



The Universal Stages of Evolution

Lessons for Leadership Development

By Richard Barrett

Abstract

*This paper places leadership development in the context of the evolution of consciousness from the Big Bang¹ to the present day. It identifies the five characteristics that are at the core of all successful evolution and integrates them into a four-part process for leadership development that supports the continuing evolution of Homo sapiens. This paper is an extract from Richard Barrett's soon to be released book, *The New Leadership Paradigm*.*

Understanding the Evolution of Consciousness

According to scientists, everything that exists in our world began 14 billion years ago with a “Big Bang.” After that, it was all about evolution. The evolution of energy into matter, matter into living organisms, living organisms into creatures, and one of those creatures—Homo sapiens—is now involved in attempting to carry the baton of evolution to a new level.

The force behind all evolution is the “will” to survive. Every entity that exists in the physical world is driven by the “instinct” of survival. This applies to atoms, molecules, cells, organisms, creatures, human beings, and all their group structures, such as molecules, organisms, organisations, communities, and nations. Every atomic, cellular, and human group structure is organised in such a way as to maximise its potential for surviving. What makes survival possible is adaptation. The will to survive drives adaptation, and adaptation drives evolution. Let me explain.

¹ Big Bang: A term used to describe the initial conditions and subsequent development of the Universe.

Entities are able to exist in the physical world for one simple reason: they have learned how to manage their *internal stability* and *external equilibrium* in the framework conditions that define their existence. When abnormal changes take place in their framework conditions, entities must learn to adapt or they will cease to exist. This applies to atoms, cells, human beings, and all their group structures— molecules, organisms, organisations, communities, and nations.

The purpose of all adaptation is to attain, maintain or enhance the *internal stability* and *external equilibrium* of an entity.

If an entity (atom, cell, human being) is unable to adapt—if it cannot become viable and independent in the new framework conditions, it will either perish—breakdown into its component parts—or it will have to find ways to *bond* with other similar and compatible entities to form a group structure that has enough resilience to survive the new framework conditions.

If a group structure (molecule, organism, organisation, or nation) is unable to adapt—if it cannot become viable and independent in its new framework conditions, it will either perish—breakdown into its component parts—or it will have to find ways to *cooperate* with other similarly “aligned” group structures to form a higher order group structure that can survive the new framework conditions.

The Universal Stages of Evolution

Thus, the evolution of an entity moves forward in three stages:

- Individual entities learn how to become viable and independent in their normal framework conditions.
- As an entity’s framework conditions become more complex and threatening, an entity learns how to form group structures by bonding with other similar and compatible entities.
- As a group structure’s framework conditions become more complex and threatening, the group structure (the individual entities) learns how to create a higher order entity by cooperating with other similar and compatible group structures.

We see this three-stage pattern of evolution throughout the whole of evolution.

After atoms became viable and independent in their framework of existence, they bonded with other atoms to form molecules; as framework conditions became more

threatening to their survival, molecules became more and more complex, and they learned how to cooperate with each other to form a higher order entity called a cell.² Once cells³ had become viable and independent in their framework of existence they bonded with each other to form organisms; as framework conditions became more threatening, organisms became more and more complex they learned how to cooperate with each other to create a higher order entity called Homo sapiens.⁴

Now the baton of evolution has been passed to Homo sapiens. Human beings are learning how to become viable and independent in their frameworks of existence (individuation⁵); then as conditions become more complex, they are learning how to bond with other humans to form clans, tribes and nations; and the largest of these group structures—nations—are now learning how to cooperate with each other to create a higher order entity called humanity.

