



Sustainable Leadership in an Unsustainable World

By Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink

Buried amidst all the news of wildfires, floods, inflation, gun violence, political gridlock and culture wars, there has been a little noticed obituary for one of the twentieth century's most remarkable and influential people, James Lovelock. Not only did Lovelock live to the impressive age of 103, this scientist, philosopher, inventor and activist changed the way we think, or at least should think, about our relationship with our planet. In doing so, he helped to initiate the sustainability movement.

Lovelock was best known for his Gaia theory: a controversial idea he proposed in the 1960s that suggested a radically different way of looking at the evolution of life, compared to most of modern science at the time. Gaia held that the countless millions of organisms not only competed, but also cooperated to maintain an environment in which life could be sustained: a process of co-evolution. As Indigenous Peoples have understood for eons, the fate of people and the planet are indivisible. Lovelock's proposition challenged Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and survival of the fittest. In 2001, more than 1,000 scientists met in Amsterdam to declare that the planet

“behaves as a single, self-regulating system comprised of physical, chemical, biological and human components.” Mocked and ostracized throughout his career, Lovelock had ultimately won the day.

Some years earlier, a much-cited report to the World Commission on Environment and Development concluded, “Humankind has the ability to achieve sustainable development – to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Around the 2005 launch time of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, and inspired by environmentalist Lucy Hargreaves, we began to ask ourselves what the environmental paradigm of sustainable development could offer to educational leaders. The result was our book on *Sustainable Leadership*. It argued that sustainable leadership and change “preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefits for others now and in the future.” We connected sustainable organizational leadership among people in schools and elsewhere to the

environmental literature on sustainability. as well as to environmentally influenced educational literature on curriculum for sustainability and on creating sustainable (green) schools. The book highlights seven interrelated principles of organizational sustainability, which, like the environment itself, are both timeless and urgent and retain the power to enable schools and school systems to sustain positive and inclusive educational change.

According to the late Neil Postman, “Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.” We can’t accurately predict the future, but we can anticipate some trends and help young people begin to engage with what the future may bring. Our children are already living in what many call a VUCA world in which the following four conditions apply:

- *Volatility* of accelerating change in different directions
- *Uncertainty* of evidence, information and ability to predict the future
- *Complexity* of multiple, interacting forces
- *Ambiguity* regarding what this all means

VUCA is taking a toll on young people. In a worldwide survey, 77 per cent agreed with the statement: “the future is frightening.” Millennials, and their successors Generations Z and Alpha, our current and next generation of learners, are desperately worried about climate change, deeply concerned about their economic futures, believe a world war is likely in their lifetime, and fear the rise of totalitarianism at home and abroad. On top of this, their paths to adulthood have been compromised by the world-wide pandemic.

Yet, the news isn’t all bad. Ironically, in a VUCA world, our youngest citizens are learning to speak up, become activists and advocate for change, because they believe it is their only remaining option for sustainability and survival. On TikTok, YouTube and other social media, they are making their voices heard. They are organizing protests, campaigns and passive resistance movements. Young people are forsaking Gen Xers’ calculative career paths and degree choices in business and corporate law, for subjects with a public and social mission like political science, constitutional law and epidemiology. Students no longer feel it’s enough just to get on in life within the world as it is. They feel impelled to change that world for the better.

What does this mean for educational leadership and the seven principles that can help make it sustainable in this VUCA-like context? Systems driven by competition, performance numbers, literacy and numeracy targets, standardization, top-down accountability, examinations and tests are already on the back foot in many countries. Political leaders from Scotland to New Zealand are putting quality of life before Gross Domestic Product. Radical assessment reform is evident in places like California and Ireland. A more sustainable approach to educational leadership and change is not just awaiting us. In many places, it’s already underway.

Here we recap the seven principles of sustainable leadership and update them in relation to today.

PRINCIPLE 1: DEPTH

Sustainable leadership matters. It preserves, protects and promotes deep and broad learning for all in relationships of care for others.

This goes to the very heart of the purpose of education. Sustainable leadership puts learning and well-being at the centre of everything leaders do. Deep learning goes beyond ingesting what is required for success on tests and exams. The cram and grind schools of Asia and Ireland that prepare students for end-of-school exams, must become things of the past. In learning that has depth and purpose, joy is the outcome of true and meaningful accomplishment, which comes at the end of that process, often after struggle and sacrifice – not just to get a grade, but to achieve something that matters. As Michael Fullan and colleagues argue, deep learning must also address young people’s growing desire to have a positive impact on a profoundly troubled world. Leaders must know how to make this happen.

PRINCIPLE 2: LENGTH:

Sustainable leadership preserves and advances the most valuable aspects of learning and life over time, year upon year.

