

The 5C Regenerative Leadership Framework

A developmental architecture for leadership learning and practice

White paper

Gerasimos Kouvaras, PhD | Athens, 2026

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1. Introduction: From fragmentation to a developmental architecture

Ecological disruption, widening inequalities, social fragmentation, economic instability, technological acceleration and geopolitical tensions are increasingly entangled. They interact across social, ecological, economic, political and technological systems, often amplifying one another and producing consequences that cannot be understood through any single crisis alone. The term polycrisis has entered both scholarly and mainstream policy discourse to describe this causal entanglement of multiple crises (Lawrence et al., 2024; World Economic Forum, 2023).

Yet recognising that crises are interconnected does not necessarily explain why they continue to be reproduced, or why responses so often prove insufficient. In this paper, metacrisis is used as a deeper diagnostic. While polycrisis draws attention to the interaction among crises, metacrisis directs attention to the underlying patterns of thought, values, relationships and institutions through which those crises are generated and addressed. It asks whether dominant assumptions about progress, development, knowledge and human relationships with the living world are themselves implicated in the challenges we are attempting to solve. This deeper perspective resonates with sustainability research showing that transformation cannot be approached solely as an external or technical challenge, but requires attention to the relationships between inner, collective and systemic change (Wamsler et al., 2021; Ives et al., 2023).

A central expression of this deeper condition is separation. Contemporary sustainability challenges have been associated with forms of disconnection from self, from others and from the wider living world, as well as with fragmentation across institutions, disciplines and systems of knowledge. Knowledge becomes separated from action, economic activity from ecological conditions, specialised expertise from wider systems, and individual agency from collective responsibility. Such fragmentation makes it difficult to perceive relationships between parts and wholes and to respond accordingly (Abson et al., 2017; Ives et al., 2018; Wamsler et al., 2021).

This diagnosis has significant implications for leadership development. If contemporary challenges are partly rooted in how people perceive, make meaning, relate, judge, organise and act, then technical expertise, management tools and external competencies, while necessary, are not sufficient. Leadership development

must also engage the capacities through which people examine assumptions, remain grounded in values and purpose, understand complexity and power, relate constructively across difference, generate intelligence with others and act under conditions where outcomes cannot be fully predicted. Inner development matters here because the ways people interpret and participate in systems influence the possibilities for transforming those systems. It should therefore be understood in relation to collective and structural change, rather than as a private project of self-improvement (Wamsler et al., 2021).

The Inner Development Goals (IDGs) provide an important reference point for this shift. The Inner Development Guide identifies 25 skills, qualities and capacities organised across five dimensions: Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating and Acting (Inner Development Goals Foundation, 2025). Their significance lies in making explicit a connection that is often underdeveloped in sustainability and leadership discourse: progress towards more sustainable and just societies also depends on the human capacities through which people engage with complexity, relationship and change. The IDGs therefore provide a useful shared language for connecting inner development with outer transformation.

A regenerative orientation takes this proposition further. Regeneration asks not only how existing systems can be sustained or made less harmful, but how human activity can contribute to renewing relationships and strengthening the capacity of living systems to adapt, develop and flourish over time. Regenerative thinking therefore shifts attention from isolated interventions towards relationships, interdependence and the developmental potential of social-ecological systems (Mang & Reed, 2012; Hahn & Tampe, 2021).

The **5C Regenerative Leadership Framework** brings these strands together as a developmental architecture for leadership learning and practice. It is not proposed as a new leadership theory, an ideal type of leader or another leadership style. Rather, it provides a structure through which interconnected dimensions of development can be explored together and brought into conversation with established approaches to leadership. Its five dimensions are **Conscious, Critical, Companionate, Collective and Catalytic**, corresponding most closely to the IDG dimensions of Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating and Acting. They are supported by two foundational conditions, **Curiosity** and **Artfulness**, and connected through the **Interstitium**, the relational space in which the dimensions meet and influence one another. The framework is neither sequential nor a checklist of competencies. It is an

interconnected architecture intended to support leadership development across individual, relational, organisational and systemic contexts.

The 5C Framework did not emerge from a single study or leadership theory. It has developed through more than two decades of applied leadership practice, facilitation and reflection across civil society, higher education and cross-sector settings, progressively brought into dialogue with scholarship on adult development, systems thinking, critical inquiry, relational and collective leadership, and regenerative practice. It is therefore offered as a practice-informed developmental architecture, open to further testing, refinement and research. It has taken the form of a white paper to make its conceptual foundations and developmental logic explicit, provide a transparent basis for critical engagement and application, and invite further development through practice, dialogue and research.

2. The five dimensions

2.1. Conscious leadership: Leading from being

Conscious leadership concerns the inner ground from which leadership practice takes shape. It develops awareness of how attention, values, emotions, assumptions, intentions, social position and privilege influence the ways people perceive situations and participate in them. In conditions of pressure and complexity, this inner orientation matters because action can easily become reactive, habitual or disconnected from purpose.

Values provide an important part of this orientation. They function as an inner compass, helping people judge what matters when rules, incentives or established routines offer insufficient guidance. Purpose gives those values direction by connecting personal and collective effort with a contribution beyond immediate performance. In a period marked by uncertainty and a wider crisis of meaning, the capacity to examine what one stands for and what one is serving becomes an important part of leadership practice.

