purpose of the university just educating students? But then what is the impact of your education on your students, and what is the impact of your graduates on their community? Does the university have ownership of the inequities where the university operates, around the university? Is your purpose to improve the human condition of the communities your students serve, that your students will return to? If that is the case, how do you equip those graduates to improve their communities?"

For an educational institution, I would like to think they are judged on the improvement their graduates contribute to the quality of life of the people they serve.

EMANUEL

I would say that every single university and, for that matter, every educational institution across the world shares a calling to nurture a more inclusive and connected world, because that's the reason we exist, to come back to that perspective of being universal.

Within that calling, bridging leadership brings one of the most auspicious responses to the global ailments we are currently facing in our world. And most of these challenges fit into three relational dimensions: our

“Every educational institution shares a calling to nurture a more inclusive and connected world.”

relationship to ourselves, our relationship to others, and our relationship with nature.

The response that bridging leadership offers all three is fundamental. It's building bridges to improve our relationship with ourselves, connecting us with a sense of purpose and our own energy, and healing those areas of self that need attention. It's bridging to bring a nurturing environment for our relationship to others, especially in a world that's increasingly polarized and divided. And third, becoming aware of those voiceless beings with whom we share this world, understanding their needs and their calling to correct the way we relate to the natural world is an urgent bridge. Having bridging leadership as part of an educational program addresses the whole purpose of education.

CHONG-LIM

I'm curious. Are these aspects that you don't see in other approaches in education? How do you see bridging leadership as being unique compared to other approaches?

EMANUEL

There are similarities with other educational approaches. The closest connection I see is with global education. Global citizenship and the attributes, skills, and awareness a global citizen brings to the world are fundamentally similar to those of bridging leaders. Another significant approach is social emotional learning—when we're talking about bridging within oneself and with others—which is also taking shape in many educational institutions.

But there are striking differences, with tendencies pulling humanity in another direction, where doctrines or points of view—about the world, culture and society—become increasingly strengthened through ideological or political avenues. We must work at being countercultural to those tendencies, focusing on nationalist or bonding approaches that include those who are like me and exclude those who are not like me.

“ We must work at being countercultural to ... nationalist or bonding ... approaches that ... exclude those who are not like me.

“ Bridging leadership must be relevant to the times.

ERNESTO

I thought that, for educational institutions, the questions would be: What will the post COVID-19 world be? What is the role of bridging leadership in crafting that new post-COVID world? And what is the role of educational institutions in getting leaders and communities to craft that new reality? COVID-19 has exposed the inequities in the system, its unpreparedness in looking after the marginalized.

Let’s just take one aspect. The post-COVID world calls for the transformation of the health system. The health system must be resilient to calamities and disasters, as well as pandemics. A pandemic-responsive health system will be a different system. How will that be created? If the goal is universal healthcare where every person has the same access to the same health services, and is consequently pandemic-responsive, then how do you get societal leaders together to agree on a vision, on the priorities and what needs to be done to transform the health system into an inclusive, equitable one? That’s how you make bridging leadership relevant at a particular period of change.

This is where academics come in. They have a lens that practitioners don’t have and can develop an approach that’s relevant to a new period. For instance, the bridging leadership framework crafted in 2002 must be enhanced to be relevant in 2021 because the context has changed. The challenges and power relationships have changed. I think bridging leadership will retain its interior work, but the co-ownership issues may need some tweaking, as may the co-creation. That’s where the educational institutions come in, in examining the concepts, the practice, and what’s emerging from the practice in relation to the concepts.

“ Bridging leadership is the key to whether civilization is extinguished or flourishes.

MARK

I know from my own leadership work that most of the leadership models come from the United States and Europe. Is bridging leadership empowering the rest of the world or is it just another North American or European leadership model that’s being thrown at the global south?

EMANUEL

Bridging leadership goes to the roots of what we are as a human race. If you go back to our origins, from what I understand about our evolution, you find bridging leadership was there from the start, when we had the prospect of becoming extinct as a species or flourishing as a civilization. What let us go through as a human race was being able to build a common vision, based on common beliefs, to build the trust needed to collaborate to address our shared challenges. So, going back to that primitive moment of our existence, I would say that this is common to us all as human beings. We've already tried the other leadership models. It's time to come back to the essence of what leadership should look like, and how we build community from there.

ERNESTO

By the end of the global workshops, we had a sense of the characteristics of a bridging leader. Synergos encouraged us to continue developing bridging leadership in our home countries. When we returned to Manila, we developed the bridging leadership framework that is used now. So, the framework of ownership, co-ownership and co-creation was created in Manila at AIM. From AIM, bridging leadership moved to other sectors and organizations, where it resonated. When you ask political leaders about the impact of bridging leadership on them, they say that what was most important was ownership of the inequity or challenge that connects to their purpose and responsibility.

Bridging leadership concepts are meta-concepts and have local terms. Coming to my responsibility is not a Western concept, it's a meta-concept. That I need to do it with others is also a meta-concept. A public leader owns the inequity of their constituents. It is the leader's responsibility to address them. But the leader realizes they cannot do it alone, they need co-owners to collectively address the inequity. While a leader may have a vision to address it, they need the participation of others to be able to do it. What was new was the realization that, in the process, power relationships must change. In the process of co-

“ Bridging leadership concepts are meta-concepts, with local terms.

ownership, the leader must share power to gain the trust of co-owners to do collaborative work. The political leader realizes that “I am not the sole owner of what needs to be done. I have to get other people to be able to do it.”

Another concept I thought was new in how it was introduced is that leaders are accountable for results. During your term of office, the development indicators of your constituents must improve. That’s a new concept, related to purpose. Your purpose as a public leader is to see to it that your constituents benefit during your term of office.

Bridging leadership has relevance in countries with deep divides. The concepts are universally applicable, but the content and process will be country- and culture-specific. If a theory or an approach doesn’t work, it will fall by the wayside. If it works, it will take root, because people see its relevance.

“Bridging leadership is about sharing power to make change.”

EMANUEL

From a power perspective, bridging leadership is about sharing power among all those empowered to cause change. Building upon shared power allows change.

I’ll share another story from our university. Through the bridging impact initiative, we have an urban planning degree. As part of the bridging impact principle, we set up the Carolina District, an area close to the university where we have connections with six different impoverished neighborhoods. We began to establish a relationship with them, where our students facilitate the relationship and conversations.

These communities were used to having external parties coming in and trying to take advantage of their presence, especially with electoral intentions. A political leader would promise all these changes, and in exchange expect a vote. Decades passed with that kind of disrespectful relationship going on. So initially, they were hesitant about a relationship with the university. It took time for them to realize that we were trying to be good neighbors, trying to establish trust, to have space to be together, and share some good times.

Starting from small collaborations, our relationships have been building. Over the last three years, we've had a beautiful monumental Day of the Dead celebration in one community. We work together to set up that event, and it's been growing. In its latest edition, there were over 80,000 visitors. That caused an economic downpour for the community who sold their tamales or coffee or whatever. Just being able to share the potential returns and deliberate together has been very empowering.

Accountability is a significant complement to power sharing. If there's not clear and regular communication of what's going on and what's being accomplished by the community, people begin to fall into the traps of envy or mistrust.

CHONG-LIM

Based on what you've already witnessed, if you were to take a step back and look into the future through the lens of education, what would be your vision for the impact that bridging leadership can have? What's your biggest hope?

EMANUEL

I think that the notion and the practice of bridging leadership should be in every single educational curriculum around the world. We should think of including such a notion and practice at all levels of education. If you nurture it in early childhood and it grows through basic education, and you have children organizing in this very democratic and bridging way early on, and they take those practices into their secondary and then college education, it's a beautiful way of establishing the foundations for the kind of values and connection we want to see in the world.

That's my vision—to take that potential with great urgency and seriousness, and partner with organizations around the world that can support the work of designing these programs, negotiating with the sub-national, national education systems, making sure we can reach every corner in the world. Formal educational institutions can play a significant role, but there are other ways of igniting bridging leadership in terms of awareness and practice. We must make use of communication and

“Bridging leadership is the bridge to a higher ground for humanity.”

examples and practices in communities. It’s a system that will provide the foundational awareness and skills for bridging leadership.

I’m not exaggerating to say this is of the utmost importance. It could bring a significant solution to many challenges we are currently facing. Think of what happened on January 6, 2021, at the US Capitol. Think of the many places of the world where we’re letting division and deep inequities take over and polarize the potential that we have to grow to a higher ground for humanity. Bridging leadership is the bridge to a higher ground.

ERNESTO

How is bridging leadership relevant at the time when there is traction for authoritarian leaders and populism? People move in that direction because the present system is not giving them the quality of life or the benefits they want. People say, “I want a strong man who will cut corners but will produce the results.” Bridging leadership strengthens the democratic alternative because the leader and the community co-own the challenges and co-create institutional arrangements that will produce equitable results. If democratic leaders ensure their constituents have a better quality of life, constituents will adhere to the democratic alternative.

“The global challenge of bridging leadership is to strengthen a democratic alternative that produces equity results.”

The role of bridging leadership initiatives is to introduce the concept to public leaders, to make their leadership and governance more accountable for results, seeing to it that their citizens are better off. So, it’s a system that produces the results. If I am a constituent, and I have access to better development services and am engaged in democratic participation, why would I go for the authoritarian leader who will take my participation away?

That’s the challenge of bridging leadership—to strengthen the democratic alternative by making leaders own and better understand the challenges and inequities and respond by getting sectors to co-own and co-create new institutional arrangements towards better development equity. People prefer a democratic leader who produces results; when that fails, they go for an authoritarian leader who produces results. If the preferred reality is a democratic alternative that produces development indicator

results, how do we move to that reality? That's the global challenge of bridging leadership.

EMANUEL

It dawns on me that we're talking about a global cultural transformation. I see bridging leadership, in all its manifestations, as one of the stepping-stones for that transformation, to enable us to shift from survival mode to thriving, from the competition we're facing to the collaboration we need, from self to others. It's time that we share this notion that we can shape a global culture, based on these values, in deep respect for our own cultural manifestations.

Touchstones

- Bridging leadership is relevant wherever there are deep divides. Its concepts are meta-concepts, universally applicable, but the content and process are country- and culture-specific.
- Starting from within, making a deeper connection between your personal elements, keeps you true to your purpose and enables you to connect strongly and collaborate with others.
- To teach bridging leadership, one needs to be a bridging leader.
- Every educational institution, at every level, shares a calling to nurture a more inclusive and connected world. Bridging leadership responds to the call, so including bridging leadership in an educational program is a way of addressing the purpose of education.
- From early childhood through college education and beyond, we can nurture the skills and values of trust-building, deep listening, and respectful engagement across divides.
- Public leaders such as mayors and governors need a mode of leadership that uses public resources for programs that result in better human development indicators. A facilitated bridging leadership curriculum can provide this.

- Bridging leadership helps public leaders to connect to their purpose, do a better systems analysis of problems, get different stakeholders to co-own the issue, and co-create institutional arrangements to address the challenge.



Bridging Beyond Profit

The Corporate Lens

Nili Gilbert and Bruno Vercken

In a competitive environment, profit matters. So, why should corporates invest in bridging leadership? Nili Gilbert and Bruno Vercken make a compelling case, a case that appeals to profit, people, and planet.

Nili speaks as a thought leader in the investment field. She chairs the Investment Committees of the David Rockefeller Fund and of Synergos, which have both made net zero investment commitments. Bruno is employee representative and union leader at Danone, based in France. He was formerly Global Head of Health, Safety and Working Conditions (2010–2022), Danone. Bruno was an advisor for the Inner Work for Social Change Project, an initiative of Synergos and the Fetzer Institute.

The demands on corporate leaders are huge, says Bruno. Not only must they grow profits and compete against their competitors but they must also be visionaries who set the company's direction and act "super ethically" with employees and customers, respect the environment, and contribute to the public good. An impossible ask of a single individual. Recognizing the impossibility of an omnicompetent leader, bridging leadership aims to build high-trust teams within corporations. Nili takes a daring further step to envisage teams of bridging leaders connecting across corporations within the same field of operation. For her, bridging leadership is unique in getting people out of a stuck place within their assigned corners. It opens space to think together towards a shared vision without forfeiting a competitive edge.

Accelerated time in the corporate world is a systemic barrier to trust-building, Bruno says. Trust-building involves slow time, pauses in the relentless drive for productivity, long enough to bring diverse stakeholders to the table for a holistic approach to setting company priorities. Together, the authors advance a persuasive case for corporates to invest time in building trust and collaboration. Whether the case is strong enough to render a change in corporate pace remains an open question.

Mark Gerzon and Chong-Lim Lee hosted this conversation.

MARK

Before we dive into the specifics of the corporate world, perhaps we could begin by each of you just saying a few words about when you first encountered bridging leadership. Each of you probably had a moment when you said, “Oh, bridging leadership.” I certainly did. What was that moment and what impact did it have on you?

NILI

Synergos was my first employer after I graduated from Harvard in 1999. Around that time (in 2000 or 2001) Synergos first started working on a formal bridging leadership program, although ever since Synergos was founded, the Synergos team has been working, in a way, through bridging leadership.

I was a young professional, just 21 years old, and I cared so much about the world and social justice. But I also found that some of my favorite work was on the finances, working in spreadsheets and trying to figure out the dollars and cents of things. I thought about going into finance and investments. But it was hard to find the courage, because a lot of people working in the social justice area feel that finance and investment are a problem, getting in the way of the causes that we care about, like equality and sustainability.

Learning about bridging leadership, and being able to talk with Peggy Dulany about this, gave me the courage to move into the business sector, as a way of trying to advance the issues that Synergos and many other great organizations are working on—to be a bridge. I’ll always remember Peggy saying that the work of Synergos requires bridges in every sector, and that finance is one where we just don’t have enough. How about you, Bruno, when did you first come across the concept?

BRUNO

I first came across the concept of bridging leadership in 2019 at the Namibia retreat for the Inner Work for Social Change case studies. I was there as a member of the project advisory team.

Upon reading *Building Trust Works*, the booklet Peggy Dulany had written for the 30th anniversary of Synergos, it became obvious that a

major challenge of today's world is the ability to resolve complex problems, where a lot of irreconcilable contradictions push in opposite directions. The only way to solve them is to bridge people who represent those different directions, putting them together to leverage the collective intelligence of those who would not usually talk or work together in order to find solutions.

I immediately made the connection with the path our company, Danone, was on. It is a narrow path between being a for-profit cooperation in the globalized, financialized, short-term driven economic world, and at the same time working for the good, in other words, becoming a B Corp (a for-profit company voluntarily certified in meeting high standards of social and environmental performance, aiming for both shareholder and stakeholder success). It's quite different becoming a B Corp when you are a privately owned, medium or small size business from becoming one when shareholders own your stock. It dawned on me that the only way to succeed is through a bridging leadership approach. In turn, in the backyard, you need to overcome your own fragility and reluctance to bridge with the others.

So, that's where I learned what bridging leadership is. I immediately saw its relevance to the path of our company. The governance crisis in the company (during the first quarter of 2021) put a finger on the need to go further in terms of bridging leadership, and on the limits of not having done so before.

In personal terms, my biggest bridging leadership experience is taking place in my role as an employee representative. From 2010 until 2022, I was Global Head of Health, Safety and Working Conditions for Danone, a French-based global food company with 100,000 workers worldwide. In 2019, I also became a union leader in the company. So, I'm an employee representative (for the company) and a union leader at the same time. While we won the employee elections with 40%, we still needed to work with other unions to negotiate with the corporation.

Currently [in March 2021, at the time of this conversation] we are negotiating the package and conditions for employees who have to

“ The only way to solve complex problems is to bridge people together with different perspectives to leverage collective intelligence.

“The more complex the topic, the more the solution lies in being together around the table with people who see the complexity.”

leave the company because of global restructuring in response to the company’s governance crisis, as well as the conditions for those who stay. We are working through an inter-union setup. In France, I’m working with a union whose philosophy is directly inherited from communism. We have managed over the last five months to sign an agreement with management. This is the first time in the history of the company where all unions have signed the agreement, including the former communist union, who signed the agreement for the first time ever. The unions are said to be extremely ideological, extremely demanding, and aggressive. But I can judge that they are truly motivated by employee welfare. So, that’s my own experience of bridging leadership.

As far as I’m concerned, the more complex the topic, the more the solution lies in being together around the table with the people who have a view on the complexity. It’s part of the complexity that people pull in antagonistic directions.

CHONG-LIM

Nili, what are your reflections on what Bruno has been describing, especially in terms of the role of bridging leadership and walking that fine line?

NILI

Bruno, the complex relationships between the business community and the stakeholders on whom it relies is a topic I’ve been thinking about a lot. I sit on an advisory committee for the Ownership Project at Oxford University, where we talk about ownership structure and the way it affects a business’s ability to pursue and achieve their purpose. It’s interesting that you mentioned becoming a B Corp, because this is a particularly good example of how a legal corporate structure gives a company a wider mandate to see and respond to the needs of all the stakeholders it relies on for success—its employees, and even nature. Natural capital, for example, is an important input, without which we couldn’t do our work.

One of the things we see today, with the deepening political divides in the US, is rising antagonism between business and some of its

“Rising antagonism between stakeholders makes bridging within the business community even more important.”

stakeholders, and between political leadership and its stakeholders. I've been thinking about why that is. It comes down to a breakdown in trust.

In so many ways, trust in the relationship between the employer and other stakeholders has changed. A lot of this is because of the rise of shareholders. Milton Friedman, the famous economist, 50 years ago put forward the doctrine that the sole role of the corporation should be to maximize wealth for its shareholders. Over time many corporations took this to heart, and it changed the way they think about the other people and entities that make up the wellbeing of the corporation. A lot of corporations lost touch with their true core purpose, which is a social role.

To rebuild this trust, I think that business should do exactly the kind of thing you've described Bruno, which is first to start listening to and empowering employees and other stakeholders more, as a way to keep connected with purpose. Then, there's an important conversation to be had about the legal structures that govern how companies should work, and about corporate social responsibility in the context of the broader social contract which gives business its right to exist in the way that it does today.

BRUNO

Something in our current context is a major structural barrier to trust, and that is the acceleration of time. There cannot be instant trust between two people. I trust you because you are from Synergos, and I've worked with Synergos for the last two years. I trust what you say, I like what you say. But then I would need more time to see whether what you do is consistent with what you say. A critical obstacle to trust is when change in a company becomes a goal in itself. This is an obstacle to the time needed to build trust between people.

In my role as Global Head for Health, Safety and Working Conditions, we do safety culture audits. We spend five days or so in a plant or sales branch. We interview people, we observe how they work. At the end of this period, we share our findings and make recommendations on the health, safety and wellbeing culture of the plant or branch. We've observed that the greater the turnover of people, the less the culture is sustainable. Sharing

“ Trust takes time. It is extremely challenging to build trust amid constant change and rapid turnover.

a culture of wellbeing also means sharing some fundamental decision-making criteria. For example, do we reward people for the speed at which they work, or for the way they engage their team?

NILI

In my work, I always try to think about short-term action in the context of long-term goals, and long-term goals in the context of values and purpose. This way, change processes have context and can be culture building, so long as we remind ourselves of values which can be like a compass along the way.

That's what helps us know where we need to go in the world, that's the constant, the North Star. If we're making a new business decision, if we're bringing on new people, if we're launching new products, if we're closing down products, or losing people, everything is in the context of a shared long-term goal.

A last point about trust in the context of corporate governance—the shareholder primacy of the Milton Friedman doctrine comes from a place of lack of trust, from the shareholders' lack of trust in corporate management and boards to make decisions concerning all of the corporation's shareholders and to treat them fairly. The doctrine is rooted in a suspicion that if shareholders let the corporate leaders decide how to prioritize stakeholders, corporate leaders would prioritize themselves.

CHONG-LIM

You've both described trust and the time that it takes, and the importance of culture, and having a team—whether it's within smaller teams, or the whole of the corporation—be guided by shared commitments and values. I can see the connection points to bridging leadership and wondered if you could both speak a bit more about what makes bridging leadership unique for addressing the challenges you're describing and in helping to re-envision what a corporation's place is in society?

BRUNO

Today's corporate governance is driven by investors who have a definite

agenda that the company continually adapts to match the pace of technological innovation, consumer expectations, and so on. It's a never-ending story when technological innovation, one project, one opportunity, one requirement is chasing the other, and most of the directors represent the investor community and do not have the necessary knowledge of the different stakeholders, especially the employees. There is still a gap between the representativity of the board of directors and the sum of stakeholders who should be considered in today's world.

When it's time to decide on the right rhythm of transformation and innovation, there's a fear that if a company does not transform or innovate to keep pace with technological progress, investors will say, "We missed the train." Our CEO says that the most complex topic he has to address is the right speed of transformation for the company. A solution can only come if you put around the table people who represent the different points of view on the impact of continuous change on company activity, on the different stakeholders, and on the sustainability of employee engagement. The composition of our board of directors today has very few employee representatives that are directors. Beyond these seats, bringing bridging leadership into corporate boards would help to address the complex and sensitive topic of the right speed of transformation. How do we set our own pace that is sustainable for the company, its stakeholders, and auditors?

NILI

You can also look at this issue of pace from an investor's perspective, for example, the time horizon over which investors evaluate companies and buy and sell stocks. Right now, on the New York Stock Exchange, the average amount of time that an investor will hold a share in their portfolio is less than four months. The reason that investors are so jumpy may be because they think it helps them to make profits. But if you research this assumption to see whether fast decision making and short holding periods add to profits, you will find that it does not. The truth is that investors would do better to identify companies with management teams and leaders who

“Bridging leadership is useful in helping corporate leaders determine the optimal speed for sustainable transformation.”

are planning for the long-term, and then to buy and hold those stocks for a long time. That's really where you can make the most profit.

You can see this in certain measurable ways, coming back to what you were saying, Bruno, about the pace of change. You'll see some companies where the pattern of profit and loss over time, or even just the sales pattern, is very volatile. These are the kinds of companies that you'll also hear investors buying and selling a lot, because there's always a new story to tell. But the truth is that there's more value—a patience premium—in investing with a long-term focus, with strong and stable businesses and great corporate leadership.

A question that I get a lot as a responsible investor is whether business is doing too much to try to change the world and make it a better place. This brings us back to this lack of trust across sectors. Do you know the book by Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All*? The basic premise of this book comes from the author's deep lack of trust in elite-led efforts to promote social change. He suggests that in the US, corporate leaders made donations to politicians who weakened the government, causing the government to be less effective at protecting the commons for the people; then corporations stepped up and said, "Well, look, the government is terrible at protecting the commons and social wellbeing, so now we're going to have to do it." You have many people like this questioning the role of business in society.

I was on Bloomberg Television last year, talking about how the David Rockefeller Fund had become the first foundation in the world to join the Net-Zero Asset Owners Alliance, committing to align our portfolios with a one-and-a-half-degree future for climate change. The interviewer said something like, "Don't you think that philanthropy is going too far? Shouldn't it be the government that is leading in these efforts?"

I see this as zero-sum thinking, this sense that everybody has to stay in their corner, as opposed to thinking about what could happen if we could all find ways to step up behind a shared vision and do what we can in concert to try to make it work.

For me, what's unique about bridging leadership is that it gets us out of that stuck, forced dichotomy where specific kinds of leaders have to do

specific kinds of things and where there's a presumption that they should not even be talking to one another. If everybody stays in their box, then the box stays the same. But if there's mobility and dynamism inside the container, and the box itself can change, it becomes another kind of shape completely. That's what's unique about bridging leadership.

CHONG-LIM

What does the bridging leader in that kind of a context look like, as an individual? From your professional experience, what does somebody who operates not in the prescribed role look like?

NILI

For today's corporations, it may be hard to understand how to welcome and adapt to having bridging leaders on their teams. Bridging leaders have more than one job description, they're doing many diverse kinds of things, with many different types of people. Bridging leaders don't look like your old kind of model of a corporate employee who's sticking to a fixed set of objectives in a limited fashion. Bridging leaders are dynamic, crossing lines and working with other types of people within their organizations, and even outside of it.

BRUNO

The asks on modern corporate leaders are huge. Twenty years ago, they only had to grow profits and compete against their competitors. Now, not only do they have to do that, but they also have to behave super ethically with the employees and consumers, respect the environment, recycle their products, and contribute to the good around them. This multiplicity of stakes really makes the corporate leadership-holder a job I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

First, you cannot be an expert in all those aspects at the same time. Second, on top of that, the dominant leadership model displays people who are super-assertive, who are visionary and know where they're going when, in fact, all those questions plus the accelerated pace at which they regenerate, and the environment and its issues, are changing every year.

“Paradoxically, the power and success of rising in leadership can cut one off from others and make bridging harder.

The context of continuous change is incompatible with that model of leadership. Bridging leadership plays a role in acknowledging that it's simply not possible. Even so, there still needs to be a leader, because the leader is the one who makes decisions. We have to choose a leader using the right criteria for the context and the challenges, but a leader who makes bridges with others who can play lead roles around the leader.

To be a bridging leader, you need to be aware of your fragility and your limits, because otherwise you don't feel the need to bridge with anyone. This is difficult, especially if you are a successful leader. Power and success can isolate you and so break the bridges. If you are unsuccessful, and because we are in a hurry, we fire you. The threat of being fired undermines trust. Just today, I learned from a union colleague that the turnover in senior leadership in French corporations has never been as high as it has been over the last two years. That's probably because the results are not there, or not there quickly enough.

It's difficult to be a bridging leader, trusting others, putting your future in the hands of others, when your head is at stake. That's raising the bar in terms of challenge in this risk that you take. Yet you have to trust others.

NILI

Why is it that power and success make leaders more isolated? Is that about trust too?

BRUNO

Success contributes to making you think that you are right and that you should continue to trust yourself because it's proved efficient. You think you can handle it, and that you can do it alone. Also, the simple fact is that power attracts people around you who are there to flatter you. But it's especially important as a bridging leader to maintain some counter-power from people in the organization, who will tell you where the truth lies. To give an example from our global corporation, whenever our CEO visits your plant, you may be sure that the plant has been totally repainted in the weeks before he visits, because your career advancement as a factory

director depends on his power. And when he visits, you will point out the things that are good.

Also, the aversion to risk is high, higher than ever in corporations. We are becoming more risk averse. You see this in the rise of compliance. In our company, in the general secretary's office, responsible for legal compliance, public affairs, and food safety, the headcount has multiplied by five over the last five years. Aversion to risks does not favor trust. The more I am at risk, the more I rely on myself to be sure I'm tied to the right rope and can manage my future.

MARK

I'm hearing a vision from both of you. I'm hearing a vision of a high-trust team of bridging leaders as a model that business needs. When you talked about the complexity and the risk, Bruno, and Nili when you spoke about the need to look at all the stakeholders and how complex this is, the vision that was coming to me out of your remarks was of a high-trust team of bridging leaders. Building on what I've just said, what's the vision for you of how bridging leadership, if it took hold more in the business sector, could make a positive difference in that sector and for the world? Can you just put some flesh on the idea of what your vision is? I'm drawing it out of what you're saying, but I'd like to hear it in your own words.

NILI

I'd love to see high-trust teams of bridging leaders within a given organization. But my vision, when I think about the big dream, is of a high-trust team of bridging leaders who can connect across organizations. For example, let's say that before competing, it would be helpful for Danone to partner with Nestle (or some competitor) in a project for improving the agricultural farming landscape in a country or region.

So, it's not just high-trust teams of bridging leaders within organizations. The big vision is seeing more bridging leaders connecting across organizations to achieve a common vision.

“ My dream is of high-trust teams of bridging leaders who can connect across organizations.”

BRUNO

I will focus on the internal bridging leadership because I have a less panoramic view than you have, Nili. I've observed how corporate social responsibility has evolved over the last 15 years. Today, the way companies are managing the dark side (profit or short-term innovation) in relation to the light side of the force (B Corp or working for the good) is like this. You have the operations in the field—the ones who produce, who sell, who manufacture, who buy—being squeezed out and having always to produce more with less. I'm caricaturing, of course. Above them, you have a layer of people—the ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) people—who try to push the operations people to do good through various, mostly project initiatives. This upper layer plays a key role in meeting the agenda of rating agencies, like DJSI (Dow Jones Sustainability Index) or Vigeo, with good stories. They are storytellers but not really interested in day-to-day reality.

