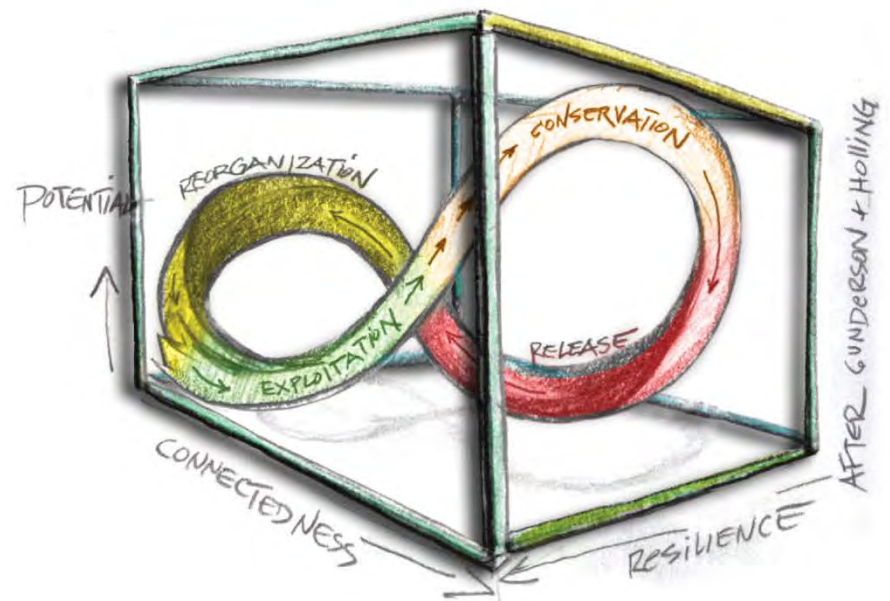# Framing an Intentional Practice to Develop Adaptive Social Serving Organizations

Ken Hubbell

An essay contribution to
Gary Hubbell Consulting *Conversation 2013*

garyhubbell consulting

planning ▲ strategy ▲ philanthropy ▲ coaching

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ABOUT GARY HUBBELL CONSULTING *CONVERSATION*

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals from throughout North America for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about philanthropy, organizational leadership, and social sector change. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the philanthropic environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each GHC *Conversation*, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek

Ken Hubbell

Principal, Ken Hubbell & Associates

Ken Hubbell is Founder and President of Ken Hubbell & Associates (www.kenhubbell.com), a consulting firm based in Little Rock, Arkansas. Established in 1992, the firm of Ken Hubbell and Associates (KHA) specializes in organizational development, change coaching, and strategic planning. Clients include charitable, regional and community foundations, nonprofit organizations, city governments, state and federal agencies, educational institutions, and select private companies.

Ken Hubbell has twenty years of experience developing resilient organizations and communities. KHA specializes in highly visual strategy tools and systems thinking. Ken has a wide range of experience with multi-stakeholder collaboration, social innovation, economic development, and equitable approaches to grassroots civic participation and poverty alleviation. He has worked in urban neighborhoods, rural regions, and in Namibia (in southern Africa).

His foundation clients include W. K. Kellogg, Northwest Area, Winthrop Rockefeller, Walton Family foundations, the Foundation for the Mid South. He provided unpaid strategic assistance to the Arkansas Community Foundation as it refined its community partnership strategies. Hubbell provides on-going consulting and coaching services to national nonprofits including MDC, Inc. in North Carolina, which provides wise strategic thinking to the field of philanthropy.

Ken has experience designing social solutions to complex problems (Native leaders and private foundations collaborating on social enterprise and governance in Indian Country across the upper Northwest; empowering vulnerable communities to redesign the future of their neighborhoods; and coaching collaboration among diverse stakeholders to accelerate Latino student success across the U. S.), adapting whole systems to organizational strategy (ecosystem and force-field mapping, scenario building to rehearse futures and test strategy for foundations and natural resource, health, arts, and food relief organizations), and facilitating new leadership development and learning for social sector organizations in Canada and the U.S.