In Ervin Laszlo's, *Evolution: A General Theory*⁶ he states that,

At every stage of evolution, from atoms all the way through to the human society, the bonding energies between entities have decreased in strength to be replaced by an increase in cooperation and organisation energies. Thus, atoms are more highly bonded energetically than cells, and cells are more highly bonded energetically than Homo sapiens. And it follows therefore that from evolutionary perspective, that cells are more dependent on cooperation and organisation than atoms for their resilience, and human group structures are more dependent on cooperation and organisation than cells for their resilience. This pattern can also be seen operating as clans evolved into tribes, and tribes into nations. At the clan level there is a family bond, at the tribal level there is an ethnic bond, and at the nation level, at least in a democratic nation, there is a values bond. As the level of bonding energies decreased the level of cooperation energies increased.

The decrease in the strength of bonding energies, and the increase in strength of cooperation energies that has occurred throughout the history of evolution means that the evolution of Homo sapiens will be principally dependent on mental or mind evolution—because bonding and cooperation at the level of Homo sapiens does not depend on structural characteristics as it does in atoms; it depends on consciousness

² Cells arose because one atom in particular—the carbon atom—had an internal structure that had more potential for bonding than all other atoms put together, hence the division between organic (carbon-based) and inorganic chemistry.

³ One cell in particular—the eukaryotic cell—had an ability to bond that was far superior to all other cells.

⁴ The arrow of evolution passed to Homo sapiens because our species has a greater propensity to bond than all other creatures.

⁵ Individuation: The process by which we become the master of our own destiny by letting go of the personal and cultural conditioning that prevents us from realising our true self and our full potential.

⁶ Ervin Laszlo, *Evolution: The General Theory*, Hampton Press, New York, 1996.

characteristics—values and beliefs. In other words, with the passage of the baton of evolution to Homo sapiens, the continuation of fourteen billion years of evolution is now dependent on the evolution of human consciousness.

The Role of Consciousness in Evolution

In order for evolution to begin and progress, every entity involved in the chain of evolution had to have an awareness of its surroundings. Without awareness there was no way for an entity to recognise threats to its internal stability and external equilibrium arising from changes in its framework conditions.

Evolution also placed another requirement on all entities and their group structures; they had to be able to “institutionalise” their learning about successful adaptation so that they could pass this learning on to their “progeny”. Without awareness, adaptation, and institutionalised learning, there would have been no evolution.

Life forms institutionalised their learning by encoding the instructions for adaptation in their DNA or to give it its full name, in molecules of deoxyribonucleic acid. DNA enables entities to store information of the type, “If you notice in your *awareness* an event called ‘a’, then do ‘x’, and if you notice in your *awareness* an event called ‘b’ then do ‘y’.” In other words, DNA is an “institutionalised” form of memorising instructions for maintaining and enhancing internal stability and external equilibrium that has enabled entities to survive, and thrive (grow and develop) under increasingly complex conditions for the last approximately 4 billion years.

The most important point to notice about the above statement is that atoms and molecules are significantly involved in “institutionalised” learning and are intimately linked with awareness and memory-making, particularly with regard to understanding what to do in circumstances that threaten the survival of an entity.

If therefore, we define consciousness as,

Awareness with a purpose

and, we recognise that the purpose of all entities and their group structures is always to attain, maintain or enhance internal stability or external equilibrium, we can categorically state that consciousness is present at all levels of creation, and we can expose the myth that only humans are conscious.⁷

Atoms, cells and human beings are all conscious because they all have *awareness with a purpose*, and the purpose of all entities is to attain, maintain or enhance their internal stability and external equilibrium—to survive and thrive.

⁷ The one aspect of human consciousness that differentiates itself from creature consciousness is that we are aware that we are aware. In all other respects creature consciousness and human consciousness only differ by the degree they are able to handle complexity.

Surviving

Surviving means that an entity is able to continue its existence in the physical world. If an entity cannot survive physically in its framework conditions, it will eventually breakdown into its component parts. The component parts will continue to breakdown until they are in a form that enables them to maintain internal stability and external equilibrium in their framework conditions. “Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust” is a phrase from the Anglican burial service which exemplifies this idea: it suggests our star dust origins are similar to earth dust ending.