These two worlds talk less and less together. It's a way to separate agendas and make people focus on what they need to do. The vision is to do business more efficiently, with excellent quality, and safely, but also sustainably. In the day-to-day the operational people are mostly evaluated against owners' financial expectations: productivity results, quick customer satisfaction results. A long-term perspective is brought by the ESG people. In the past, our company's all-company formal corporate social responsibility framework was really from the top down. But because our agenda is too demanding in terms of contradictions to manage, we moved away from top-down consistency all the way from headquarters to regions to local operations.

A team of highly trusting stakeholders would have a greater ability to reconcile the different agendas of profit, people, and planet to make something consistent. There is no easy way. Either you go fast on profit, and you do only this and that, or you take more time and are more holistic. It's a simple principle of conservation of energy. Here I mean the energy of people.

A team of bridging leaders could reconcile those competing agendas. Instead of having people focused on short-term results but in a very narrow way, knowing what the others are doing would be a way of

“High-trust teams of bridging leaders would have a greater ability to reconcile the competing agendas of profit—people—planet.”

achieving something more sustainable, more holistic, more interconnected, addressing all the complexities.

NILI

Your comments take me back to the idea of corporate structure. It's said that the corporate structures that we have today came out of the Industrial Revolution and are designed for the heavy industry that we used to have, whereas today the soft side matters too. It's not just the production. It's the service and the people. Also, for a higher and higher percentage of companies worldwide, it's what we call the intangible value, beyond the stuff that we build and make. Yet, we still have a corporate structure that was designed for a physically heavier economy.

Bruno, when I was hearing you describe the type of structure that you think would be better, it sounds to me like Agile, where you have smaller, malleable teams working on different issues and where sustainability is part of every objective, as opposed to a structure where sustainability is here, accounting is there, and the production team is there. If things were more flexible, with sustainability on every agenda—is that the direction of your thinking?

BRUNO

I've been trained in the Agile method because we use it to restructure some of our businesses. What I see, however, is that there is a risk with this method. You say, we are going to build a house, little by little, not by making the big plans and starting with a clear view of the end results; we will build it by working. However, at some point, you still have to ask how much cement and how many bricks you will need, you still have the reality of the physical time you need to get the supply of bricks. While the idea of Agile is good, what I see increasingly in the corporate world is the temptation not to make choices because the world is so complex. So, we start by building a house but eventually it may become a boat or a plane!

Because the world is changing so dramatically and so quickly, corporate leaders don't want to make a big bet on ordering bricks to build the big house and then tomorrow, or in three years, we no longer have big

houses. The Agile method is legitimate from the standpoint of corporate leaders and enables an effective use of resources. Nonetheless, you still have to connect with the realities, and you still have to make choices. I think that corporate leaders, more than ever, must make choices. Choices on the priorities. Choices on the time they will dedicate to those priorities because in no time, there's no trust. For me, that calls for a major change in corporate leaders' mindset.

Technology can help, but it will not deprive leaders of having to make choices. They are encouraged to say, yes, everything is possible. That's terrible for them and for their teams. We see this in the political world as well, where we have politicians promising everything, even the contrary of everything, to their electors. Only a true bridging leadership attitude in senior people can help to create a space of possibilities.

NILI

Because the world is increasingly complex, it's understandable that people see the risks as being higher and so feel more risk averse. Bridging as a leader helps me feel safer and more confident in making choices, because it enables me to evaluate the risks I'm taking. So, I'll say to people, I'm thinking about making this choice, do you think it's crazy? I ask leaders who are looking at it from different perspectives to see whether I'm missing anything, which is easy to do when you're dealing with complex situations.

BRUNO

For me, this conversation has been really insightful. We spoke about governance, about investors, about stakeholders. Our company is exactly at a point where all those dimensions surface at once. Now we have choices to make. Only bridging leadership can support those choices.

Touchstones

- We need bridging leaders in every sector, including business.
- Trust is the bedrock of bridging leadership, but trust takes time and is difficult to build amid constant change and rapid turnover.

- By bringing together stakeholders with different perspectives, bridging leadership can help corporations to set the right speed of transformation, with a pace that is sustainable.
- Bridging leadership gets people out of their boxes and creates more dynamism and possibilities in who can do what.
- A bridging leader needs others who are willing to criticize, to present counter-perspectives, not flattery. Unless you are aware of your limits, you don't feel the need to bridge.
- Even in a competitive environment, teams of bridging leaders can connect across organizations to achieve a common vision.
- High-trust teams of bridging leaders have a greater ability to reconcile the competing agendas of profit—people—planet.





Defending Democracy

The Political Lens

Adewale Ajadi and Mark Gerzon

Two gifted storytellers bring the concept of bridging leadership to life through their portrayals of bridging within the political terrain. Mark Gerzon is the founder and president of the Mediators Foundation in the USA. He is a key architect of the field of global leadership and an experienced mediator in high-conflict zones. Mark's books include *Leading Through Conflict* (2006) and *The Reunited States of America: How We Can Bridge the Partisan Divide* (2016). Adewale Ajadi is Chair, Ethnocopia, Ltd. and is the author of *Omoluwabi 2.0: A Code of Transformation in 21st Century Nigeria*. He led Synergos' efforts to launch the State Agriculture Partnership for Nigeria, with the state governments in Benue, Kogi, and Kaduna.

Coming from worlds apart, their stories focus on very different problems and aspects of politics. Adewale tells of struggles around natural resources and agriculture in Nigeria and the Niger Delta, while Mark recounts a story of bridging between Soviet and Hollywood filmmakers during the Cold War. They find common ground in a shared conception of bridging leadership and its political value for the greater good, regardless of issue or locale. Universal in concept, bridging leadership is culturally adaptive in application.

Their conversation enriches themes from earlier chapters. The coupling of hard and soft is one such theme; listening is another. For bridging leadership to have purchase in practice, kindness and empathy must go hand in hand with a willingness to assert and stand one's ground, to disagree and accept disagreement. Understanding where and why we disagree requires deep listening and is a powerful springboard for collaboration. Deep listening is a layered activity—listening to what is said and how, noticing who speaks and who stays silent, “listening” for what is left unsaid, observing patterns; in short, listening for metamessages.

Sparked by their experiences of the ills of partisan politics, wherever it occurs, the authors show why bridging leadership is critical for a free and representative political culture. Their conversation goes beyond

electoral politics to consider the wider sphere of human social relations where dehumanizing attitudes can damage people’s wellbeing. For them, bridging leadership is the path not only to the evolution of democracy, but to the wellbeing of humanity and the earth itself. On this note, they bring Part 1 to a bold and hopeful close.

Chong-Lim Lee and Shirley Pendlebury hosted this conversation.

“When I first heard the terms “bridging leader” and “bridging leadership”, I realized that’s what I was doing ... it helped me understand what I’d been doing.”

CHONG-LIM

For these interviews, Mark has crafted a few questions that may help to prompt the conversation. So even though you know this question, Mark, I’m going to start with you: When did you first encounter bridging leadership and what impact did it have on you?

MARK

In the mid-80s, I was working on a project between the Soviet Union and the United States, two nations with nuclear weapons pointing at each other which could destroy the Earth during the Cold War. When I met Peggy Dulany and first heard the terms, bridging leaders, and, bridging leadership, I realized that’s what I was doing. It was a frame of reference for what I was doing. It was comforting, and exciting—but also humbling because I realized that I had a lot to learn about being a bridging leader. I was trying to do it instinctively to solve a problem, nuclear annihilation. So, I was very grateful to have found a global community where I could learn more about what it means to bridge.

ADEWALE

I first heard the phrase “bridging leadership” when I met John Heller in London. I think it was about six years ago, in 2015. I was waiting to meet some people from Synergos in the lobby of a hotel in London. This gentleman walked past, and I don’t know why but his presence was attractive in the sense that he seemed to be comfortable in his own skin. He came up to me, we started talking and in the brief conversation without seeming to recognize me he said, “Adewale you’re waiting for me,” and I said, “John.” And from that conversation, the concept of bridging leadership came up. That was my first introduction.

I remember going into our workshop with Synergos, between Synergos and a Nigerian consultancy. I was very skeptical because it seemed that in the exercise of bridging leadership, those that were there were allowing people who did not have the same integrity to run rings around them. So, I was skeptical about bridging leadership from the get-go. I came from a tradition of adaptive leadership. I was skeptical, and I was very reflective about whether bridging leadership had any purchase in practice.

It remained that way for quite some time until years later I met you, Mark. Your expression of bridging leadership instantly connected with my own value system. I became more excited about it. That was when I got inspired about bridging leadership.

MARK

I was equally touched meeting you, Adewale, in Namibia. We were on the same channel about bridging leadership. We both had recognized independently on different continents that, if we don't bridge, we end up with bullies ... with demagogues. We both felt that bridging leadership is the critical ingredient to having a free and representative political culture. We had a shared understanding that bridging leadership involves kindness, empathy, vulnerability, and inner work. But it also requires a kind of fierceness because the stakes are very high. If we don't bridge, eventually we fight—and we pay a big price when we fight. After all, we wouldn't be having this conversation or working together on this if there were no obstacles.

ADEWALE

The main obstacle I see, especially in Nigeria, is that we confuse understanding with agreement. We don't listen enough, we don't listen in layers, we don't listen in depth. And if we do not listen in depth, we listen to the first stage, to the point where we know the facts that we want to put forward and that are easily sorted out. But you know, when we listen and empathize with those we disagree with, then our disagreement becomes clear. Clarity and understanding why and where we disagree, in order for

“ When we make anybody less than human, we make all of us less than human. ”

us to find ways to collaborate, where we can, and to give each other space where we disagree—that is very powerful. Across the world, we specialize in dehumanizing the other. We choose those that we find our affinity with. And we use that affinity to make the other person less than human. When we make anybody less than human, we make all of us less than human.

MARK

I agree with you that a major obstacle to bridging is that we don't value human life equally. That takes the form of dehumanization, which means believing, "My life is more valuable than yours." In America, we built our economy in part through dehumanization, through slavery and the expropriation of the land. So, bridging leadership actually requires profound inner work regarding our cultural lineage. Bridging leadership is about people having equal value and all having part of the solution. Bridging is based on the premise that we all have a piece of the answer. We all have something to contribute and our own dignity. Finding a solution that enriches *all* of our lives and the *whole* community is the absolute opposite of dehumanization.

“Bridging is based on the perspective that we all have a piece of the answer.”

ADEWALE

Across the African continent, we have over 3000 ethnic groups. They have spent generations distinguishing themselves from one another and fighting for resources. And in the fight for resources, they've spent a long time perfecting the skill of dehumanizing the other and, in that way, we have built something that eroded trust, fundamentally. If you bring it to West Africa, to my own country Nigeria, and you look at why we have a country 60 years old, formally, that is still struggling to become a nation, you start to see that the seeds for this were planted in the transatlantic slave trade, where we sold our brothers and sisters, participated in the kidnapping of other humans, or ignored the kidnapping of neighbors, and allowed strangers to take them away. That eroded trust not just within the community, but beyond the community.

So, with a country called Nigeria that was created by colonialism, you get into the big problem of trust. We have a minus zero trust in this country,

with over 200 ethnic groups with a history of conflict and competition with each other. For us to become a nation, for us to live up to the promise of the possibilities of our engagement, for us to become the fullness of the potential for our children and our children's children, we have to create a kind of space where we honor each other, and with respect, disagree with each other through understanding, rather than through lack of it.

In 2016, we had this great summit, where we brought together all our stakeholders on a beach in Lagos. It was playing with the kind of complex challenges I've facilitated before. So, we just said, "Okay, let's bring everybody together from the three states where we are working and bring them out of their own comfort zone."

The backstory is that in 2016, while I was working for Synergos as a country director in Nigeria, we had just started a project called the State Partnership for Agriculture. It brought together stakeholders from three states in the north-central part of Nigeria, ostensibly to start discussing how they could work together to change the agricultural system. But there were embedded conflicts across the different states. The one they weren't talking about but which was going to prove to be a deciding issue in my country, was the conflict between herdsman and farmers. Pastoralist herdsman drive cattle across the country, from the north from the Sahara down to the coast. And often that means they are in conflict with farmers because of the cows going through the farmlands and destroying crops. Or they fight over water tables and access to water. And these lead to a lot of people dying.

At that time in 2016 nobody had anticipated that this problem would become the huge national problem that it has become today. But I reflected on a project I had led across the Horn of Africa, across eight countries, developing a strategy for pastoralists, from Djibouti down to Uganda. It was the first project that was a crowd-sourced strategy for something called CEWARN (Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism, a cooperative initiative of member countries of the Inter-governmental Authority on Development, IGAD). Combining the skills of facilitation and the critical skills I was learning about in Synergos and listening, I went back to Gates and said, "Look there is a deeper issue that nobody is addressing, and we can

“We were able to anticipate this crazy conflict because we were listening ... to what people were leaving unsaid.”

anticipate the issue by a few years. We need to look at the potential conflict between herdsmen and farmers.” Gates was skeptical. I think everybody was skeptical about us doing that work because nobody saw the possibility that the conflict could become so amplified.

But I think that we, the team that I worked with in Synergos, made credible inroads through listening and preparing a policy brief, because of bridging leadership. We were able to anticipate this crazy conflict by a few years because we were listening to the metamessages: the system reflections, what people were leaving unsaid on the table, what we were observing in the patterns. It is one of the most profound examples of bridging leadership that I’ve seen, not that it completely succeeded but we started something that nobody else thought was going to be important.

MARK

Trust was also key in my work, Adewale. Because I was working in Los Angeles with a socially responsible film company, I saw that the Soviets were making films which depicted Americans as devils and the Americans were making films that portrayed the Soviets as devils. Filmmakers were fueling distrust ... fueling hatred ... fueling dehumanization of “the other.” I was shocked and ashamed to be part of that industry. I wondered: *What if we brought Soviets to Hollywood, and we brought Hollywood leaders to Moscow? What if they got to know each other? Might they change their behavior?*

We called our project the Entertainment Summit. And it actually succeeded in helping end the Cold War on the movie screens in the Soviet Union and the United States. A year or two after that project, Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan ended the Cold War. The Berlin Wall came down. Our project played a small but significant part in that major shift. Learning about bridging leadership was exciting for me then because it helped me understand that I was part of something much larger than my project—a vision of leadership that I think the world urgently needs.

CHONG-LIM

Could either of you speak more about how bridging leadership is different from the normal discourse in politics? Mark, you started to talk about how

it brings in the language of trust and, Adewale, you've talked about how it brings a metamessage to have a conversation in a different way. From a political perspective, what is unique about bridging leadership? How is it different from the other approaches that you've seen for social change in this sphere?

MARK

Adewale's and my stories make me think that what makes bridging leadership different is its universality because it is inherently culturally adaptive. Filmmakers in the US and USSR, and farmers and ranchers in Nigeria—those are two *totally* different worlds, two *totally* different problems. But bridging leadership was relevant to both. Literally every story on the front page—whether it's the conflict in Myanmar, the distribution of vaccines in the EU, Vladimir Putin repressing protests in Moscow, fights between Democrats and Republicans in Washington—bridging leadership could be useful in *all* these situations. Unless we work together across the differences that we have, we'll tend to make things worse, we'll miss opportunities.

When we operate from low trust, we prevent ourselves from finding optimal solutions. That's what makes bridging leadership special: it's culturally sensitive, and that's key.

Let me share a metaphor: When we build a bridge across a river or a bay, we need to find two solid places on both sides to anchor it. *The foundations on both sides of the river aren't the most dramatic, the actual bridge is the showstopper, the photo op.* But the foundation is that deeper, often invisible work that makes the bridge span possible.

Bridging leadership sees that, and a lot of other approaches don't.

ADEWALE

My people, the Yoruba people of Nigeria, say nobody claps with one hand. You have to bring two hands together to clap. You know, when you really look at it, why politics always eschews bridging is because we have presented it as a winner-takes-all system. And in a winner-takes-all system, we all lose.

“ Unless we work together, we'll tend to make things worse. We'll miss opportunities.

“ The foundation is that deeper, often invisible work that makes the bridge span possible.

In my country, a country that is yet to become a nation, it is critical that we do not have the kind of partisan politics where whoever gets power, does so to the exclusion of the other, and does it in such a way that he does not think that the other's views merit action. That sets up a situation where, once the voting has finished and the winner is declared, the opposition starts to discredit all the new government does, both good and bad. Not working together on solutions for the country, the opposition starts acting for its own sake.

The country is only better when you can use the brains of everybody rather than the brains of one section. Because what happens for the next four years is that one part of the country spends all the time trying to undermine everything the other one is doing and characterizing it as the worst. And that's such a massive waste.

If you look at the country, where we have over 200 ethnic groups, and imagine the politics following ethnic lines (which it does across the world to one degree or another), then you see how power and opposition have become vested in ancient roots of dislike. The very things and people who should bring the country together lead to the conflicts that destroy it. Every single civil war in the world, especially across the African continent, has been a result of the refusal to find a space in the politics for each other's concerns and reflections. There is nothing greater to bring those together than the concept of bridging.

“In a winner-takes-all system, we all lose.”

MARK

When you said that “When a winner takes all, we all lose,” I think that's a concise and precise summary of the problem. I don't know of any conflict I've ever worked in where that does not apply. It may appear in the short run like someone is winning and someone's losing but, ultimately, we all lose.

ADEWALE

I have a story of my time working in the Niger Delta, for the US government, as someone leading conflict resolution before the 2015 election in Nigeria. The Niger Delta is the source of Nigerian oil, and it's a place of great environmental damage to a place of great beauty. Imagine parts of New

Orleans, the waterways, or Florida Everglades. It's a place of heart-aching beauty. But the human economy of violence pervades the communities there and the communities were constantly in conflict.

Part of my responsibility, funded by the US government, was to make sure that we were able to have the national elections in the three states of the Niger Delta. There was something called the CSO (Conflict Stabilization Organization) in the US State Department. I was working for them to work with young people who were involved in this conflict. One of the most difficult things for me was that I was an outsider. I was from an ethnic group in Western Nigeria. Also, I was a Brit, I had lived in England for about 25 years, coming back into Nigeria to do this job. I was also an outsider in the sense that I had never worked in a voluntary organization, nor had I ever worked for the government. So, I was completely incompetent, I think, in the sense of being an outsider.

One of the most enduring moments for me—this was during the Obama regime—was that I was asked to facilitate a meeting of the US government (with an undersecretary of state from the State Department, an undersecretary of state from the Pentagon, and the head of US command in Africa) with a group of young militants from the creeks who were illegally blowing up pipelines and siphoning oil to make diesel for themselves. And it was an incredible experience because I had to facilitate these people who saw me as the enemy. On reflection, without bridging leadership I would not have survived being the facilitator of a very, very tense meeting between the United States government and these militants. When I came into the room, and I was introduced, the people from the creeks stood up in protest and said, “This man, you are asking to facilitate, is a Yoruba man, is our enemy. You're asking our enemy to be the facilitator of this event.”

In retrospect, now, I remember very clearly that the first thing I needed to learn was, it was not about me. The second thing I needed to quickly work out is that I had to show great vulnerability and sincerity towards them, I had to build trust. I was very fortunate that the person who was chairing the meeting, was this woman, I forget her name, who was the undersecretary of

“ The second thing I needed to learn was that I had to show vulnerability and sincerity ... I had to build trust.

state from the United States, who held the space with assertiveness for them to humanize me, and to engage me so I could do my work.

It taught me two things. One, that when someone asserts, so long as they're not aggressive, it doesn't mean that they're not allowing bridging to occur, that people will respect the sincerity of others, even when we are giving them information they don't like. Also, if you hang in there long enough with your vulnerability and sincerity, people will see your authentic self. That was very powerful for me. We managed to get the information we wanted from them, which helped the US government to support the Nigerian government in resolving part of the issues. It was a very powerful moment of bridging for me, not my personal bridging but the chairperson creating this space.

MARK

Your story, Adewale, helped me understand the difference between collusion and bridging leadership. There was collusion, *not* bridging leadership, between the Nigerian elite and the oil companies to exploit Nigeria's oil for their own benefit. Can you say more about this difference, Adewale? I think if we're going to say what bridging leadership is, we have to distinguish it from collusion. Having witnessed up close one of the greatest collusions in the world, how would you characterize the difference between collusion and bridging leadership?

ADEWALE

Well, I think it's a little bit more complex. I think there's collusion going on a lot. Collusion occurs when you do not allow the space for truth to emerge, where you pretend, because the oil company did not really like the Nigerian elites, they just wanted the money. And the elites did not like the oil companies, they just wanted the money too. Communities also collude with the other companies in ways that do not benefit the greater good. So, anything you do that is just for private benefit is challenging. What dehumanizes other people who don't have access, what creates scarcity where there's abundance, what dehumanizes and ignores the condition of others, that is collusion. Anything that has integrity, that offers a platform

for discussion, dialogue, understanding, and possibly disagreement, that's bridging, where you can decipher between where people can collaborate and where they might not want to collaborate.

MARK

Adewale, you said, "When you create scarcity out of abundance, that's collusion." Perhaps the reverse is also true. Bridging leadership is designed to benefit the many, not the few. Bridging leadership creates abundance out of scarcity.

This happens because of another element of bridging leadership which we have not yet discussed: *systemic thinking*. Bridging leadership is about benefit for the *whole* system. I think that's an important point to make when we look at bridging leadership through a political lens.

ADEWALE

A quick addition, recently a court decision came out of the Netherlands, finding against Shell, the oil company, and finding for farmers in the Niger Delta. But that's still the problem of a few. It will benefit a few people, and those people will play into our saying: One rich man and ten poor people is a poor person because his own is going to be begged, borrowed, or stolen, he cannot enjoy his wealth. When you create abundance for a few in a planet of plenty, you don't solve the problem, you make it worse.

So bridging is, as you quite rightly said, looking at the whole system, making sure that understanding is not just for the parties, but for the entire system, the Niger Delta. Some of its rare species, animals and plants have been decimated. Things that were not known to the world, they've been decimated as a result of that scarcity mentality rather than creating abundance.

MARK

The lesson that I learned when I worked with the US Congress was exactly what you said, Adewale. *When the winner takes all everybody loses*. Because the Republicans had replaced the Democrats as the majority in the House of Representatives, they felt that the Democrats had kind of taken

“ Collusion creates scarcity where there's abundance. Bridging leadership creates abundance out of scarcity.

everything when they were in control. So now that the Republicans were in control, *they* wanted to take everything. But in fact, there was a need for a relationship. For them to realize we're in a long-term relationship between two parties. This American system is basically a two-party system. And it's almost like a marriage. There is a long-term marriage going on in the House of Representatives, between Democrats and Republicans. It was an opportunity to work on the relationship and learn to bridge. But as we can see now, after this has gone on for the past 25 years, they didn't decide to work on the relationship, they decided to double down on winner takes all, as if the other side was going to disappear and be gone after the next election. But the other party's not gone ... and they're not about to disappear. They missed the opportunity of building a real relationship. Instead, they treated politics as a zero-sum game.

I'm trying to apply that lesson with work I'm about to do with state legislators. I'm going to encourage them to pick two or three issues and put them in an innovation lab or what we might call a "bridging leadership laboratory." I'm going to encourage them, for example, to pick issues related to the COVID pandemic. They owe it to their citizens to give them the best possible testing and vaccination programs. That will not happen if they turn it into another fight. Then people will die unnecessarily.

In America it's often been said that partisanship stops at the water's edge. One is never supposed to take partisanship into foreign policy because it puts troops in danger. I feel the same way about the COVID pandemic; our own citizens' lives are being put at risk. The people deserve the best possible bridging solution to the question of testing and vaccination. That's the appeal that I'm going to make: Let's be bridging leaders in policy areas where it's a matter of life and death. My hope is that, if legislators can make headway on one or two issues, it will build confidence and lead to them trying a bridging leadership approach on other issues as well.

ADEWALE

This COVID pandemic is a window into a new world. We cannot afford to go back to where we were. And I think here in Africa is where the last stand

of changing the world must start. We have the youngest population and we have not been as damaged by COVID at the moment. And we can move away from scarcity to abundance. Fortunately for me, I was asked by both the Nigerian presidency and the United Nations to look at moving the country along toward a national compact for its future. One of the learnings that is emerging for me in working on a policy brief is that for us to move as a country, to move from a country to a nation, we need to move from just a representational democracy to a participatory democracy.

What we saw happen in the US Congress on the sixth of January was a reflection of where the winner-takes-all system gets you. In a young country like Nigeria, to build trust and to ensure ownership, people have to stop sitting back and saying, “Let the government do it.” They have to take responsibility for creating the society they want to see. So, democracy itself has to become a practice. We have to be able to bridge to each other. We must not wait four years for an election before we start talking to each other and identify where we agree, where we disagree. We have to take responsibility, the right, to apply ourselves to make change happen.

Ultimately, we have a responsibility in terms of our politics to ensure that our people don’t reduce themselves to warring tribes every time there’s an issue in front of them. We have to make sure that they have a language and a space where they can share reflections and understanding and collaborate with each other. If we don’t do it, our children will not forgive us for handing to them such a toxic world where the winner takes all, where a few people are getting rich, and plenty are poor, and many are dying.

In the African continent, we don’t have the material luxury, but at least we can have humanity. We don’t have wealth, but at least we can have kindness. We don’t have resources, but at least we can have love, the greatest resource. We can build these things. Nigeria is a prototype, and we’re talking about a great African dialogue in the next few months.

“ Democracy itself has to become a practice.

“ We don’t have resources. But we can have love, the greatest resource.

“Bridging leadership is not based on your position or your academic degree. It’s based on how you use the power of your own being.”

SHIRLEY

I’m curious about the role of bridging leadership in what I call democratic citizenship, where democracy isn’t merely about electoral politics but is part of an ongoing deliberative engagement across different groups.

MARK

It’s true: we all need to be bridging leaders. I think the power of the phrase “bridging leadership” is that it makes people aware of what they already are doing in the parts of their life that are working—and what they’re *not* doing in the parts of their life that are *not* working.

Of course, we want politicians to be bridging leaders. But what about us? How are *we* leading? Whether one is a mayor or a police officer, a superintendent of schools or a teacher, or a father or mother—these practices are for *all* of us. Bridging leadership is not based on your position or your authority or your academic degree. It’s based on the power of our own being. And we can use that power in a way that bridges or that doesn’t. Whoever we are, we can build trust—or we can deplete it.

ADEWALE

Bridging leadership is critical for the times we are in. One of the most toxic spaces we have is how we speak to each other in our communities online, how we dehumanize each other. If this is a habit that you’re engaging daily, and it’s part of your character, then you can’t turn it off, and you say things like, “People that you see every day, drink human blood as part of a political elite.” or “If you don’t kill them pastoralists, they’re like vermin.”

These are all things happening in our world today. It’s what happens to us when we refuse to wear masks, because we think that it doesn’t matter and what matters is that *we* feel all right. It’s what’s happening when we buy vaccination as rich nations and we don’t consider poorer nations, and do not realize that buying all the vaccines doesn’t make us immune because this is a global pandemic.

So, Mark, there are very powerful ways in which you talk about the habits of democracy that are the habits of humanizing other people, humanizing their voice, making yourself vulnerable and humble enough to

recognize there is something that can be learned from creating a space for all, and that we are all responsible for it. It's not something that is special for the political classes, or the political powers or the political elite, but for all of us to engage.

Until we create a world where the continuous improvement of democracy is not about elections, but about learning the lessons of moving from a negative feedback loop to a positive feedback loop, we will just end up back to where we're at today, which is not very good.

MARK


My hope, my vision for bridging leadership is that there would be states within the United States or countries within the world that became powerful prototypes for bridging leadership. The Netherlands, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Namibia, Denmark—sometimes a country will do something amazing and the whole world notices how well it worked. How did the Dutch turn a dangerous flood zone into one of the most productive areas of the country? How did Costa Rica end up not wasting precious resources on an army? How did Country X manage to have a virus-free culture within a matter of months?

