



A Living Future

Why Organisations Must Begin to Behave Like Organisms

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Summary: A Living Future

Imperative

In the early days of the Industrial Revolution, the most successful organisations functioned like clockwork. They were rigidly hierarchical, obedient to command, and engineered for efficiency. Their rhythm matched the thrum of steam engines and factory whistles.

Humans were simply another series of cogs and gears in these clockwork behemoths, patiently and diligently doing the fine motor skill tasks for which we had not yet invented a machine. Output was measured in widgets and work hours, not wellness or wisdom.

But that era, for most, is long gone. We now live in an age defined not by predictability and gradual evolution, but by emergence. Climate collapse, AI acceleration, and political instability have conspired to render the old models obsolete. Change is no longer cyclical, it is **erratic**, **unpredictable** and **exponential**. And many of our institutions, companies, and social structures were not designed for this Volatile Uncertain Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment.

So, the question arises: ***What kind of organisation can survive in a world where everything changes at once?***

The answer sees us increasingly erring away from machine-like mechanistic and hierarchical structures, and more commonly looking to nature and the living world. Not a pyramid. Not a spreadsheet, nor a machine designed by man (or woman). Rather, a forest, a coral reef, or a plant or animal body.

The truth is that even in previous transformational eras, change was far from instantaneous. Consider the shift from horses to motor cars in cities like New York. In 1900, there were 100,000 horses in the city, leaving behind 2.5 million pounds of manure per day. By 1912, cars outnumbered horses. Yet even this shift, revolutionary in hindsight, took nearly two decades to manifest fully in infrastructure, employment, and public psychology. Change, when not designed for, dawdles and drags its feet. And the cost of delay in today's hyper-accelerated context may be existential.

To thrive in this new world, our organisations must stop behaving like machines. They must begin to foster the emergent behaviours expressed by organisms.

Introduction:

Take a minute to stop reading and ask yourself; What is an organisation, really? Is it a collection of people? A building? A product? Or a function? Or, is it something subtler, something alive? Something that learns, forgets, heals, and evolves? Something perhaps, **greater than the sum of its own parts?**

Biology in the 21st Century, doesn't just offer neat metaphor; it offers method. Organisms have survived for billions of years not by controlling their environments, but by responding to them. They scale without central control. They heal without outside intervention. They adapt, sometimes beautifully, sometimes brutally, to their circumstances.

At CLIMB Leadership, we believe that the shift from mechanism to metabolism is not possible without leadership. But not leadership in the traditional sense of heroic individuals

at the helm. We speak of leadership as behaviour, distributed, embedded and catalytic. Six behaviours, to be precise: Self-leadership, Servant leadership, Values-based leadership, Action-centred leadership, Inspirational leadership, and Metamorphic leadership.

Each of these behaviours is a kind of cellular intelligence, small on its own, but transformative in concert. As we'll explore, they are the roots of the type of change we seek. And they are necessary if we are to lead not just effectively, but biologically.

These behaviours are the **spark of energy** that all organisations need to encourage the **emergence** of truly useful interactions between its member parts. **Symbiotic** couplings between individuals and departments that drive innovation and problem-solving, but more importantly infuse a degree of organic plasticity allowing the organisation to adapt, learn and evolve in real time.

Fractals: Scale, Redundancy, and Information Efficiency

Nature never scales by command. It scales by replication. Look at a tree. A river delta. A lung. You'll see patterns that echo themselves at every level, branches that branch into branches, capillaries into capillaries. These fractals are not merely beautiful; they are **efficient**. They optimise surface area for exchange. They ensure redundancy and robustness. If one branch dies, the others still breathe.

Why, then, do so many organisations centralise power, hoard information, compartmentalise function and treat deviation as defect? Should we not learn from biology, and embed resilience through design?

Fractal thinking in organisations means building teams that mirror the whole. Each node knows the mission. Each part carries the DNA of the culture. This decentralised coherence allows for agility without anarchy. Fractal design encourages the growth of an organisation composed of **general specialists**. Each member of the organisation capable at a low level of understanding or functioning in any area of the organisation.

Each fractal member is also encouraged to specialise. The combination of these clusters of general specialists is a fractal organisation with a **living working memory** capable of evolution, and innovation in any area of the organisation. This fractal structure also confers greater resilience on the whole organisation as less reliance is required on any individual.

In mathematics and nature alike, fractals offer one profound advantage: they **maximise function with minimal complexity**. A fractal leaf captures more sunlight without increasing its mass. A fractal coastline increases biodiversity by providing more ecological edge. This principle applies to organisations too, more touchpoints, more autonomy, more resilience, with lower managerial overheads. Efficiency emerges not through control, but through intelligent repetition.

Key Leadership Insight:

Leadership plays a vital role in this replication. **Values-based leadership** provides the moral template, ensuring every fractal cell holds the same ethical code. **Action-centred leadership** enables local agency, teams that act autonomously but in alignment, like limbs responding to the same nervous system.

Disease: Feedback Loops and Organisational Illness

When a body falls ill, it's rarely due to a single event or cause. More often, illness creeps in through broken feedback loops, a failure to sense, to signal, to respond. Cancer, after all, is a cell that forgets how to stop. Fever is a system that overcorrects. These are not alien invaders; they are internal errors.

Organisations too, get sick. Fear metastasises. Bureaucracy calcifies. Teams burn out, not because they are weak, but because the system stopped listening. How many meetings go unspoken? How many reports go unread? How often does an organisation ignore its own immune response?

