

Chapter 16

Reimagining Sustainability Leadership: Integral Action Research in a Non-Profit Organization

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ABSTRACT

This research explored how the stakeholders of Integral Without Borders (IWB)—an international think tank and NGO focused on applying integral metatheory to sustainable development—might reimagine sustainability leadership to increase their collective capacity for wise and transforming action in the world. Applying an integral action research methodology in the context of an action research engagement model, eight individual interviews, two focus groups, and an open space lab were conducted with participation from an international cohort of IWB’s stakeholders. The study identified fertile territories from which the possibility space for sustainability leadership might be expanded, specifically “four Rs” of integral transformation praxis: (1) revive, (2) reidentify, (3) recode, and (4) reconfigure. Recommendations relevant to IWB’s specific leadership goals and development as an organization were also proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Context

This study focused on implicit and explicit dimensions of Integral Without Borders’ sustainability leadership. Integral Without Borders (IWB) is a non-profit society¹ incorporated in British Columbia (BC), Canada that operates like an informally structured community of development practitioners and social change activists working in a number of countries around the globe (IWB, What we do, n.d.). IWB fosters impact by “supporting practitioners and organizations to bring greater clarity, depth, and rigor to their global development efforts” (IWB, Vision and purpose, n.d.). The board is committed to helping

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5873-6.ch016

agents of social and environmental change generate deep transformation, by providing “support for the advance of an integral approach” within their initiatives (IWB, Vision and purpose, n.d.).

At the nucleus of this global community is the IWB board consisting of eight people: one currently based in Vancouver, one in Latin America, one in the California, two in the United Kingdom (UK), two in Norway, and Ken Wilber, the originator of Integral Metatheory (IM), in Boulder, Colorado. Wilber is less involved operationally and acts more as a special advisor to the board. Periodically, additional field-based volunteers participate in specific projects and engagements from other locations.

Unlike many international development organizations, IWB does not focus on a single issue or methodological approach to change. Instead, it seeks to positively impact a broad range of issues and approaches through the application of IM: a framework that bears significant potential as a source of robust solutions to the multidimensional, interlocking, complex dilemmas currently faced by the human species (Hedlund, Esbjörn-Hargens, Hartwig and Bhaskar, 2016; Stein, 2105, 2016, in review; Edwards, 2010). In practice, IM has been used in numerous contexts to expand the possibilities for positive change. For example, IM has been applied in the areas of climate adaptation and mitigation (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2010; O’Brien & Hochachka, 2010), international development (Hochachka, 2008), psychotherapy (Witt, 2014), addiction (du Plessis, 2013), organizational development (Laloux, 2014), education (Stein, 2009, 2013), and other fields. One of IWB’s principal interests is how an approach informed by IM might produce or enable transformations at the level of planetary systems and culture, leading to a more just and sustainable future for humanity.

In the months leading up to and during the study, IWB was in transition. Four new directors joined the board, two stepped down, and the long-standing Executive Director moved out of her role (although she continues to serve on the board of the organization). As these shifts took effect internally with IWB, unprecedented worldwide geopolitical, cultural, and technological changes also surfaced the possibility—or perhaps more appropriately, the necessity—of rethinking how IWB can best contribute to planetary transformation. Specifically, IWB’s intent participating in this integral action research project was to harness these internal and external shifts to build energy and capacity for bringing-into-being the highest possibilities for “what sustainability leadership actually is or could be in today’s moment” (G. Hochachka, personal communication, March 1st, 2017).

Purpose

This project brought together different perspectives from within IWB’s orbit. Inquiry participants included IWB board members, current and past members of the organization’s global community of practitioners, and individuals who supported the organization’s work. Together these participants explored the question: “How might the stakeholders of IWB reimagine sustainability leadership in a way that increases their collective capacity for wise and transforming action in the world?”

There were several challenges with framing the inquiry project this way. To address one of the most obvious, it is important to acknowledge that the very phrase “sustainability leadership” is suspect: *Leadership* is notoriously challenging to define. It is a topic that is “vast, amorphous, slippery, and, above all, desperately important” (Bennis, 2007, p. 2). Perhaps the nature of *sustainability* is even more resistant to clarification. Mulvihill and Milan (2007) observed that the word is fraught with paradox and futility, and that “many use it reluctantly, lamenting the lack of better terms to frame discussion” (p. 658). The inherent contradictions of many sustainability initiatives, they suggested, tells us that a sustainable hu-

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