Behind positive stories like these, one often finds bridging leadership. Bridging leadership is like the yeast in bread. It's always there when something turns out well. I hope that we have more and more of these prototypes, whether small or large. The proof, after all, is the bread itself.

My hope is that Homo sapiens is a learning species that can say, "Ahhh, that works well. Let's try that!"

ADEWALE

In my own ethnic group, the Yoruba people, your life is a contract between your ancestors, yourself, and posterity. The question of what legacy you leave your posterity is critical, especially in the African continent and the context of the world. I believe that if you can get Africa to exemplify the possibilities of the future, you can change the world, primarily because it's the youngest continent, and it's a continent that has the least to lose, considering its current economic endowment.

 When you explore stories where something works out well, you often find an element of bridging leadership.

“ Bridging leadership turns democracy into a dialogue leading toward excellence... toward continuous improvement.

These are the things that I see and hope for. Firstly, I see the possibility of using the new African free trade zone as a catalyst for new economics, economics that is about abundance not scarcity. This will guide our politics very powerfully. If the world becomes a place where the economic forecast is in everybody having equal opportunity to be the best possible person they can be, and exemplifying the purpose of their life, then we have a greater chance of creating a world where there are not just winners and losers. We need to create a space where everybody can be a winner, but this doesn't mean that everybody must have the same things. Different things matter to us.

Second is to turn democracy into a dialogue leading toward excellence, which is a continuous improvement dialogue. In a dialogue, you're always talking and listening to people. And if democracy is the practice of exchanging ideas, of exploring ideas, of learning from mistakes, of listening to each other, rather than a practice of winners or losers, then we have a chance to move towards a better world. The final thing is the recognition that we can create social interactions that can build trust.

Touchstones

- Bridging leadership maximizes equity, promotes empathy, and balances love with truth.
- By fostering bridging leadership, trust is built locally and internationally.
- Bridging leadership humanizes conflict and fosters collaboration.
- Bridging leaders can foster vulnerability and trust in political spaces.
- Collusion is dissolved by bridging leadership.
- By practicing bridging leadership, leaders can replace winning with cooperation, collaboration, and progress.
- Bridging leadership is designed to serve the many, enabling democracy to work.
- Bridging leadership turns democracy into dialogue and empowers collaborative change.



Part II

From the Ground Up: How Bridging Leadership Works







Bridging Leadership in Practice

Overture to Part II

Len le Roux and Chong-Lim Lee

Len le Roux recently retired from Synergos, having served the organization for 15 years, mostly in relation to work around bridging leadership. As a member of the original bridging leadership working group and the Synergos Senior Fellows program, Len has seen the approach develop and grow. He has provided leadership and support through most of the stages of the development of bridging leadership at Synergos.

Chong-Lim Lee is Synergos' Senior Director for Global Programs. She has helped establish Synergos' programs in new geographies, many of which are spotlighted in this book: with the Bhavishya Alliance for child undernutrition in India, with teams in Ethiopia and Nigeria for improved agricultural livelihoods, and in Bangladesh for the care, protection, and development of young children.

Len and Chong-Lim first worked together for the launch of Synergos' public health leadership program in Namibia, where bridging leadership re-emerged as an organizational approach.

In times of crisis the wise build bridges; the fools build dams.

(African proverb)

In 1997, at a Kellogg Foundation seminar on Leadership and Civil Society, Peggy Dulany, the founder of Synergos, started exploring the notion of “bridging individuals”, “bridging organizations” and “bridging leadership.” She argued for a shift in civil society leadership that recognized the importance of trust as a “key characteristic for bridging”, and of “chains of trust as essential prerequisites” to solving complex, multifaceted problems. This was all woven into a theory of change—the proposition that with the complexity and interconnectedness of the world, it was increasingly difficult for any one group to achieve a goal by itself. A new style of leadership needed to emerge to build multistakeholder partnerships, a leadership style that encouraged bridge building.

Part II lays out a series of stories of what bridging leadership looks like in practice. The conversation between authors continues, and eleven more voices are added to the chorus. Whereas Part I explored the concept of bridging leadership through six different lenses, Part II focuses on six issues that call upon the wise to build bridges: wildlife conservation, sustainable agriculture, conflict zones, youth innovation, inclusion and social justice, and child development and education. Bridging leadership in practice is attuned to geography and cultural setting. The stories in Part II come from four continents—Africa, Asia, and North and South America. Some tell of local initiatives, others span across regions, and one—about coffee—has global reach.

In our overture to Part II, Len shares some of his experiences of bridging leadership and sketches a four-piece frame for how it plays out in practice. Chong-Lim then picks up the baton to trace recurring themes and reflect on how they fit the frame.

Len: Reflections on practice

The quality of human life on our planet is nothing more than the sum total of our daily interactions with one another. Each time we help, and each time we harm, we have a dramatic impact on our world.

(Desmond Tutu)

My first encounter with bridging leadership was observing my father. Although I would never describe him as being a politically progressive thinker, what to him was always important was taking a just approach to life. Living and growing up in apartheid Namibia (then South-West Africa and a part of South Africa), he made a conscious decision to create spaces to bring communities and people together to engage with one another, an uncommon thing in Walvis Bay in the 1960s and 70s. It wasn't huge convenings, it wasn't a political movement or anything like that. It was based on relationships, on friendships, on building a space of trust. An example was opening up the Boy Scout movement in Walvis Bay to make it a non-racial venue for young people to engage. My father would never have considered himself a bridging leader. It was just something that came to him. And it rubbed off on me. As I progressed along my journey in life, in the path I've taken, I've very often found myself in the situation of asking: What does it take to bring people together to share different perspectives, and how do we go about doing that?

Stories from the field

My more formal introduction to bridging leadership was in about 2000 when Synergos started exploring the idea of a bridging leader. Peggy Dulany coined the term, which became prominent in the organizational vernacular of Synergos in the early days. Then it dropped off a little as the organization explored other things. But it resurfaced. This led to a decision to set up a working group to explore the idea of bridging leadership, and what it meant in different societies. The centerpiece of the research was a series of in-depth interviews, in different geographies, with community leaders who were able to galvanize communities, bringing people together from different parts of a community to act collectively in the interests of their community, and not getting caught up in divisive politics. Through selected case studies, developed from the interviews, the group identified the commonalities between these people who were able to serve as bridges. In that process, we also came across organizations that were bridging. They often fulfilled the role of being a safe place for people to engage with

each other where they could put aside their anxieties, their fears, or their differences, and move forward in solving some of the problems they were encountering in communities.

Two decades later, the conversations in this book confirm and enrich many of those early findings. Take the matter of trust, for example. The early research, the conversations collected here and my own experience all show how genuine bridging requires trust, not only between individuals, but also between groups and organizations. I'll share a story from my own work experience that spotlights how trust enables bridging and collaboration.

Before joining Synergos, I worked with the Rössing Foundation, a corporate foundation that is separately registered as a nonprofit. The majority of the board were independent members, who came from different walks of life. Right from the outset, this organization enjoyed the trust of the private sector because of its corporate nature. It also enjoyed the trust of the NGO sector, where I knew a lot of the key actors in the NGO community, and we built up trust and a relationship with them. And we had built up a relationship with the liberation movement, SWAPO, in exile. That's where I first met Nahas Angula. We were trusted enough that I was invited, prior to independence, to a conference in Lusaka, where SWAPO was preparing itself for the education sector, what changes they would make and how they would go about it.

That relationship went on right through the early years of Namibia's independence, when we at the Rössing Foundation, because of our institutional credibility and reputation, became a funding conduit for the donor community, as people were nervous of putting funds straight into government or other organizations that they were unfamiliar with. So, we also became a trusted partner in that way. We could create spaces where people could come together and have these open conversations around language policy, around curriculum, around a whole range of things that we felt it was important that people were debating and engaging in prior to any change being made in the early years of independence.

By the time I joined Synergos, I had those connections. Connections are really important. But for me what is critical in bridging leadership

and how it plays out in practice is about depth. It's about taking things deeper. You intentionally go deeper into understanding yourself and how you appear and present yourself in a challenge. You also go deeper into understanding by looking at the challenge in a more systemic way and in a way that enables you to connect personally with the challenge. And not trying to patch it up with the quick fix. I think of the quick fix as the old army biscuit. Here's why.

During his term of office as prime minister, Nahas Angula and I started an initiative around nutrition. As an old soldier, his approach was to give out fortified biscuits. He said, "Oh, biscuits, we can solve the problem with biscuits. And do you know what, we can actually get youth employment because young people can make the biscuits. Yes, we can buy that. So, we solve the two problems. We are addressing nutrition and we are creating employment opportunities for young people." To enable him to see beyond the quick fix, I arranged an extensive journey, bringing in people to share the complexity of nutrition with the prime minister, and for him to grasp what a multisectoral challenge it is. He came out of those series of meetings—we call them learning journeys—and he said, "You know, we need to build an alliance of actors across different sectors: private sectors, into government departments, NGOs, church, academics. We need to build this alliance outside of government. Government must certainly be part of it, but it mustn't be hosted and driven by government." So, his approach was we've got to bridge all these different areas. And that's what we did. We met with individuals, convinced them, brought them on board, and built the Namibian Alliance for Improved Nutrition. That alliance demonstrated, at least in embryo, what I see as the main facets of bridging leadership.

Framing bridging leadership in practice

I see bridging leadership as having four facets or pieces—the individual leader; a bridging organization or collective; a framework; and an approach.

First, there's the **individual leader**. A bridging leader is one who goes about leadership in a reflective way. As a bridging leader, you listen deeply—to yourself and others, working on yourself and how you engage

with individuals or teams. A bridging leader recognizes that social problems arise within systems and that their resolution depends on collective action. A bridging leader builds and nurtures trust to stimulate and sustain effective working relationships among stakeholders whose collective input is needed to make progress in addressing a given social challenge. As I've mentioned, my father displayed some inherent qualities of a bridging leader in the ways he built trust and brought disparate groups together in Walvis Bay under apartheid. On a much grander scale, someone like the late Desmond Tutu was a bridging leader, always seeking. And it's not seeking compromise. Often people think bridging leaders are people who are trying to compromise and get total consensus. It's not about that. You can be quite firm about what you want, what you believe in, and how you go about it, but you do it in a way that is participatory and inclusive. The conversations in this book offer some inspiring exemplars of leaders whose actions, attitudes, styles of interaction, and personal qualities embody bridging leadership.

The second piece is the **bridging organization** (or network or alliance). Organizations that fulfill a bridging role may not describe themselves as bridging organizations. They play a critical bridging role because of how they are positioned and show up in difficult or demanding situations. The Rössing Foundation played an important bridging role in Namibia's transition to democracy. Bridging organizations (or networks or associations) recognize the necessity of collaboration between government, business, and civil society (including a vibrant social giving and philanthropy sector) if the massive and complex social deficits are to be overcome. Bridging organizations enable "bridging dialogue" and forge chains of trust between government and other social partners. They do this to hear the voices of the poor and civil society in both policymaking and service delivery; to protect and expand public spaces where marginalized people can mobilize as citizens; and to convene enabling spaces where civil society organizations and citizens can play a meaningful role in multi-sector partnerships. By intent, Synergos is a bridging organization, one that has also helped to craft

other bridging alliances. The conversations in this book illustrate how organizations and networks have bridged deep divides to build trust and collective action towards a common cause—the conservation of natural resources, sustainable agriculture, LGBTQ rights, quality education and childcare, youth development, to name but a few.

Third, bridging leadership offers a **framework or architecture** for designing the flow of a change process to address a complex problem. The framework has three main segments: ownership, co-ownership, and co-creation. *Ownership* is a leader's personal response to a social challenge, anchored in his/her values, sense of purpose, and societal vision. Coming to ownership is a journey of awareness of oneself and one's environment towards a vision of change. It involves individual leaders coming to understand how they are part of the problem, what role they play in the system where the problem arises, and to come to terms with their role in social change. *Co-ownership* brings together key stakeholders through trust-based relationship building to arrive at a shared vision and a collaborative response. It involves bridging leaders creating an awareness of the importance of collective work and crafts a process of dialogue to build trust and kindle a common response to the issue in question. It invites the group to see new ways of relating to one another and enables new forms of relationships. *Co-creation* is a collaborative response through innovative ways of addressing the issues and challenges. Co-creation covers the work of the collective as they embark on a partnership to bring about change. It includes agreed processes for managing and sustaining collaborative action and accountability. Sustaining collaborative action eventually rests on institutionalizing the efforts and may involve the creation of new institutions or transforming existing institutions to make them more responsive. Together the framework's three segments guide a transition from the self to the system, where leaders journey with other stakeholders to a deep, shared understanding of what's happening, coming up with shared values and a shared vision, and enabling a co-created change to emerge. My story about the Namibian Alliance for Improved Nutrition

gives a glimpse of how ownership, co-ownership and co-creation played out in the formation of the alliance.

Finally, bridging leadership is an **approach or methodology**. The approach is built on four interdependent practices: bridging, inner work, multisectoral partnership, and systems thinking. *Bridging* is a style of leadership—practiced by both individuals and organizations—that builds trust and collaboration among diverse stakeholders to address a systemic challenge. *Inner work* is the work you do on yourself to try to overcome the barriers that are preventing you from realizing your potential, or fulfilling a purpose, or working well with other people to make change. *Partnership* is an integrated effort of different sectors and organizations—government at different levels, civil society, foundations, institutes, NGOs and other social organizations, and private initiatives—working together to solve a problem or explore a new opportunity. *Systems thinking* is the practice of understanding and addressing problems that arise in complex systems. In a system all the parts are interrelated and interdependent, so that changing one part of the system affects other parts and the whole system. This approach allows for multiple entry points into a planned intervention but requires all four practices as part of a process and its design. Keeping all four practices in mind helps you think through all the moments when you convene a group of people to initiate change to resolve a systemic problem. You use bridging leadership as a methodology for designing your actual interactions, whether for a day-long workshop or a series of workshops over a much longer time span. The learning journey I arranged for Namibia's former prime minister was crucial in enabling him to see that undernutrition was a systemic problem that needed the collective effort of stakeholders across the system to solve it.

Bridging leadership is no substitute for politics and citizen action. But if we can engage a representative cross-section of the actors that experience and affect a social problem, begin to perceive the problem anew through each other's eyes, and forge both trust and common purpose despite our many points of divergence, then the complex world of poverty and injustice just might be shifted enough to produce some everyday miracles in the lives of poor and marginalized people.

Chong-Lim: Recurring themes

In true dialogue, both sides are willing to change.

(Thich Nhat Hanh)

I'd like to pick up on these four facets of bridging leadership in practice that Len has described. These facets are interwoven through the Part II dialogues as threads in a rich tapestry, depicting scenes of bridging in different geographies—for example, senior government officials in Nigeria putting their status and titles aside to listen afresh to smallholder farmers' needs; volunteers drawing on a community's skills and resources to construct a bridge in Egypt; and a university-educated project manager in Namibia abiding by an indigenous elder's caution that "young man, what you must realize is your education needs my wisdom."

Bridging leaders as individuals

The contributors illuminate bridging leadership not only through what they say about it, but also through how and who they are; through their being as well as through their saying. Bridging leadership begins with the individual.

Reflection is at the heart of bridging leadership at an individual level. Hisham El Rouby describes how bridging leadership serves as a way for people to realize themselves and so builds how they see each other and possibilities for change. Joyce Malombe echoes this view, saying, "the change has to start with me as a leader, and how I perceive my role and then how I open spaces for other people to exercise their leadership."

Such a re-envisioning of one's leadership and role involves humility. Claudia Cisneros has found in her work amid political conflict in Venezuela that "to be humble at heart is important, to understand your position in the whole conflict and approach with humility, and to be able to listen to the other side for an understanding of their side. One of the things that every human being is looking for is to be recognized." By calling on this perspective, she convinced the Colombian government to understand the

bind that Venezuelan immigrants were in and allow them to enter with alternative identification when official passports were unavailable.

This reflective form of leadership is tough. While leading with humility, a reflective leader also must be prepared to be humbled. From her work leading ambitious community-based conservation programs in Chile and Argentina, Kristine Tompkins shares the learning that “you yourself are being stripped down every day and learning something. Especially if you’re older and you think you know so much—you do have to absorb what you’re learning every day and be comfortable shifting.”

Although a reflective process may result in a reconsidered role and leadership style, Abera Tola Gada and Claudia Cisneros illustrate how others may not even receive you as a bridging leader. In their experiences in Venezuela and Ethiopia, you are first seen by your labels—such as your ethnicity, family, or other affiliations—and must actively work to overcome these identity perceptions. As an additional nuance, Neville Gabriel cautions on the interplay of intersectional identities woven into power dynamics, so that someone who presents as a bridging leader may exert power in a way that excludes or marginalizes some groups. Bridging leadership, in Neville’s view, therefore requires “consciousness of one’s positionality, even though at different times one might be at different places in the power play.”

Bridging organizations

Leadership that is reflective, inclusive, humble, skilled, and nuanced are also themes at the level of organizational bridging leadership. The contributors to Part II have all played key roles within bridging organizations. Some have led in the founding of a bridging organization or network—such as Margaret Jacobsohn, who co-founded Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation in Namibia, and Joyce Malombe who birthed the Regional Education Learning Initiative in East Africa. Others are seasoned leaders within a bridging organization—such as Hisham El Rouby, Abera Tola, and Victor Adejoh of Synergos. Still others are helping to shape new bridging networks—like Olavo Setúbal in Collective Action for the Amazon.

The chapters spotlight the scales at which a bridging organization may conduct its work (local, regional, or global) and illuminate how bridging organizations forge chains of trust between government and other social partners for collective action on a wide range of social issues. Victor Adejoh and Bambi Semroc describe the intentional vision and action required to successfully establish their cross-sector forums, the State Partnership for Agriculture and the Sustainable Coffee Challenge, respectively. For them, bridging between organizations and across sectors goes beyond seeking representation from stakeholders; it involves active strategies to meaningfully bring in government and community voices.

By working across sectors, bridging organizations not only shape a systemic understanding of a challenge, but also reveal opportunities. Margaret Jacobsohn describes a rural resource mapping exercise where participants were invited to produce flipcharts or, if they couldn't write, to use stones and bottle tops. The richest map of all came from members of the indigenous San community in Namibia. Their stone mapping on the ground astounded the formally educated government officials who had no idea that there was so much knowledge in this indigenous community. Bridging organizations can elevate diverse knowledge and provide a forum to connect, thus shifting mindsets and fostering mutual appreciation.

In a changing funding landscape, bridging across sectors revitalizes thinking on opportunities and resources. In East Africa, Joyce Malombe observes that when you bring people together “they start to see possibilities of where they can leverage what they have, and where they can connect with others.” Similarly, Hisham El Rouby describes the collective community contributions of expertise, labor, and materials in Upper Egypt to build a bridge, which the local government had failed to construct for many years. Margaret Jacobsohn describes how communities' reliance on youth to serve as protectors of wildlife creates a different ownership, forged with a common vision in a relationship of trust and respect.

Donor organizations can also play a crucial role in enabling the ongoing work of bridging. Joyce Malombe offers wise counsel from her experience as a senior member of a donor organization: “We all have

distinct roles to play. We, as donors, play the role of connecting” but, she cautions, “unless people themselves are empowered to connect themselves, then when you are out of the picture you are gone” and the network you’ve built ends. As a young philanthropist, Olavo Setúbal reflects on how bridging leadership in philanthropy involves understanding and addressing the dilemmas collectively to make principled choices about the issues to invest in. His reflections dovetail with those of Marina Pfeffer in Part I of the book.

Bridging leadership as a framework

The flow of a bridging leadership change process can be seen in the work of the Part II contributors. Many of their stories illustrate how change begins with a vision. Joyce Malombe had a vision for quality education to be one of the Sustainable Development Goals and, coupled with this, a vision for education leaders from the global south “to have a space at the table.” Esha Husain had a vision for integrating drowning prevention within a holistic package of early childhood care and development, and Bambi Semroc for leveraging success with ethically sourced coffee to rapidly scale up collaboration that addresses major issues within the coffee sector. The formation of such a vision involves inner work or reflection to cultivate awareness and purpose and to place oneself in the system. Olavo Setúbal speaks of the moment of realization when he and other young philanthropists in Latin America found they knew more about initiatives in North America and Europe than they did of their neighbors. This prompted their vision for bringing together young people from the region to commit to joint philanthropic work for the Amazon.

A vision then expands as it is shared with others: Kristine Tompkins describes the importance of holding a vision as a roadmap for people or entities going in the same direction. In her response, Margaret Jacobsohn concurs, speaking of her work in wildlife conservation in Namibia, “It started with our vision, which was very much changed by the different communities, the partners ... it grew.” Relationships of trust and respect among partners foster a vision’s endurance. Bambi Semroc says, “How

you build trust is really critical.” It is this ongoing trust-building that has led her work in the global coffee sector to “progress in moving from thirteen organizations working together towards 160 plus, getting them to co-invest and collaborate on specific issues amongst highly competitive actors.”

This flow from ownership of a vision to co-ownership with partners and stakeholders opens the way for co-creating innovative responses. We see examples in Part II of how the process sets in motion transformative actions—education reforms in East Africa; the Bangladesh government’s adoption of a project for integrated early childhood care and development; and the establishment in Namibia of more than eighty communal conservancies and more than thirty community forests and fish reserves.

While process may seem linear, with a start and finish, Neville Gabriel reminds us that it is never-ending. For him, bridging leadership is an iterative process that will include readjustments, re-strategizing, and changes to the expected outcomes. Joyce Malombe cautions that changing mindsets is not easy; the process of bridging leadership is purposeful and deliberate, and it takes time. In the conversation between Abera Tola Gada and Claudia Cisneros, time features in a different way—in times of violent conflict the process of bridging leadership is especially demanding and risky. In such times, trust-building is more complex, more fragile, and more urgent than during times of relative peace.

Bridging leadership as a methodology

As a leadership style that has been cultivated and put to work on a range of issues in contexts around the world, bridging leadership has developed a methodology and tools for inner work, trust-building, multisectoral partnerships, and systems thinking. Together they lay the necessary ground for addressing complex social problems. For Abera Tola Gada, “knowledge of bridging leadership means you have to equip yourself with its methodologies to be able to respond to a variety of challenges, contexts, and opportunities.” Sensitivity to language is crucial. “Each word you say, each facial expression you show,” says Abera, “has a meaning when you are bringing people together as a bridging leader . . . We have to also go through interpersonal

skill training to learn what to say and what not to say, how body language manifests, and how our language itself influences our engagement with others.” Neville Gabriel recalls how his southern African regional work requires a sensitivity to languages in different contexts: “Not just different languages spoken but language in different social sectors, interests that are different, and ways of engaging that are completely different.”

Victor Adejoh describes some of the tools deployed to reshape the engagement between farmers and government into a collaborative, co-creative relationship where, “as a result, public investment and programs now target the farmers’ real needs.” Journalling, dialogue walks, and role play are among the many tools that can reshape engagement and prompt systems thinking. Margaret Jacobsohn recalls her partner Garth being asked “What do you think is the best tool?” He responded, “. . . my best tools are my ears. Listen.”

Skills grow through practice. Even while sharing the successes and transformations made possible with bridging leadership, these practitioners also speak of the continuous journey it presents at individual and system levels. It involves examining all contingencies, seeking resources, understanding the insights of others, and being attuned to the skills and approaches to bring in.

Discernment is a crucial quality in bridging leadership, discernment about when and how to act, about when to pause and when to push. Hisham El Rouby speaks of “tunneling leadership” as a tactic that leads to the same place as more overt bridging leadership, without attracting harmful attention prematurely.

Along with discernment comes a deep commitment to transformation, to changing things for the better, no matter how demanding the task. As Neville Gabriel reminds us, bridging leadership can’t be reduced to multistakeholder processes; it is “a much deeper life skill and ought to be transformative.”



Bridging Leadership for the Holistic Development of Children

Esha Husain and Joyce Malombe

A relative newcomer to the field, Esha Husain converses with a seasoned bridging leader in education development, Joyce Malombe. Esha focuses on early childhood development and protection in Bangladesh; Joyce moves from a wide global perspective to the drive for inclusive access to quality secondary education in East Africa.

Joyce is a senior program officer and interim program director for the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund's International Children's Education program. Growing up in a rural village in Kenya, she overcame disabilities to attend school and university, earning a PhD from the University of Western Ontario, Canada. Over her twenty-five years in education development, Joyce has held positions at ELMA Philanthropies, the Ford Foundation, and the World Bank. Esha is Partnership Lead for Synergos in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where she leads Synergos' national outreach and programming. Prior to joining Synergos, Esha worked in communications and knowledge management with UKAID, USAID, and Save the Children.

In this conversation, Esha tells how her work on child drowning prevention in Bangladesh led her and her colleagues to advocate for bringing early childhood education, development, and protection under one broad umbrella, with different government departments working together instead of in silos. Joyce's passion for education infuses her many stories about bringing Africa into global thinking about education. She tells of the push for quality education to be included in the Sustainable Development Goals, of the birth of the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) in East Africa, of the roles she plays as a funder using a bridging leadership approach.

Their conversation sparkles with a palpable interest in each other's experience and an openness to learning. They concur that once bridging leadership has brought a critical issue onto the agenda, the issue can

be addressed in a sustainable way only if the government is on board and collaborating groups do the work. Joyce reminds us that a donor's role is not to fund bridging work in perpetuity or to dictate the form of a collaborative venture. It is to support and facilitate. Esha reminds us that inner change is needed for sustained and committed outer action.

Chong-Lim Lee and Shirley Pendlebury hosted this conversation.

CHONG-LIM

In the work you're doing, as philanthropic and development practitioners, you're helping children to reach their full potential so they and their communities can thrive. How did you each first encounter bridging leadership? What impact did it have on you?

ESHA

I had been working in partnership, trying to bring different sectors or conflicting groups together. But I wasn't introduced to any theoretical concept. It was just a focus on collaborative action, collectively organizing events, engaging in collective advocacy. In November 2017, when I joined Synergos in Bangladesh, Bloomberg Philanthropies had been funding community daycare centers for a while, because their research showed that keeping children under five in daycares or creches can help to prevent drowning and so save children's lives. When Bloomberg shifted its funding priorities, they appointed Synergos to help find sustainability solutions for the centers.

We realized that drowning prevention is neglected in childcare and protection. We also saw an opportunity to link two sectors—the child protection sector and the early childhood education and development sector—to bring drowning prevention under the broader frame of early childhood care, education, and development. Our approach didn't explicitly include bridging leadership, although we knew that we had to work collectively, with a common purpose.

I was hearing the terminology of bridging leadership from our global New York office. Then in December 2018, Synergos arranged for me to join an international colloquium on bridging leadership in Manila. In the Philippines, the practice of bridging leadership had been around for a

while. The Team Energy Foundation there, in partnership with the Asian Institute of Management (AIM), had established a bridging leadership center to create new kinds of leaders to meet the challenges of the times.

The high-level colloquium brought together practitioners of bridging leadership, both local and international, from various sectors and tiers of society, including alumni from AIM's bridging leadership training program. That was my first exposure to bridging leadership. I saw participants' outpouring of strong feelings and reflections on the positive changes the training had brought about for them. They spoke of how the process of bridging leadership had triggered an internal change in them, which in turn led to positive outward actions. I got a sense that it had been a spiritual journey for many of them. But I didn't know what actually happened or how the process brought about this change. I picked out nuggets like a journaling exercise and going on spiritual and nature journeys, but it was vague.

I came away intrigued. I wondered what it would be like to have something similar here in Bangladesh. I had my doubts, because of cultural differences. Yet this is something we need. Currently there's a lot of frustration, a lack of purpose. I thought that to give some purpose to the young generation and to those in the driving seats in government, it would be nice if we could bring about a similar change.

Ever since that experience in the Philippines, we have been thinking about how to implement bridging leadership and inculcate its principles more explicitly in our program. I started reading about it and talking to global leaders who use this practice. So, Joyce, I'd like to hear about your experience of bridging leadership.