Ken is the author of The Art of Change: A Handbook for Leading Effective Social Change (2012) a Field Guide to Community Coaching (2010) and "What's Love Got to Do with Philanthropy" and other insightful scenario essays on the future of nonprofit organizations for monographs edited by Gary J. Hubbell focused on discovering new meaning in the application of philanthropy in our times (http://www.garyhubbellconsulting.com/ghc-conversations/ghc-conversation-2012).

This is Ken's fifth *GHC Conversation.*

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Framing an Intentional Practice to Develop Adaptive Social Serving Organizations

Ken Hubbell

Managing for change is an important leadership attitude. Especially if we consider the viewpoint of leading ecologists that most open systems—communities, organizations, natural areas—move through spasms of change. "Change is neither continuous and gradual nor consistently chaotic. Rather it is episodic, with periods of slow accumulation….punctuated by sudden releases and reorganization."[1]

So, navigating the pulsing nature of change around us requires real resilience and adaptive capacity. Thinking beyond short-term efforts is necessary. It isn't realistic to try to prepare for full security and permanence. The world is guaranteed to continue changing around us. Expanding the fiber of true resilience will help you weather shocks, emergencies, and new threats. Resilience helps you restore teams, organizations, or places. Ecologists define resilience as the capacity of a system to experience disturbance and still maintain its ongoing functions and controls. I like to add another definition that infuses creativity alongside the adaptive qualities that are typically thought of as resilience. Business thinkers in the Netherlands defined resilience as the capability to self-renew over time through innovation. ***So, adapting to disturbance and continually being able to renew through innovation is a more useful definition.*** This requires knowing what should be preserved (and why) and what must evolve or be discarded. It also requires you to invest in foresight, in stretching your boundaries of learning and caring, in the ability to perceive trends, and in rigorous examinations of your assumptions about your business and how it is adding real value to the world.[2]

But the kind of resilience that is required to confront real complex social challenges or problems is not a fixed, ideal static state. We need a flexible response and orientation. "The challenge," according to ecologists C. S. Holling and Lance Gunderson, "is to conserve the ability to adapt to change, to be able to respond in a flexible way to uncertainty and surprises. **And even to create the kind of surprises that open opportunity."[3]**

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[1] C. S. Holling and Lance H. Gunderson, *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*, Island Press, Washington, 2002, page 26.

[2] Ken Hubbell, *The Art of Change: A Handbook for leading Effective Social Change*, XLibris, 2012, page 7

[3] Holling and Gunderson, page 32

It is clear that change, resilience, and adaptability are integrated attributes of a social context where organizations work to create well-being, opportunity, and thriving communities. "The social resilience may depend mostly on adaptive capacity and reflects the degree to which a system is capable of reorganization, learning, and adaptation."[4] This blend of resilience is dynamic and helps shape how well the system confronts vulnerability and also generates options and innovation.

In the following section, we'll touch on these adaptive capacities and examine resilience as one of three integrated properties of adaptive cycles of change.

What are the common features of dynamic human and social systems?