Self-awareness is therefore more than introspection. Siegel's concept of mindsight describes the capacity to observe the activity of one's own mind while remaining attuned to others (Siegel, 2010). This includes noticing emotions, bodily signals, patterns of reaction and the stories through which experience is interpreted. Consciousness in this sense is embodied as well as cognitive: attention is carried through the whole person, not only through analytical thought.

Conscious leadership also involves developmental openness. Kegan's constructive-developmental perspective suggests that adults can change the structures through which they make meaning, gradually becoming able to examine assumptions and identities that previously operated outside awareness (Kegan, 1994). This creates the possibility of unlearning: loosening attachment to inherited ways of seeing and acting when they no longer serve the demands of the present.

The quality of attention is central to this dimension. Scharmer (2009) argues that the results of action are shaped by the quality of awareness from which action arises. Attention, intention and agency are therefore closely connected. Conscious leadership develops the capacity to notice where attention is directed, what intentions organise it and how both influence action.

This inner work does not imply an isolated or self-contained individual. Indigenous and relational perspectives challenge the assumption of the autonomous self and situate identity within relationships with community, ancestry, place and the living world (Spiller, 2021). Conscious leadership therefore includes awareness of oneself as a participant in wider relationships and systems.

Within the 5C Framework, Conscious corresponds most closely to the IDG dimension of Being. It establishes an inner orientation from which the other dimensions can develop, while remaining in continuous exchange with them.

2.2. Critical leadership: Thinking in systems, seeing through assumptions

Critical leadership is a commitment to deeper seeing. It extends beyond evaluating arguments and evidence to examine the structures, power relations, and assumptions that shape what appears normal, desirable, or possible. It engages complexity through reflection, questioning, and ethical discernment, asking what is happening, why, for whom, and with what consequences. It also considers leadership as a collective process of movement and direction: what is being moved, in which direction, through whose influence, and towards whose understanding of flourishing (Chandler & Kirsch, 2018).

Systems thinking is central to this work. Complex challenges are produced through relationships, feedback loops, delays, interdependencies and unintended consequences. Their causes are distributed across actors and structures, and interventions can generate effects far from their point of origin. Critical leadership therefore looks for patterns and relationships before reducing a challenge to a single cause or solution.

It also examines paradigms: the deeper assumptions that determine which questions appear sensible, what counts as evidence and which futures are considered realistic. Critical pedagogy and critical management scholarship show how such assumptions are entangled with histories of power, inequality and institutionalised forms of knowledge (Freire, 1970; Foucault, 1982; Spicer et al., 2009). Feminist leadership perspectives add particular attention to how privilege and bias shape voice, participation and authority, and to how power is exercised and shared (Batliwala, 2011). Postcolonial perspectives further challenge the universalisation of dominant Western categories and invite greater epistemic plurality (Escobar, 1995).

Unlearning is especially important here. It involves making familiar assumptions available for examination and remaining open to the possibility that an established mental model may no longer be adequate. This requires epistemic humility, including the ability to think against one's own preferred interpretation and to engage perspectives arising from different disciplines, cultures and ways of knowing.

Creativity strengthens this process because critical inquiry needs alternatives as well as critique. Creative leadership involves reframing problems, moving across contexts and combining diverse perspectives in ways that open new possibilities (Mainemelis et al., 2015). Shapira (2020) similarly shows how uncertainty can become a generative condition for team creativity when it is engaged rather than prematurely closed down.

Critical leadership also benefits from polarity thinking. Some tensions cannot be solved once and for all because both poles carry value and risk. Johnson's (1992) work on polarity management offers a way to work with such interdependent opposites without collapsing them into either-or choices. This is particularly relevant where leadership must hold short- and long-term needs, stability and change, autonomy and interdependence, or continuity and disruption at the same time.

Within the framework, Critical corresponds most closely to the IDG dimension of Thinking. Its distinctive contribution is to connect systems awareness with assumptions, power, unlearning and the plurality of knowledge through which situations are understood.

2.3. Companionate leadership: Leading with presence, reverence and relational depth

Companionate leadership names the relational depth of the framework. The term draws directly on Zoogah's (2020) formulation of companionate leadership, developed from African historical, anthropological and philosophical traditions and

particularly the Kemetic idea of shemsw, those who journey together. This provenance matters. Companionate leadership begins from a view of leadership as relational participation, shaped through attention, co-relation, communication, engagement and cooperation over time.

Compassionate leadership provides an important neighbouring tradition. Research highlights empathy, openness, communication, wellbeing, inclusiveness, integrity, respect and dignity as central dimensions of compassionate leadership in organisations (Ramachandran et al., 2024). Compassion also brings attention to suffering and to the ethical responsibility to respond. At the same time, scholarship has noted tensions that arise when compassion becomes episodic, managerial or instrumental, or when one person is positioned primarily as the giver of care and another as its recipient (Simpson et al., 2022).

Servant leadership similarly foregrounds humility, service and the development of others (Greenleaf, 1977). Companionate leadership shares these ethical concerns but places particular emphasis on the relationship itself. Its image is walking with rather than acting for. The relation is durational and reciprocal, shaped by a mutual claim on attention and responsibility. People remain distinct within the relationship; connection does not require fusion or the absorption of one perspective into another.