JOYCE

I was part of the first cohort of Synergos Senior Fellows. This is where I first witnessed the power of people coming from different sectors, working together on a common agenda. What makes things not move forward is everybody doing their own thing, not finding a common purpose, a place where you can converge and move an agenda ahead. With bridging

“Bridging leadership triggered an internal change ... which in turn led to positive outward actions.”

“With bridging leadership, instead of being the one who leads, you facilitate leaders to come together and figure things out.

leadership, instead of being the one who leads, you facilitate leaders to come together and figure things out.

This came alive for me as we at Wellspring started a program to address a gap after early childhood education. What happens after that? We wanted to fill the gap. This was just before the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Improving education outcomes was on top of everybody’s mind. That is where we first started seeing the power of bridging diverse kinds of leaders in this field to really push for access to inclusive, quality education with improved education outcomes. That’s when the whole issue of secondary school arose.

We started mobilizing leaders globally, working with them to figure out the next step forward, asking “Where do we need to be? Where do we need leaders from the global south to be on the forefront of advocating for access to inclusive quality education, rather than focusing narrowly on access to schooling?” We at Wellspring were supporting leaders from across the globe, but mainly from Africa, to have a space at the table, to say what they wanted to do, and how they wanted to do it. We supported leaders to go to Incheon, South Korea, to the World Education Forum in 2015. I went too, not to do the work but to encourage, to give ideas. We all have distinct roles to play. We, as donors, play the role of connecting. We support people to be brokers for children at the local level. A lot of back and forth, finding who is pushing what, where, and bringing them onto the center stage, getting them to different congresses—it all paid off. Quality education is in the SDGs.

“We, as donors, play the role of connecting. We support people to be brokers for children at the local level.

Once the agenda was there, the next big thing was who was going to be doing it? In 2017, we started the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI), a member-driven initiative working to ensure inclusive learning for all children in East Africa. The work has grown around three East African countries (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) with seventy member organizations. Wellspring facilitated leaders to come to the table and bring the issue of access to inclusive, quality education to bear on their activities.

We realized that when we bring together civil society organizations, the only way to make an impact on education is to involve government. If governments are not part of the play, you can make all the changes you

want with little impact. So, we convened a number of sessions with our civil society partners and the government.

That is where our journey began. The power of collaborative, inclusive leadership is phenomenal. It was rocky at the beginning. Everybody wanted to do their own thing. We kept reminding them: “We are here together because of the children. We want to be able to deliver for children so that they can get quality education to enable them to move ahead.” Initially, these leaders didn’t see the point of bringing them together. Now they do. They are organized at the country level, where they have made amazing input on policies around curriculum reform for inclusive education. They are embedded in these processes as conscious leaders who are there to ensure that the government supports quality education for all children, including the most vulnerable who are so often left behind.

Our role has been to bring these leaders together. We provide the space; they bring the ideas and are doing the work. Transformation is set in place, not because we are there, but because they are there. It is they who will bring lasting change for children in East Africa, not us.

SHIRLEY

Joyce, you’ve spoken about the impact of bridging leadership on education in East Africa. Esha, what impact is bridging leadership having in Bangladesh?

ESHA

The concept of bridging leadership is absent, even though different sectors have been working collaboratively. In Bangladesh, there isn’t much funding in early childhood education. But we have an alliance, the Bangladesh ECD (Early Childhood Development) Network, with representatives from international and national agencies. The alliance has worked to introduce pre-primary into the education sector. The government’s education budgetary allocation is one of the lowest in the world. So, the alliance and others came together to advocate for an increase in the budgetary allocation, and there has been a nominal increase.

“Our role has been to bring these leaders together. They are the ones doing the work; they know how it should be done and how to influence their governments.”

“ We facilitated the two sides coming together ... A unifying concept of care helped us broaden the frame in a way that both sides accepted.

I would say the kind of work I am doing is a perfect example of bridging leadership. We come from the child protection sector, which was very neglected, although research has proven that child drowning for children under five is the highest cause of death for this age group. When we first approached the ECD sector to work together as a larger alliance, there was resistance. People are comfortable in their own silos, and there are ego issues involved.

We, at Synergos, worked as facilitators, trying to bring the two sectors (education and child protection) together. We applied a bridging leadership approach to overcome the initial reluctance. We didn't put participants through a training program or sessions on bridging leadership. Rather, we ourselves served as bridging leaders, facilitating the two sides coming together. In the end, we succeeded. The ECD side accepted that child protection is a part of childcare and development. And the drowning prevention researchers, who are international figures, agreed for the greater good of the children to join the alliance.

We had to initiate compromises. Drowning prevention worked with children from ages one to five; the ECD sector focuses on children from three to five. Many thought that bringing this wider age group from one to five years under one umbrella would not fit well because different age groups have different learning requirements. We used a unifying concept of nurturing care to help us broaden the frame in a way that both sides accepted. Under the broader framework of integrated early childhood care, protection, and development, we could design a comprehensive childcare and development program, where experts from both sides contributed. In a related compromise, instead of calling a center either a creche or a learning center, we are calling it a childcare center, which includes protection, learning, development—everything.

This was the design phase where, as a collective, we designed an integrated project framework. Later, we submitted a proposal to the government, where the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs agreed to finance the project to the tune of 80% of the cost, with the development partners financing the remaining 20%.

In the next phase, when the project gets final government approval, we will be working as a technical partner to the government. We want to introduce bridging leadership more explicitly into project implementation and to target government officials and stakeholders at various levels for bridging leadership training. We are currently developing a customized training program for our context, based on the global curriculum that Synergos has applied in other countries.

CHONG-LIM

You've both described how you've been successful in bringing together coalitions of partners to put a critical issue on the agenda. How does the work get done once you've reached this important milestone?

JOYCE

Even when we get things on the agenda, the organizations that we support are used to operating in silos. They resist collaboration because they're competing for the same kinds of funds and want to guard what they believe is their own small unique piece. With RELI, there are about seventy civil society sector organizations throughout East Africa all doing education. Few knew what the others did, or what worked and what didn't. Even when they knew, they did not collaborate, or care, or connect. We had heard from the governments, "We can't listen to ten voices, with everybody coming and saying different things," so governments welcomed the idea of people getting together.

Our role as bridging leaders is to convene people to focus on an important issue. For them to be able to do that, they need to see the importance of each other. We invest time in them coming to know what each of the others is doing. After this process, participants in RELI started visiting each other's programs. Instead of competing, they realized they were doing the same thing, and that some were doing it better than others. Within a year, the competition and wanting to hide things under the table left the place. They wanted to work together as a country. They realized using the country as the focal point was important. Once they were united, they moved on to the region.

“Our role as bridging leaders is to convene people to focus on an important issue. To do that, they need to see the importance of each other.”

Their work on the life skills curriculum has been one of their most successful ventures around thematic areas. In all three participating East African countries, there are committees involving government and civil society organizations working on life skills. They meet at the country level, but they bring their knowledge to the central regional level of RELI.

As a broker, we took the RELI work to other donors and asked, “Would you like to join them—not Wellspring, but *them*—to support them to create the space to enable them to really understand better the dynamics and to connect together and do the work?” Providing space is important, but members of the network do the work. They are the only ones who can move it ahead.

People want to see that coming together gives them power to do what they want to do. Then they can put their energies together and can have an impact because governments are looking for this. We know they do the work, but they need support at various levels to be able to see the value and implement it. It is their network, not ours. They are the ones who have to figure out how the government systems work, how to position themselves. For example, the special needs people from the network went to the Government of Tanzania at the point when they were discussing special needs policy. Their input to that process has left a clear footprint on the policy.

When people see the power of coming together with a clear purpose, you see them rally around children with the prospect of transforming their future, because they are working together for one purpose, although they may not agree on many other things. This is the way to bring change.

ESHA

Joyce, you’re working on a bigger platform than I am, so there’s a lot to learn from you. I like the idea of keeping the movement for early childhood development going. I would like to see the government take it forward. At the same time, we need to build the civil society movement, the networks, to keep the advocacy going. In Bangladesh, there are so many competing issues and sectors, so to make the government realize

“When people see the power of coming together with a clear purpose, you see them rally around children with the prospect of transforming their future.”

how important children's education is, we have to keep the civil society voice powerful.

For two years with the pandemic, the schools were kept closed, not because the government was worried that the children would contract COVID, but opening schools was a low priority for the government. We must raise our voices now in favor of children, to make government realize how important this age group is. The predicted demographic dividend of youth cannot be a dividend if we cannot utilize this age group productively. At the same time, we have a fast-growing aging population, so the ratio of dependence of elderly on the young will be extremely high. The country is also going through a change in economic status from low-middle income status to a middle-income status, aiming to reach high-income country status in 2041. Investing in children's education is important for taking the country forward to that level of prosperity.

So, advocacy for children's issues should be more powerful. I see a role for bridging leadership to keep it going.

The unique component of the bridging leadership program is its inner work element. You have to start from within, otherwise the change is not lasting. I have been in other partnership projects, where collaboration is geared towards one advocacy issue, and then fizzles out. In our team, we are talking about how to make change sustainable, and how to use inner work more effectively for a permanent shift in the mindsets and commitment of leaders who want to continue advocating for children.

Donors are receding because the country is moving to a better economic status, development assistance is slowly decreasing. I see the government coming into this role. But, as I've said, to have children's interests uppermost in the government agenda, we need a stronger civil society voice.

SHIRLEY

You've both mentioned being bridges *between* groups. Do you also need bridging leaders *within* the groups that you build together? How do you support those bridging leaders to develop? And, thinking about lasting change, can children be taught bridging leadership skills?

“ The unique component of bridging leadership is its inner work element ... You have to start from within, otherwise, the change is not lasting.

“You can connect people, but unless people are empowered to connect themselves, then when you are out of the picture you are gone.”

JOYCE

You can connect people, but unless people themselves are empowered to connect themselves, then when you are out of the picture you are gone. We tried to build a membership-led network. Usually when donors introduce something, they run it. As long as they run it, it runs; when they leave, it stops. From the outset we said, “If this network is not led by you, you don’t need the network.”

What has happened is that we have seen people springing from the woods, people who were there but not saying anything, because they had no platform to say anything. The network has bloomed them in a way that was unimaginable. They are young people, enthusiastic and wanting change, but not knowing how to do it. We realized that we would have to do leadership development, supporting the emerging leaders to take the center stage. In this way, we’ve developed the middle leadership.

Most of our programs also work with children to develop their leadership skills at local level, in primary and secondary school. Leadership is part of the whole process. While the programs may not be bridging from school to school, they are producing young leaders who, as they move onward through their schooling or to do other things, are stepping into spaces where they can exercise their skills.

As connectors we must be sensitive. We did a needs assessment of the organizations and the people that participate. Leadership was up there, fundraising was up there, governance was up there. Now as I speak to you, we are running a program on leadership for social transformation with about twenty organizations. There’s also time for coaching. Donors must be willing to invest in the infrastructure to support emerging leaders to get the skills they need to collaborate.

ESHA

In Bangladesh, we have a Children’s Academy with a cultural orientation, but we don’t have a Directorate for Children. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the Directorate of Women address children’s issues. Working with the Ministry and the Children’s Academy, we are starting our

program on producing local leaders. We don't have enough budget, but we have scoping funds to start it. We can seek more funds to extend the work across the country or program areas. But that is not enough, we need a longer-term leadership program that will create this different kind of leadership.

Should we also introduce bridging leadership skills among the children? Absolutely, yes, but who would do it? There is an absence of political will, and the current understanding of leadership is more like a guru; a leader is somebody with many followers; a leader is not an enabler or facilitator and is not an inclusive leader. This concept of bridging leadership is missing, culturally and nationally. So, it has to be introduced in the public school system, and there has to be willingness from the government to do so. If we can change the mindsets at the higher level, then perhaps they will.

That is the answer to all the problems: for future leaders to be a different kind of leader. Not corrupt, not competitive, not looking for self-gratification, but thinking about the society as a whole. To bring about that change, there's a whole gamut of changes we have to address. I don't think it's within our power, but if we stick around for a long time, we can start from our work.

CHONG-LIM

You've both talked about the importance of shifting mindsets. Could you say more about what you found to be effective?

JOYCE

It takes time and purposefulness. This was one program where we wanted people to get the muscle to lead the process themselves. It involved a lot of patience, talking together, bringing in different concepts and issues around leadership for social justice, about the voice of children, about what network members want to see happening in children's lives in 10 years, about what legacy they wanted to leave behind. We focus on helping them to reconnect with their passion. We then enable them to realize that unless somebody leads the process of change it will not get anywhere, and to

“ The answer is for future leaders to be a different kind of leader. Not corrupt, not competitive, not looking for self-gratification, but thinking about the society as a whole.

“ Change has to start with me as a leader, and how I perceive my role, and then how I open space for others to exercise their leadership.

realize that they are those leaders, the teachers they work with are those leaders, the kids in the children’s club they are leading—those children for whose sakes they work—those children can be leaders, too.

This creation of a network of leaders was our sustainability strategy as donors, to leave behind a strong network that can run itself. Give the people that you work with credit. They care about the stuff that they do. They are connected to the stuff they do. But they may not see the big picture. They wake up and find children on their doorstep and that preoccupies them. When you bring them together, they start to see possibilities of where they can leverage what they have, and where they can connect with others. It has taken us almost five years, and we are not there yet. But it is a process that the network members are managing. They came in as program people. Now they are leaders, with a stake in the network.

In changing the game, the change has to start with me as a leader, and how I perceive my role, and then how I open space for others to exercise their leadership. Leaders have a vision. I keep pointing network members to a world where vulnerable children can stand on the same stage with those who have abilities or are rich and be able to contribute their bit without being given the short end of the stick. Our role isn’t to position ourselves; our role is to position the children. For that to happen, we must lead but we must follow in the same way. It is about solving the problem, not about me becoming this or that. It is hard work. I have to keep my eyes on the prize. That prize is children who cannot speak for themselves usually, but whom we can enable to speak if we open the space and support them in ways that can be transformative for us and for them.

ESHA

Joyce, I like what you said about how people started as program people and then they became committed leaders. As facilitators, we created this space for practitioners to connect to the common purpose of working for children. In our country, we achieved our liberation after a bloody war. So, the keen sense of nationalism is there, but sometimes it gets muddled into something materialistic. Through the process we facilitated, participants

came to see that helping the cause of children is also being in service to the country.

We also appealed to sustainability because the donors are eventually going to go. This issue of sustainability was a connective tissue. Program participants got interested in finding out how to attain commitment from the government. Commitment towards children, the feeling of being in service to the country, and uncovering pathways to sustainability—these are some of the things that helped us reach consensus in finding a common platform.

JOYCE

Esha, what you are saying prompts me to ask about ownership of the process. Whose is it? Does it belong to the donors? Or does it belong to the people? And what steps do donors need to take to give the ownership back? It is a power shift, shifting power from whoever is supporting initially to the people who own the process and are the only ones who can sustain it.

What about the other owners in this space of education? The parents, the communities who care about these children, where are they? Leadership and ownership of the process come at different levels. COVID brought the parents in East Africa center stage. In Uganda, for example, everybody was at home for two years. And who was doing the education? The parents. Who is the major stakeholder in education? The parents. So, recognizing that they are co-owners of this agenda, how can they powerfully be connected so that we can really have a holistic approach?

Children “belong” to so many people in this system. For children to be nurtured, we need to bring in different stakeholders. But if there is no leadership, it doesn’t happen. People have good ideas, and they can set up different things here and there but without leadership, recognition, support, and opening up space for collective action, we will just keep talking. And children are still growing while we talk.

ESHA

I agree about parent involvement and community engagement. Demand has to be created from below for the government to make more investments for children. If there is wider awareness among community and the parents,

“The people who own a process of change are the only ones who can sustain it.”

“We have to move away from a single leader concept to collaborative leadership. The work we do is so complex that you cannot be the only authority.”

then the government will cooperate. But many parents in rural areas of Bangladesh don't recognize the value of education. They are dropouts, especially from secondary education, where girls are taken out for marriage or domestic duties and boys are taken out to work and supplement the family income. During COVID, girls were taken out from secondary schools and the rate of early marriage increased by four or fivefold. Secondary school enrollment is dropping. We have to continue to raise public awareness about the importance of education and its life-changing effects.

JOYCE

Yes, and we have to move away from a single leader concept to collaborative leadership. The work we do is so complex that you cannot be the only authority. It's about working together, not just waiting for somebody else to move. It's not one leader, it is many leaders who will open different spaces for each other to be able to deliver for children and their communities.

I think a lot about the African concept, Ubuntu, “I am because you are.” We are because of others. Without realizing the importance of the other person, leadership becomes about me. When I am looking at other people and using whatever resources I have to support working together, then it is about us. This is our common future, and—in our work—the common future of children. This is the idea of children being brought up by a village, with all of us playing our role. People will own the process as long as they see it is about not themselves but about their children, a life-calling for transformation to make this world a better place.

ESHA

I'm curious, Joyce, to know more from you about your experience of working with bridging leadership in the African context. I sometimes wonder if bridging leadership will be popular in our context. We can continue to work in our limited space, in our safe space among the development practitioners. But will it really appeal? Will it be popular among our political leaders or public servants? Their leadership practice is the opposite of bridging leadership.

JOYCE

This is a slow process. Almost everybody thinks of leadership the other way: “I am here to dominate. I am here to tell you what to do.” But there are people who believe in this collective way of leading. In Africa it is part of our culture, although it is often not honored or respected. A leader models a way of leadership and its related power dynamics. From my experience with the network, I say you need a few people like you, Esha, who believe in bridging leadership to model. And as you do, find like-minded people to work with you.

I was surprised at the response when I told the RELI network that their donor funding was ending. One member said, “It doesn’t matter whether there is money or not, what has been started here cannot be stopped by anybody. What we are doing, we are going to figure out how to continue without money, because it directly impacts us, and actually changes the game for us. This is not for you, we are not doing this for you, Joyce, we are doing this because it makes sense.”

Sometimes we find that those who have been selected as leaders don’t get it. But the assistants do get it. So, we are running a four-week leadership for transformation program. The transformation thing is very deliberate. In the colonial systems, we were trained in a particular leadership style, and that leadership was transferred to NGOs, the way our government tells everybody what to do. That will not do here. We are about change, and change involves having the people concerned seeing to the change.

ESHA

It’s inspirational to see a leader like you, Joyce, working on such a big platform at regional and country level, with a high-level presence. We are working in a small sphere. We are starting small, but I have this feeling of going into something big. We’re not a real democracy here so sometimes I get nervous. How will government officials and higher-level government offices receive it? That’s why we must be careful, and humble. Humility is an important trait. I’m like a sponge, willing to learn anything and everything

“Humility is important ... So, I’m like a sponge, willing to learn anything and everything that I can from other sources and other successful examples.

I can from other sources and other successful examples, because we are entering into a new kind of phase.

Bridging leadership is uncharted territory in Bangladesh. But I have real faith in the process. If we can run it for a long time, I’m sure demand will be created. It’s also good for the government. For the development of the integrated childcare program, we need cross-sector engagement, inter-ministerial collaboration, interdepartmental collaboration, and multistakeholder action. Previous collaborative programs, in the health sector for example, were not successful. If we succeed in making cross-sector collaboration happen through bridging leadership, I’m sure there will be higher demand from the government side, even for other sectors. I am hopeful.

JOYCE

There is nothing small in what you are doing, Esha. What you are doing is so big. You just can’t see it yet. When we started talking about bridging leadership more than twenty years ago, there was hardly any opportunity to implement at scale. What we are doing now is big, but it wasn’t planned. I am learning every day. Hearing what you are doing, I’m humbled by your approach. That is where greatness is made, realizing what your role is, realizing that you are serving the system and that you are not the system. It is such a pleasure to have an opportunity as development workers to play the role of transformation for others, to be able to serve. I’m humbled by that. Often, I think this is going to crash. Although it hasn’t always gone the way I would have thought, it has not crashed once.

“Bridging leadership is no longer a side issue. It is *the issue about tomorrow*.

Bridging leadership is no longer a side issue. It is *the issue about tomorrow*. Bridging leadership has never been more important than now, because now everybody seems to be thinking about themselves. Mine is not to control and tell people what to do. That is not leadership. Bridging leadership creates bridges and enables people to see that everybody has a stake. We all must rise up as leaders.

Touchstones

- With bridging leadership, instead of being the one who leads, you facilitate leaders to come together and to find a common purpose and move an agenda ahead.
- For diverse groups to find a common purpose, it may be necessary to broaden the framing of an issue. For example, in Bangladesh the concept of nurturing care led to a framing that integrated early childhood care, protection, and development.
- Once the agenda is there, the next important thing to decide is who is going to do it. Stakeholders in a process of change must accept ownership of the process. Teachers, caregivers, government officials, communities and parents are all co-owners in the space of children's education and development.
- The only way to make an impact on education is to involve government. If governments are not part of the play, the changes you make will have little impact.
- Children, too, can be leaders. Developing skills and opportunities for bridging leadership among children is an integral part of inclusive quality education.





Youth Innovators as Bridging Leaders

Hisham El Rouby and Olavo Setúbal

A seasoned social entrepreneur and a young philanthropist reflect on innovation by and with young people. They spotlight the realities of youth in their regions and consider how bridging leadership can nurture a new generation of social entrepreneurs.

Hisham El Rouby is a Synergos Senior Fellow and Synergos' regional director in the Arab World. He is a man of many accomplishments, with a passion for youth development. Hisham founded the Etijah Youth and Development Consultancy Institute, which creates models of youth development throughout Egypt and the Arab world. Hisham is author of the book *Volunteerism and Managing Volunteers*. Hisham was named as an Ashoka Fellow in 2003.

After graduating, Olavo Setúbal spent two years working at Itaú Unibanco, his family's business in Brazil. In 2019 he served as a volunteer in Primavera X, an initiative that engages children across Brazil in reversing environmental degradation in their territories through a gamified experience. Since 2020, Olavo has been working in Quinto Andar, a leading startup in Brazil. He is a founding member of Collective Action for the Amazon.

Olavo tells of how a bridging leadership learning journey gave birth to Collective Action for the Amazon. He talks of the fledgling group's dilemmas in choosing which projects to support within remote communities. Hisham draws from his abundant store of wise practice stories to illustrate how to resolve some of the dilemmas. The needs of a community can seem overwhelming. Hisham tells a story to show how enabling a community to recognise and use its assets is the route to strong solutions, where the community takes ownership of the change they want to see.

Two vivid images in this chapter illuminate aspects of bridging leadership. One is an image of bridging and tunnelling as different ways of reaching the other side; the other is an image of the Amazon biome as an emblem of interconnectedness.

Mark Gerzon and Shirley Pendlebury hosted this conversation.

MARK

Please would you introduce yourselves and talk about how you first came across bridging leadership and what it means to you?

HISHAM

I'm based in Cairo, Egypt. In the 1990s, I was studying pure mathematics. I love mathematics but felt I didn't want to be in such a small world. So, I started to research around volunteerism and found that all over Egypt there was a misunderstanding about volunteerism. I decided to introduce a new logic where volunteerism is not only for rich people or for religious motivations but could also help young people develop themselves and their communities. With a network across Egypt, I established a smart-matching center that matched a young volunteer's interests or ambitions to an organization's needs. The equation is very simple. For example, if you want to be a filmmaker, I help you find an organization with opportunities related to film-making. I started the volunteer center in 2001 with more than 100 organizations across the region. In 2003, Ashoka elected me as the first Ashoka Fellow in the region. It was then that I first heard the term "social entrepreneurship," although I had already been practicing it. In 2008, I joined Synergos, working in a new program model involving bridging leadership and young people.

OLAVO

I am based in Brazil, where I studied public administration. I'd always wanted to work in NGOs or government. But at university, I decided to change my focus. After graduating, I joined my family business. My father is the only male from his generation who doesn't work at the business. He is a physician, a pediatrician, and is also involved in philanthropy. I sit on the board of his foundation.

Since I'd studied public administration, I saw a huge opportunity to change our family business and bring a view of how business could change society as well. I would really like to join these worlds together. Right now, they are separate, the family business and the foundation in philanthropy.

After I'd joined the family business, Daniela Weiers from Synergos Brazil invited me to participate in bridging leadership work in Latin America. Through Synergos, I did a bridging leadership course. What I really liked about bridging leadership was the inner work—that to understand what we should do in our philanthropy we should look inside ourselves. This resonated with me. When you try to join a lot of actors together, if you don't have your ego well-balanced, you may feel frustrated, and then things cannot go really well in partnerships. This whole concept made a lot of sense, and not just for philanthropy.

In the learning journeys for the course, we realized that we Latin Americans knew little about each other. We knew more about philanthropic initiatives from North America and Europe. We weren't looking at our neighbors, although our realities are similar in many ways. A small group of us started to ask, "Why don't we do something together? Why don't we get to know more of each other's initiatives and about the projects we have in Latin America?" We also started a conversation about a vocation for Latin American philanthropy, about which kinds of work we should pay more attention to.

This was the seed of Collective Action for Latin America, which brings together young people from the region to try to make regional bridges. We focus on environmental projects because we think the environment is a common good. We chose the Amazon as a focal place because the Amazon is a biome that has a lot of Latin American countries, not just Brazil, and because the benefits the Amazon provides are good for the whole world, not just for the region. And we made a commitment to do our philanthropic work together.

HISHAM

I first heard the term "bridging leadership" in South Africa, in Johannesburg, in a Synergos Senior Fellows meeting, where a facilitator was talking about how bridging helps to solve complex issues by involving diverse partners. I told him, "In my region, if you want to solve complex issues, you need to use tunneling leadership. If you are bridging and everybody can see you, you are an easy target, and it will be difficult to reach a solution."

“If you don't have your ego well-balanced, things cannot go well in partnerships.”

“Bridging leadership is the essence of solving complex problems where you need to work with different people, different mindsets, different egos.”

When I started thinking about myself, I realized that although I had good logic and I'd started to help people to discover themselves, civil society to discover the needs of volunteers, and the government to use volunteers, there were a lot of challenges. I needed to work with every partner in a different way—helping the government to let their ego go a little bit to accept that volunteers could help them; and getting NGOs to admit that they couldn't manage volunteers so I could introduce volunteer management training to them.

I'll give you an example. Egypt in 2005 wasn't polio free. They'd tried hundreds of solutions. In a meeting with the minister and the WHO, I introduced the idea of using medical students as volunteers and training them to do a door-to-door campaign, helping people to understand and then vaccinating their children. We recruited about 15,000 volunteers, mainly students in the medical schools. In a few years Egypt had become polio-free. But it had been difficult for a minister to accept a solution coming from an NGO leader and led by volunteers.

I realized that bridging leadership is the essence of this kind of complex problem. You need to work with different people, different mindsets, different egos, trying to help people to let go a little and accept other people in the picture.

Bridging leadership is now one of our main offerings to our established social entrepreneurs, startups, and young volunteers. At different levels, we offer them pieces of bridging leadership to help them think more about their quest, their vision, and how to match their vision to their innovation and their purpose in working collaboratively. For me now, bridging leadership is a container for any growth.

OLAVO

Hisham, what you lived in your practice, I first learned from a theory and examples in the bridging leadership course. I learned that in collective action, you must know what the different actors' needs are, and which needs they can't give up on. For instance, the government needs publicity so if you work with the government, you can provide publicity for them. I

remember an example of a Synergos project in Pará here in the Amazon. Synergos was almost invisible to the public. This was a conscious choice because the government needed to take the credit. Synergos needed to see the impact. But it's not easy to let go of all the publicity and let the government take all the credit. That's why it's so important to know the values that will guide you, because it's a gray zone with no right or wrong.

At first, everything was just a theory to me. Although I started to see how we could promote bridging leadership in my family business, it was hard to get enough organizational strength to change anything there.

Then a group of us who had been on the learning journeys with Synergos started Collective Action for the Amazon, where we try to live bridging leadership in practical ways. We are a group of five people with different views. We also have an implementing partner, as well as Synergos, and the people who are at the receiving end. So, we have to reconcile a lot of interests and needs. Just as we were about to kick off, the COVID-19 pandemic started. It was a big learning curve for us not to let the project die. Now that everything is coming back, maybe we can live bridging leadership more vividly.