As noted previously, it is the nature of all non-mechanical systems to seek stability and resolve disruption, yet there appears to be some consistent and recurring patterns. These suggest that we are always moving through adaptive cycles. They operate for lengths of time harnessing potential around some efficiencies or standards but eventually become vulnerable and are disrupted. The disruption breaks open the system to some changes and innovations, which alter the way the system is functioning, and some new ideas or ways of behaving become more prominent—and the cycle repeats. Even the pace of the cycle moves in pulses: the stable phase is slow and incremental, the disruptive phase tends to be swift and disorienting; the following reorganization and final reinvention phases are times of rapid changes and complex reshuffling.
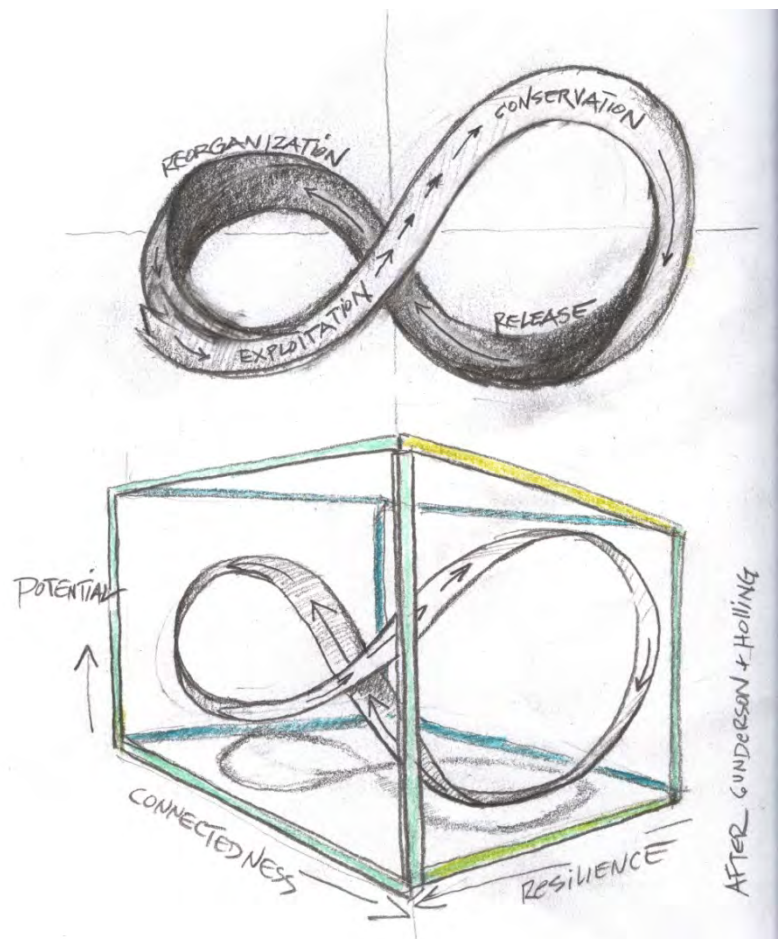
The graphic diagram suggests a classic adaptive cycle that was developed to explain recurring patterns of change in social

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[4] Marten Scheffer, *Critical Transitions in Nature and Society*, Princeton, 2009, page 103

and natural ecosystems by Holling and Gunderson in their excellent study, *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems.* The cycle (top) is created from an intermingling of opposite forces: stability and innovation, destruction and reorganization, predictability and unpredictability. Successfully navigating one phase sets the stage for the opposite: "it is as if two separate objectives are functioning, but in sequence." [5]

As illustrated in the bottom diagram on the preceding page, these authors also suggest that the **responses to change in every such system will be shaped by three properties**. How well organizations and communities thrive seems to depend on:

- The **potential** available for change
- The degree of **connectedness, flexibility** or rigidity to external variations or pressures
- The **resilience** of the system, the degree to which it can withstand unexpected disturbance or shock without losing its identity and character and still make space for new variety and creativity.

By investing more in developing untapped potential, connecting more pieces of the entire system, and strengthening natural resilience through continuous learning, change agents can help human or natural communities move optimally through adaptive cycles. This shortens the disturbance or imbalance and hastens renewal or rebirth. If we are practicing adaptive responses, we can take the learning and spiral up the impact from our work. In the next section, we examine possible ways to intentionally improve our adaptive capacity.