This can be described as mutuality without fusion. Difference is not an obstacle to relationship but one of its conditions. Companionate leadership therefore asks how people can remain present to one another across disagreement, asymmetry and vulnerability while continuing to share direction and responsibility. It resonates with relational leadership perspectives that understand leadership as a social process emerging through interaction rather than as a property located within an individual (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Reverence extends this relational orientation beyond interpersonal care. It refers to an attitude of respect towards life, place and the more-than-human world, recognising that human relationships are embedded within wider ecological and intergenerational systems. This does not require turning nature into an enlarged version of the self. It asks for relationship across difference, acknowledging dependence, limits and responsibility.

Within the framework, Companionate corresponds most closely to the IDG dimension of Relating. It deepens the capacities of empathy, connectedness, humility and appreciation by locating them within an ongoing practice of reciprocal relationship and shared journeying.

2.4. Collective leadership: Leading through shared agency and collective intelligence

Collective leadership concerns how meaning, intelligence, power and agency are generated together. It shifts attention from the capacities of a single leader to the conditions through which people can think, decide and act with one another. This is already a substantial field of scholarship. Distributed leadership examines how leadership practice is stretched across people and situations (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006); shared leadership explores mutual influence within teams (Pearce & Conger, 2003); collaborative leadership focuses on joint work across organisational and sectoral boundaries (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Huxham & Vangen, 2005); and plural leadership examines configurations in which leadership is produced through multiple actors and interactions (Denis et al., 2012).

Within the 5C Framework, the contribution of Collective is not the invention of another collective leadership category. It provides the Collaborating dimension of the architecture with a particular developmental focus: the capacity to generate shared agency and collective intelligence while working with difference, power and interdependence.

Collective intelligence is more than the aggregation of individual expertise. Research suggests that groups can develop a general capacity to perform across different kinds of tasks and that this capacity is associated with relational conditions such as social sensitivity and more equal participation (Woolley et al., 2010). Diversity therefore becomes useful when a group can actually hear, connect and work with different perspectives. Inclusion, trust and co-creation are not peripheral qualities; they form part of the infrastructure through which collective intelligence becomes possible.

Power is equally important. Mary Parker Follett's distinction between power-over and power-with remains valuable because collective leadership does not imply the absence of power (Follett, 1924). It asks how power can be generated through relationship, participation and coordinated capacity instead of being treated only as possession or control. This makes space for solidarity, coalition-building and forms of countervailing agency when established arrangements exclude or silence particular groups.

Collective leadership also matters across organisational boundaries. Cross-sector and inter-organisational challenges require shared purpose, negotiated alignment and structures that allow collaboration to endure despite different interests and institutional logics (Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Ostrom's

(2010) work on polycentric governance further demonstrates the value of multiple centres of initiative, experimentation and learning rather than assuming that complex collective problems require a single directing authority.

Scharmer's work adds the importance of shared attention, common intention and collective agency to this picture (Scharmer, 2009). Groups do not become collective simply by assembling people around a table. The quality of listening, dialogue and attention shapes what a group can perceive and what forms of action it can generate.

Within the framework, Collective corresponds most closely to the IDG dimension of Collaborating. It focuses on how intelligence and agency are constituted together. Catalytic leadership, which follows, concerns what happens when this shared agency begins to create movement and change.

2.5. Catalytic leadership: Acting for change

Catalytic leadership concerns the capacity to create movement within systems and to help emerging possibilities acquire form, momentum and reach. The chemical metaphor is useful because a catalyst changes the conditions of a process without becoming its sole author. In leadership practice, catalytic action may involve connecting actors, redirecting attention and resources, opening an institutional possibility, protecting an experiment or acting at a moment when a relatively focused intervention can influence a wider pattern.

Such action requires systemic judgement. Every intervention enters an existing field of relationships, institutions, resources, histories and power. Actions can reinforce the dominant pattern even when their immediate intention is progressive. Catalytic leadership therefore asks not only whether an intervention works, but what it strengthens, what it makes easier to repeat and which future it helps to normalise.

Bill Sharpe's Three Horizons framework provides a useful way of thinking about such transitions. It suggests that three patterns coexist in the present: a dominant system that is losing its capacity to respond to changing conditions; emerging practices that carry the seeds of a different future; and a contested space between them, where innovations may either prolong the existing system or help new patterns take root (Sharpe, 2013). Catalytic leadership operates particularly within this transitional space, attending to which experiments merely improve the existing pattern and which create conditions for a different one.

Courage matters because action in this space cannot wait for certainty. Waddock's (2015) study of intellectual shamans illustrates how boundary-crossing, sensemaking and a commitment to making a difference can challenge established

frames in complex systems. Hope also has a practical role. It is sustained by the capacity to perceive possibilities already forming in the present and to participate in their development without assuming that favourable outcomes are guaranteed.

This connects with Scharmer's recent distinction between pattern-repeating and pattern-originating agency. Pattern-repeating action applies familiar responses to changing circumstances; pattern-originating agency develops the capacity to sense what is emerging and to act in ways that allow new patterns to take shape (Scharmer, 2026). Catalytic leadership therefore combines initiative with receptivity: it acts, but it also pays attention to what the system is becoming.