HISHAM

I want to touch on bridging leadership and the younger generation. When I started this idea of volunteerism for development in Egypt, my ego was very high. "This is my idea," I thought, "everyone who wants to start this kind of work must consult with me." For the first four or five years, I felt mad if I heard of somebody starting something without consulting me. Gradually I realized that if I wanted this idea to be replicated on a bigger scale, I needed to let go. The same happens with every young innovator. In very early-stage innovation startup teams, they have the same attitude. I can manage this with them, helping them to understand themselves and learn that letting go is much better for an idea than holding it for yourself. Anyone working with young people needs to understand that this is nature. When a young person has an innovative idea, especially if it's successful, it's natural to feel "This is my idea." Don't judge young people when they have this ego.

Try to understand them and then start introducing the idea of bridging leadership—of letting go, listening, collaborating, and all the other bridging leadership skills.

MARK

Hisham, when you spoke about first hearing the concept of bridging leadership, you said your approach was one of tunneling leadership. Can you talk about the difference?

HISHAM

In our culture, when you want to achieve something, you need to be hidden until you reach a strong point where everybody can see you. If you start where everybody can see, you are easy targets for other interests. My mother says if you want to accomplish something you must first work hard for yourself and don't involve others till you reach your goal. Tunneling will help you reach your goal but it's more effort. Building a bridge, I think, is easier than building a tunnel. But it is the same concept of reaching out to others. The difference is that when you are not observed by other stakeholders, by people thinking in a different way, you are not a target for them. For example, if you are a small group of leaders who are bridging and the government realizes this, they can kill your idea at the outset. So, this was my first reaction, if I want to achieve something I need to first work hard internally.

“ Tunneling leadership and bridging leadership are part of the same concept. Both are ways to reach the other side.

OLAVO

At first, I thought that tunneling leadership was specific to your reality, Hisham, but as I reflected, I realized that this makes sense here in Brazil. In the Amazon, it's dangerous to be an activist. We see the government as an important actor and promoter for our project. If we want to be scalable, we need to join with the government at some point, so we want to be noticed by the government. But we are afraid of people who are taking down the forest and doing other bad things.

HISHAM

It's about timing and tactics. It's using a tunnel to work closely with your partners in a modest way until you need to partner with the government

and for them to know about your work. But tunneling and bridging are part of the same concept and purpose. You can bridge using a bridge or through a tunnel. It depends on the timing and on your partnerships.

But can we talk more about young people in your country and mine?

In my region, MENA (Middle East and North Africa), young people are frustrated. It's a young region. Seventy percent of the population are young people. There is a view that they are the source of problems. I see them as a source of hope and as part of a solution. This can put a lot of pressure on young people, especially those from poor families. They may think: "I cannot be an entrepreneur because this is for elite people. Myself, I need to work hard just to earn some money to get food and clothes." And if you are a young woman, you think that to be an entrepreneur you must be a man to face society. So, lots of things put pressure on young people in this region.

This is why we are bringing bridging leadership as a way of helping them to realize themselves. We start by helping them feel the importance of building the ways they see themselves and each other, then we move towards innovation. Our model differs from Ashoka, Schwab, or other models of leadership and social entrepreneurship in that we're not only investing in established social entrepreneurs or leaders. We work with established entrepreneurs, very early startups, and young people to create a cohort of the three categories working together, learning from each other.

When I became part of the Ashoka fellowship, I heard the theory that only five people in each one million become social entrepreneurs. If I am a young person and I hear that, I conclude I will never be one of the five in a million. I realized this could not give hope to young people. So, why not allow young people to work as volunteers, or closely with a social entrepreneur? When you allow young people to be part of social enterprises, working with social entrepreneurs and startups, many turn out to be social entrepreneurs in the making. Now from our network, ninety percent of new Ashoka Fellows every year are either young people or startups. We must not get stuck with the theory that social entrepreneurs

“ We must open the gates for young people to be part of social enterprises, working with social entrepreneurs and startups. ”

are rare. We must open gates for young people to experience social entrepreneurship, even if they finally decide it's not for them.

What about young people in Brazil and Latin America?

OLAVO

This is a big theme here right now because we have the largest youth population in the history of Brazil. It's a dramatic moment. The pandemic has made everything much more difficult, especially for the most vulnerable families. They can't get decent jobs. Most jobs they can get are really low-skilled.

Within the Amazon project, we take a close look at young people. Most of those who live in rural or remote areas try to get away in search of a better life elsewhere. This is bad for the culture. Youth who leave sometimes never return, and some who go away really wanted to stay in their home area, but they don't know what to do there. When we give opportunities for them to develop something, it's not just an opportunity to thrive and get better jobs and a better standard of living, it's also preserving the culture of their community. They are close to their grandparents and parents and can help to keep the traditions going. Already we've lost so many people who left their communities and didn't get connected enough to pass on the ancient knowledge. I'm not just talking about indigenous communities, but also of people who just live far away from the city centers.

This is an important issue that poses big questions for philanthropy. What should we choose to support in this kind of community? Is it a decision we should make? How do we choose which dimension of this community we will help? Should we support what they want to build there, even if we think it's not going to succeed?

We have a lot of these dilemmas, especially when we're talking about indigenous communities. I'm just starting to understand these issues. As a philanthropist, it's not just about me and what I want. Bridging leadership helped me a lot with this. I have these means and these opportunities, and this goal, and I want to join people together. So, I have this to put on the

“Bridging leadership in philanthropy involves understanding and addressing dilemmas collectively.”

table, what else do we have here in this group? Then together we decide what we think we should do.

In our group, we spent the last year and a half deciding which project we would help. We decided to help a project with the Xingu indigenous community, one of the most traditional communities in Brazil and the first to have their land protected by the government, back in the 70s. There is a project of creating an enterprise for this indigenous community to produce a special type of honey that comes from native bees. It's not just about the honey, it's also about pollination and the preservation of the forest.

When we started, we just chose this project. But our partner, at Connexus, reminded us of the kinds of dilemmas we must face: For how long will we support the project? How far will we go with it? What does this community want and what do we want? We know more about what we want now. We're going to meet the community leaders soon. One specific dilemma is about whether we choose to work with this community or another community. At first, we were open to everything. We just wanted to understand what the main need was for the Amazon. They have a lot of needs, and we were presented with lots of projects. Everything presented was a problem in need of a solution, but not everything moved us. We realized that for this standing forest economy to be really inclusive, entrepreneurship was something that touched us. This presented another dilemma because we might have strong technical reasons why we should do something, and yet have our hearts drawn to other projects not as technically fundamental. For example, we had a good opportunity to get matching funds to create a platform where entrepreneurs could sell their products. Prospective partners were ready with a lot of money, and we were going to put up more. The project was powerful and could make a lot of difference. But it didn't move us.

HISHAM

Allow me to share with you some ideas. When you start to work in a community and you focus on needs and problems, this gives you a specific picture. I encourage you to consider the assets inside the community, so

“When you work in a community, focus on its assets as well as its needs and problems.

“With bridging leadership, you help people discover themselves and discover the community assets together.

that a solution will contain the community’s assets and their needs, all together.

I will tell you a story to illustrate what I mean. In a village in Upper Egypt, we started a volunteer group, and I developed a toolkit for asset-mapping and needs assessments. In the asset-mapping, we collected all individual inventory ideas, successful businesses, NGOs, everything seen as assets in this community. In the community, a small water canal divides the village. The problem was that they didn’t have a safe bridge over the canal. They had cut a palm tree in half and put it over the canal for people to cross. This resulted in a lot of drowning and death, especially among children.

For 25 years the people had waited for the local government to build a bridge. Then when the volunteers did the asset-mapping, we found in the individual inventory that there were seven people in this village who were either students in the engineering school or had graduated in engineering. We called them to gather round a table and I asked them, “Can you design a very simple bridge?” They sat together for three or four hours and designed a bridge. I asked them, “What do you need to build the bridge?” They made a list of materials and copies of the list for volunteers to go from door to door to ask people to donate some of the material. Finally, they built the bridge in one week, with no cent coming from outside the village. So, it was a huge problem, and nobody had realized the internal assets they had to solve it.

When you work with a community to discover their assets, they can use them to solve the issues they face. After the villagers had built the bridge, they used the same concept to build other things. Many communities don’t look at themselves as worth something: “We are poor, we have nothing to give, we have nothing to do.” With bridging leadership, you help people discover themselves and discover the community assets together. Then you can build a model with the community being part of the solution. This makes the solution strong. The results are amazing, because the community lives with the concept that they can do something for themselves. At some point, you might need external funders. It’s a mix between internal and external together that will make a difference.

MARK

The Middle East and the Amazon are powerful archetypes in the world. Do you think your region has a unique gift to give the world about bridging leadership?

OLAVO

I think that the Amazon has a unique role in demonstrating bridging leadership. The Amazon River is born from the melting snow in the Andes in Peru and then flows all over Brazil. And there are the flying rivers, the rivers of vapor, formed by water evaporating from the Amazon. So, the Amazon is a really interconnected biome. It doesn't matter whether it's in Brazil, or Peru, or Venezuela, everything is connected, just as we humans should overcome our differences and separation to realize our connections.

There are a lot of competing interests in the Amazon region. We have legitimate economic interests, but we also have economic interests that are not legitimate. We have things that the indigenous communities want, but what do the riverine people want, and what do people from the cities of the Amazon want? It's hard to reconcile these interests. An initiative in the Amazon that succeeds in bringing diverse groups together would be an important example of bridging leadership. The best answers to the problems in the region will come from bringing different interests to move together in one direction.

HISHAM

From the Middle East, I think the main thing we can share with the world is the power of young people, and how young people can work together, live together, and overcome their history and the difficulties arising from the political complexity of the region. The land, its resources and people and culture—everything is so beautiful. But in very beautiful places you can find very difficult lives. I think young people now are aware that we have a lot of resources, especially human capital. We need to think how we can work together, to collaborate so our resources are not wasted. What we have is very precious.

“ An initiative that brings the diverse groups of the Amazon to move in one direction will be an important example of bridging leadership.

“ From the Middle East, the main thing we can share with the world is the power of young people and how they can work together to give new life to a complex region.

If we allow young people to lead, if we look at them as a “big box” solution and not the problem, if we allow them to exercise leadership as emerging leaders-in-the-making, to contribute, collaborate, and imagine together, this will teach the world how a very complex region can live and work together to give life to the region.

SHIRLEY

Would you say some more about why you think bridging leadership is so important for young people and about the kind of support needed to nurture bridging leadership among the youth?

HISHAM

Every young person in the region thinks they are alone and that, because they are alone, they will never accomplish anything. If you offer them bridging leadership concepts and skills, you can help them to think differently, to see they’re not alone. When you talk with them individually, you find leaders as individuals, but there is no collective movement among young people to take them away from this “alone” way of thinking. This is why we need bridging leadership for young people.

We have many organizations that are either youth organizations or youth-serving organizations, but they work with young people as if it is just another group. They don’t understand the psychology of youth, and so they don’t have the power to serve young people. Anybody can work inside an NGO, a government or university doing youth activity without any training. We need capacity-building programs for youth organizations across the region, and for individuals. This will help young people to get more support and do more for themselves.

OLAVO

It’s hard for me to say because I do not know the reality of the Amazon in as much depth as I would like to. I’m just starting this journey. But I think that it’s crucial to empower people in the vision they have for themselves. The youngest people in the community that we are supporting are the connection between tradition and the new world. These communities

“If you offer young people bridging leadership concepts and skills, you help them to think differently, to see that they are not alone.”

aren't going to remain as insulated as they were. They are probably going to be more connected to a lot of other communities and even to big centers. Maybe they'll even have really good Internet in, say, three to five years. This is going to represent a huge change.

The youth in this region have an important role in keeping tradition together while appropriating new technologies in their own way. If they let the world tell them how to use the Internet, or a mobile phone, or how to use what's on the television, they may lose their traditions. This has happened to many young people who have left their communities to go to the city centers. But now the city centers are going to the communities. So, it's important to show communities what we value about their traditions and to empower them to choose what they value. It's about how to empower young people to see themselves as they would like to see themselves, and not as we see them.

MARK

Every new generation is an opportunity for innovation and problem solving. What would your region look like if we raised a generation of bridging leaders, not five out of a million, but many, many out of the million?

HISHAM

If we succeed in helping a lot of young people to be emerging bridging leaders in the region, we will have more collective action and more successful innovations because they will not be competing with each other. We will also have more collaboration between countries in the region. Culturally, we have a lot of common history, but because Egypt is unique as a country, we can offer things to other countries. If this interaction is led by bridging leaders, I think this will help the country to retain its citizens. When you ask young people, "What do you want to do in your life?", many want to get out of the region. Maybe with bridging leadership, we can retain our human resources in the region and nurture the belief that we can do things.

“ Youth in the Amazon region have an important role in keeping tradition while appropriating new technologies in their own way.

“ A first step towards changing the system more profoundly is for people from many different social positions to become bridging leaders.

“ We need to make bridging leadership closer to young people’s hearts.

OLAVO

I would like the Amazon region to see itself as a more unified entity. That’s really hard to do because, as I’ve said, we have a lot of countries and many competing interests. We do have bridging leaders from the region, even though they may not call themselves this. Mostly they are community leaders. It would be interesting to have farmers who are bridging leaders, as well as government officials, people from different countries of the Amazon, indigenous communities, and riverine people. So, we would see more bridging leadership roles across society. We are used to seeing the bridging leadership community as NGOs. Not many businesses think in this way. Although some government officials think this way, they don’t see themselves as part of something bigger. A good first step in creating the conditions for starting to change the system more profoundly would be to have a lot of people from many positions in society thinking about the Amazon in this connected way.

HISHAM

In closing, let me say that as much as we need bridging leadership as a concept and practice, we also need to start from the younger generation. When you hear the word “leadership” or “bridging leader,” you immediately connect this with an established leader. We need to make it closer to young people’s hearts, make it easier to understand and practice.

Touchstones

- Bridging leadership begins with self-reflection and is about the people we serve and represent. If you don’t have your ego well balanced, then things cannot go well in partnerships.
- As a young person with an innovative idea, it’s natural to feel, “This is my idea.” Don’t judge them; try to understand them and then start introducing the idea of bridging leadership—of letting go, listening, collaborating.

- In collective action, you must know what the different actors' needs are, and which needs they can't give up on.
- Tunneling leadership and bridging leadership are part of the same concept. Both are ways to reach the other side. Which one you use depends on timing and tactics.
- Bridging leadership helps young people to discover themselves and discover their community's assets. When a community is part of the solution to its problems, the solution is strong.
- A good first step in creating the conditions for changing a system is to have a lot of people from many different social positions playing a role as bridging leaders.
- Make bridging leadership closer to young people's hearts.





Bridging Leadership for Sustainable Agriculture

Victor Adejoh and Bambi Semroc

Rich examples of practice thread through this conversation between Victor Adejoh and Bambi Semroc. Their stories illuminate the challenges and breakthroughs of a bridging approach to bringing diverse stakeholders to work together towards more sustainable agriculture.

Victor is Country Director of Synergos Nigeria and a graduate of the United States International Visitors Leadership Program in the non-profit sector. Over the years, Victor has worked as a development practitioner in rural communities in Nigeria. His work has included budget advocacy, women's rights, and emergency response. Bridging leadership practice has enabled him to become a deeper, more empathic listener and has changed how he engages with stakeholders.

Bambi is Senior Vice President of the Center for Sustainable Lands and Waters at Conservation International. To protect nature and improve human wellbeing in critical ecosystems around the world, the Center promotes sustainable production and innovative financing models. Bambi's stories here focus on the Center's coffee program, which she has led in a sector-wide effort to make coffee the world's first sustainable agricultural product.

Power is a recurring theme in their conversation. A bridging leadership approach must acknowledge and find ways of dealing with the dynamics of power. For Bambi, this begins with being mindful of who you are and the power you hold. Her personal reflections display a fine sensitivity to how stakeholders might respond to a white woman from the global north facilitating a global dialogue. Victor describes a workshop activity that symbolically strips participants of their positional power and enables them to see one another as equals. In Bambi's view, while you can't change power dynamics fundamentally, you can leverage your power to drive positive change. Victor's distinction between having *power over* and having *power within* offers a pointer towards more responsible and responsive uses of power.

Mark Gerzon and Chong-Lim Lee hosted the conversation.

“ I created a bridge for them to have conversations ... to see themselves as part of the problem and as part of its solution.

MARK

I'm curious. Chong-Lim and I would love to know how each of you first learned about bridging leadership. When did you first hear the term? How did it affect you? Could each of you say a little bit about how you encountered the term, and why it matters to you?

VICTOR

I found myself working with Synergos in Nigeria's agricultural sector, where different ministries, departments, and government agencies were working in silos, in different directions, duplicating their efforts instead of collaborating. For example, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, at the policymaking end, did not relate with the MD of the Agricultural Development Agency, at the implementing end. They were not having any conversation about how their programs, plans and priorities connected to improve the livelihood of smallholder farmers.

Positive change in the system needed conversation among the leadership of various ministries, departments, and agencies who could influence change. That's when I heard about "bridging leadership." With Synergos as the bridging organization, the State Partnership for Agriculture was formed. We convened leaders from different agencies involved in agriculture—government, farmers' groups, investors, and finance institutions.

The role I played was to create a bridge for them to have conversations that enabled them to see themselves as part of the problem and as part of its solution. Bringing them together to look at how they could work together was that bridge. And the fact that they could work together created a bridge for farmers to understand the policy and how to benefit from public investment in agriculture.

BAMBI

I am not as familiar with "bridging leadership," but I've worked with the Synergos team, learning how you approach a major new initiative.

I'm Senior Vice President at Conservation International where I lead our Center for Sustainable Lands and Waters. We work with the agricultural sector globally to think about sustainable landscapes and how to build

transformation at scale. We try to restack incentive structures to drive sustainability at scale.

We've worked hand in hand with a number of coffee companies for over two decades now, building bridges *within* those companies to increase sustainable sourcing or increase their impact at scale, making sure they were connected to the farmers who produce the coffee and building those connections. We had been working with Starbucks for 15 years, and they had reached the major milestone of 99% of their coffee coming from ethically sourced origins and supply chains.

So, what next? We could try to replicate that work with other key raw materials or commodities. The bigger play was about how to leverage that moment to the rest of the sector, without them taking 15 years to achieve the change. So, we needed to expedite and scale up the work quite rapidly.

I wasn't aware that I was doing bridging leadership at the time. It was just a way of trying to understand the state of play in the sector. We started out convening different stakeholders and listening to them—what was happening in the sector, what things already existed to help drive sustainability—and then mapping that and identifying the gaps. We were trying to identify an opportunity for stakeholders to work together to solve huge issues within the coffee sector. There's extreme poverty, there's still expansion of coffee production into forests, there's still low yields. All those things are still at play, despite the fact that we've been at this for twenty plus years. So, it was a really open conversation: "Why is this? Why haven't we made more progress? Why isn't sustainability just the norm now?"

We had this idea of listening to the experts, acknowledging progress, and figuring out how to motivate people to build from that place of strength. It's about thinking about where you are now, what's the next step you can take, and how to get us all closer to a shared vision and goal. How you build trust is critical. When you meet people where they are and you listen to them, you start to understand the situation a bit better. They know your heart and your mind are in the right space. Then it's about what we could do to improve the situation together, and how you build a partnership to do that.

“ When you meet people where they are and listen to them, you start to understand the situation better

It doesn't always go smoothly. People have different ambitions, priorities, or incentive structures. If you can meet them where they're coming from and acknowledge that you have some similar objectives, it's a start for thinking about how to work together to make a situation better. But you also must understand what disincentives they might have for collaboration. Do you work within those disincentives or work to change those incentive structures themselves?

We've made progress in moving from thirteen organizations working together towards 160 plus, getting them to co-invest and collaborate on specific issues amongst highly competitive actors. But there's still a long way to go in figuring out how you do it. Maybe you don't have to get down to all join arms and sing Kumbaya together. Maybe you do need to work out how new investments can be nested under a bigger structure, how organizations can see themselves in a bigger structure, and get credit where credit's due in driving a more ambitious agenda together. I think that navigating differences to bring people to work together is about asking: what does everybody bring to the table, how do we acknowledge that, and then how do we build from that?

VICTOR

When we started engaging with government and other critical stakeholders, there was a high level of competition within the system. Government agencies were competing amongst themselves. Farmers' groups, too, and investors, all competing.

The first meeting was to listen and understand their issues. It was really complex because there was diversity, with panels from different ethnic groups and people in government from different ethnic groups as well. And there was polarization amongst all these stakeholders, with everyone leaning towards their own extraction, not wanting to let go of the space. We had to help them understand that one organization alone can't solve the problem, so there was need for collaboration and partnership. In this way, we could bring them to look at the agricultural system as a whole and see where there were disconnects.

We started getting them to understand that the purpose of integrating all the institutions on that platform was to bring about a shift from agriculture being perceived as development to agriculture as business. Our goal was to ensure that all the stakeholders were sitting at one table, having a very frank conversation. This way, the various individuals representing their ministries or agencies could speak from a place of ability to make change happen. We invited leaders who could go back and make things happen. To do so, they needed to be able to engage externally and internally in a collaborative way.

We started by looking at bridging leadership from its key elements of collaboration, partnership, and systems thinking. Personal reflection, which we call inner work, enabled individuals to look inwards, to reflect on themselves and then use that inner wisdom in a very humble way to engage with others. Inner work became a core element driving bridging leadership for us as we realized that, at an individual level, stakeholders didn't have insight into themselves and their roles and responsibilities within the system. Bridging leadership is not just a trend, it is a continuous practice of ensuring that you don't see yourself outside the problem.

Gradually stakeholders started owning the process, because we tried to make it inclusive and participatory, and to ensure that everyone takes responsibility for their roles within the system. Using empathy and compassion, we were able to get mutual understanding among the stakeholders.

I come from a background of activism, where our role was always to make demands, looking at agriculture from a place of human rights. We never understood that government has its own challenges, systemic challenges that affect the capacity to help deliver services to citizens. Coming to understand this allowed me to develop facilitation skills, especially the skill of listening deeply for where the other person is coming from.

Farmers were wary of government, wary of the providers of agricultural inputs. How could we help them see themselves as part of the issue so they could understand from a government perspective what

“ We used the key elements of bridging leadership: collaboration, partnership, systems thinking, and personal reflection, which we call inner work. ”

“Co-creating does not mean meeting each other in the middle. It’s about starting together.”

the challenges were? And, similarly, so government could understand that farmers also had issues, and these were not all the same? As a farmer your issue could be around mechanization, access to seed, or access to finance. Because government is unlikely to provide all these, we needed to expand the stakeholders’ platform by asking, “Who else is required in the conversation?” We had to ensure that everybody who could make a difference could participate in an inclusive dialogue to co-create the process. Co-creating does not mean meeting each other in the middle. It’s about starting together.

We used different tools in the process: roleplay; journaling for people to document their experiences within the sector; transit walks, where people walk together and have conversations to build relationships. Through roleplay, government leaders could put themselves in the shoes of the farmer and be better able to understand the farmers’ needs from a place of planning. As a result, public investment and programs now target the farmers’ real needs. We saw this clearly in the cassava value chain, where farmers began to have access to agronomic practices (such as improving crop production and soil management to increase yields and quality). This never used to happen because the farmers were getting different messages from different locations and so not understanding which variety of crops to plant.

Change wasn’t fast or easy. This didn’t happen in one month or two. It happened over time.

CHONG-LIM

Victor, you outlined how inclusivity, participatory ownership, empathy, and other bridging leadership values informed the activities which then produced desired results. Bambi, how much of that resonates with how you’re working?

BAMBI

It all resonates. I would add that you have to learn to be a good facilitator. I’ve learned that you get the best out of people by taking time to plan the meetings, agendas, and inputs so that people leave the space feeling

they've accomplished something together. We also make sure we do all that listening at the beginning, but then we have to put a clear action plan together.

We wanted people to take ownership of what they were doing and make it public. So, we created a commitments hub, where different stakeholders could state their commitment to sustainable coffee, and then report on their progress over time. This was a mechanism for transparency, but also to get people to jockey for positioning, and to show that we were listening and trying to make sense of a complex system. Then we could say: "We've got all these different commitments (whether it be for gender issues, conservation, or technical assistance), all these different but fragmented ways of thinking about the system. How do we make sense of the complexity?"

We spent 18 months in working groups of volunteers who wanted to participate in a discussion about a theory of change, about how the system works. After 18 months, we could say how we would know what success looks like and how all the different commitments would count and add up to significant outcomes. People could see themselves in the system; they could also see how the system was working around them.

A key part of bridging is trying to meet stakeholders where they are, but also trying to broaden their perspective to see that, for instance, somebody is thinking about this from a gender perspective, somebody else from a health education perspective, or a production and supply perspective.

We can't change everything about the system; we must select the things we want to change together. We had participants suggest, and vote on, where they wanted to focus in collective action networks, and then sign up for that network. This resulted in four different action networks. Then we took a step back to chart what was already out there and working, and to figure out: Why aren't more people doing that? How do we prove that it is working?

Driving that kind of change is about doing your homework, doing good planning. It's also about an innate sense of curiosity. You want to

“ A key part of bridging is trying to meet stakeholders where they are, but also trying to broaden their perspective ...

understand what motivates people, why things are or aren't working, why this problem still exists, what we failed to think about, and how you put yourself into the problem statement.

We must be able to have honest conversations, acknowledging that although we've made tremendous progress, we have yet another price crisis, the markets are failing again, low productivity, and we still have expansion into forests. So, how do we reconcile our good intentions with the realities we're seeing?

We've learned a lot about stakeholder engagement and bringing more people into the room in an inclusive way. But there are significant challenges. We had a lot of companies and NGOs at the table, but governments were not really there. We had a couple join but they didn't understand what they were getting out of it, what we wanted from them. Now our partnership with international coffee organizations brings governments to the table. We needed to find those initiatives to build even bigger bridges.

The other thing that we have been struggling with is how to bring in farmer voices. There are farmers who are also businesspeople or have other roles in the value chain. But just a pure farmer voice has been challenging because of language and cultural barriers, and time barriers to investing at that level and getting something meaningful out of it.

I do think it comes back to the deep listening, facilitation, humility and understanding yourself, and to trust. And letting go of some of our competitive nature. A good negotiation is when everybody loses something meaningful.

MARK

Victor, you used the term "inner work." Bambi, could you say a bit about what the term means for you and your work?

BAMBI

Being mindful of who you are, and the power that you hold in terms of what you look like and where you are coming from—those things matter as you enter into a conversation. We have to be mindful of the implicit things

we're bringing to the table. That, to me, is the inner workings of "Am I in the right mindset? Do I understand how the different stakeholders might perceive a white woman from Arlington, Virginia, engaging in this kind of global dialogue and facilitating it? What other voices do we need to bring in, so that the dialogue is more balanced and reaches the right level of engagement?"

I would expand the idea of inner work to the late nights when I'm thinking through: "What are we trying to achieve? How is this going to work?" At the beginning of the process, we thought everybody's just going to come to this table and, lo and behold, some miraculous thing will pop out as a solution. I remember John Heller when he was at Synergos saying, "Bambi, they're waiting for you to tell them what to do." And I'm, like "Who am I to tell them what to do, I want them to be co-owners." Later, five years in, John says, "You've built all this trust, you need to leverage that trust to lead." Inner work is being aware of when we've done the groundwork, when we have the trust, and when it's right to leverage that trust to push the agenda forward.

MARK

As a bridging leader, how do you make the dialogue productive when you know you're in a world with differential power?

VICTOR

I'd like to start by telling you a story. On a training day, when everybody came in, we asked all the participants to give us something of value to them. Each brought out something they valued, and we put them into a bag. Then we told them, "For this training day, you have dropped your portfolio, you have put your power into the bag. For this learning process, you are just your name, there's no title, there's no mister, there's no doctor." The Permanent Secretary was no longer Permanent Secretary: he was himself by his first name. The same with the deputy, the middle cadre officers, and the farmers.

At that point, something started happening. We all started looking inward and seeing that, but for the office that I have, I am no different

“ We all started looking inward and seeing that, but for the office that I have, I am no different from this person.

from this person. We began to see that our power should be located within the system and be used to make things happen differently. So, if you're in an office where farmers should have access, your own role, and the power that you have should be used positively towards creating access.

