Deep Environmental Leadership – Stuart B. Hill - 2009

Accepting and learning from small failures is the primary path to significant successes. Trying to avoid this process, paradoxically, results in large failures.

First I'll answer the inevitable question, what do you mean by *deep*? Essentially it is everything I am arguing for in this article. It is the opposite of the more common *shallow* leadership. This is more concerned with appearance than substance, with quick (often temporary), de-contextual, problem-solving interventions than with the design of systems that are problem-proof, with individual heroics than team work and collaboration, and with a single-factor focus rather than dealing with whole systems.

Another important distinction that is important to appreciate is between *leadership* and *management*. Whereas management is primarily concerned with ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of operations within existing designs, leadership is open to the possibilities of redesigning systems to achieve improvements of a much greater order of magnitude. Predictable problems arise when those with primarily management skills are appointed – and mistakenly labelled – as leaders. Such individuals tend to oppress others (through over-management and control), and to not appreciate *deep leadership* initiatives within their organisations. *Deep leaders* need to employ and be supported by equally *deep managers*, who similarly need to be supported, by the leaders.

Deep leadership is relevant to the specific needs of the moment; and *deep environmental leadership*, in addition, must be in the service of *environmental wellbeing* (most *well* environments are characterised by ecosystem processes that build *natural capital*, and that have high functional *biodiversity* and *resilience*). These observations may seem like stating the obvious, but leadership failures are often the result of having de-contextual, inflexible agendas, and of leadership being primarily in the service of ego and drives for positional power.

So, one indicator of *deep leaders*, paradoxically, is that they are not psychologically driven to be highly visible; indeed, many of the really great ones are *reluctant leaders*, e.g., Rachel Carson was an outstanding environmental example. Because of the value of this quality, one of the 'exercises' that I use in leadership training is to challenge trainees (after each has chosen a personally-relevant leadership issue) to brainstorm what they might do to enable them to reduce their visibility as a leader, i.e., to become an *anonymous leader*. You might like to do this exercise yourself, before reading on.

The following are some of the things that might help to reduce such visibility: if the project is spread over the long term; with many people collaborating in making things happen; and using primarily indirect strategies and subtle interventions. It is my experience that projects with such characteristics have much higher chances of being relevant, effective, adopted, and sustainable than the more common interventions that use *magic bullet*, instant, high-powered solutions, delivered by conspicuous heroes. Such so-called solutions usually eventually have numerous negative side-effects, few in the population are beneficiaries, and any positive outcomes are generally temporary, i.e., not sustainable.

All of us have the potential to develop leadership skills; however, their development needs to be thoughtfully enabled, particularly throughout our formative years. To provide such support, it helps to recognise the diverse qualities and expressions of leadership, especially visioning, innovation, inspiration, team formation, organisation, planning and action, and eventually – through experience – wisdom and clarity of values. Most leaders excel in one or more of these, but rarely in all. The development of these, and other related, abilities is most easily achieved in individuals who have suffered minimal *wounding* throughout their childhood, and who have been enabled to recover/heal from any such wounding. When this has not been the case, we must adapt to whatever situations we find ourselves in; and we tend to do this by giving up some of our power and awareness, by compromising our visions and values, and by developing patterned (rather than spontaneous/in-the-present) behaviours. Thus, survival-enabling adaptations, without healing, tend to become patterned maladaptations, which are so common that they are

generally thought of as 'normal'. These *distress* behaviours may be recognised as tendencies to postpone or over-react, to be re-active (rather than pro-active), to act on fear (rather than on love), and to be living primarily in the future and past (rather than in the present). Such individuals tend to subconsciously be attracted to *substitutes* for what they have lost (or did not receive), and exhibit *compensatory behaviours*. Sadly, these are as common within the environmental movement as in the rest of society, as is denial about this situation. Because most consumption is *compensatory consumption* (e.g., nearly everything in the centre isles at the supermarket!), the recognition, prevention and 'healing' of this patterned behaviour could go a long way towards resolving many of our resource and environmental-impact challenges.

Within the environmental movement, common patterned behaviours include an excessive emphasis on attacking those in power (this usually being, to some extent, a subconscious acting out against a surrogate oppressive figure from the past, usually a parent), fragmented problem-solving and substitute-seeking (vs. whole systems redesign/design) approaches, and lack of collaboration between groups. Thus, alternative energy systems, biological controls for pests, and even many 'conservation' initiatives, while appearing superficially progressive, commonly become distractions and barriers to the underlying need to redesign/design whole systems that can enable wellbeing, equity, meaning and sustainability, and that can be as problem-proof as possible. A major institutional barrier to the development of such systems is that now nearly all large research projects are funded through partnerships between governments and industry; these folks (understandably) have no interest in funding projects that might make their products redundant, or that might risk attracting any negative publicity.