How can we enhance our *stores* of these three critical properties to optimize our adaptability?
Enhancing potential
In social and economic communities and organizations, we can enhance the potential of all stakeholders. High quality education and customized "just in time" learning should be the basic scaffolding. This could be enhanced with additional skill building, leadership development, knowledge creation and sharing promising practices and theories of change. This might also be accomplished by building networks or connecting people to networks both human and online. Enhancing creative skills in the arts, in graphic communication, media and technology, in core collaboration practices—facilitation, collective governance or partnerships; visual recording, system mapping, idea generation and document or business plan development—seems like an extremely valuable way to increase human potential in

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[5] Holling and Gunderson, pages 32-51

any system. Expanding foresight potential could be accelerated through intentional learning in scenario thinking, trend scanning, and system dynamics.

The other avenue for increasing the available potential is trust building and social capital development; essentially, capitalizing on assets, diversity, and shared beliefs and creating safe spaces for different people to gather and solve problems. Investing in consistent ways for many stakeholders across all sectors of society (public, community, faith, and private spheres) to engage and work together is the most sensible approach.

Enhancing Flexibility amidst Connected Structures
We can enhance the capacity of any system to withstand threats and disturbance from outside forces, yet it seems the challenge is to protect sufficient flexibility to keep the organization or community from becoming rigid, defensive, reactive and closed to new ideas. This property describes the importance of enhancing balance and navigating through the tendency for systems to get stuck in current paths, to exert control and become overly bureaucratic, or to default to technical standards and an excessive aversion to risk. The other side of the response to outside influences might look like passivity or paralysis in the face of uncertainty; this cause destabilizing situations too.

To counter these tendencies that reinforce the status quo, we could invest in understanding feedback systems, helping leaders diagram causal relationships and unintended consequence. Investing in learning from the environment and capturing "what works internally" would be sensible strategies. We could initiate innovation centers within organizations or institutions to intentionally produce a stream of alternate ideas or business models for consideration. Investing in regular and deeper strategic conversations could help avoid rigidity caused by default thinking and clichés. Using probing questions to illuminate current assumptions about business, customer or constituent behaviors and beliefs and framing inquiry by starting with questions like "what are we missing that could change the way we see things here?"
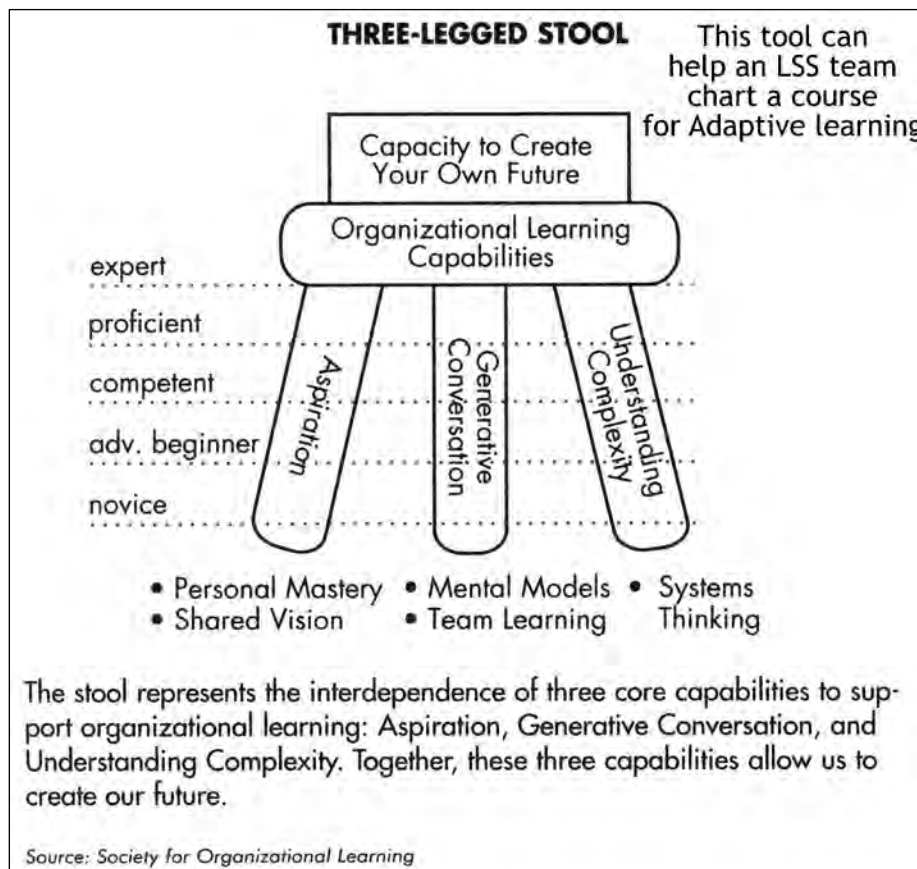
Enhancing Resilience
The best path to enhance personal or organizational resilience is inner work and consciousness practice: doing less and being present is a good start. Increasing your capacity for empathy and compassion nurtures the soul of leaders, which can reduce the self-centeredness and protectiveness that limits organizational responsiveness. Organizational learning is critical in strengthening resilience. This can be enhanced through cultural storytelling, bus trips to visit and learn from successful organizations in different fields or sectors, hosting your own "TED" conferences where invited guests deliver short