Power dynamics come in with how you use your *power within* and how you use your *power over*. *Power over* has largely been responsible for corruption and mismanagement—you want to use your position to acquire wealth, or to engage in devices that hinder the system from operating optimally. For us, power dynamics played out in individuals' ability to look at themselves and remove the barriers that prevented them from delivering on their own full potential.

Lately, I'm learning that again. In a project of providing the ministry with training in monitoring and evaluation, planning and budgeting, things were still not happening differently until we ran the bridging leadership training. Done in a natural environment, this brought everybody to see themselves as a child, after stripping them of their various portfolios, of the power that ordinarily stands as a blockage to how they deliver on their roles or use their own gifts to help define process. Communication became a key thing that happened differently in understanding power dynamics. Knowing how to engage with the farmer, with their own colleagues, was something the officials started to practice. This created openings for farmers to engage with government before the budget process, to say these are our needs, this is our location, and for government officials and the farmers to do the costing together. Before, the budgeting process was shrouded in secrecy.

A key learning for me is that inner work is a central element in bringing about transformation in the agricultural sector. People who were used to doing the same thing in the same way discovered novel approaches through this reflective conversation. Now, they are working in collaboration with others, they are listening more, with heart and power. They've started letting go of those thought processes that made them comfortable walking in their own shoes.

Approaching power issues from a place of inner work means understanding your mindset so you continue to adapt to changes and create an environment for improvement, for yourself and others. We followed the “U-process,” where through sensing, you are able to understand what the issue is that is presenting itself within you. Inner work has helped us build trust in the system, has allowed us to let go. Letting go allows a new beginning. Right now, this is how government officials are seeing themselves: “I am in this place today to render services to farmers. I’m letting go my power to let in more service.”

In less than a year, we were able to develop all agricultural policies, because we got stakeholders in the same room. The first two or three months we had to read a lot of data and evidence. But over time, everyone understood that we all needed to bring our own beat to the table, for us to reach a place of understanding, to fully engage. Today we have policies, we have investment plans that drive the way government engages with smallholder farmers.

BAMBI

I love the idea of having people put something in a bag and saying you’ve lost your power, trying to balance that out a bit more. It reminds everybody that “There but for the grace of God go I.”

There’s always power in a system. You won’t be able to change power dynamics fundamentally, but you can leverage the power you have to drive positive change or contribute in a meaningful way. With great power comes great responsibility, so how do we internalize and take that responsibility to heart?

Giving people the benefit of the doubt means putting yourself in their shoes. Why are they acting that way? They’re not evil because they’re cutting down trees. They’re doing it because the incentives are stacked in favor of that action. We like to paint people as good or bad because they do good or bad things. But everybody has good and bad in them. I make mistakes every day, and I do positive things every day. It’s about trying to understand how to do more positive things over time and make fewer

“ Inner work has helped us build trust in the system, has allowed us to let go. Letting go allows a new beginning.

“ How do we internalize and take to heart the responsibility that comes with power?

mistakes. Being under stress or threat drives us to make more mistakes. So how do we become more mindful so that we can progress in what we're trying to achieve together?

If you're going to use your power for the good of the world, then you're thinking about how that power serves a greater purpose and others. Leadership is sometimes quiet. It comes from your heart being in the right place, so your mind is in the right place, and you can build the trust needed to drive progress on what we're trying to do together.

CHONG-LIM

Victor and Bambi, as you bring bridging leadership into your work, how do your stakeholders, your partners receive that kind of approach?

BAMBI

People are refreshed by bridging leadership because it is inclusive, it builds trust, and it builds the community you're trying to establish. People recognize it when they see it, but don't have all the training and background in bridging leadership. I was able to take some training because somebody offered it to us. My response was "Oh, this suits my personality in some ways." As an introvert and a quiet leader in an organization, it's hard to make people understand that just because you're quiet or humble, doing this from a bottom-up approach, doesn't mean you have no vision. You're not hammering it from above, you're trying to figure out how to get people to move in this direction if it's the right direction. If it's not, then let's figure out the right direction for all of us.

So, I think people do find bridging leadership refreshing. But it's also misunderstood as not dynamic enough, because of an old sense of leadership. There's a lot more work to ensure that this bridge-building approach is understood and valued, not just because people have experienced it, but because they know that it's out there and is effective. That's my perpetual challenge: I believe in it, I know it's the right thing to do, but trying to convince others that the approach is effective can be really challenging.

VICTOR

I've gradually seen inner work to be at the center of the way we work. I say this from a place of learning and proof of concept. When we engaged some fourteen management leaders from the ministry, they had never attended any leadership training. We started by having them talk about themselves in an open manner, knowing full well that they have left their power outside the training venue. And they could begin to see themselves from a different place. A process of personal reflection revealed a deeper sense of self-essence. Many of them have learnt a lot around relationship building, around grounding trust in how they engage with people.

The crucial difference here is continuous self-development. Beyond those skills you need to deliver on your professional job is understanding that you alone can't truly do it. You need others to be part of this process. It's a process of new learning, improving your skill, and taking responsibility. It brings you to a place where you recognize that you need to co-create. Co-creating means working with others, in partnership and collaboration that takes you through the journey.

Now, you wouldn't want to travel on a journey with someone you don't trust. For you to be able to build trust, you must bring some level of openness, accountability, and transparency. It is rare that we've seen leaders within the agricultural system express their vulnerability, being able to tell how they've not been able to get things right. Yet, if you are not all on the same page in understanding that you, too, have weaknesses, you can start blame-trading. Inner work allows you to see your own weakness, so when another person expresses weakness, you empathize with that person, and you show compassion.

We say that a community of practice is made up of individuals who have learned about inner work and how to engage, and are using it to improve their system, their community, to change the way they work. Because it takes time and a process, it might seem that it doesn't work. If we start an early understanding of how to address complex situations by accepting that we all think differently, have different professions and roles, and then look at how we could bring our roles together from a holistic

perspective and get each of us to do our own best, a shift begins to happen in the system.

I now hear staff of the Ministry say, “I never used to delegate tasks. I didn’t trust my subordinates. Now I’m no longer afraid to allow people reporting to me to carry new tasks or responsibilities.” So, fear plays out, the fear that if you start delegating or get someone else to work with you, you’re going to lose out. Over time, you understand that you are more productive by delegating or engaging with others, as against living with that fear.

But we are so much living lives of insecurity. This is why we see more people wanting to amass more than they need, engaging in corruption, cutting corners. Inner work creates the potential for us to step back and understand who we are, in a way that we begin to add value not only to our lives, but also to the lives of others around us. I guess it’s the only way for us to survive in these turbulent times, post-COVID. Stepping back and understanding that you are not alone in this kind of situation is very helpful.

MARK

Bridging leadership is a global approach, and our assumption is that every part of the world has a gift to bring to it. What does your place in the world and the cultures that you’ve grown up in, Bambi and Victor, what do they bring to bridging leadership?

VICTOR

My cultural belief is that we have a common humanity. Sometimes we need to learn it because we have lost it, the environment and grim times have molded us in a way that we become defensive. If we can understand ourselves and wish to understand others, we will not make things difficult for them. So inner work has a way of playing out in my culture.

BAMBI

My parents were factory workers. My dad worked the midnight turn to be able to earn a little bit more to send my brother and myself to college; my mom worked three different jobs. They said, “You won’t inherit very much when we pass on; your education is your inheritance. We will do everything

in our power to make sure that you have a good education so you can contribute to the world in some way.” The other thing that my dad always said to me was “Think before you speak,” and my mom said, “Treat others the way that you want to be treated.” These are foundational things that I have learned and kept with me.

The industry that supported my family is all gone. Economics change very rapidly in the globalized world we live in. My parents saw it coming, and they didn’t fight it, except in their own little ways. They knew the forces were there and they wouldn’t be able to change them, so we had to adapt. My mom still lives in that same community, and they want “those good old days” to come back. The romanticism of it—forgetting things weren’t so great, like the long hours and the pollution. If you don’t enable people to have hope for the future, or to think about what that transition will look like, we do kind of wallow in what’s lost, rather than thinking about what we can gain through change.

VICTOR

Bambi, just listening to you, hearing about your upbringing, I figured out what the challenges are for me.

I grew up learning that we needed to be perfect, not make mistakes. My mom was a nurse, my dad was an airframe engineer. Because they grew up in tight discipline, it just felt that we couldn’t make mistakes. And because we live in a patriarchal community, we feel that men don’t cry, men are not vulnerable. Inner work has helped me understand that my weaknesses and failures are a starting point, that meeting my own experiences in a way where I feel vulnerable does not make me a weak person as a man. So, these are things picked up from within the society where we work and because everyone just wants to make ends meet, they try to play out these things. These are the kinds of challenges that I think will stand as a barrier if they become fixed in thought processes that block new learnings, because inner work is about continuous self-improvement. So, what do you think will be an impediment to inner work thriving?

“ If you don’t enable people to have hope for the future ... we wallow in what’s lost, instead of thinking about what we can gain through change.

BAMBI

It's not that people don't recognize the value of the inner work. It's just that it takes time, and it takes commitment. It's not easy work to think about: "Where do I fail? Where am I not doing all the things that I should or could be doing, or not treating people the way that I would want to be treating them? How have I forgotten about the power dynamics?"

In the United States, we're grappling with social justice issues. You recognize that you have privileges. Do you need to feel guilty about it, or do you need to act? I think you need to act. But everybody wants to protect themselves from vulnerability. That's a hard space to step into.

Working under COVID restrictions, we found a new level of transparency into one another's lives, seeing different people's backgrounds, seeing their kids run around behind them during online meetings. That was all very compartmentalized before. But that's gone away. In the beginning, there's a lockdown and it's a struggle every day to figure out how to do these calls and sit beside my son, helping him with school. As I shared more of that experience, others also opened up. Somebody has to be willing to share first. That's the lesson I learned—the more you share, the more that support community comes around you and holds you up through those really challenging times.

That's also when you think: "What do I bring to this initiative?" I have certain skills and strengths, but I have a lot of things I'm missing too. I don't have to be superhuman to drive this process forward. I have to recognize my skill sets, my strengths. It's a question of how do we build the right team, so that my weaknesses are somebody else's skill set and a great opportunity for them? That's a lot of inner work in terms of being mindful of my strengths, my weaknesses, my challenges. If I can have an open and honest dialogue with people about that, they will come and support me.

Your vulnerabilities allow other people to bring something to the table. It's like when you say, "I'm going to host a party, and I need everybody to bring something." And everybody brings the dish that they're amazing at making. That's what you want in these multistakeholder consortia. You want everybody to bring what they're really good at to the table. Not

everybody needs to be good at making pasta salad. You don't want a dinner that's just pastas. You want a dinner that has everything. You want it well rounded.

MARK

That's a beautiful way to close this conversation. Your interaction was beautiful. You were modeling what you were talking about there at the end.

Touchstones

- A bridging approach enables stakeholders to see themselves as part of a systemic problem and as part of its solution.
- The key elements of bridging leadership are collaboration, partnership, systems thinking, and personal reflection or inner work.
- When you meet people where they are and listen to them, you start to understand the situation better. If you can acknowledge that you have similar goals, you can start figuring out together how to help the situation and how you build a partnership to do that.
- People have different ambitions, priorities, or incentive structures. So, you have to understand what disincentives they might have for collaboration.
- A key part of bridging is trying to meet stakeholders where they are but also broadening their perspectives.
- You get the best out of people by taking time to plan the meetings, agendas, and inputs so that people leave the space feeling they've accomplished something together.
- Approaching power issues from a place of inner work means understanding your mindset so that you continue to adapt to changes and create an environment for trust and collaboration. Bridging leadership is about using your power as a leader to contribute to positive change in a responsible, meaningful, and collaborative way.





Being a Bridging Leader During Conflict

Claudia Cisneros and Abera Tola Gada

Conflicts in Ethiopia and Venezuela were headline news in August 2021, when this conversation took place. In Ethiopia, a conflict between the government and forces in its northern Tigray region had left thousands of people dead and others living in famine conditions. In Venezuela, since 2015, political turmoil, severe economic hardship, shortages of food and medicine, and widespread unemployment had resulted in mass migration. Here, Abera Tola Gada and Claudia Cisneros reflect on the challenges of bridging leadership in conflict zones. Squeezed into an interval between Abera's meetings about the Tigray region, the conversation conveys a sense of immediacy.

Abera is a Synergos Regional Director based in Ethiopia, where he leads a bridging program to increase food security and the livelihoods of smallholder farmers and to bolster Ethiopia's economy. Prior to joining Synergos in 2011, he was Regional Director of Oxfam America for the Horn of Africa Program. He is the founder of HUNDEE, an Ethiopian development organization. Claudia is committed to a family legacy of combining business and social investment. She started Digisalud, a health tech organization that facilitates digital health data collection to transform the lives and health of vulnerable children in Latin America. Her bridging abilities span the worlds of business and art, within and beyond Latin America. In this conversation she focuses on her natural inclination towards bridging during the Venezuelan conflict.

The stories in this chapter show how Claudia and Abera apply their people skills and guiding values in using their influential connections for the greater good. Much of their conversation focuses on the risks of being a bridging leader during conflict. Bridging the inevitable conflicts that arise during times of relative peace is not easy. The complexity and ever-present threats in situations of violent conflict make bridging more urgent, more challenging, and more vulnerable to failure. Claudia reminds us that in political conflicts that involve opposing factions within a country plus

external players, bridging is more like spinning a delicate web to connect many dots. Trying to do this in a conflict zone comes with high personal risk. For Abera, this is one of the unique challenges for a bridging leader in a time of violent conflict. Playing a bridging role in such circumstances must be intentional, rooted in a recognition of the risks and one's willingness to take them.

Being a bridging leader during conflict requires courage, patience, persistence, and resilience. This is no task for a naive idealist or an unreflective activist.

Mark Gerzon and Chong-Lim Lee hosted this conversation.

CHONG-LIM

Claudia and Abera, would you take a minute to introduce yourselves to each other?

CLAUDIA

I'm Claudia Cisneros. I come from a family that has been doing business in Venezuela for sixty years, starting with my grandfather. And I have a nonprofit working on humanitarian issues. Right now, as you know, Venezuela is a country of conflict. So, I'm in a position not only as a social person doing good for humanity, but also as a businessperson, as a Venezuelan working with government, surviving in politics. So, it's a bowl of tropical fruit, a mix of everything. Resilience has been part of my training for the past ten years, and I have to say that now I feel pretty good about it.

ABERA

Hello Claudia. I'm Abera Tola. I'm working for Synergos here in Ethiopia. We have various projects, ranging from institutional capacity building for government institutions to develop and build leaders in Ethiopia. Our work is mainly with government institutions and the agricultural sector. We currently have two or three projects associated with agriculture. I can say that we are contributing to the wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of farmers in Ethiopia through our innovative approach of bridging leadership, agricultural clusters, and other capacity building initiatives. I recently celebrated my tenth year in this work.

MARK

When and how did you first encounter the concept of bridging leadership, and why has it remained part of your life?

ABERA

When we started this Synergos office, we had to work with different stakeholders, like the Minister of Agriculture, the Gates Foundation, and the different agricultural institutions, regions, and others. Otherwise, our project could not happen on the ground. These institutions have competing interests. The Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA) competes with the Minister of Agriculture, and the Minister of Agriculture competes with ATA, with the research institutions, and with the regional agricultural bureaus. In this kind of environment, it became apparent to us that we had to build trust among the stakeholders.

With funding from the Gates Foundation, we started by bringing stakeholders together, engaging them in an open dialogue, helping them go through a process to enable them to collaborate in achieving their common goals and objectives. There's no difference between the goal of the Minister of Agriculture and ATA or the regional agricultural bureaus. They share the goal of developing the country's agricultural economy and improving the livelihoods of small farmers. But people did not trust each other, for many reasons, including egos. So, that's how we started our bridging leadership work, based on creating alignment and trust, and enabling stakeholders to focus on their common goals and objectives.

CLAUDIA

In 1993, a long time ago, when I was first working in the family business, I felt that it was not enough just to be working. I needed to do something more to enrich my work. So, I decided to create the equivalent of a 911 service for Venezuela. There were no Google Maps, there were none of these technologies. I found someone who had digital maps and we created our own equivalent of Google Maps. This is where I started.

When you have a common goal and when people want to be part of something of success and you create trust, that's when people flow in an

“ We engaged stakeholders in an open dialogue ... to enable them to collaborate in achieving their common goals.

easy way. So, we were bringing innovation, even though we were from the private sector, and we wanted to create a network for the whole country. I had to do a lot of this with our team. I found that the common goal and really being able to have trust are what made it happen. At the time, 911 was part of our cell phone company, so it was private. Then once we sold the company, the buyers left the number. Today that's the emergency phone number in Venezuela. The government now has it and builds upon it.

I feel good about the whole circle closing, seeing that something we started is still alive today, living through all the hardships and changes in politics. This is a subject—changes in politics—that I want to discuss with you, that I want to continue learning how to relate to, especially with the government of today, which is very different from government twenty or thirty years ago.

CHONG-LIM

As bridging leaders helping to address conflicts in your countries today, what has been the impact of bridging leadership and what do you see as the challenges?

ABERA

Let me give you a live example. Only an hour before this conversation, I was at the Sheraton Hotel, meeting with the USAID Administrator, Samantha Power, and her team, who were delegated by the Biden administration to look into the problem of conflict in the Tigray region.

The US government had come up with a clear roadmap. They said we have to go back into our Constitution and use it as a framework to resolve conflict. They said that the US government was there to help because they had a good relationship with the Ethiopian government and, assumed, also with the Tigray regional administration. So, they had wanted to be a sort of bridge, which we believe was the right thing. But that didn't work out, even though the idea they were suggesting is novel. One of the parties won't accept it because they say the US government representatives are siding with the Tigrayans and not looking into the content of what is really there.

Because they see people from the US delegation as being sympathetic to the Tigrayans, they don't see the point of bridging, even with the Constitution as a framework.

My meeting earlier today was to give the USAID Administrator and team the background of our knowing the Tigray (with whom we've had many engagements, personal as well as institutional) and also knowing the central government. Most of our institutional capacity building is for the central government, for the Prime Minister's office. This gives us at Synergos the leverage to talk to the prime minister and also to talk to the Tigray and, because of the position we hold, to talk to the US government. This is part of what we call bridging—people have someone or an institution like Synergos to talk to about what can be done about this conflict.

The problem in conflict is about labeling, always judging the other person or group. Conflict resolution is not something you can just do easily. It requires your own personality, your own skills, how much you can give, and how much you are committed to the cause of peace. In a country like Ethiopia, for example, where people are polarized along ethnic lines, it's difficult to just engage in bridging leadership. Even though you have the skill and the coaching experience, you are always labeled by your ethnicity. Whether you are genuine, skillful, and honest is always a question mark from one of the conflicting parties.

That's why I suggested to the US government delegation that, if we need some kind of inclusive dialogue, then we need external facilitators who will have the technical know-how to guide the process. For example, if they say, "Abera, you can help in this", definitely one party to the conflict would say, "No, I don't trust him because Abera is Oromo and the Amhara and Oromo have conflicts, and it's natural for Abera to be standing with his ethnic group." So, that is a challenge for a bridging leader, for a person who wants to go in and really provide technical know-how and use his or her skills for the greater good. It is really complex when conflicts are based on ethnicity or on race.

At Synergos, we are good at creating value chain alliances, bringing the businesses and the farmers together, bringing government, seed

“ The problem in conflict is about labeling, always judging the other person or group.

enterprises, or other government agencies, commercial banks, and others to work together. We do that. That's what our projects are all about. We bring all these stakeholders together, and we know how to do it. We do the system map, we engage stakeholders in all sorts of dialogue, and then we create consensus for shared goals and a way forward. It is easier for a bridging leader to engage in this type of general issue than in issues like conflict or ethnicity.

CLAUDIA

I can relate to many things you've said, Abera. Talking about the past and the present, when a country is not a country of conflict, the bridging may be from point A to point B, but when you become a country of conflict, there are many points and bridging becomes more like a web, it becomes more complex. So, it's not a one on one, it's connecting many dots. Finding common ground and common objectives and building trust become more of a challenge.

“ In a country of conflict, bridging becomes more like a web ... connecting many dots. Finding common ground ... becomes more of a challenge.

In Venezuela, politics is the primary issue. Our biggest conflict is over maintaining the power of the government. We also have the US from outside because we have sanctions, and we have two opposition parties. We have a national government, and we don't know what it is. Is it a dictatorship? Is it terrorism? What, really, is it? It's a new way of government. Then we have all the businesspeople who have actually survived. Both the government and the private sector are important for the country. So, right now the difficulty that I'm finding in Venezuela is how to connect all these dots. I cannot understand right now what our common objective is.

For finding a common objective, it's important to use outside coaches, consultants, someone that is neutral. It's a lot of psychology, because in the end these are all human beings who have power in these different sectors. As humans, we're conflicted, we have emotions, thoughts, perspectives. The psychology is important when we start trying to solve today's conflicts. But it also has to do with culture.

CHONG-LIM

While an external person can be helpful, it's not sufficient to have an external facilitator without a deep understanding of the country. As bridging leaders with deep understanding of your countries, do each of you have a specific story of how you bring your role as a bridging leader into these complex situations?

CLAUDIA

To be humble at heart is important, to understand your position in the whole conflict and approach with humility, and to be able to listen to the other side for an understanding of their side. One of the things that every human being is looking for is to be recognized. When you listen to the other side and what they want, you're recognizing them as human beings and understanding their ideas, you're not making judgments.

I'll give you a recent example. We have a sugar mill, and we're one of the biggest producers of sugar for the food industry. Right now, because of sanctions, we have no diesel for transporting goods. Seven other big companies need diesel to keep working and to provide food and other goods. And then a lot of people don't have access to those goods. It's a ripple effect. The whole private sector is going crazy. There is no gas, no diesel, so what are we going to do? That's when I come and say I have contacts with the government. I could ask permission to import the diesel for all of us, for the whole industry to help everyone. If I'm able to also talk to OPEC to say we need this permission because it's a humanitarian cause, I would. So, first is building up the OPEC contacts. Second is getting permission from the local government, and then distributing diesel for the good not only of the people, but also for seven big factories that need diesel to continue working to produce goods. That's an example of something I've been working on currently.

Another example is from 2019, when we had all the Venezuelan emigrants trying to cross the border to Colombia, but they couldn't get passports. My own passport had only one page left. But I was able, through my father, to get an official contact. We went together to the office and sat

“ When you listen to the other side and what they want, you're recognizing them and their ideas, you're not making judgments. **”**

there for three hours to wait for a passport. The official explained to me why we were having difficulties, because of sanctions, and why they couldn't just give away passports. This information was eventually very useful when I spoke with a Colombian government representative to explain why they needed to allow the Venezuelan people across the border without a passport. Because they knew that those facts were real, they understood, and they allowed the Venezuelan people to cross the border without passports, and only with their IDs.

In a country of democracy that was much easier. What I'm living right now is a more complex situation, because now we are bringing in a third party, which is the US, because of sanctions. So, it's living the same thing that I lived two years ago, but in a more complex situation.

“A bridging leader knows how to talk to people, particularly people in power, and be a person who has their confidence, who can knock at their door and get in to talk to them.”

ABERA

I agree with what you said, Claudia. Bridging leadership takes everything, it takes whatever you can offer to the idea. Sometimes, bridging leadership is something you do from your heart and with some things, you love doing it. It starts before the dialogue table, before the workshop. I mean if you are a bridging leader, you must know how to talk to people, particularly people in power, people who have issues. It's not only the ability to talk to them. You must also be a person who has their confidence and trust. You must be a person who can knock at their door and just get in and talk to them, without any bureaucracy and other such things.

Then, of course, your humility, your knowledge, and your skill also matter. Knowledge about bridging leadership means you have to equip yourself with its methodologies: “What is it that I do, how do I perform, what will be the outcome of this? How do I go about it? What kind of survey do I have to do, what kind of interviews must I conduct and with whom?”

As a bridging leader, you need to go into many kinds of action. Once you are successful in bringing people together, then you must have the capacity to lead and manage the workshops, meetings, or dialogues, and to show openness and honesty. We humans are amazing creatures, and people easily read if a person is honest or not, just doing it for the sake of

doing it or doing a deed from his or her heart. So, it's the ability to hold or to own all these kinds of behaviors or characteristics. That's why it is really tough. Each word you say, each facial expression you show has a meaning when you are bringing people together as a bridging leader. That's why it really requires more than just being kind. We also have to go through interpersonal skill training to learn what to say and what not to say, how body language manifests and how our language itself influences our engagement with others.

MARK

The two of you are in the middle of violent conflict. If you could address world leaders, many of whom are not in situations of violent conflict now, what would you say about what bridging does differently during a violent conflict, as opposed to being a bridging leader at a time of peace? What is the unique challenge for a bridging leader in a time of violent conflict?

ABERA

As a bridging leader in a time of conflict, first of all you must decide: Are you willing to take risks in this kind of violent conflict? What are the real risks? One of the risks is social media. Are you ready to make yourself vulnerable to all kinds of accusations and name-calling? It might even go beyond you, might reflect on your family or your place of work. This is the nature of violent conflict because there are always aggrieved people out there, particularly people with social media. You don't know them, but they are out to tarnish your image or name. These are some of the risks.

As you know, the people of Tigray are not getting humanitarian assistance and people are dying. Therefore, I want to talk to the government. Suppose I say to the government, "Please, this is happening. I know because I have data, I have information. These people are also your citizens, and you have responsibility, you have power, you have authority. Perhaps you are not aware, but I know. I'm on the ground and I know." When you start saying this, just as a first statement, which is a fact and is the truth—that people are dying, or that people need humanitarian assistance—this will put you on the spot.

“As a bridging leader in a time of violent conflict, you must be aware of the risks and whether you are willing to take them.”

This is how conflict-related bridging leadership is so difficult. As bridging leaders, we have to know that we are making ourselves vulnerable for anything when we start coming out to make ourselves open to help. Anyone who opts, or would love, to help would confess to this kind of challenge.

CLAUDIA

Abera, thank you for what you've just said. That's exactly my crossroad right now. I'm thinking about the risks that I have to take now. Actually, I woke up this morning having those thoughts and having to make some decisions. You're right, it's about being vulnerable, it's about taking risks, with a lot of people not understanding what you're doing because they have their own perspectives. I am myself taking risks for the good that I'm doing. But we have to do it in a very responsible way, because whatever decisions we make can ripple and affect our families, can affect the people closest to us.

So, risk has to be taken in a responsible way. And with more strategy. The difference between being in a country of violence versus in a country of non-violence is that we must add the concept of strategy at a deeper level. All of us have Facebook, Google, and you know that if you're a public person, you are at risk. I completely agree that when you're in conflict you're risking much more than when you're in a democracy or when you're not in a conflict zone. I would add that another difference is the complexity, as I said before, of having to add more people—patiently.

I think it's important, as you were saying, Abera, for us to think about what we say. We have to think about our actions, we have to think about every step we take. That's what makes the difference. If you step in the wrong place, the bombs are going to go off. It's like, really, a minefield. When you're in conflict, you must look at every detail. You have to be critical, you have to use your head very much, because with one wrong step, it can blow up in your face.

In my experience, a difference between working in a non-conflict zone versus a conflict zone is that we must be very responsible with our

“ When you're in conflict, you must look at every detail. You have to ... use your head. **”**

risk, we have to think things through three or four times. We need to have a group because we need help from other people to be able to see things from different perspectives. And we need to understand that today you win one battle, tomorrow, you lose it. You have to be able to get up to say, “It’s okay, how do we handle that emotion on hearing that today everything was moved back?” The next day, you’ll have a new way of moving, and then you win it again the next week.

That’s what I live every day. My biggest learning right now is that when I get hit by a “No!” I need feedback on how to manage those emotions. And in three days, I’m able to get up again, and come back with a new strategy, and a new way of doing things to keep on doing and trying whatever must be done for our mission.

CHONG-LIM

Could you each say more about how bridging leadership may have a unique contribution in helping people to manage through those complex situations and through the risk?