Resources form part of this judgement. Time, money, attention, relationships, natural resources and institutional legitimacy are all directed through action. Meadows' (1999) work on leverage points shows that interventions differ greatly in their capacity to influence systems, with deeper leverage often located in information flows, rules, goals and paradigms. Stewardship therefore involves considering how resources are used and which patterns of resilience and transformation they support.

Resilience is likewise more than the capacity to return to a previous state. Work on climate adaptation distinguishes absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities, drawing attention to whether action enables systems to withstand disturbance, adjust to changing conditions or reorganise more fundamentally (Pelling et al., 2015; Oxfam, 2017). Catalytic leadership may need all three, while remaining attentive to the danger of making harmful arrangements more resilient.

Within the framework, Catalytic corresponds most closely to the IDG dimension of Acting. It brings courage, hope, initiative, resource consciousness and resilience together through one central proposition: leadership can help emerging regenerative possibilities acquire agency, form and momentum.

3. Foundational conditions that support the 5C Framework

The five dimensions are supported by two conditions that influence learning across the whole architecture: Curiosity and Artfulness. They are not additional Cs and they are not competencies to be completed. Curiosity keeps the question open. Artfulness enlarges what leadership is able to perceive, know and imagine.

3.1. Curiosity: The developmental driver

Curiosity is the developmental impulse that keeps the framework open and alive. It is the willingness to encounter experience without assuming that its meaning is already

known. In leadership learning, curiosity supports the capacity to remain with a question, notice surprise and treat uncertainty as a source of information rather than only as a problem to be eliminated.

This matters for adult development because growth often begins when an existing interpretation no longer explains experience adequately. Berger (2012) describes development as an increasing capacity to hold complexity, multiple perspectives and uncertainty. Curiosity sustains this movement by making it possible to examine assumptions without immediately defending them. It therefore supports both learning and unlearning.

Curiosity also has a relational quality. Questions asked with genuine interest create different conditions from questions used to test, persuade or expose. They can make space for other people's experience and allow disagreement to become material for learning. In deliberately developmental environments, practices of inquiry, feedback and reflection become part of everyday work rather than occasional development activities (Kegan & Lahey, 2016).

At a systemic level, curiosity encourages attention to relationships, feedback and patterns that might otherwise remain invisible. Senge's (1990) learning organisation depends on disciplined inquiry into how systems behave and how one's own assumptions participate in them. Curiosity supports this inquiry by resisting premature closure and remaining attentive to weak or unexpected signals.

Across the framework, curiosity enables movement. It opens Conscious awareness, keeps Critical inquiry revisable, supports receptivity in Companionate relationships, makes Collective learning possible and allows Catalytic action to remain responsive to feedback. Its role can be stated simply: curiosity keeps the question open.

3.2. Artfulness: An integrative way of knowing

Artfulness expands the forms of knowing available to leadership practice. It includes sensation, emotion, image, atmosphere, metaphor, intuition and imagination alongside analytical reasoning. The term does not mean that leadership must become artistic in a conventional sense. It refers to the capacity to perceive and give form to aspects of experience that may not yet be available through propositions, data or linear explanation alone.

This is where the aesthetic dimension of experience becomes relevant. Aesthetic knowing refers to what is apprehended through the senses and through felt qualities such as rhythm, tone, movement, tension, image and form. Arts-based approaches to leadership development show that such modes can deepen reflection and make

tacit or difficult-to-articulate aspects of organisational life available for inquiry (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). Analytical thinking remains essential, but it is joined by other pathways through which meaning can become perceptible.

Sensemaking in uncertain situations often begins from incomplete cues. Weick (1995) shows how people construct meaning from fragments of experience while events are still unfolding. Artfulness strengthens the ability to remain attentive to what has not yet become fully explicit, including emotional undercurrents, symbolic patterns and emerging possibilities.

The concept of socioperception offers an adjacent perspective. De Vulpian and van der Zouwen (2013) use the term for the capacity to detect weak signals and social change by drawing on sensory, emotional-relational, rational and intuitive forms of intelligence. Socioperception combines systemic awareness with imagination, helping people construct possible scenarios and act with greater relevance in changing environments. It illustrates how perception can become richer when forms of knowing that are usually separated are brought into conversation.

Artfulness also has a generative function. Metaphor, drawing, movement, storytelling, prototyping and other forms of expression can make an emerging understanding tangible enough to be shared and explored. They create objects around which collective sensemaking can develop, even when the group does not yet have a settled language for what it is experiencing, as illustrated by the use of color to cultivate connection and collaboration in IDG-related practice (Burckhardt & Campos Suarez, 2025).

Across the framework, Artfulness connects perception with possibility. It supports embodiment in Conscious, reframing in Critical, attunement in Companionate, collective sensemaking in Collective and imagination in Catalytic. Its function can be stated equally simply: artfulness enlarges what leadership is able to perceive, know and imagine.

4. The Interstitium: where the five dimensions interact

The term interstitium comes from anatomy. It refers to the fluid-filled spaces within and between tissues. Recent research has drawn renewed attention to the interstitium as a body-wide network that exists across several scales and contributes to fluid movement, mechanical functioning and signalling between tissues (Benias et al., 2018; Wells & Theise, 2026).