presentations on fresh topics beyond your current radar. Learning from the future through scenario exercises is an effective channel for building new muscles. Expanding people's understanding of system-thinking tools would be a strong enhancer: basic behavior over time analysis; stocks and flows diagrams; influence and causal mapping all enable leaders to re-perceive interdependencies in a complex system like a community or a region or a sector.

Noted writers and change practitioners in the Society for Organizational Learning, recommend a path to resilience by strengthening the aspirational capacities of groups, especially vision clarification and enhanced personal mastery in connecting individuals to a deeper sense of purpose, meaning, and interrelationship. Strengthening any group's collective commitments and trust helps them withstand unexpected turbulence. The diagram below charts intentional learning using a Three-Legged Stool metaphor.

THREE-LEGGED STOOL — This tool can help an LSS team chart a course for Adaptive learning

Capacity to Create Your Own Future

Organizational Learning Capabilities

expert
proficient
competent
adv. beginner
novice

Aspiration — Generative Conversation — Understanding Complexity

- Personal Mastery • Mental Models • Systems
- Shared Vision • Team Learning Thinking

The stool represents the interdependence of three core capabilities to support organizational learning: Aspiration, Generative Conversation, and Understanding Complexity. Together, these three capabilities allow us to create our future.

Source: Society for Organizational Learning

Enhancing organizational resilience is not a quick or short-term project; unfortunately the only way to build resilience is to continually practice learning and reflection, so it demands

new approaches and investments .It requires a long time frame and lots of experimentation. Even using the learning and mastery sequences for the Organizational Learning Capabilities illustrated above, it is obvious that with an intentional learning agenda, it might require several years for a group to increase its resilient capacities. Resilience can't be accumulated strictly through technical strategies where organizations see to stockpile reserves, though maintaining a resource buffer for disruptive periods provides a bit of operational protection as the organization works through reorganization and renewal.

If we don't achieve adaptability, what will happen?

According to Hollings and Gunderson, there are examples of systems that fail to properly balance the three key properties for adaptability: potential, flexible connectedness, and resilience. Failure of an organization to navigate unexpected disruption and reorganization often leads to a downward spiral or worse. But, if a community or organization chronically disinvests in the potential and connections of its residents, the result is usually called poverty. In these cases, low potential, lack of trust and flexibility, and little capacity for reinvention and resilience produce a "poverty trap." At the other extreme, excessive rules, standardization, risk avoidance, and inflexibility can manifest in a "rigidity trap" that can be seen in hierarchies like large bureaucracies.[6]

I'm quite interested in the idea that recurring adaptive cycles shape the context for the social sector. The phases and sequences that we've described as the panarchy model of adaptive cycles can provide a lens on the development challenges that an organization or community will eventually face. In the sketch below, we can see that as leaders move through different phases of the cycle, they face unique pressures, particularly unlearning old behaviors and resisting the impulse to "do more as before!"