Deep leadership, which proactively recognises this situation, as well as enabling the design approaches described above, is significantly different, and sadly much rarer, than *shallow leadership*, which tends to be reactive to emergent problems, and then often only when they reach crisis levels. Although reactive resistance, improving efficiency, and the promotion of more benign substitutes can function as stepping stones towards the design of sustainable systems, this requires that the transitional role of such 'reactive' initiatives be recognised, and that they are not regarded as end-points.

Consequently, I believe that the environmental movement would benefit enormously if all individuals and groups within it were to set aside time to reflect deeply on the nature of their environmental understanding and action, and to do what can be done to replace any *shallow* (reactive) environmentalism with *deep* (proactive, 'healthy' system-design focused) environmentalism.

As an aid to such reflection and ongoing evaluation, I have found it useful to test all goals, programs and actions (mine and others) against a broad list of criteria. The *testing questions* provided in Table 1 may be used as a starting point for this process. Note how different (and more challenging) this holistic approach is than the more usual single criterion focus.

To address the predictable tendency to feel overwhelmed by such a list, it helps to focus on *small meaningful initiatives that you (or your group) can guarantee to complete*; and then on the widespread communication of the processes involved, the outcomes, and the lessons learned. This is in contrast to the more common tendency to dream-up 'Olympic-scale' (mostly unachievable) projects; with communication being only about 'grand' outcomes (usually short-term conspicuous successes or catastrophic failures).

To complement the above ideas, I have listed a few *wisdoms* about *deep leadership* for you to reflect on (Table 2). One way to use such a list is to try constructing (over-the-top) sentences in which you claim to 'always' do whatever is implied; and to say these aloud, following each with a really loud (from the gut) 'Ha, Ha!' Then reflect on examples of where, when and how you exhibited each of these qualities, even in very small ways. Such acknowledged initiatives represent important steps on your journey towards further deepening your leadership. Also, note the characteristics that are most difficult to claim; these probably indicate the areas most needing attention, and psychological 'healing'.

Table 1. 'Testing questions' for evaluating environmental goals, programs and actions.
Note particularly the implied parallel and mutualistic relationships between personal, social and natural capital (underlined); other key interrelated and parallel concepts are highlighted in **bold**.

To what extent does my/our/another's environment-related initiative (policies, programs, plans, regulations, decisions, actions, etc.) support each of the following qualities?

Personal Area

1. empowerment, awareness, creative visioning, values and worldview clarification, acquisition of essential literacies and abilities, responsibility, wellbeing and health maintenance practices, vitality and ***spontaneity*** (building and maintaining personal capital – personal sustainability)

2. loving, responsible, mutualistic, ***diverse caring relationships*** with others (valuing equity and social justice), other species, place and planet (home and ecosystem maintenance)

3. positive total life-cycle ***personal development*** (lifelong learning) and 'progressive' change

Socio-Political Area

4. trust, accessible, collaborative, responsible, creative, celebrational**, *life-promoting community and political structures and processes*** (building and maintaining social capital – cultural [including, but not privileging, economic] sustainability)

5. the valuing of 'functional' high ***cultural diversity*** and mutualistic caring relationships

6. positive ***cultural development*** and 'progressive' psychosocial co-evolutionary change

Environmental Area

7. effective ***ecosystems functioning*** (building and maintaining natural capital – ecological sustainability)

8. 'functional' high ***biodiversity***, and prioritised use and conservation of resources

9. positive ***ecosystem development*** and bio-ecological co-evolutionary change

General Area

10. **proactive** (*vs.* reactive), **design/redesign** (*vs.* just efficiency and substitution) and **small meaningful collaborativ**e **and individual initiatives** that can be achieved (*vs.* heroic, Olympic-scale, exclusive, high risk ones), and their **public celebration** at each stage – to enable the spread of concern for wellbeing and community and environmental responsibility

11. focusing on key opportunities and **windows for change** (pre-existing and contextually unique change 'moments' and places)

12. effective monitoring and evaluation of progress (broad, long-term, as well as specific and short-term) by identifying and using **integrator indicators** and **testing questions**, and by being attentive to all **feedback and outcomes** (and redesigning future plans, actions and initiatives accordingly)

Table 2. A preliminary list of *deep leadership* characteristics (feel free to edit, and add others)