ABERA

What bridging leadership teaches us is that we already know the business we are in, we know the challenges, we know also about vulnerability, and we get prepared for that. Usually, we do our contingency plan through thinking “What if this happens, how can we overcome this one?” Sometimes we also do a power mapping: Whom should we approach, who can help us with this, who is really a resourceful person? We can also ask for support. We cannot do it all. Some challenges are professional challenges, some are technical, and we have to pull whatever resources there are around us. It is not only one or two or three people doing it.

When we talk about bridging leadership, it is teamwork, sharing the challenges, sharing the approach, and also sharing the tools we should use. Of course, in bridging leadership we use a framework to guide our process. We may ask, for example, “Shall we add in Theory U, or shall we use something else?” So, when we engage in this kind of endeavor, bridging leadership guides us to use teamwork as much as possible, different

“Bridging leadership is teamwork, sharing the challenges, the approach, and the tools we should use.”

professional skill sets, and some kind of strategy around the work we are going to do.

For example, when we work on value chain alliances, even though we are good in bringing people together and invoking dialogue, we always bring into our team people with planning and strategy skills, with monitoring and evaluation skills, with community development skills. Bridging leadership is not a one-man show; it is a collaborative effort of many.

“ In this process, we have to be patient for the outcome, patient with people, patient with ourselves.

CLAUDIA

One word that my father taught me when I was a child was a constant word, and it was “patience.” That is a word I would add to this conversation. In this process, we all need to have patience, because not everything turns out as we wish, immediately. We must be patient for the outcome, we must be patient with people, we must have patience with ourselves. That’s a tool my father taught me and that I’ve been using a lot lately.

I’m in this because it’s a natural thing. I guess it’s my learning from my own parents. My father and my mother, both of them, I saw them all their lives constantly doing bridging leadership (without putting the word to it), constantly connecting things not only in business, but for humans, for NGOs, for communities. So, for me bridging was something natural. Because it’s a natural state of what I do, I do it by instinct. Now I’m in the process of giving it a formal structure, understanding not only with my feelings but understanding it intellectually. I think that’s my second stage of where I am right now, bringing what I know spiritually and in an instinctive way to give it form in an intellectual way. So, that’s what I have to add to what Abera said.

ABERA

Thank you, Claudia. I’m happy to know you and let us continue this conversation. If you’ll excuse me now, I’m just going to leave.

MARK

Before you leave, Abera—you’ve both talked about humility, about patience, and about the courage to face risk. I just want to say to both of you that I admire you. You both inspire me in the way you work.

Touchstones

- Bridging leadership work begins with building alignment and trust, enabling stakeholders to focus on common goals, a process that requires patience in many forms.
- Bridging in a time of conflict depends on your facilitation skills, how much you can give, and whether you are fully committed to the cause of peace. But this may not be enough. Where people are polarized along ethnic, racial or ideological lines, it's difficult to play a bridging role. You may be labeled by ethnicity or affiliation; and one or other of the conflicting parties will surely question whether you are genuine.
- In a conflict zone, bridging becomes more like a web ... connecting many dots to try to find common ground for building trust.
- Playing a bridging role in conflict calls on you to understand your own position in the conflict and to recognize the personal risks of being a bridging leader.
- To play a bridging role you must know how to talk to people, especially people in power and people who have issues. You must also have their confidence and trust, and the strength of connection to approach power holders directly, without the hindrance of protocol and bureaucracy.
- Bridging leadership is not vested in individuals. It involves teamwork, sharing the challenges, the approach, the tools, and the resources for addressing an urgent and complex problem. Bridging leadership is not a one-person show; it is a collaborative effort of many.





Bridging Leadership for Inclusion and Social Justice

Neville Gabriel

in conversation with Mark Gerzon and Shirley Pendlebury

This chapter breaks the book's established pattern. Instead of an interchange between two leaders in the same field, the main voice here is Neville Gabriel's, with occasional comments and questions from his interlocutors. Force of circumstance shaped the chapter's form. The person invited to be Neville's conversational partner became unavailable at the last minute. Time constraints prompted the editors to go ahead with the interview anyway. The result is a bridging leader thinking aloud—forthright, reflective, and critically attuned to the demands of working towards a more inclusive and socially just world.

Neville is the executive director at the Other Foundation which gathers support to defend and advance the human rights and social inclusion of LGBTI people in southern Africa. Based in South Africa, Neville works across the region, including in Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, Swaziland, and Lesotho. Earlier in his career, as the founding executive director of the South African Trust, Neville directed innovative work to build the ability of civil-society organizations to engage in national, regional, and global policy-development processes to overcome poverty in southern Africa. He is a Synergos Senior Fellow.

Neville's view of bridging leadership is provocative, unsentimental, and intricately shaped by his context. His reflections spotlight aspects of bridging leadership that often lie in the shadows. For him, in working for social justice, timing is crucial for choosing when to follow "the inside track of diplomacy" to build trust, and when to take the "outside track" that challenges power with the intention of exposing contradictions and fault lines. As he says, "unless you expose those fault lines, you wouldn't know where to bridge." The primary bridges we need, he believes, are between ideas, futures, and aspirations, as well as between people.

MARK

Neville, when did the idea or the concept of bridging leadership first enter your life? I'm sure it's a thread in the rich tapestry of your life. But tell us about that thread. How did it enter the tapestry? And what is its place in the tapestry?

NEVILLE

The concept never entered my life in any conscious way until my involvement with Synergos. But I guess it's part of the makeup of who I am as a result of where I've grown up and my multiple identities, the inevitability of living in a multicultural context that faced several social, economic, and political justice struggles, all at the same time, under apartheid in South Africa. I was shaped by context, in working on social justice issues, to have a transformative approach, both to progress and social justice, but also to conflict and transformation. And, I think, because it's inevitable in South Africa that the only path to progress is to bridge in a sustainable way, but always with a firm commitment to justice and transformation, rather than simply bridging for the sake of making everyone feel good.

SHIRLEY

Yes! Too often people assume that bridging is about feeling good, not really recognizing that bridging leadership has what Mark describes in the chapter on democracy as a kind of fierceness.

Neville, you've spoken a lot about how context has shaped your transformative approach to social justice and to peacebuilding. Can you give us some examples of the way you use bridging and of the challenges that you faced?

NEVILLE

When we were talking earlier [before the recorded interview], Shirley, you referenced the Southern Africa Trust. The primary purpose of the Trust was to promote strong engagement between non-state actors and governments across the region. So, we were bridging in multiple ways—regional,

multi-country, cross border, between civil society organizations and state actors, but also with a strong eye on the private sphere, so with private business. That required a sensitivity to languages in different contexts. Not just different languages spoken but language in different social sectors, interests that are different, and ways of engaging that are completely different and—especially at that time, coming from struggles for freedom and equality—sometimes quite confrontational. At the time (in the mid-2000s), most countries in the region with post-liberation governments were far more interested in economic development, and particularly attracting foreign direct investment, so their language was completely different, and their attention was focused in a different direction from civil society’s attention.

So, it required the particular ability to build trust, with authenticity and clearly declared interests, but at the same time finding common ground at least on which to have a discussion. In the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the intergovernmental forum in southern Africa, there was no room for direct formal engagement with civil society groups, authentically. SADC would engage with selected groups, more professionalized, larger, more managed, more funded, and more respectable groups that didn’t quite challenge them. Shifting them along that path to having, for the first time, a summit of SADC that brought together hundreds of NGOs and other civil society groups (churches, trade unions, community-based organizations, research institutes) into a forum with heads of states and other very senior government officials to talk about the development path for southern Africa was an extraordinary experience. That took years of work.

One of the challenges with that work, which was supported by overseas governments (particularly the British government), was the question of attribution in an aided context. Public attribution for achieving certain gains is difficult, especially with the narrative about “Whose agenda is this? Is this authentic? Is it real?,” while at the same time knowing that doing this work needs money, and the money was certainly not coming from the southern African governments.

“Bridging in multiple ways ... requires sensitivity to language and the ability to build trust, with authenticity and clearly declared interests.”

“ In bridging for freedom and equality for LGBTI people, we recognize that we don’t all experience injustice, exclusion, or marginality in the same way.

So, that was one experience. Very briefly let me talk about another, my work on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, freedom, equality for LGBTI people in southern Africa. Again, this is at its heart about bridging, not only *within* the LGBTI communities across the region but also bridging the differences within South Africa, which is very privileged in many ways but still experiences many hardships, especially for people on the bottom end of the society. And different identities and expressions of sexuality and gender within the community means that we have to keep an eye on the big picture, the goal that we are trying to achieve, at least in the medium term, while at the same time recognizing that we don’t all experience injustice, exclusion, marginality, in the same way, even though we’re all part of a broad LGBTI community. So, Black lesbian women and those in poorer townships in South Africa, or any other part of the region, are the ones who, in the first instance, experience violence and death disproportionately compared to other LGBTI people by virtue of the multiple exposures to different exclusions.

I don’t want to go too deeply into that because I think it’s obvious. But building alliances with groups that would not normally even be open to have a discussion—for example, faith groups, the churches, particularly in southern Africa, which is by far the largest religious community—and simply being able to start having a discussion about the word “gay” in public is an extraordinary sign of progress, small as it is.

“ Bridging leadership requires some independence and autonomy, while still being located in a particular context ... and being conscious of one’s situatedness.

MARK

What makes our conversation with you unique is that you’ve dealt with so many of these polarities: rich, poor; north, south; Black, white; conservative, liberal. And now you’re also addressing male, female. How have you dealt with all these dualities? And what have you learned about bridging in the process?

NEVILLE

The point I want to make is that bridging leadership requires some level of independence and autonomy, while still being located in a particular context and community and being conscious of one’s situatedness.

However, an issue that is coming to the fore more and more has troubled me. There is the notion that that everyone is a citizen or ought to be and that we all act or ought to act from that positioning, and that being in a particular sector or institution doesn't make you a different order of person. That's the first thing this ideal of equal citizenship. But what's emerging is the notion of intersectionality, of multiple aspects of marginality, exclusion, violence that are not hierarchical layers of exclusion, but there's an interplay into which is woven power dynamics. And those power dynamics can play out in in very different ways.

I want to give an example. I've been asked to lead a review of an incident that happened with the head of a university, who happens to be a very smart, driven, youngish Black woman. We would certainly want to celebrate and support that transformation at a prominent university in South Africa. But the incident was about how she and a colleague had spoken publicly about LGBTI people, and the issue really comes down to the exercise of power in a multistakeholder process, and how that power is used to exclude while at the same time wanting to be seen to be exercising bridging leadership.

The incident arose because the university head had independently on her own social media platforms tried to reach out to communities beyond the university's establishment, even beyond academic institutions, to the public. In her mind, this is bridging leadership, because she's breaking the confines of closed academic practice, scientific practice. But in doing that, there was no voice or visibility for the subjects whom she was talking about with a colleague.

This incident is an example of how power dynamics can play out. There's a matrix of power and identities and multiplicities that shift. And I think a very structured (and rigid) concept of orders of marginality and exclusion is a problem. So, the point for me is that bridging leadership requires humility, and the consciousness of one's positionality, even though at different times one might be at different places in the power play, depending on which context you are in at a particular time.

“Bridging leadership requires humility, and the consciousness of one's positionality, even though at different times, one might be at different places in the power play.”

SHIRLEY

Neville, you've given an interesting example and shown how it is *not* an example of bridging leadership because it's exclusionary, because it's using power in a particular way, because it doesn't have humility. So, what do you see as the central features of a bridging leader? Can you say in practical terms, how your multisectoral positioning informed your own capacity for bridging leadership? You've mentioned that you built trust in those big forums where you've brought together people from government institutions, civil society, and others. But I don't yet have a sense of how you did it. Can you give us a bit more of a sense of, one, what you regard as the central features of a bridging leader and, two, what it takes in practice to bring those huge forums together as successfully as you clearly did?

NEVILLE

Tough questions. In transformation work one never can say it's been successful because it's a lifelong project. George Soros—whom I've worked for and with for a long time—one of his best statements, that he makes over and over again, is that the struggle for freedom never ends. Part of bridging leadership is that it's never-ending. You're not going to say, "We've reached the bridges, the bridges are done." So that's one thing.

I think that the example I gave about the university head says very clearly that bridging leadership means that you should not and cannot do it on your own. It requires a community of people and, therefore, networks are important. One should have those networks and use them and deliberately maintain them.

One of the things that I'm very conscious of is that we get it wrong, over and over again. You constantly have to review and re-strategize and work at it again. You might have a prototype. And you might experiment and develop it as you go along. But you're not going to have the design of the process and the outcome before you even start.

I think that the constant, the compass, must always be to check oneself that the process doesn't become self-serving, because you can feel very accomplished and very recognized in a process that necessarily

“Transformation work is a lifelong project ... You're not going to say, 'We've reached the bridges, the bridges are done.'”

involves working with power. But one must always remember the outcome that you're trying to achieve, at least in the short to medium term, and that it's not the whole answer to what a solution might be, and that others might pick it up along the way or afterwards. So those are some thoughts.

SHIRLEY

You said something that rings true with me, that bridging leadership never ends. Once one builds a bridge, the bridge needs maintenance and care. It needs to be reinforced every now and again. Because if it isn't, it collapses. So, I think that continuity and the capacity to look critically at yourself and make sure that what you're doing is not self-serving are crucial.

MARK

Neville, if you could wave your magic wand for a moment and imagine that bridging leadership were more prevalent, more common, can you paint a little picture of what would happen in southern Africa, or more broadly? If bridging leadership were to have more traction and become more of the modus operandi for leaders, what might happen? Can you just address that on a vision level?

NEVILLE

While a lot of privilege will fall, first of all, I think there would be greater equality at many different levels, between countries particularly. Southern Africa and the world are constructed with wealth and power concentrated in centers, probably a few more centers than there were in the past. But that model of the powerful center with satellites orbiting around it would probably change. And I think that's good. Not only at a geopolitical level, but within countries and communities. We're living in two different worlds at the moment, both in countries and between countries.

MARK

Say more about that, about the two worlds, please.

NEVILLE

In countries and between countries, we're living with inequalities of many different sorts. The visible expression of this is economic—poverty and

“ The primary bridging that we need to do is not just between people, but between ideas, and futures and aspirations, and things like that.

economic inequality. I think in a COVID context, this has been exacerbated in many ways. And unfortunately, most of our development paths are still premised on building on those who already have and then taking a welfare approach to those who don't. I don't have an answer to how that might look differently right now because the world is in a serious situation. But that is the primary bridging that we need to do (between the “haves” and the “have-nots”). It's not just between people, but between ideas, and futures and aspirations and things like that.

Let me just highlight another example that I think speaks to the idea that bridging leadership is taught. It's not something particularly new, it's common sense for anyone, even in business. Because always, but now more and more, companies have known that to succeed as a company, you need a market, you need the license to operate. And so, the community that you operate in needs to have a sense of your value. And a sense that you are making some contribution to the advancement of society.

I'm involved in some renewable energy initiatives in South Africa, where the renewable energy program of the state requires a certain level of community ownership of any new solar or wind or other renewable energy company or plant. It's not unique to South Africa, there are models like this in Europe and elsewhere. But it's a fascinating model, because you have community ownership in a new industry that is positioned as being the future, increasingly, of the South African economy. And you have both overseas investors with big amounts of money in electricity production and local actors. South Africa has this requirement for broad-based Black economic empowerment. So, there's some wealthy Black individuals with companies who must own some part, and then there's the community ownership as well. In this coming together, companies are learning very quickly that the task is not just to placate communities but to work with communities to make business succeed. This changes their whole way of thinking about doing business, and about the practice of bridging leadership. But this is inherent, and it ought to be in any corporate model. So, it's not something that's foreign to how business is done or should

be done. These new models just make it more explicit that those parts of working together need to be developed more.

SHIRLEY

Early in our conversation, you suggested that bridging leadership is the only way in South Africa, precisely because we're the kind of diverse society that we are. Yet, bridging leadership is not really the norm here in South Africa. What do you think, is bridging leadership strongly present in South Africa and what kind of impact has it had? And does bridging leadership have traction in southern Africa, in the countries you work in? What's the impact of its presence or its absence? I'm also interested in the remarks you made earlier about language and in the role of bridging leadership in your advocacy around LGBTI+ rights.

NEVILLE

Historically, in southern Africa, particularly, we've had extraordinary bridging leaders, of world renown. And I don't mean just Madiba (a name of respect for Nelson Mandela, the first president of a democratic South Africa). The one thing that strikes me about South Africa's "bridging leadership" expectations is that it's often the people on the underside of the power dynamics who are expected to be the bridges. And that means, for people involved in bridging leadership, we need to know when to challenge very strongly, and when to allow space for understanding the limitations of various people.

One of the characters of South Africa's trajectory has been this notion of the inside and the outside track, recognizing that at different times, there needs to be an outside track that challenges power very forthrightly and directly and maybe even sometimes threaten it with the intention of exposing contradictions and risks, while at the same time also knowing that the inside track of diplomacy, building confidence and trust, is important as well. So, on the one hand, exposing the fault lines. A bridge is good where there are fractures, fissures, and where the fault lines are. And unless you expose those fault lines, you wouldn't know where to bridge.

“ It's often the people on the underside of the power dynamics who are expected to be the bridges.

“ Unless you expose the fault lines, you wouldn't know where to bridge.

“ Bridging leadership is not just about multi-stakeholder processes ... It's about transformation. And part of transformation is being transformed yourself in the process.

MARK

Imagine that we said to you, thank you very much, this has been a wonderful interview. And we ended our Zoom call, and we said goodbye. And then you started getting about your day and you thought, oh, I should have talked about this, I can't believe they interviewed me about this, and I didn't talk about X. What would come up for you in five or 10 or 15 minutes after we end the call? This is a chance to say it now.

NEVILLE

It's a sense of discomfort that bridging leadership is often reduced to multistakeholder processes that development practitioners love reducing to models and how things should be done. And that doesn't resonate well with me. It's not just about multistakeholder processes. That's a very state-centered approach to bridging leadership. In my view, it's not transformative, but very utilitarian. It's about achieving a particular project.

The practice of bridging leadership is a much deeper life skill and ought to be transformative. I want to emphasize the transformative aspect. And it's not about using process to get the outcome that you want. It's about transformation. And part of transformation is being transformed yourself in the process. So, I think there's a depth of, I don't know what to call it, spirituality or humaneness, whatever you want to call it, but there's a depth and the depth, I think, is lost in simply reducing it to multistakeholder process.

MARK

I couldn't agree more. I'd like to indulge myself by asking you a personal question. I want to ask you about hope and faith. There're times when I look at what's going on in the world, and I despair. Despair, when I look at the climate change negotiations, I despair when I look at some of the civil wars that go on and on, whether it's Ethiopia or Sudan. Or when I look at my own country, the United States and our disarray and our fragmentation, I despair. When I look at the borders and the way we hurt people, and they get stranded at borders, when there's no reason for them to be stranded at borders, whether it's the US–Mexico border, or the Belarus–Poland border,

I despair. And so, I'm curious, when I asked you that question about your vision for bridging leadership, I wanted to ask you, where do you find your hope and faith about the possibility of the world really embracing bridging leadership more in our lifetimes?

NEVILLE

Honestly, I don't have very much hope right now. But I know that inevitably, there will be people and groups who re-emerge with a new vision. Talking about the rest of the world, South Africa is a horrible place to be right now with the many problems that we face. Let me put it like this: I think that progressive people who value things like bridging leadership have over many years lost touch with the people and become far too technical in their approaches. Hopefully, the people themselves will start to recreate movements that are geared towards progress. Right now, I don't really see that. Almost every country, or if not every country, every second country in the world, has gone backwards, in my view, on basic things like human dignity and respect for citizens and equality. I do think, though, that cannot sustain itself and people will come back with different ways of thinking.

MARK

Thank you for that beautiful, honest, and true answer, I appreciate it. Shirley, what's in your heart for Neville?

SHIRLEY

Neville, I appreciated the depth and honesty of your answer. Hope is an interesting emotion or state of mind. People can hope blindly or naively, and not take any action to ground their hope. It seems to me that well-grounded, well-formed hope requires the kind of critical honesty you've just engaged in. I think if we tout bridging leadership in a superficial way as a panacea and as the source of great hope, this will do a great disservice to a rich and important concept. I want to link that thought to your saying, in one of your examples, that bridging leadership can't be done alone but takes a community of people. My thought is that through building a community of bridging practice, with the kind of critical depth that you've

“ Unless the contradictions and the polarities are evident and not masked, the practice of bridging leadership cannot authentically happen.

displayed in your conversation with us today, there might be grounds for wise hope, rather than naive hope.

NEVILLE

I entirely agree, Shirley. The world is extremely polarized. I don't know if it can get more polarized than it is right now. Maybe. But, again, unless the contradictions and the polarities, the differences, are evident and clear and not masked, the practice of bridging leadership cannot authentically happen. Because masked power and difference don't make for good bridging and good transformative approaches.

I have no standing to do this, but in my view in the United States, as bad as it is, the one outcome of the past years has been that the differences in the polarization have become evident, which for many years, wasn't as evident. Similarly in South Africa, right now, or in many other countries in the world, Brazil, India, wherever. The polarization is very depressing and feels like failure. But at least we know where people stand and can take more effective transformative approaches with at least some of them.

MARK

Neville, this has been a truly provocative conversation. Thank you so much.

Touchstones

- The path to progress is to bridge in a sustainable way, but always with a firm commitment to justice and transformation, not simply for the sake of making everyone feel good.
- Bridging for inclusion requires sensitivity to language and context as well as the ability to build trust, with authenticity and clearly declared interests.
- Multiple aspects of marginality and exclusion are intersectional and not hierarchical layers. Power dynamics can play out in quite different ways along the intersecting lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and language.

- Bridging leadership requires a level of independence, but at the same time it requires humility and being conscious of your positionality. This includes being conscious of the different places you occupy in the power play, depending on which context you are in at a particular time.
- Masked power and difference don't make for good bridging or transformative approaches.
- Bridging leadership for social justice and inclusion doesn't ever end.
- Bridging leadership is not something you can or should do alone. It requires a community of people so it's important to build and use networks, and deliberately maintain them.



A Holistic Approach to Communities and Conservation

Margaret Jacobsohn and Kristine Tompkins

A fierce skepticism about academic leadership theories permeates this conversation between two women who, on different continents, have lived out a vision for conservation that embraces and benefits local communities. Their work, in southern Africa and South America, displays many aspects of bridging leadership in action, although neither author was aware of the concept of bridging leadership before receiving the invitation to contribute to this book.

Margaret Jacobsohn is a Namibian writer, anthropologist, and community-based conservation specialist. She is an authority on the social organization and cultural economy of the semi-nomadic Ovahimba people of Namibia and Angola. Her writing includes the books *Himba: Nomads of Namibia* and, more recently, *Life Is Like a Kudu Horn*. Margaret has won some of the world's top conservation awards for her work. They include the US Goldman Environmental Prize for Africa for grassroots environmental activists, jointly with Garth Owen-Smith, her late husband, with whom she founded the Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation Program.

Kristine Tompkins is president of Tompkins Conservation, which she co-founded with her late husband Douglas Tompkins. Together they bought swaths of land in Patagonia and Northeast Argentina, and engaged in restoring and rewilding the ecosystems to return them to the public as national parks. Tompkins Conservation still continues these efforts today, together with their offspring organizations, Rewilding Argentina and Rewilding Chile. In May 2018, Kristine was named UN Environment Patron of Protected Areas. Earlier in her career, she was CEO of Patagonia, Inc, the outdoor clothing company which she helped Yvon Chouinard to launch.

Despite differences in their contexts and approach, these two formidable women concur that first-hand experience is the bedrock for understanding. They concur, too, that conservation efforts can be sustainable only if local communities are enmeshed in them, benefit

from them, and have ownership of them. Bringing out and using local knowledge is part of this, as is the “alchemy of sweat and tears” in forming new leaders through collective action.

Chong-Lim Lee and Shirley Pendlebury hosted this conversation.

CHONG-LIM

In this conversation, we’re focusing on bridging leadership in the conservation work you’ve both been doing with communities. We see your way of working as that of bridging leaders and your organizations as bridging organizations. But how familiar are you with the concept of bridging leadership?

MARGARET

I first came across the concept when Len le Roux asked me to take part in this enterprise. I haven’t a clue what bridging leadership is about, and deliberately didn’t read up on it, because Len assured me that everything we’ve been doing at Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) for the last 35 years in Namibia was bridging leadership.

KRISTINE

I’ve never heard the term “bridging leadership” before. But I will say that it’s really a combination of what you personally want to get done and knowing that you can’t do it unless you have a roadmap and that people smarter than you, whoever they are, are on the same bandwagon.

We started Patagonia (the clothing company) in 1973. And I started running it about then. It’s always the same. You can’t go anywhere unless you’ve packed up this complex combination of people or entities that are going in the same direction. That’s the job actually, having a map and then getting going. And it’s an organic process, almost always. I was in business for almost 25 years and then my husband Doug and I started conservation work; I’ve done that for almost 30 years. I don’t see a big difference between the two when I think about bridging leadership.

“You can’t go anywhere unless you’ve packed up this complex combination of people or entities that are going in the same direction.”

CHONG-LIM

In your work in conservation, how do you create a collaborative response to bring about a system shift that impacts not just the land, but also people, in a holistic sense?

KRISTINE

When we work on species extinction, the loss of key habitat, and on what we call rewilding, we also have to rewild ourselves, reconnecting ourselves as communities back into our relationship with nature. In many ways, the easiest thing is acquiring the land or working with governments to protect seascapes. The most difficult thing to imagine is the durability of these places. There is no durability without communities that are benefiting from the very nature of protecting nature. So, ethically, we can't separate ourselves from the human community.

There will be no national parks anywhere in the world in one hundred years if communities don't find themselves not only enmeshed in them, but benefiting from them, so that their kids aren't leaving home because there's no future for them. You can't really count on national governments or global entities. It has to be local; it has to be real, and it has to be durable. Whether we're reintroducing jaguars or another million acres, that is finally the key. How do you make this real for everybody living in these territories? When you walk away or you're dead and your money's gone, do those people have a sense of ownership of those lands? That's essential.

MARGARET

Kristine, you spoke of a roadmap. We would call it a vision. Everything starts with a vision, which is organic, which grows. Ours was that wildlife, which was rapidly disappearing in the areas where we were working and living, would be conserved if it were valuable, if it were, once again, useful to local people across Namibia. If wildlife could once again be of value to people, they would manage it sustainably, durably. It started with our vision, which was very much changed by the different communities, the partners . . . it grew.

The next thing to build is trust and respect. In that way, you develop a relationship. You can't work with a community, or anybody, if there isn't

“ Everything starts with a vision, which is organic and grows. The next thing to build is trust and respect.

trust and respect. I have a little book we wrote in about 2010, called *Lessons from the Field*. It's accessible online on the IRDNC website. We distilled the key practical ways of working. The theory is all very well but 95% is making it work on the ground. It starts with a common vision, which we grow together, then through trust and respect, you develop a relationship. That's how you go forward.

We started working with a few key communities where we were losing our black rhino, losing our desert-adapted elephant, our lions, our predators, everything was down to almost zero, just remnant populations. The only way we could turn that round was getting ordinary communities caring that this was happening. And that's what we were able to do, starting in the late 1980s. With Namibia's independence (from South Africa in 1990) we were fortunate that the new government was idealistic, and this idea of a community-based approach resonated with them. It's been an up and down relationship since then but, broadly, they are still supportive because the biggest post-independence transformation in Namibia is probably in the conservation sector, where so many people have been empowered.

We went from a few communities to more than eighty communal conservancies and thirty plus community forests and fish reserves. We've more than doubled the areas under conservation status. It's not all a success story. It really does go up and down. Anybody who works with communities knows that.

That's the background and it's all about the same things—a common vision which grows, having trust and respect for one another and working in partnership. It's about negotiation and equal partnerships. Whether it's an illiterate Himba community in the far northwest or the German government as a donor, we try to level the playing field to make sure we work as equals.