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[6] Hollings and Gunderson, page 95
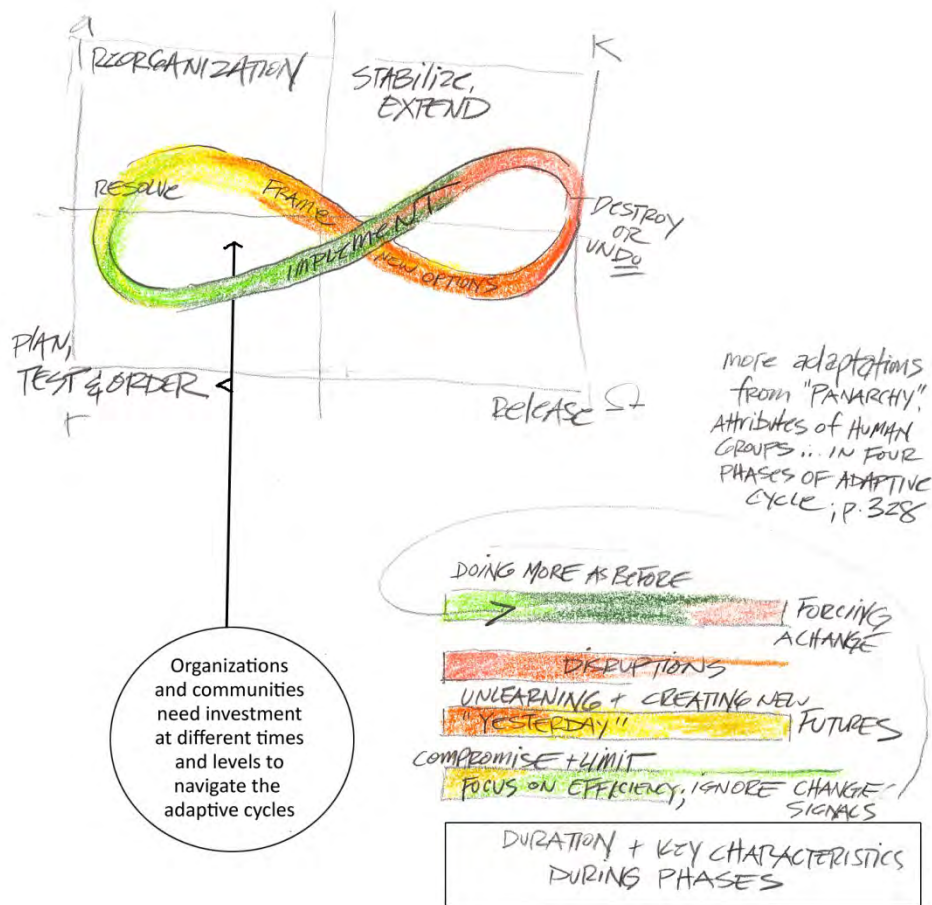
As indicated on the left side of the sketch, the adaptive cycle suggests a framework for the kinds of focus and investment required. There are foundations in Canada that are using the panarchy or "ecocycle" concept as a guide to investment as they partner with organizations to create and sustain vibrant communities.

> "Although funders are more comfortable in the front loop of the S curve (the birth, growth and maturity of organizations and/or ideas), they can enter into this process at any point. Some, less amenable to risk, will choose to support initiatives that are at the stage of consolidation; that is, they are already tested and ready for larger scale implementation….Other funders will want to invest in research and development ("renewal" and "reorganization")….Some may want to follow and support an entire cycle.

Funders can also work together to support promising initiatives through these various stages and thus share the risk."[7]

How can any leader find the right attitude and accelerate an intentional adaptive learning practice?

