

Foundations and Resources of Integral Leadership

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LiFT Foundations & Resources Book

0. Introduction: What is Integral Leadership?

In a world that is increasingly experienced as VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, Bennis & Burt, 1985), the challenges that leadership has to address inevitably increase in complexity. Moreover, leaders might find that previous definitions of skill, position or knowledge they have been socialized into are no longer sufficient to adequately address these challenges. In many areas of business, politics and broader socio-cultural and educational realm, people holding decision-making responsibilities therefore feel “in over their heads” (Kegan, 1994) in view of some of the problems they are confronted with. And so do considerable parts of the larger society and citizenry as well.

This state of affairs is a common experience in the course of large-scale processes of change and transformation, dramatically shifting the principles that govern the ways in which things are done, together with the patterns and structures within which this happens. They require to equally fundamentally shift the ways of perceiving and addressing the given challenges. Moreover, recalling Einstein’s famous quote that “we cannot solve problems with the same level of thinking that created them”, it might also need moments of “not knowing” or letting go of previous, familiar knowledge, in order for new kinds of perspectives and insights to arise. In other words, one must be prepared to endure moments of chaos and discomfort and trust that something new, better will ultimately arise out of them. – This is about what tends to happen in a Collaboratory, which therefore is a good prototype of what next stage collaborative – or integral leadership can look like.

However, this book speaks not so much about the Collaboratory itself (that is the focus in all other LiFT outputs) than about some of the larger context behind it. It looks at what are the elements that are required of a new kind of leadership to be an adequate response to the VUCA world. And why, we think, integral leadership can be (part of) that response.

So this book is about why it needs a shift in how we see and do leadership, and what **the “added value” of integral leadership** is, both in theoretical regard, and in view of practical applications. The concept of “integral leadership” as described here builds up on elements, which in themselves are not completely new. However, as an overall, comprehensive approach to leadership theory and practice, it is fairly recent and has (at least) not yet taken root as an academic subject area.

As indicated, our conception of integral leadership has two dimensions. First, it is a leadership *model and theory*, or more precisely, a metatheory on leadership and about the challenges faced by leadership in diverse contexts. Second, it is also a *practice* of doing leadership that goes beyond the “conventional wisdom” and widespread practices in many regards.

So what is it about integral leadership that is different and that is new? In what sense and why is integral leadership better suited and better equipped to meet the array of challenges that are necessary to address in order to lead in complex circumstances successfully? What does the concept of integral leadership have to offer as a conceptual lens? How does its function as a meta-model enable it to transcend and include previous approaches to leadership, and what new value or advantages does this bring?

As a **metatheory** on leadership, in other words, a theory on theories of leadership, the concept of integral leadership offers a broad, high-level map of various existing perspectives on the phenomenon and their mutual interrelations – or feuds. It is more comprehensive, because it aims at constructively integrating the theoretical insights and empirical experiences and accomplishments of previous approaches, without unreflectively taking in their limitations. Thereby, as a concept, theory and practice, integral leadership wants to open up perspectives, shed light on previously neglected dimensions of leadership and on the complex interrelations between these.

One important way in which it goes beyond much of the academic literature is by combining and weaving together perspectives focusing on external, *facts and figures* with perspectives focusing on the internal, subjective and intersubjective realms of the (shared) experience of those participating in processes of leadership. Similarly, perspectives focusing on the person of the individual leader are woven together with those focusing on leaders' multidimensional interactions with their social and systemic environments. Furthermore, in all of these four dimensions, i.e. cognitive/emotional, behavioral, interpersonal/cultural and systemic/institutional, integral leadership also looks at how perspectives, contexts, behaviors and systems differ in their complexity – and what this implies for successful leadership. In this sense, the focus of integral leadership is on “tetra-evolution” and “tetra-responding”.