Thriving

Whilst attaining and maintaining internal stability and external equilibrium are survival strategies, *enhancing* internal stability and external equilibrium is a thriving strategy. Thriving takes the “pain” out of surviving, and it also allows entities and their group structures to gain more internal stability and external equilibrium by exploiting opportunities when favourable or “life” enhancing changes take place in an entity’s framework conditions. Thriving has thus played a significant role in advancing evolution by enabling entities (in good times) to build their resilience to withstand shocks. Basically, thriving enables resilience, and resilience enables an entity to expand the boundaries of the framework conditions in which it can survive.

Reacting and Responding

The ways in which atoms, cells and humans respond to changes in their framework conditions and maintain their internal stability are different.

Atoms maintain their internal stability by keeping their electromagnetic fields in balance, and making structural changes that minimise their internal entropy when they bond.⁸ Cells maintain their internal stability by keeping their chemical composition in balance through a process known as homeostasis.⁹ Human beings maintain their internal stability by keeping their emotions in balance through a process called personal mastery.¹⁰

Thus, we can identify three significantly different types and stages in the evolution of consciousness— atomic consciousness, cellular consciousness, and human consciousness (an advanced form of creature consciousness). Each type of

⁸ Entropy is the amount of energy in a system that is unavailable for useful work. Bonding requires energy which is therefore not available for useful work.

⁹ Homeostasis is the property of a living system that allows it to maintain internal stability by regulating its chemical composition when changes occur in its framework of existence.

¹⁰ Personal mastery is the property of a human being that allows it to maintain internal stability by regulating its emotions when challenging situations occur in its framework of existence.

consciousness differentiates itself from the preceding type of consciousness by its ability to handle greater levels of complexity.

Thus, we can state that structural evolution—how entities bond—and consciousness evolution—how group structures cooperate, represent a parallel continuum of increasing complexity in which the energies involved in structural evolution (bonding) have become weaker and the energies involved in consciousness evolution (cooperation) have become stronger.

At the level of Homo sapiens, bonding takes place when human individuals trust each other—they have similar values and beliefs, share a common sense of identity, and a shared vision of the future. Cooperation takes place when human individuals have similar values and beliefs, empathise with each other, share a similar vision of the future they would like to create but do not share a common sense of identity.

The main conclusion we can draw from the above is that for evolution to continue, we as humans, and the group structures we form—organisations and nations, have no option but to focus on the evolution of our individual and collective consciousness. As a species, this is our evolutionary imperative. It is also our pathway to success.

The universal three-stage process of evolution is simply the most successful strategy that has ever been developed for surviving and thriving.

The Implications for Leadership Development and Talent Management

What this means for leadership development is highly significant.

I am using the term “leadership development” to describe a process for supporting individuals in their personal and professional growth so they can become all they can become, and thereby find personal fulfilment. The focus of leadership development should always be on helping people to become fully self-actualised¹¹ and by this means support the evolution of consciousness of humanity at the same time as supporting the evolution of the organisations in which they work.

I am using the term talent management as a process for identifying individuals who display characteristics that an organisation values and would like to fast track to positions of influence in the organisation by putting them through an accelerated programme of leadership development.

¹¹ The term “Self-actualisation” was first used by Kurt Goldstein to describe the driving force in organisms that actualises as much as possible their individual capacities. The term was later used by Abraham Maslow, not as a driving force but as the desire in human individuals to become more and more of what one is, and to become everything one is capable of becoming—achieving the full realisation of one’s potential. It is growth-motivated rather than deficiency-motivated.

The critical questions I now want to address are: What are the characteristics that an organisation should look for in selecting individuals for a talent management pool, and what form of leadership development is most appropriate for these people?

The answers to both these questions are found in the understanding we have developed about evolution.

There are five characteristics or qualities that are essential for successful evolution.

Adaptability

First, and foremost, is the quality of “adaptability.” Adaptability is the ability of an entity to maintain internal stability and external equilibrium when changes occur in its external environment. There are two components to adaptability—speed and resilience. The speed at which an entity is able to adapt is important in improving the entity’s chances of survival. The resilience of an entity is a measure of the scope or range of changes or shocks that an entity can successfully sustain and quickly bounce back to internal stability and external equilibrium. The more resilience an entity possesses, the greater will be its ability to survive.