The key to making a deeper shift to intentional adaptive learning is to recognize that you have to start where you are and just begin. The real catalyst is to make an intention and a commitment. It helps to build a personal and organizational learning agenda. Engaging in regular reflective practice is useful in gaining clearer perspective on the blind spots that hinder an individual's ability to perceive change as it is unfolding and on the personal or ego attachments to ideas, structures, and hidden rules that make it difficult to entertain fresh and untested possibilities. Fortunately, there are numerous national networks that host learning retreats that foster effective reflective practice, for example: The Courage and Renewal Network; and the Shambhala Authentic Leadership in Action annual summer retreat in Nova Scotia provides learning experiences in system thinking, wakeful awareness, clear seeing, and transformative action that enable leaders to shift the dynamics of systems.[8] Another benefit from such advanced training is your connection to a diverse community of practitioners; being in a creative supportive environment can accelerate your own insight and expose you to new tools and concepts that you can use in your everyday change work.

Learning your way to a new adaptive worldview also requires having simple metaphors to express the convergence of belief, view, behavior, and faith that are central tenets of adaptation. There may be no simpler guide than the list proposed by system thinker and ecologist Donella Meadows. She calls this approach to adaptive work, "the dance," suggesting the exquisite interdependence and reciprocity that is required:

1. Get the beat.
2. Listen to the wisdom of the system.
3. Expose your mental models to the open air.
4. Stay humble. Stay a learner.
5. Honor and protect information.
6. Locate responsibility in the system.

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[7] Katherine A. Pearson, "Accelerating Our Impact: Philanthropy, Innovation and Social Change," The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, November, 2006, page 10
[8] Retrieved February 17, 2013 from
http://www.impactalliance.org/ev_en.php?ID=8747_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC and www.couragerenewal.org

7. Make feedback policies of feedback systems.
8. Pay attention to what is important, not just what is quantifiable.
9. Go for the good of the whole.
10. Expand time horizons.
11. Expand thought horizons.
12. Expand the boundary of caring.
13. Celebrate complexity.
14. Hold fast to the goal of goodness.[9]

Afterward

The way toward resilience for communities and regions will be framed by the degrees leaders can:

- work in more holistic ways with more allies
- blend the known and the emergent
- move from a reliance on programs to concerted efforts in connected networks
- strengthen their own organizations AND collaborate in service of real sustainable collective impact

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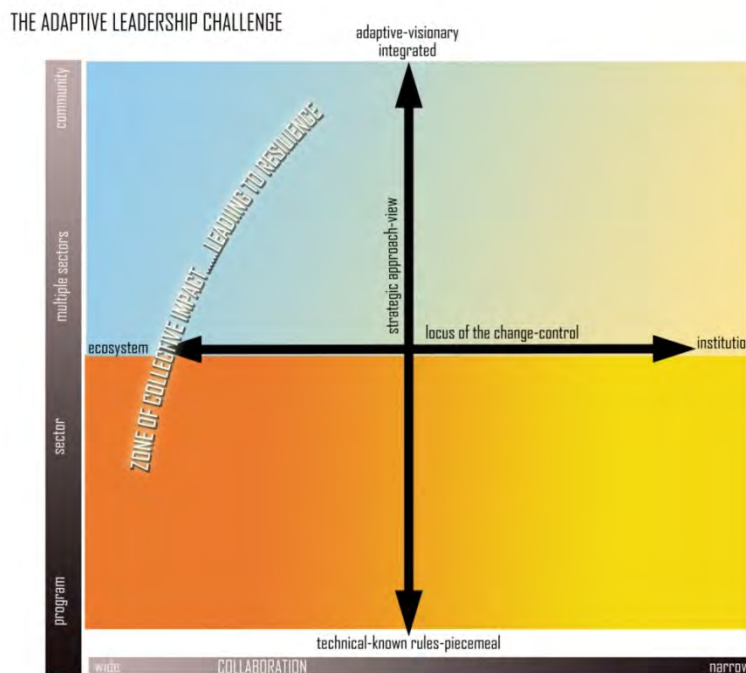
[9] Donella Meadows, "Dancing with Systems," *The System Thinker*, Vol. 13 No. 2, March, 2002, page 1.