As a **practice** based on the meta-theoretical opening and perspective integration outlined above, integral leadership offers methodological *tools* and approaches which help to grasp and analyze complex leadership situations and challenges more adequately. In other words, lenses which help to identify what matters most in a particular setting, to distinguish important from less important aspects, and to find ways towards solutions, that offer more productive and more durable answers to the challenges in question. This means, essentially, answers which serve larger populations on a longer range. This can be done by framing and orchestrating conflicts across developmental levels, and by facilitating adaptive work, in other words, by conducting collaborative processes that invite all involved stakeholders to step beyond their usual habits and to engage in deeper, more transformational kinds of conversations.

Integral leadership offers tools and **methods for „collaborative thinking and doing“** (Senge, 2006) which help to shift the focus towards decentered, meta-level perspectives, without losing micro and meso levels out of sight. The Collaboratory is one such tool that can help leaders to set free the full (joint) potential of the people they work with by inviting them into spaces where holding on to their usual roles or lenses is no longer possible– nor necessary.

While the concept of integral leadership constitutes a **paradigm shift** (Kuhn) in leadership theory and practice in many regards (see chapter 3), it has also been a product and result of a long and steady process of change and transformation that has been going on for decades in many areas beyond the field of leadership proper. It has been going on in the area of values, worldviews and general principles which underly not only the trends and developments within leadership, but shape the broader embedding socio-cultural context at large. Moreover, the vision of integral leadership can better be sketched against this background of gradual cultural evolution in most societies. The following book therefore starts by broadly outlining this context before delineating and discussing the concept and specifics of integral leadership itself in more detail.

Chapter 1 will give a comprehensive overview of leadership theory, research and practice as seen from an integral perspective. It shows how leadership theory and practice have developed over time and

proposes a meta-perspective onto current trends and discussions in the field. Moreover, it points out how leadership research has started with rather linear models and gradually developed, taking more and more context and complexity into account while studying and explaining leadership.

On this basis, **chapter 2** prepares the ground for the concept of integral leadership as a "next stage" of leadership thinking, going beyond mainstream models and approaches. Starting with a history of the term "integral", going back many centuries, it delineates how the idea of "integral" as used here has emerged and taken shape. It then looks at important sources of inspiration that the integral model of leadership is indebted to, namely complexity and systems theories, holistic and network thinking. It also briefly presents a holistic management approach which in some sense can be considered as a predecessor, but falls short of the full depth of the integral approach itself.

Chapter 3 then spells out the "added value" and significance of the integral model of leadership as compared to preceding approaches. It fleshes out a couple of important aspects of "integral", such as the underlying epistemology and heuristics, as well as core conceptual elements, thereby discussing why it can be seen as a paradigm shift in leadership thinking. After that, chapters 4 and 5 will introduce the two major dimensions of the model, as well as their implications for implementing collaborative leadership (chapters 4 and 5).

Chapter 4 presents the four quadrant model developed by integral theorist Ken Wilber and how it translates to the field of leadership. It looks at how interior and exterior, individual and collective dimensions of leadership help to conceive and understand its complexity, and how this multi-perspectivity of lenses can help leaders to develop their own leadership practice and behavior.

Finally, **chapter 5** introduces the dimension of vertical cognitive development and personal growth and explores how personal development and leadership effectiveness are connected. It gives a broad overview of research in the field, pointing at some important skills and tacit prerequisites of collaborative leadership that can be fostered by advancing the leader's personal development.

Thereby, the book provides "thick" background material about the origins, workings and preconditions of integral collaborative leadership that draws on the latest research in the field. The level of depth and detail offered in this book is aimed at interested readers who wish to go beyond the practical aspects and possible applications of collaborative leadership as they are offered in LiFT's other outputs. While this book takes a more academic look onto integral leadership – and is therefore not immediately essential for practitioners of the Collaboratory, – the book does invite readers and practitioners to step back and engage in a (self-)reflective journey into the deeper whys and hows of integral leadership's calling for collaborative approaches as tools for addressing today's "wicked" global issues more effectively.

References

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Senge, P. (2006). *The Fifth Discipline. The art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Doubleday (first published in 1990).