Sustainable leadership takes the long view. This means making positive change happen that endures and even extends its impact from one school leader to the next. Today, leadership succession is about more than planning for the next in line. It involves working across different generations of leaders, professionals, parents, grandparents and students to figure out what they want, how they think, how they communicate and what else they can bring next that the current

generation of powerholders cannot offer. In a VUCA world, schools need to be places of safety for exploration and engagement. The point of sustainable leadership is to engage with VUCA – not amplify it. Leaders must also resist hasty adoptions of technological innovations and be sure these are trialed and tested before they are applied to everyone.

PRINCIPLE 3: BREADTH

Sustainable leadership spreads: it sustains the leadership of others.

In a complex, fast-paced world, innovation and improvement cannot rest on the shoulders of the few. Shared, collaborative and distributed leadership among the whole school community is needed. Shared leadership also involves drawing on digital skills educators developed during the pandemic to make more and better use of online interaction, especially across schools. With the growing hunger of rising generations for activist engagement with their crisis-ridden world, distributed and shared leadership must involve young people. The most effective policy responses to COVID-19 secured the collaborative involvement of teachers, school leaders, parents and students alike, in solving immense and

constantly changing problems together. Student voice made things better. VUCA calls for agility. Agility requires collaboration close to where the problems and challenges are. It's time for distributed leadership to go deeper by working with students and parents.

PRINCIPLE 4: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Sustainable leadership does no harm to and actively supports the surrounding environment.

In 2006, we were concerned that the drive to raise achievement scores and narrow achievement gaps was based on competitive orientations that pitted schools against schools, communities against communities, nations against nations. Even before the pandemic, this position was changing. Children were becoming more than a number. Survival of the planet and on the planet depends on the ability to cooperate, compromise and cross pollinate ideas and practices. Professional networks are springing up across the globe. In Canada, Andy co-leads one involving 40 schools in seven provinces, collaborating to deepen their practices of green-based, screen-based and machine-based play with underserved populations. Darwin is yielding to Lovelock. Scientific rationality is being informed and challenged by Indigenous ways of knowing. The quality of education will not improve if the efforts of some schools are pursued at the expense of others.

PRINCIPLE 5: DIVERSITY:

Sustainable leadership promotes cohesive diversity; it fosters and learns from diversity and creates cohesion and networking among its richly varying components.

Strong natural systems are bio-diverse rather than standardized and homogeneous. So are strong organizations that promote cross pollination of learning and the capacity within a system and its diverse resources to bounce back and recover quickly in the face of adversity. Educational leadership needs to advocate for diversity, with attention to the cultural diversity among the adults and children in the school, engaging questions of disability, inclusion, racial conflict and LGBTQ identities, for example. How are diverse students acknowledged, valued and included within deliberately diverse communities? What is the responsibility of a school that serves the privileged for the less privileged in its midst? Embracing diversity is not just about celebrating a mix of cultures and styles – it is about knowing how to work on the hard



edge of change, where there is conflict, disagreement and uncertainty. That is what sustainable educational leadership calls for today.

PRINCIPLE 6: ENERGY RENEWAL

Sustainable leadership develops and does not deplete material and human resources. It renews peoples' energy and wastes neither money, nor its people.

Burned out educators cannot ignite the flames of learning. This is an eternal truth of teaching. The pandemic placed extraordinary stresses on educators. Following a global pandemic, in the middle of a war that is disrupting global supply chains of energy and food, many of us are also facing years of economic downturns and austerity. With that will come damage to teachers' pay and working conditions, reduced support and continuing high workloads that undermine educators' ability to get their job done properly. A system is not sustainable when its teachers are running on empty. What can leaders do? They can advocate and organize. They can educate parents and public about the value of the work schools do. Millions of parents watched teachers teach during the pandemic. Leaders must tap into that empathy before the memory dissipates.

PRINCIPLE 7: CONSERVATION

Sustainable leadership respects, protects, preserves and renews all that is valuable from the past and learns from it to build a better future

The end of the pandemic and the slow return to normal is a time for an audit of present and past practices. How do they measure up against the principles of sustainability? What did we learn from virtual teaching-learning experiences that will help our students in the future? How can we perpetuate the organic networking that characterized teacher collaboration in response to this crisis? How can we better use the resources of our community to prepare students for a VUCA world? How can we integrate the promise of digital technology with the continuing value of in-person, teacher-student relationships? How can we incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing and leading that are intrinsically about securing sustainability and spirituality into learning and development to benefit everyone? How can we build a more sustainable future in ways that draw on and do not abandon the best of our past?



CONCLUSION

The future of the planet will soon fall to the very students we have in our schools. This “living message” of Generation Alpha is already committed to action, but it also needs the knowledge, skills, dispositions and habits of mind and body that will enable it to tackle and take collective responsibility for the great issues of their time. In Greek Mythology, the Goddess Gaia was preceded by Chaos. Today, members of Generation Alpha are up against VUCA. It's the duty of educational leaders to equip them for this battle on which the survival of the planet and its people may depend. Education based on organizational as well as environmental principles of sustainability is a good place to start. [CP](#)

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