Continuous Learning

The second most important quality is “continuous learning”. There are two important components to successful continuous learning. First is the ability of an entity to institutionalise its learning about maintaining or enhancing internal stability and external equilibrium through memory-making. Memory-making makes it possible for an entity to recall and repeat the successful actions that enabled it to deal with a specific change in its environment in the past. Second is the ability of an entity to use whatever it has learned in the past as a platform for future learning through the use of fuzzy logic. This means being able to use past learning to help determine a response to a new situation that has never been encountered before. This quality lies at the core of innovation, which is the principle form of the manifestation of adaptability.

The Ability to Bond

“Bonding” is the most important adaptability strategy in evolution. Whenever the framework conditions that an entity encounters are more complex than it has been used to handling, and threaten the entity’s internal stability and external equilibrium, then the ability to bond with other similar entities for the purpose of mutual survival in a group structure with a shared “identity” becomes very important. Successful bonding maximises the amount of energy that is available for responding to external changes, and minimises the amount of energy that is required for internal stability. Bonding can be a strategy for both maintaining (surviving) and enhancing (thriving) internal stability and external equilibrium.

The Ability to Cooperate

“Cooperation” is also an important adaptability strategy in evolution. Whenever the framework conditions that entities involved in a group structure encounter are more complex than the group structure is used to handling, and threaten the internal stability and external equilibrium of the group structure, then the ability to cooperate with other group structures which have a different “identity” for the purpose of mutual survival becomes very important. Successful cooperation not only enables surviving, it also enables thriving. When the framework conditions are favourable and group structures are able to cooperate then they can successfully create a higher order entity.

The Ability to Handle Complexity

The ability to survive and thrive in increasingly complex framework conditions lies at the core of evolution. Unlike the other four qualities, the ability to “handle complexity,” as far as humans are concerned, is to a large extent, age dependent. We can develop our adaptability, continuous learning, bonding, and cooperating skills at almost any age; our ability to handle complexity however, develops gradually, and naturally as we grow older, as long as we keep our lives focused on our self-actualisation. This age dependency has significant repercussions on leadership development.

Criteria for Talent Selection

Based on the above analysis, I am proposing that the first and most important set of criteria for talent selection is the ability of an individual to display the five evolutionary characteristics. This is true for all individuals in all types of organisations. These evolutionary competencies have been successful for 14 billion years of evolution. They are integral to the future of humanity.

I am also proposing that there is a priority order in mastering these competencies. We cannot lead others if we are unable to lead ourselves. Thus, I propose to explore these five evolutionary competencies from the perspective of leading self, leading others, leading an organisation, and leading in society.

Thus, we can identify a hierarchical approach to leadership development.

- Leading *self* requires us to master the five evolutionary characteristics involved in self-leadership and to operate with a low level of personal entropy¹².
- Leading *others* (in a team or a project) requires us to master the five evolutionary characteristics involved in self-leadership and team leadership, as well as to learn

¹² Personal entropy: The degree of dysfunction or disorder in your life that is caused by the presence of conscious or subconscious fear-based beliefs.

how to embody the value of trust, and create a team environment that operates with a low level of cultural entropy¹³. Trust is the human characteristic that enables bonding to take place. Without trust, there will be no bonding.

- Leading an *organisation* requires us to master the five evolutionary characteristics involved in self-leadership, leading a team, and leading an organisation, as well as to learn how to embody the values of trust and empathy, and create a culture that operates with a low level of entropy. Empathy is the human characteristic that is required for cooperation to take place. Without empathy, cooperation with other entities will be difficult.
- Leading in *society* requires us to master the five evolutionary characteristics involved in self-leadership, leading others, leading an organisation, and leading in society, as well as to learn how to embody the values of trust, empathy, and compassion, and create a culture that operates with a low level of entropy. Compassion is the human characteristic that is required for developing unity.