- Because I know that most of what is remains unknown, when striving to make wise decisions I endeavour to intuitively engage with the unknown, as well as with the miniscule known; because of this I can clearly recognise the flaws in the common naïve demand for 'evidence-based decision-making'

- I communicate between my essence/core/unwounded, wise self – and that part of every other person, even those who I might think of as my ‘enemies’

- I focus on collaboration rather than competition

- I act in the service of my higher values and goals; and in support of nature’s benign qualities and life-enabling processes

- I progress my thinking by moving along an upward spiral, with knowing and acting (including taking ‘small meaningful risks’) on one side, and unknowing and learning on the other

- I focus on design/redesign/front-end/whole system approaches rather than substitution, naïve efficiency, and problem-solving (back-end) strategies within existing designs

- I live fully embodied in the present – aware, empowered, flexible, attentive – living SPONTANEOUSLY – in a process of mutual synthesis with others and the environment

- I work to enable the benign expressions/agendas of others (meeting all others where they are, and engaging with their time-frames and contexts)

- I have a long-term vision and commitment to engagement – and work back from that to the present; and I act without postponement (a dominant pattern, paradoxically related to perfectionism)

- I am attentive to paradoxical understandings and processes, e.g., having a long-term focus invariably leads to the most relevant and effective short-term action(s)

- I take time to genuinely acknowledge what has already been done (by myself and others), and use this as a starting point for subsequent planning and action

- I subject all of my/our goals, plans, actions and outcomes to a broad range of holistic, integrative ‘testing questions’ (similar to the concept of ‘integrator indicators’ in ecology)

- I consciously choose to act on love rather than fear

- I employ a diverse range of mutually supportive enabling tools: signage, stories, active listening, co-counselling, leader-effectiveness training, meditation, etc., and recognise that there is never only one way (note: most ‘therapeutic branding’ is the product of persistent distress of the therapies’ proponents; the most effective qualities of therapies are likely to be those that re common to all of them; invariably it is the therapist, nt the therapy, that determines effectiveness

- I focus on enabling approaches (vs. using manipulating/socialising strategies) to support wellbeing, empowerment, awareness, vision and values clarification, social equity, ecological sustainability, aesthetics, peace, expression of and acting on love, spontaneity, living in the present…

- I am open to learning from cutting-edge developments in other areas; and I use the full spectrum of the arts appropriately and imaginatively in enabling progress

- I am sensitive to language – I ‘actively listen’ first, and make sure that I have fully understood the other, before sharing any of my thoughts (by communicating genuine interest and by asking questions)

- I use humour supportively (always in non-oppressive ways)

- I distinguish between and prioritise what is most ‘important’ rather than what may present as superficially ‘urgent’

The following two case studies are also provided as examples of deep leadership approaches. Note especially the strategic questions at the end of each example.

Examples of Deep Environmental Leadership

Issue: need to include 'ecological sustainability' in the national goals for agriculture (in country X).

Shallow approaches: diverse pressure strategies, studies, committees, reports…

Deep approach chosen: do homework (set up extensive data base, facilitating easy access to any needed relevant high-quality information); identify the national agricultural leaders (in this case there was one who was particularly powerful and respected); befriend this individual; support his development and broad understanding about 'agricultural sustainability', and related areas; as it happened, this individual had to present a ground-breaking lecture to all agricultural research stations and agriculture departments in universities; while he was considering what to focus on, he was influenced (by the *deep leader*) to consider examining the issue of 'agricultural sustainability'; this leader was able to supply him with the best available background material relevant to this topic, and support him throughout the process.

Outcomes: the initial outcome was that the leader decided to address this topic, and successfully did so (this was the first time that any agricultural leader in that country had dared to speak publicly about 'agricultural sustainability'); this led to much media coverage and discussion; and not long after, to 'ecological sustainability' being adopted as the fourth national goal for agriculture (the others were 'domestic supply', 'export', and 'maintenance of the family farm'); a 'bonus' outcome for the agricultural leader was that he quickly progressed from being a Dean of Agriculture at a university to Deputy Minister of Agriculture within his state; a 'bonus' outcome for the *deep leader* was that he was encouraged to use this 'adopt-a-leader' approach more widely; subsequently his students successfully adopted leaders in governments, industry and other institutions and organisations, with similar amazing successes.

Reflections as 'strategic questions': in what ways can we: a) reframe (and then effectively engage) apparent 'enemies' as potential allies? b) best meet people where they are, and help them take 'their' next steps? c) most effectively apply our learning from one area to others?