The 5C Framework uses the Interstitium as a biological metaphor for something that is easily overlooked in leadership development: the space through which otherwise distinct dimensions interact. The metaphor matters because the biological interstitium is not simply an empty gap between more important structures. It is a medium of connection and exchange.

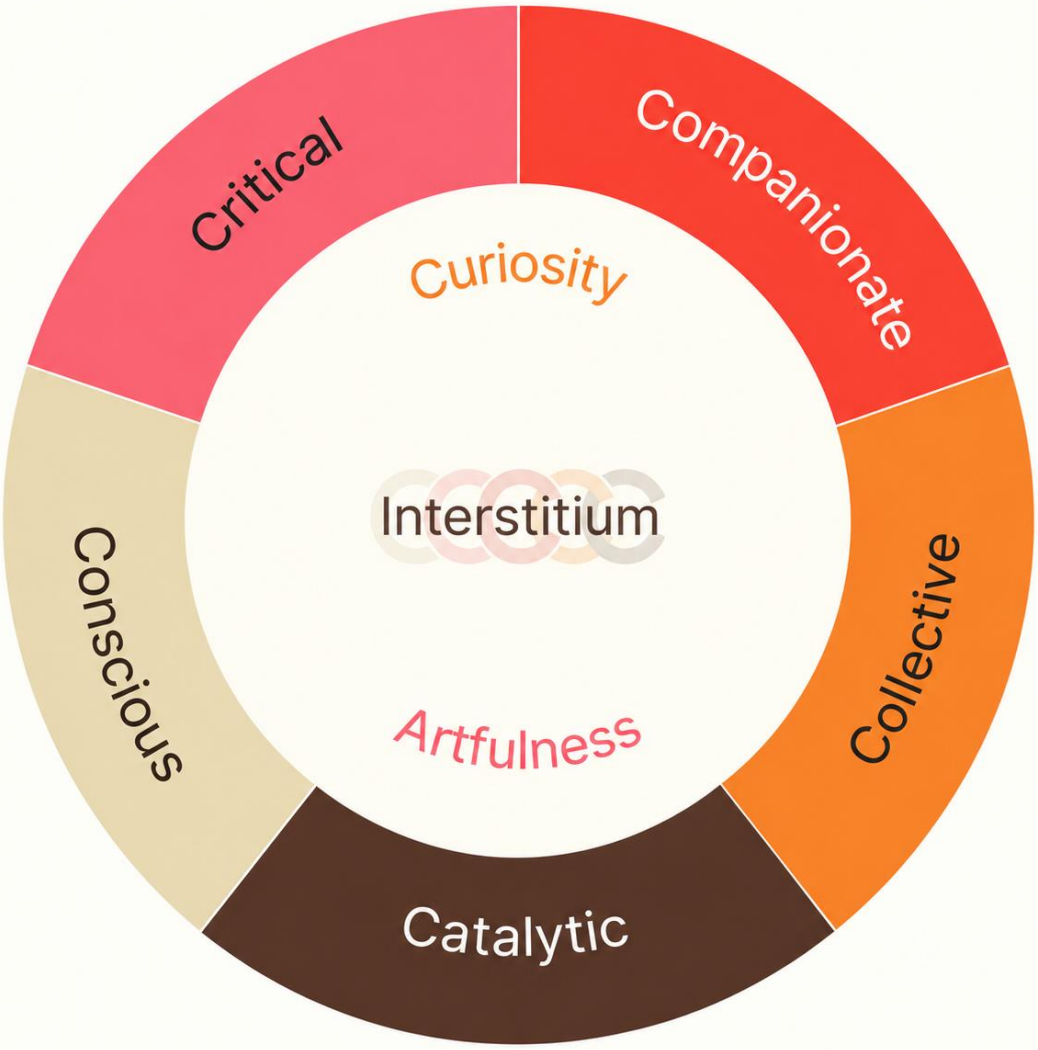
Within the framework, the Interstitium is not a sixth dimension. It names the connective space through which Conscious, Critical, Companionate, Collective and Catalytic influence one another in practice. Consider a difficult collective decision. Values and emotional responses are present; assumptions shape how the situation is interpreted; the quality of relationships affects which perspectives can be expressed; collective processes influence what becomes possible; and action changes the conditions for what follows. None of these dimensions operates independently.

The idea is consistent with relational perspectives that locate leadership within social processes rather than solely within individual positions (Uhl-Bien, 2006), and with complexity perspectives in which new patterns can emerge through interaction, feedback and adaptation (Stacey, 2011; Shotter, 2010). Emergence here refers to meanings, patterns or possibilities that arise through interaction and could not be fully predicted by examining each element separately.

Scharmer's concept of the social field offers a related perspective, drawing attention to how the quality of attention and relationship within a group affects what that group can perceive and create (Scharmer, 2009). The Interstitium serves a more specific function within the 5C architecture: it draws attention to the movement and exchange between the five developmental dimensions, including the connections between inner orientation, interpretation, relationship, collective agency and action.

Curiosity and Artfulness help keep this space generative. Curiosity keeps inquiry open to difference, uncertainty and unexpected signals. Artfulness broadens perception and expression, allowing embodied, imaginative and intuitive forms of knowing to complement analytical understanding.