Leading Self

The first criterion for selection into a talent management programme should be a strong capacity for self-leadership. This requires mastery of the five evolutionary competencies that enable an individual to develop a strong sense of inner alignment and a deep sense of their own authenticity.

Authenticity implies a way of being in the world wherein you remain true to the spirit of your deepest soul origins. The first part of our lives is driven by the needs of the ego. Then, if the consciousness conditions are right, the soul takes over and drives the later stages of our lives.

The ego is like the shell of an acorn, and the soul is like the core. Only when the conditions are right does the shell decompose so the core can break through to allow the acorn to become an oak tree. Only when we express our authentic self can we become all we can become. Learning to lead your self is the process by which you uncover and express your own authenticity and become fully self-actualised.

Leading Others

The second criterion for selection into a talent management programme should be a strong capacity for leading others. Being able to lead yourself is a necessary but not sufficient quality for leading others. Leading others requires a different level of application of the five evolutionary competencies, *and* just as importantly, the ability to engender trust. Trust is an end value. This means that there are multiple other competencies that have to be mastered for trust to be present. Trust is the glue that

¹³ Cultural entropy: The degree of dysfunction in a human system such as an organisation or nation caused by behaviors that are rooted in self-interest. Cultural entropy results from the manifestation of personal entropy.

holds people together, and the oil that allows work energy to flow.¹⁴ Trust builds internal cohesion.

Leading an Organisation

Being able to lead self and lead others are necessary but not sufficient qualities for leading an organisation. Leading an organisation requires a different level of application of the five evolutionary competencies, *and* just as importantly, not only the ability to engender trust, but also the ability to display empathy. Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in another's place, experience and understand their feelings and desires, and to be able to communicate this experience and understanding to the other person.

Leading in Society

Society is a higher order and a more complex entity than an organisation and therefore, not surprisingly, the competencies that a societal leader requires go beyond leading self, beyond leading others, and beyond leading an organisation. You need to be able to do all of these and also be able to lead the whole population of your community or nation.

Leading society requires a different level of application of the five evolutionary competencies, *and* just as importantly, not only the ability to engender trust, and empathy but also the ability to display compassion. Compassion is a more vigorous form of empathy that gives rise to an active desire to alleviate another's suffering. A compassionate person feels the pain of another and desires to alleviate that pain as if it was his or her own. This is the most important personal characteristic or soul quality for a leader of society to embody.

Talent management programme

The design of a talent management programme should include a professional (education) component and a personal (character) component. The professional component should focus on the skills required for professional growth and advancement. It should be about *educating* people in the hard skills of their business or their profession.

The character component should focus on—leading self, leading others, leading an organisation, and leading in society. It should be about helping people to grow and develop so they can become all they can become by furthering their self-actualisation, integration into society, and service to humanity and/or the planet.

¹⁴ Steven M. R. Covey. *Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

Of the four components, leading self, leading others, leading an organisation, and leading in society, the first two should form part of a leadership development programme that is available to everyone in the organisation who is over the age of twenty-five and wants to explore their personal and professional evolution. The latter two should be reserved for those who are selected into the organisation's talent management programme. I have included the module "leading society" because in the future, and particularly in large multinational organisations, it will be vitally important for leaders to integrate their organisations into society, and be attuned to societal needs.

Based on the above, I believe the selection criteria for a talent management programme should include the display of the evolutionary competencies as applied to leading self and leading others, as well as the competencies that are required for building trust. If these conditions are met you will have identified the best candidates possible for further training and future leadership positions.

Conclusion

The intent of this paper is to provide a structural overview of the key characteristics necessary for the development of a successful talent management and leadership development process modelled on the three universal stages of evolution.

The details of such a process and how it relates to the Seven Levels of Consciousness will be exposed in my upcoming book, *The New Leadership Paradigm*, to be published in 2010.

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