Issue: declared desire by local people to make their coralline island (in country Y) self-sufficient in food and energy

Shallow approaches: ecological change agents bring 'appropriate technologies' and procedures from elsewhere and try to get them adopted (invariably fails to enable a sense of ownership by the inhabitants)

Deep approach chosen: the *deep leader* first lived (with his children) on the island in a 'learning and relating mode', before doing anything; gradually he identified the key issues (concerns of the people), problems (both recognised and not), local resources, opportunities for improvement, and eventually collaboratively visioned and developed a plan of action; although very small, the island had several hundred species of plants, which were surveyed and their medicinal and non-medicinal potential uses documented (partly from local knowledge and from published documents); based on this information, a comprehensive directory was constructed, giving all of the inhabitants access to answers to questions about local resources that could meet most medicinal and non-medicinal needs (surprisingly, nearly all needs could be met with several alternative locally available options); the soil mostly comprised calcium carbonate, with little organic matter, and it was deficient in manganese (this had to be imported); rather than trying to make the soil of the whole island uniformly fertile, the strategy chosen was to create numerous small islands of fertility throughout the island (whereas this was doable, fertilising the whole island would have been an impossible project); this involved innovative organic matter collections on a nearby more fertile island and composting processes, which resulted in introducing beneficial soil organisms to selected sites throughout the island, along with the compost; complex multi-story planting designs were developed to make best use of the space, meet the people's needs and

avoid problems; one strategy was to plant a locally available stoloniferous (grows sideways) legume in most of the small islands of fertility; their growth filled in the gaps between these islands, thereby eventually making the whole island fertile; these are just a few illustrative examples of the many things that were done.

Outcomes: the island became fertile, and was maintained in this state, by the inhabitants, who 'owned' the process, and whose lives were improved in numerous ways.

Reflections as 'strategic questions': in what ways can we: a) use this approach of working with small 'islands of possibility', and enabling the subsequent spread of the benefits, in other areas? b) best enable ownership by, and relevance for, the main beneficiaries of any improvement initiative? c) resourcefully and creatively first use local resources, before relying on importation?

Related material of mine on the topic of this article may be found in the following few papers; and related power-point visuals at: www.stuartbhill.com

Hill, S.B. 2003. Autonomy, mutualistic relationships, sense of place, and conscious caring: a hopeful view of the present and future. Pp. 180-196 *in* J.I. Cameron (ed.), ***Changing Places: Re-imagining Australia***. Longueville Pr., Sydney, NSW.

Hill, S.B. 2005. Social ecology as a framework for understanding and working with social capital and sustainability within rural communities. Pp. 48-68 *in* A. Dale & J. Onyx (eds.), ***A Dynamic Balance: Social Capital and Sustainable Community Development.*** Univ. British Columbia Pr., Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Hill, S.B. 2006. Enabling redesign for deep industrial ecology and personal values transformation. Pp. 255-271 *in* K. Green & S. Randles (eds.), ***Industrial Ecology and Spaces of Innovation***. Edward Elgar, London.

Hill, S.B., S. Wilson & K. Watson 2004. Learning ecology: a new approach to learning and transforming ecological consciousness: experiences from social ecology in Australia. Pp. 47-64 *in* E. V. O'Sullivan & M. Taylor (eds.), ***Learning Toward An Ecological Consciousness: Selected Transformative Practices***. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Mulligan, M. & S.B. Hill 2001. ***Ecological Pioneers: A Social History of Australian Ecological Thought and Action***. Cambridge Univ. Pr., Melbourne, VIC.

Sattmann-Frese, W. & S.B. Hill 2008. ***Learning for Sustainability: Psychology of Ecological Transformation***. Lulu, Morrisville, NC [www.lulu.com].

****

Professor Stuart B. Hill (Foundation Chair of Social Ecology) came to the University of Western Sydney from McGill University in 1996. He has published over 350 papers and reports. His PhD was one of the first whole ecosystem studies that examined community and energy relationships (1969); and it was the earliest such study conducted by a single researcher. For this he received the awards for Best PhD Thesis and Best PhD Student. In Canada he was a member of over 30 regional, national and international boards and committees. He is currently on the editorial board of five international refereed journals, and until 2004 he represented professional environmental educators on the NSW Council on Environmental Education. Stuart has worked on environmental projects in the West Indies, French West Africa, Indonesia, The Philippines, China, the Seychelles, the UK, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. In the Seychelles his project was to make a whole coralline island completely self sufficient in food and energy. Some of his earlier publications may be found at: www.eap.mcgill.ca

Slightly edited reprint from: *Eingana* 32(2): 6-11; the Victorian Association of Environmental Education's tri-annual journal; Sept, 2009**;** http://www.vaee.vic.edu.au/resources/eingana.htm