The Interstitium therefore foregrounds a simple proposition: leadership development depends not only on what develops within each dimension, but also on the quality of the connections among them. It is through these connections that the framework becomes a living architecture rather than a collection of separate capacities.



The 5C Regenerative Leadership Framework: five developmental dimensions, two foundational conditions, and the connective Interstitium.

5. Theoretical grounding and positioning

The 5C Regenerative Leadership Framework is a practice-oriented developmental architecture for leadership learning and practice. Its conceptual grounding comes from several traditions that are already well established in their own right. The purpose of bringing them together is not to create a new leadership theory, but to provide an integrative structure through which inner, relational, collective and systemic development can be explored in relation to regenerative leadership.

5.1. Integration with the Inner Development Goals

The Inner Development Goals provide the principal reference point for the architecture of the 5C Framework. The Inner Development Guide organises 25 skills, qualities and capacities across five dimensions: Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating and Acting (Inner Development Goals Foundation, 2025). The 5C Framework retains this five-dimensional structure and translates it into Conscious, Critical, Companionate, Collective and Catalytic as domains for leadership learning and practice.

The relationship is therefore direct but not merely terminological. The 5C architecture places the IDG dimensions in conversation with developmental psychology, critical and postcolonial inquiry, relational and collective leadership, systems thinking and regenerative practice. Curiosity and Artfulness add explicit learning conditions across the dimensions, while the Interstitium makes their interaction part of the architecture itself.

Recent scholarship has further developed the Inner Development Goals through diverse experiences of collective leadership, ecological connection, education, organizational transformation, and systems change (Campos Suarez & Egel, 2025; Egel & Campos Suarez, 2025). These contributions reinforce an understanding of inner development as a relational and collective process, demonstrating the plurality of pathways through which it can inform leadership practice. Egel et al. (2025) offer a complementary integration of the IDGs with global leadership for sustainability. The 5C Framework builds on this broader conversation while explicitly adopting a regenerative orientation, foregrounding the transformation of underlying assumptions, relationships, power structures, and the conditions through which living systems can renew themselves.

Alongside these developments, the 5C Framework recognises several constructive critiques that have been levelled at the IDG initiative, including concerns about cultural universality, overemphasis on the individual, and insufficient engagement with power and structural injustice (Vogt, 2024; Barrett, 2025). The 5C Framework's approach is consistent with emerging work connecting the IDGs with systems thinking and leadership education. Satterwhite et al. (2025) argue that leadership learning for sustainability needs to link individual and collective development with the capacity to understand interdependent systems. Sustainability research likewise identifies inner transformation as a potentially deep leverage point when it is connected with collective and structural change rather than treated as a private project of self-improvement (Wamsler et al., 2021).



The connection is especially important because the crises of sustainability can be understood partly as crises of relationship. Ives et al. (2023) describe inner-outer transformation through the interdependence of individual, collective and system phenomena and emphasise connection with self, others and the biosphere. Their analysis also points to the need to expand knowledge systems and bridge disciplinary divides. This supports the broader separation thesis used in the 5C Framework: fragmentation occurs within people and relationships, but also between institutions, fields of knowledge and the structures through which society understands and acts on complex problems.

The IDGs have also attracted constructive questions about normativity, cultural assumptions and the risk of individualising responsibility for systemic problems. Lorch and Hantke (2026), for example, examine the promise and limitations of inner development within Education for Sustainable Development and emphasise the relational conditions through which inner change becomes socially meaningful. Such critiques strengthen the case for locating inner development within relationships, institutions, power and socio-ecological systems.

The 5C Framework therefore treats the IDGs as a shared developmental foundation and extends their use through a leadership architecture that makes power, unlearning, collective intelligence, relational depth and systemic interdependence explicit. Inner development becomes significant through the ways it changes perception, relationship, collective practice and action in the world.

5.2. A developmental foundation: Adult development, learning and complexity

The 5C Framework is developmental in the sense that leadership capacities can deepen, reorganise and become more complex through experience, reflection and practice. Development therefore concerns more than acquiring additional knowledge or techniques. It includes changes in how experience is interpreted, how assumptions are held, how relationships are understood and how people and collectives respond to increasing complexity. This orientation draws particularly on constructive-developmental theory, adult learning and vertical development (Kegan, 1994; Berger, 2012; Petrie, 2014).

Adult development research suggests that growth can involve changes in the structures through which people make meaning. Kegan's distinction between what is subject, embedded so deeply in experience that it cannot easily be examined, and what can become object, something that can be observed and reflected upon, is

especially relevant to the framework. Development creates greater capacity to notice assumptions, identities and habitual patterns that previously organised experience from outside awareness. This provides an important foundation for self-awareness and unlearning across the five Cs.

The framework also draws on the distinction between horizontal and vertical development. Horizontal development expands what people know and can do; vertical development concerns changes in how they interpret experience and hold complexity (Petrie, 2014). Both matter for leadership learning. New skills and knowledge may be necessary, while complex and unfamiliar conditions can also require changes in perspective, meaning-making and the capacity to engage competing demands without reducing them prematurely. Berger's (2012) work is particularly relevant here, showing how development can increase the ability to work with multiple perspectives, uncertainty and interdependence.