Garth (Owen-Smith) and I worked together for 36 years. When I met Garth in the early eighties, I was still working as a journalist. I was very politicized and then-underground ANC people were saying, "Don't talk to us about wildlife or conservation, our people need land," and me as a conservationist not having a good answer. Then I met Garth and there was the answer. Here was a man living in a remote desert, working closely

“ We talk about negotiation and equal partnerships ... we try to level the playing field and make sure we work as equals.

with communities, and making conservation and wildlife absolutely relevant to people. It was just a splendid meeting of minds. It was years before we actually started working together, by which stage, we were in different places personally. In the mid-1980s, I came to Namibia to do some academic work, and connected again with Garth, and magic happened.

When we started there was serious, illegal hunting and poaching going on. We were down to remnant populations of, especially, desert-adapted elephant and black rhino. Because we were still under the apartheid regime then, they weren't interested in working with communities. We were often under suspicion of being communist or suspect because we were talking about community empowerment. But Garth started talking to traditional leaders he'd known for a long time and simply asked people, "Are you happy to see the end of the game?" What emerged was people saying, "Absolutely not." I'll never forget a Caprivian leader—that's in the remote northeast of the country—saying to me, "We'll be ashamed to tell our grandchildren one day that all these incredible animals occurred here, and now you can only see them in pictures in books."

The wish to conserve was absolutely there. It was some white man's myth that these communities only cared about the meat in their pots. Wildlife is part of the culture, of people's background, even though now they might be driving a Mercedes and living in a city. Give people a chance and they really do like and respect wildlife if you present it in the correct way and there's enough food and people don't have to worry about the basics.

If government had come along and tried to stop the poaching, they couldn't have done it; they didn't have the manpower. But Garth asked these traditional leaders, "So what can we do?" and they said, "Well, we don't have any resources. But what we could do is get our sons to protect the wildlife." And Garth said, "What if we got some money to gather some rations together to pay these men?" This is how the community game guard system started.

The key point was we didn't appoint them, the government didn't appoint them, the community leaders appointed them. And they were answerable not to nature conservation, but to community leadership and

“Ownership was what it was all about, with a common vision and a relationship of trust and respect.”

their own communities. Ownership was what it was all about. So, there was this common vision and a relationship of trust and respect that we could work with. And then the different communities owned the initial project, the community game guards. We now have several different kinds of community rangers: fish monitors, community lion rangers, special conservancy rhino rangers, women who do natural resource monitoring, and others. After Namibia’s independence, the community game guard system evolved into communal conservancies where communities get the rights over their wildlife and other valuable resources. This is legally gazetted, so they then have rights to establish contracts with tourism and so on. In that way, benefits come back.

We’ve started a memorial fund in Garth’s name called the GOSCARs, the Grassroots Owen-Smith Community Ranger Award. Up to three men and women who are community rangers get an award every April. Because the project is now big and complex, and NGO- and government-driven at times, it waxes and wanes. So, it’s necessary to remind everybody that the real responsibility and accountability lies in the hands of ordinary African men and women in the field.

KRISTINE

We had the stuffing beat out of us in the early 90s in Chile, when we bought our first land, all from private people. Chile had never seen anything like this before, two foreigners buying up large tracts of land and saying they would conserve them. This was in Pumalin with pristine alerce forests—massive trees thousands of years old—and we weren’t cutting them. We had death threats and the military flying over our house out in a roadless area where we lived. That was 25 years ago.

We started at zero and worked both ends, in the Presidency and in the small towns around the first park we ever donated. Every country determines your strategy. What works in Namibia may not work in Chile and Argentina because we don’t have a tribal system. The community leaders are people who are voted in, and they have to meet the needs of their electorate, or they won’t get re-elected.

We decided to work faster, get things up and running so people could really believe that all were welcome. We built a center in this national park; we put in trails, with all the information about species. In this area, nobody thought about the nonhuman world as their neighbor. What we were doing, in their eyes, was a luxury, something that white people do while everybody else is trying to manage their breakfast table.

You have patience, you work as hard as you can to do exactly what you say you're doing. Transparency leads to trust. I call it the amplification of good. It took hours and hours of conversations, of severe distrust, and little by little, eventually people started coming into these parks. All were welcome. The park guards and the guys who built the trails were local people. We were the only foreigners involved. Once you get started and you can turn the conversation, it's not just the Doug and Kris show, it's all the people in the towns speaking about their work, their intention. They're the ones, more than anyone, who built those bridges to the hardest core opponents—because it's *their* park.

Once you have that, your role is to establish the roadmap with them and then, in many cases, get out of the way. We don't learn by having things done for us. We learn by listening to somebody who may have had more experience in a particular area, and then that person gets out of the way, and you do things together from that point forward. It was in 1992 that we started in Chile. In '97 when we started in Argentina, we had to do the same thing over again, because you're new.

I'm 71, I'm going to step out or drop dead. I come from the school that you do the best you can. It's priming a pump, not just somebody else's but your own, because as you think you're creating something that will be beloved and durable, you yourself are being stripped down every day and learning something. Especially if you're older and you think you know so much—you do have to take your clothes off every day and absorb what you're learning and be comfortable shifting. You never shift the target, but your strategies and hearing are finely tuned, not to what you know but to those things you don't know, and even the things you don't agree with. You realize you need to step back. It's really humbling because you come in with

“ Transparency leads to trust ... to the amplification of good.

“ You are finely tuned not to the things you know but to the things you don't know...That is leadership: you're good at being led and you're also good at leading.

the idea that everybody's going to love these projects. Far from it. You've got to stand up and prove yourself every day. That is leadership in my book: you're good at being led and you're also good at leading.

MARGARET

On your last point, the more participatory a process is, the stronger the leaders need to be, and you do get stripped. We stopped talking about environmental education a long time ago, and instead talked about environmental awareness, because we learned more from the people who we were supposed to be educating.

To come back to where you started, and this is a real lesson for the people involved in writing this bridging leadership book: there is no Holy Grail. You can't say this is how you do bridging leadership or how you do community-based conservation. Everybody knows *what* to do, but it's the *how and the who* that's important. Rolling out a concept is setting yourself up to fail. Here's a lovely example. Because we had a project that worked beautifully in the Kunene with community game guards, I thought this is how you do it. Transplant that to Caprivi, a completely different type of society, and it failed. The first community game guard I helped appoint in Caprivi was the village poacher. And he continued to poach, until we realized that the community hadn't taken ownership of this. So, no Holy Grail.

Garth was once asked in a very high-powered conference about the best techniques for getting the message across. It was before the digital footprint was so large, so we were looking at movies, theater, community theater, cartoons. Somebody said to Garth, "You haven't said anything yet? What do you think is the best tool?" And he said, "Well, quite frankly, my best tools are my ears. Listen."

You talked about durability. The job is never done. Our case study of 35 or 40 years ago has gone through different generations of people. I've realized in our remote rural setups different generations don't talk to each other how I might talk to my nieces and stepsons. A few years ago, South Africa's rhino poaching hit us. We hadn't had a rhino poached for 20-something years, because of the conservancies. Inevitably, with the

“My best tools
are my ears.
Listen.

massive price on rhino horn, poaching came across the border to Namibia, and we started losing rhinos. Garth and I had stepped down as leaders by then. For a year and a half, we watched 10% of our rhino population get taken out, and the modern (political) leaders doing absolutely nothing about it. Eventually, we couldn't keep quiet. We stepped in and raised money. Then we found all our traditional leaders, some of them two generations on, and other leaders in the communities, and took them on a five-day trip to show them the situation. We also took representatives from all sectors involved, from the police to the government, the conservancies to the NGOs.

These traditional leaders weren't aware of how serious the poaching was. They said they wanted a meeting like we used to have at our camp, Wêreldsend. "We want the young leaders of conservancies to come, every single one of them must come. And we don't want the NGOs or government involved . . . We'll call you in when we need you." It was amazing. They gave the two younger generations the history of the conservancies. "There wouldn't be rhinos in this area if it wasn't for your grandparents; we saved the wildlife." They passed on this knowledge that we'd assumed had gone from father to son, mother to daughter, granddaughter, but it hadn't. The younger people only saw the current big picture: now we've got conservancies; now we can benefit from all that. They didn't know the history—why there was now wildlife for them to benefit from, and tourism and jobs in remote rural areas.

Leadership is never over. You've constantly got to find ways of getting through to the next generation, and the next, and not take it for granted that this is being passed on.

KRISTINE

There are also many things about leadership that aren't consensual. Sometimes you have to make decisions that almost everybody dislikes. Good leaders are comfortable with being disliked. I don't mean permanently disliked. I mean that you must be the one responsible and take it on the chin. Now more than ever, the meetings are larger, the discussions longer. In

“ Leadership is never over. You've constantly got to find ways of getting through to the next generation and the next.

“Leadership is not a question of whether somebody likes power, it’s what you do with that power.”

some situations, that’s not helpful. I think bridging leadership must include the fact that there are decisions a leader is asked to make. You make them, and you fall on your sword. You’re not looking for consensus; you’re looking for advice. Leadership is a funny dance. The only reason I know I’ve had some level of success is that I can look at what we’ve finally arrived to. But getting there is really complex. Sometimes it’s bridged, many times it’s not. You hold on and hope you’re going in the right direction.

Leadership is not a question of whether somebody likes power, it’s what you do with that power. You would never be the head of any organization without some of that DNA in you. People shouldn’t be embarrassed that they want to lead. There are great leaders, and there are many lousy ones. Some leaders are great when the going is good and when it gets tough, they fall apart; they don’t like the weight of it on their shoulders.

MARGARET

We work in a very multicultural setup, with a wide range of experience and skills from PhDs to the illiterate San person with incredible local knowledge. We’re constantly moving between these different layers: the city folks, the politicians, the government officials, down to that Bushman, that San person, who can’t read or write. But as leaders, we must be able to bridge that divide.

I remember a workshop to look at what resources different communities had. We had a lot of government officials and communities. When I was working in the field as an anthropologist, I loved participatory rural appraisal mapping. So, we got people to do maps of their resources. They could draw a map on a flip chart, or the San community, who couldn’t write, could do it on the ground with bottle tops and stones. At the end of the two to three-hour session, the government officials had an elaborate flipchart map listing species, numbers, and percentages. The San’s map, on the ground, was the most amazing, rich map of all. The government officials, with their diplomas and degrees, looked at each other and said, “We had no idea that people had so much knowledge.”

The leadership point of this story is knowing this, finding ways to bring out this local knowledge, and then connecting these people. When they were asked for their evaluation of the workshop, one of the government officials said, “I’m going to do much more listening and asking of these guys, now that I’ve seen what they know.”

At a meeting I’ve just come from, we had a young project manager for a conservancy with a university degree sitting with somebody who’s his grandfather’s age and is trustee of the board of a Himba-owned safari company I’m involved with. We were making some decisions about the way forward. At one point a Himba elder said, “Now listen, young man, what you must realize is your education needs my wisdom.” Leadership is about recognizing these different levels and providing forums where this can come across.

Early in our community conservation work, the Himba talked about wanting to split a job up, to have two people working together, an elder who was illiterate and what they call a pen, a younger person who could read and write, to work with the elder. I wish I could tell you that it continued; it didn’t. The youngsters with Western schooling took over, and the politicians and the party politics.

Another thing that Garth and I felt strongly about: we had 77 staff and we worked with fifty plus communities, and we had a rule, “Don’t ever bring us a problem without some solutions too.” It created a mindset where people jumped over the obstacle into what can change it. That was one of our really valuable ways of leading.

CHONG-LIM

Can you say a little more about some of the ways you ensure that leadership endures in the organizations and the work you’re doing?

KRISTINE

I think that within the communities, most of it is driven by economic opportunity: Does what you’re doing provide some sense of economic opportunity that’s durable? That’s what transfers to the new generations.

Most of our projects were in places that had involved ranching by

“ Leadership is about recognizing local knowledge, finding ways to bring it out for others to recognize, and connecting people ... across different levels.

Spanish-speaking descendants of colonialism. Chile and Argentina both had land schemes, from 60–80 years ago, that granted people land in the extreme southern portions of both countries. To get the title, people had to work that land. Some were urban people going south and ranching. But ranching has collapsed, as it has almost everywhere in the world, especially for small-scale ranchers. So, we were facing terrific headwinds because we were seen as contributing to this collapse. So, we were facing terrific headwinds, because we were seen as contributing to this collapse, because we were taking grasslands out of production—grasslands that had been denuded over the last one hundred years—and trying to get them back into grasslands that would be regenerative. A segment of the communities we work with have come to love what they now have in front of them, a wilderness. But that’s largely because we helped install tourism. The grocery stores are working again, and the economic viability of these towns has a fighting chance for a future.

When you get into conservation, you’re usually talking about the lands and people who are living on the margins. So, conservation is still considered a luxury, although now less so because people understand the connection of our future to the natural world.

“In the absence of economic potential, it would be very hard to connect conservation from generation to generation.”

I would say you’re linking generations, firstly, by the economic potential that they see and are experiencing and then, less so, by the pride that young people take when they realize that their parents, and they themselves, helped to slow down destruction and regenerate natural resources. That ethos is there in the new generations. But without the economic possibility, it would be very hard to connect these things generation to generation.

MARGARET

I agree. Finding ways for wildlife to benefit communities means jobs and income. For the younger generation, that’s incredibly important. You must do that on a scale that can make an impact. This is where the Namibian program could be a lot stronger. Enough money isn’t going down to individual households, and COVID-19 has thrown this completely out of the

picture. People aren't going to conserve wildlife when they can't take care of the basics.

This is where the private sector comes in as a partner. Donors have become more and more inflexible, and more metric driven. They're killing creativity, killing flexibility, and they don't take risks. It's in taking risks, in making and taking opportunities, that you achieve. I wish we could get this across to the leaders of donor organizations. We're talking mostly about big bilateral donors; the smaller foundations are much better. But we could never have achieved what we did without solid funding for 25 years from some big donors like WWF. For years and years, they got what we were trying to do and gave us core funding. Today, nobody wants to fund core operations, only projects. But they still expect the core to function. And it can't, without the basics being covered. So, a huge amount of this comes down to money and being able to raise funds, but then getting sustainable stuff going through enterprises. We were doing that pretty well, up until COVID. The next step is getting enough money down to individual households. Once all that's taken care of, there's a real pride and empowerment.

KRISTINE

Another thing that happens in the two countries where we've worked is that nobody pays attention to these marginal areas. The national government doesn't. The Catholic Church doesn't; the local bishop doesn't come into these communities and baptize babies. They're just parked to the side.

People in these forgotten communities knit sweaters from their own wool, spun on spinning wheels. They do all the things that go with communities that are isolated and forgotten. Now with visitors coming in, and their local national park with their own wildlife specialists, the gaucho life is back on the map and appreciated because urban people crave a level of authenticity they don't have in their own lives. The pride these communities have now, finally, is reflected back on them by people who appreciate what they held on to. That has an impact on next generations, that people really appreciate the livelihoods of those who are living in isolated places.

CHONG-LIM

I'm curious about how you sustain that legacy and ways of doing things in the leadership that is emerging within your organizations.

MARGARET

I'm not sure how effectively we manage to pass on our leadership. The organization is struggling. It's got its third set of leaders since we left, and they are struggling. I don't have any words of wisdom, except that the youthful leaders need to be more humble. We've bred here in Africa, and in other countries, leaders who think simply because they have a degree, they know how to run an organization. How do we get across to these leaders that it means nothing to have the education without the experience? If only we could get the trust and respect going both ways between the younger leaders and the older ones. An enormous amount is being lost in the world at all levels, whether you're in a small rural community or sitting in the United States, because the youth are not open enough. Do they believe that because they can play with the technology, because they've got it all at their fingertips, that they've got wisdom?

“ You need to experience something firsthand to really understand and absorb it.

You need to experience something firsthand in order to really understand and absorb it. People need to be taken into nature; people need to be face to face. Early South American development literature showed how just by being with somebody and doing something together, you change your perspective on how you see each other and the world. That doesn't happen because you Zoom together.

To go back to experiential learning, we are working on something called a people's park, where a group of conservancies get together and form a park in partnership with government. It's a new African way of doing conservation, having not a national park, but a people's park. We took two years to get the communities on board by taking different groups—youth, leaders, politicians, prominent women in these communities—on learning journeys in the area. Amazing things happened when they did a four- or five-day trip, seeing where the people's park could be and what was possible.

In our Women for Conservation project there are Herero women in their big dresses, and youngsters in blue jeans, young women who are schooled. We showed them lodge sites and where different things could happen. The experience of these women traveling together with our team of people working in conservation, those five days of doing things together and seeing with their own eyes—that bridged into an amazing leadership group of women. It's now a couple of years later, and they are still hanging in there.

KRISTINE

In conservation life, I think, what you're doing attracts the kind of people you want. There's a magnet there. Look for them and figure out how to keep them.

We have a strong ethos of celebrating bad news. We came from a culture where we're always trying to hide things that went sideways. But for us, what really formed our leadership was for everybody to write a weekly report, because we were all out in the field and Doug and I wanted to stay on top of everything. We started the report with bad news. This trains people and gives them confidence that they're not going to be sacked if they made a mistake or something went wrong.

Being on the ground is massive. Tompkins Conservation is a small team and people are always surprised about this. But Doug and I were on the ground—I still am—and that makes a huge difference. You're training these great people who have joined you in long-term projects, working with you every day, in all sorts of circumstances, and they can observe how you react, how you do everything. You can't work from a distance and have that same language, that same ethos, that same drive. When people in our team are talking to me, I know where they are, I recognize if they think they're in trouble, because we lived together for twenty some years building all these projects. So, with our leaders today, I know that our projects and the ones they build on their own will be high quality projects. They can't do otherwise, they're brilliant, brave people. And they're funny, and we fight like cats in a bag. It's the longevity; it's the sharing of being miserable, of being in the trenches together.

I don't think you form that alchemy unless you also have everything at risk. People who work for you risk not being near their families, or whatever, for this kind of work. But you also are investing in it. It is the alchemy of sweat and tears that really builds new leaders. I don't believe in business schools. What you get out of these schools is connections. But really great leaders are coming up out of the ground, they're sprouting. I can get the best accountants and financial people on the planet and get this kind of advice and this kind of board of directors. But if I don't have the people on the ground, there's nothing to lead. There's nothing to talk about.

MARGARET

I totally agree. You can hire the hard-edged technical skills. What you can't pluck out of the air are people who are prepared to live and work in the field. If leaders aren't accessible, it's not going to work. That was why Garth and I were able to build so much because we lived in one of the areas where we were working. People could come to our kitchen table. That was a huge thing to build the initial trust and respect.

In terms of passing this on, I don't know. Namibia is a big country with a small population. We could rebel against the previous regime, and work initially with our new independent government, and then had some ups and downs with them. That was in a particular historical context. What we have now with our new Namibian leaders is that many have no concept of being against government, of being a rebel. So sometimes when you should be opposing government because they're not doing the right thing, the new leaders can't bring themselves to do that. There's such a stranglehold of the ruling party on power that anybody who's from the opposition will be discounted. That is the harsh reality of Namibian politics.

But I think the born frees, as we call youngsters born after the revolution, will be fine. They are not entrenched in the liberation politics of this day. And as long as we can get some experiential connections and not do it all on Zoom, I think we'll be fine.

CHONG-LIM

You've both highlighted the need to be there and to see, to listen, to be seen, be heard, be able to bring all those voices to struggle together, to find your contrarian voice and work through the hardship in order to be able to bring a response that is commensurate to the challenges you're trying to address. Thank you for highlighting how your work has played out in conservation and the value of community and the promise this holds for longevity, not necessarily for your organizations but for the planet.

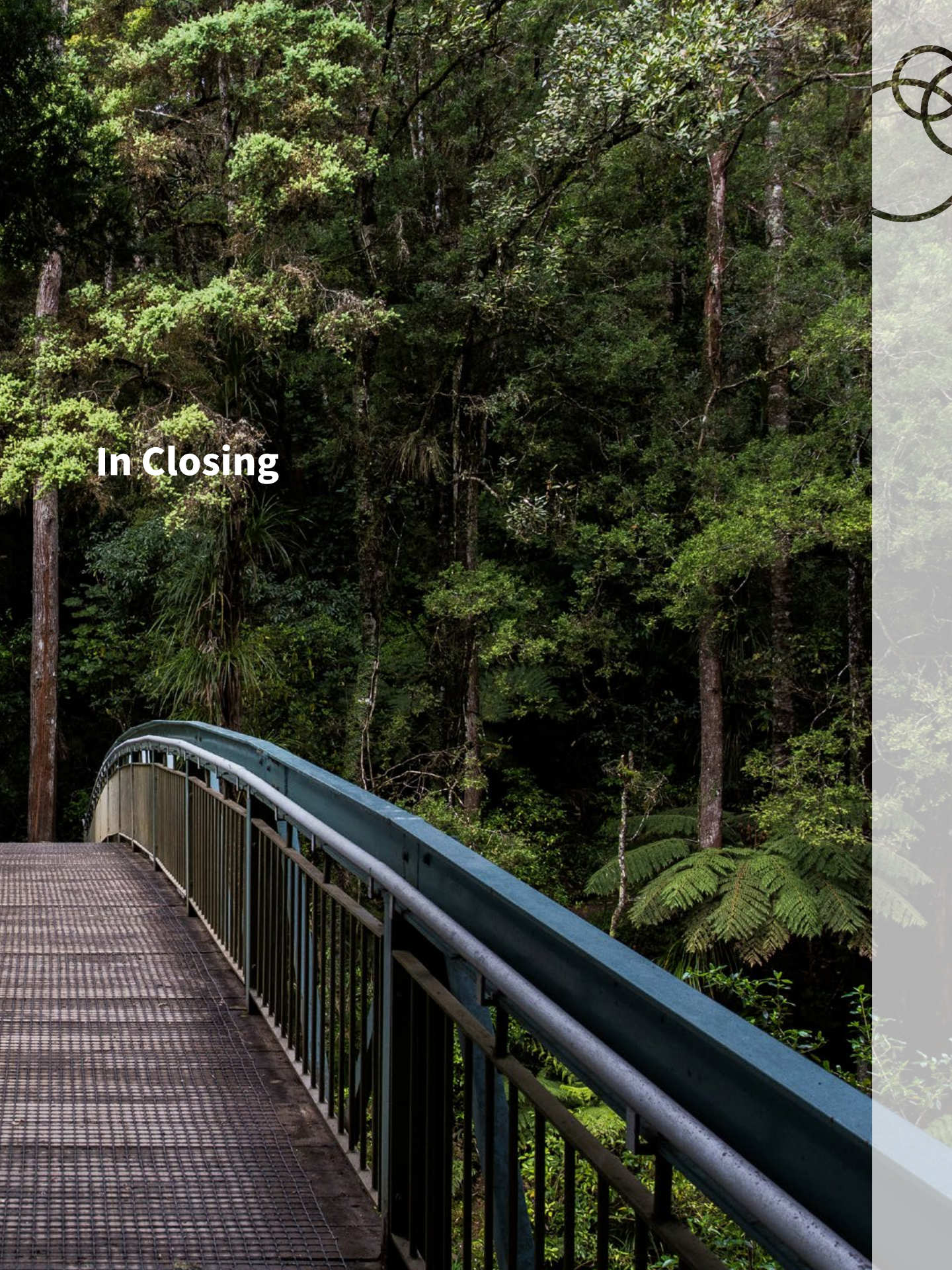
Touchstones

- There is no durability in conservation initiatives unless the communities in those areas benefit from protecting nature.
- Everything starts with a vision, which is organic and grows. The next thing to build is trust and respect, and for communities to have ownership of a project.
- Transparency leads to trust . . . to the amplification of good.
- As a leader, you must be finely tuned to the things you don't know, and to the things you may not agree with.
- Leadership is about recognizing local knowledge, finding ways to bring it out for others to recognize, and connecting people across different levels.
- Finding ways for wildlife to benefit communities means jobs and income. People won't conserve wildlife when they can't take care of the basics.





In Closing







Building Trust for a Better World

Remarks by the late Corazon (Dinky) Soliman

We close with Dinky Soliman's address on the occasion of the 2018 David Rockefeller Bridging Leadership Award Ceremony, where she shared the platform with Peggy Dulany and fellow awardees, Ernesto Garilao and Carlos Rodríguez-Pastor. We publish this extract in memory of Dinky, who through her life and work epitomized the qualities of a bridging leader. Her authenticity and grace are palpable in this short address.

When I first served as Minister of Social Welfare and Development, I started a program on community-driven development, which means people from the villages define the program, the problems, the solutions. This meant agreeing on the solutions as a community and government transferring the funds to a community bank account, which the people managed.

I was met with disbelief, distrust by the villagers themselves, as well as by my colleagues in the ministry. For the people, the government had disappointed them too often. And civil servants did not trust the poor to manage the funds efficiently and effectively.

As a civil society person, which is my background before I joined government, I was in a quandary. What do I do? It was then that Ernie and Peggy, I recall, having said, "Always listen to the people." That comes also from my tradition as a community organizer.

And so, what I did—by that time Ernie had just finished being the Minister of Agrarian Reform during the Ramos administration—I went out to the villages with my colleagues, and I listened.

I listened to the disappointment of the people. Understood their needs and the causes of distrust for government.

I listened to my colleagues in the ministry who are based out in the field. Their anxiety of giving money to poor people. Their very bad experiences on microcredit programs.

After listening, I engaged them in co-designing the program, shared with them the facts and figures of the program and agreed on indicators to measure our success.

By the time I left government, we had served 800 municipalities out of 1,400, having impact and improving the lives of more than half a million families.

Building trust means listening to the other person or party, to what they are saying and what they are not saying. Listening with your ears, with your eyes, with your mind and your heart.

Building trust means being honest, being truthful. Saying it the way it is. No half-truths or half lies. Delivering on the promises of the agreements the first time, over and over again.

Building trust means acknowledging in all honesty, the differences and disagreements. Trying to identify common interests and working on those common interests for common solutions. But if it is not possible, as Peggy said earlier, agree to disagree, with respect.

Building trust is holding power with grace. Grace-filled power and graceful power. Grace-filled power means holding power informed by your spirituality, by your faith. Graceful use of power means using your power without disempowering the other, and in fact, empowering both of you.

Friends, building trust is seeing, recognizing, acknowledging our common humanity. In the world today we have to make the effort in our own spheres of influence. Be part of what Francis Thompson had said, paraphrasing her, “connected all are we because you cannot touch a flower without troubling a star.”

Appreciations

We are deeply grateful to the bridging leaders who have generously contributed their stories, insights, and experience for inclusion in this book. Their openness and honesty gave the book its spirit, and their passion for positive change gave us fuel to move it forward. In particular, we appreciate Peggy Dulany, our bridging leadership exemplar, who laid out a vision for working together across differences and has given that vision shape and definition over the years through her reflections and actions.

We also thank Henri van Eeghen, who was Synergos' CEO when the idea for *Bridging Leadership Voices* was first introduced. He energetically supported the idea and gave us space to run with it, exemplifying his view that "Bridging leadership requires a shift from a world in which power is consolidated to the hierarchized few, like water trapped behind a dam. Bridging leadership breaks down those barriers through multistakeholder collaboration and dialogue and diffuses power like a free-flowing river, cascading shared responsibility and openness."

In that vein, we would like to thank Synergos' staff and Board for their support, feedback, and inputs in bringing *Bridging Leadership Voices* to fruition. In particular, we thank Len le Roux who provided guidance and mentorship throughout, John Tomlinson for leading on production, Constance Monatla for keeping us coordinated, Saaz Hussain for attentively assisting with production and transcripts, and Ayu Ariyanti for supporting the book's marketing. We also thank our editorial supports, including

Elizabeth Mackenzie for her editorial guidance and sensitive grasp of the form and purpose of the book, Mandy Lake for the cover and interior book design, and Alexa Barnby for copyediting and proofreading.

Finally, *Bridging Leadership Voices* is a celebration of a global community, one that extends beyond what we've been able to capture in this book. We continue to be inspired by the brave, innovative leadership we see in Synergos' global network, including that in the Global Philanthropists Circle, Senior Fellows, Arab World social entrepreneurs, current and former staff, Board members, and so many valuable partners in our journeys for collective action.