Development also involves the reorganisation of existing capacities. Dynamic Skill Theory understands development as the construction and coordination of context-sensitive configurations linking cognition, emotion and action (Mascolo, 2020). Such configurations can become increasingly complex, but they can also become rigid through repeated enactment. This gives unlearning a particular developmental significance: assumptions, identity commitments and habitual practices may need to be loosened, decoupled and reorganised before new forms of meaning and action become possible. Unlearning can therefore involve change across epistemic, identity and practice dimensions, shaped by the relational, pedagogical and institutional conditions in which development takes place.

The five dimensions should not be understood as a fixed sequence of stages through which everyone progresses in the same way. They are interconnected fields of development, and their relevance changes across situations, relationships and contexts. Growth can be uneven and recursive: experience in collective action may provoke deeper self-awareness; relational tension may challenge established assumptions; action may reveal aspects of a system that were previously invisible. Learning moves across the architecture rather than following a predetermined path.

Complexity strengthens the need for this developmental orientation. In complex social systems, outcomes emerge through interaction among multiple actors and conditions and cannot always be predicted in advance. Learning itself changes the system in which it occurs. Leadership development therefore benefits from experimentation, feedback, reflection and adaptation, allowing understanding and

practice to evolve through engagement with real situations (Stacey, 2011; Senge, 1990).

Development is also relational and collective. Kegan and Lahey's (2016) work on deliberately developmental organisations illustrates how environments, relationships and everyday practices can support or constrain growth. Within the 5C Framework, development can take place within persons, between people, in groups and organisations, and across wider collaborative systems. The Interstitium becomes relevant here because development is shaped through what happens in the relationships and exchanges connecting these levels.

The term developmental architecture is therefore deliberate. It provides structure without prescribing a universal pathway or ranking people on a maturity ladder. Conscious, Critical, Companionate, Collective and Catalytic describe interconnected domains through which leadership learning and practice can be explored, while Curiosity, Artfulness and the Interstitium support the openness, integration and relational movement through which development occurs.

5.3. A regenerative and systemic view

The 5C Framework is shaped by a regenerative orientation. Regeneration is understood here as the capacity of people, relationships, organisations and wider living systems to renew, adapt and develop in ways that increase their future capacity to flourish. It asks whether the patterns through which leadership is practised strengthen or diminish the vitality, relationships and developmental potential of the systems involved.

This orientation responds to the wider conditions of the Anthropocene, the term commonly used to describe the period in which human activity has become a major force shaping Earth systems. Research on the Great Acceleration documents the rapid intensification, particularly since the mid-twentieth century, of pressures associated with production, consumption, resource use and ecological change (Steffen et al., 2015). These developments form part of the broader metacrisis described earlier in this paper: interconnected ecological, social, economic and technological pressures whose interactions cannot be understood through isolated problem-solving alone.

At a deeper level, regenerative thinking draws attention to separation and relationship. Sustainability scholarship has increasingly connected outer crises with forms of inner and relational disconnection, including separation from self, others and the wider living world (Wamsler et al., 2021; Ives et al., 2023). The 5C Framework

understands this separation more broadly, extending it to fragmentation between disciplines, institutions and ways of knowing. Regenerative practice therefore involves reconnecting what has been treated as separate while preserving the distinctiveness and plurality of the parts involved.

Living-systems thinking provides an important foundation for this view. Living systems develop through relationships, feedback, diversity, adaptation and continuous exchange with their environments. They cannot be fully understood by examining their components separately. Regenerative design therefore asks how human activity can participate in the continuing development of living systems and increase their capacity to generate life and possibility over time (Reed, 2007; Mang & Reed, 2012). This requires learning from patterns found in nature without simply transferring biological models literally into organisations or societies.

This perspective also widens the forms of knowledge that leadership learning is prepared to recognise. Scientific and analytical knowledge remain essential, while Indigenous, ancestral and place-based traditions offer accumulated understanding of reciprocity, interdependence, stewardship and human participation within ecological systems. Contemporary regenerative practice can benefit from dialogue among these traditions when such engagement respects their origins and avoids treating them as resources to be extracted from their cultural contexts (Escobar, 1995; Spiller, 2021). The aim is epistemic plurality: the capacity to engage different ways of knowing while remaining attentive to their differences and limits.

Regenerative leadership scholarship is increasingly developing these connections between human development, organisations and systems change. Hutchins and Storm (2019) frame regenerative leadership through living-systems principles and a movement from mechanistic towards life-affirming organisational practice. More recent work places stronger emphasis on leadership for systems change and on the psychological, relational, ecological and developmental dimensions required for regenerative practice (Kempster, 2026; Canessa-Pollard & Sexton, 2026). The 5C Framework contributes to this emerging field as a developmental architecture for leadership learning and practice, organising these concerns across inner orientation, critical discernment, relationship, collective agency and action.

Regeneration also benefits from positive images of different futures. Glenn Albrecht's Symbiocene names a possible period beyond the dominant patterns of the Anthropocene, characterised by renewed symbiotic relationships between humans and the wider living world (Albrecht, 2019). Jeremy Lent's concept of ecocivilisation similarly imagines social and economic systems organised around principles drawn

from life itself, particularly mutually beneficial symbiosis and the flourishing of nested wholes (Lent & Nixon, 2026). Such concepts are valuable as horizons rather than blueprints: they make regenerative futures more imaginable while leaving their concrete forms open to development across different places and cultures.

The 5C Framework does not prescribe a particular regenerative future. Its role is to support the developmental capacities through which people and collectives can participate more consciously in creating one. Conscious connects values and meaning with action; Critical questions paradigms and perceives systemic relationships; Companionate deepens relational responsibility; Collective develops shared intelligence and power-with; and Catalytic supports action that can strengthen emerging regenerative possibilities. Curiosity, Artfulness and the Interstitium keep these dimensions open, connected and responsive to context.

Regeneration therefore provides the wider orientation of the framework: leadership learning should increase the capacity to participate in the renewal of the systems of which we are part, human and more-than-human, while expanding the possibilities available to those who come after us.

6. Using and developing the 5C Framework

The 5C Framework is intended as an integrative architecture for leadership learning and practice. It brings into relation dimensions of development that are often addressed through separate traditions, programmes or practices: inner orientation, critical and systemic discernment, relational depth, collective agency and action. Rather than prescribing a method, sequence or fixed developmental pathway, it provides a coherent frame through which these different forms of learning can be explored together and inform one another across contexts.

The framework can be used across different forms and levels of leadership development, from individual reflection and coaching to educational programmes, teams and organisations. Its architecture can provide continuity across different learning methods and experiences without requiring them to follow a standard curriculum or developmental sequence.

6.1. Leadership education and development

The framework can be used in the design of leadership courses, programmes, workshops, retreats and immersive learning journeys. It may provide the overall developmental architecture for a learning experience or sit alongside established leadership theories, methods and pedagogical approaches.



A wide range of learning practices can therefore be incorporated within it, including experiential learning, dialogue, case work, reflective practice, arts-based inquiry, peer learning, place-based learning and applied experimentation. The architecture provides coherence without requiring a fixed curriculum or sequence, allowing learning activities to be selected according to context and connected through a broader developmental purpose.

Used in this way, the framework can help leadership education connect individual, relational, collective and systemic dimensions of development rather than treating them as separate learning agendas.

6.2. Coaching, mentoring and reflective practice

In coaching and mentoring, the framework can provide a broad developmental reference for inquiry and reflection without requiring individuals to be classified into fixed profiles. It offers a language through which questions of values and purpose, assumptions and ways of seeing, relationships, participation and action can be explored in relation to one another.

Its integrative character can support conversations that move between the person and the wider contexts in which leadership is practised, while remaining sensitive to identity, experience and circumstance. The framework does not prescribe the direction such conversations should take; different dimensions may become relevant as the inquiry develops.

Reflective and self-assessment tools may be used alongside the framework where appropriate, provided they support inquiry rather than turning development into a fixed measurement exercise.

6.3. Teams and organisations

Within teams and organisations, the framework can provide a shared reference for reflecting on leadership practice and organisational culture. It allows questions of values, assumptions, relationships, power, collective agency and action to be considered within the same developmental architecture rather than through separate conversations or interventions.

This can support team reflection, organisational learning, culture change and the design of leadership processes. The framework may also be used alongside existing approaches to strategy, organisational change and transformation, helping connect leadership practice with the wider relational and systemic context in which organisations operate.

Its role is not to prescribe an organisational model, but to provide a common frame through which different aspects of leadership learning and practice can be explored together.

6.4. Research and further development

The 5C Framework is offered as an evolving architecture. Its further development should therefore be informed by application, critique and research across different cultural, organisational and educational contexts.

Several questions remain open. How do the five dimensions interact over time? Which pedagogical and relational conditions support movement across them? How do different cultural traditions interpret or challenge the assumptions embedded in the framework? How might development be examined at collective and organisational levels without reducing it to individual competencies? How do Curiosity, Artfulness and the Interstitium influence developmental processes in practice?

Further research can also examine whether the framework helps connect inner development with observable changes in relationships, collective practice and systemic action. Such inquiry would allow the architecture to evolve while preserving its character as an open framework for learning rather than a fixed model of leadership. The 5C Framework is intended to be used generatively. Its contribution lies in the quality of inquiry it enables, the connections it helps make visible, and the developmental possibilities it opens within different contexts.

7. Conclusion

The challenges facing leadership increasingly involve complexity, fragmentation and forms of separation that operate across personal, relational, institutional and ecological levels. Responding to these conditions requires learning processes capable of connecting inner development with the ways people perceive, relate, organise and act together.

The 5C Framework offers a developmental architecture for this work. It remains open to application, dialogue, critique and further development. Its contribution will ultimately be judged through practice: by whether it helps people and collectives perceive more deeply, engage difference more constructively, strengthen shared agency and participate more responsibly in the regenerative possibilities of the systems to which they belong.

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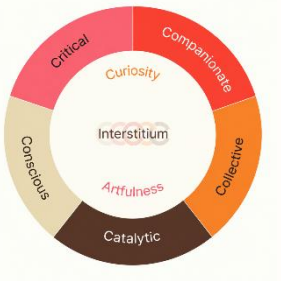


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The 5C Regenerative Leadership Framework



Related practice resource: The Inner Values Incubator (IVI© Model), co-created by Irene Papaligouras and Gerasimos Kouvaras, offers a reflective self-assessment connecting personal values, outer challenges and the 25 Inner Development Goals skills. See ivimodel.com.

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