Leadership, in this context, is less about vision and more about vigilance. **Self-leadership** is the ability to sense one's own misalignment, stress, cynicism, compromise, and correct course. It is the first immune cell. **Servant leadership** is the behaviour that clears the infection, diluting conflict, dissolving silos and restoring flow.

To prevent disease, organisms build in redundancy and feedback, as should organisations. This means cultivating environments where positive conflict is valued and where silence is not mistaken for agreement.

Crucial here is understanding **reinforcing and balancing loops**. Reinforcing loops amplify a trend, for good or ill. Think of viral misinformation or runaway promotions. Balancing loops restore equilibrium, like a thermostat correcting temperature. When reinforcing loops go unchecked, organisations can spiral into dysfunction. When balancing loops are overactive, they stifle innovation. Healthy systems allow both, but in balance.

Key Leadership Insight: Healthy organisations don't just execute well, they correct well. Leadership must be diagnostic and responsive, not just directive. Leaders must be aware of the feedback loops their decisions and actions are causing.

Adaptation: Learning, Agility, and Change

What if **adaptation was the norm**? What if learning was built into the structure, not bolted on? When we buy the latest smartphone or PC, we expect that it will rapidly become obsolete, no longer capable of working or processing at the speed our environment demands. For a short time, incremental software updates can slow down the inevitable conclusion that your device is no longer fit for purpose and needs replacing.

So why don't we view our human capital in the same way. When interviewing for new people to join your organisation you should ensure that the interviewee understands two things:

1. The organisation places a strong emphasis on the interviewees commitment to the organisation's values and motivation to achieving its purpose.
2. You (the interviewee) are expected to grow and adapt constantly. You should not be expected to be doing the same role in the same way in a year's time.

Self-leadership underpins this mindset. It creates individuals who **own** their development, who see change not as threat but as invitation. **Metamorphic leadership** builds the bridges between old and new, designing transitions that preserve identity while enabling evolution. And **Inspirational leadership** creates the emotional architecture for change, making it feel possible, meaningful, even exciting.

Critically, adaptation demands more than skill; it demands an energetic input of both **motivation** and **inspiration**. The most adaptable teams aren't just well-trained. They are well-aligned, recruited for shared values, trusted to try, and safe to fail, but most importantly they have leaders who engage every individual in the **pull of inspiration** and deliver the never-ending and much-needed **push of motivation**.

Key Leadership Insight: In adaptive systems, learning is expected, not exceptional. Leadership must make change normal, desirable, and personal.

Evolution: Memory, Pre-adaptation, and the Edge of Chaos

If adaptation is learning, evolution is remembering. Pre-adaptation, the evolutionary principle that traits developed for one purpose can find value in another, is a cornerstone of survival. Feathers evolved for warmth long before they made flight possible. Algae were creating new symbiotic life-forms with fungi before forests emerged.

In the same way, a company's abandoned process or shelved prototype may become tomorrow's breakthrough. This might be an old workflow that finds new relevance, or a skill-set once sidelined that becomes mission critical.

But for such reuse to occur, **memory** is essential. Not just data storage, but evolutionary memory. This memory lives in culture, rituals, tacit knowledge. It lives in lunchroom stories and onboarding metaphors. It lives in people.

Metamorphic leadership enables this memory to be accessed, recombined, and repurposed. **Servant leadership** ensures the system is listening, to its own history, to its people, to its environment. **Self-leadership** positions each individual as a sensor, picking up weak signals. **Inspirational leadership** sustains the energy needed to stay curious on the **edge of chaos**.

And the edge of chaos is where we must live. Too much order and nothing grows. Too little and nothing survives. But in the fertile middle, when combined with the energetic impulse of these leadership behaviours, is where structure meets freedom and evolution thrives.

Crucially, this is also the zone of **anti-fragility**. Coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, anti-fragility describes systems that don't merely resist shocks but improve because of them. Evolution is anti-fragile by nature. So too must our organisations be, not just robust, not merely resilient, but capable of using stress as fuel for growth.

Key Leadership Insight: Evolutionary organisations don't just change, they remember. They encode learning in systems, symbols, and structures that can flex without fracturing. The trick is that they consider **deconstruction** and **recycling** of organisational memory and purpose to be as important as building new organisational structures.

Summary: A Living Future

Systems thinkers have long insisted that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. But in today's climate, even that insight seems too static. Organisms don't just function, they adapt. They respond. They evolve, they remember. So must our organisations.

Leadership is the vital spark. It is the behaviour that brings the system to life. It is what turns a fixed structure into a responsive organism, capable of sensing, healing, learning, and transforming. Leadership both acts as a verb and a noun.

As a verb, it is the charge of energy, or the very behaviour that creates the desired leadership effect, such as **encouraging, motivating, inspiring, or enabling** others. As a noun, it is a **symbiotic networked series of relationships**, some elements are formal, having been designed and implemented by the organisation. Other elements are the fruits borne of individuals within the organisation creating useful informal symbiotic relationships with other individuals, internal to, or external to the organisation.

But survival is no longer enough. We must not merely respond to change; we must *generate* it. The best organisations look forward. Consider Patagonia. Beyond reacting to environmental shifts, they actively design toward a regenerative future, rebuilding supply chains, embedding activism, and redefining success around stewardship, not just sales. They did not merely evolve; they evolved *with purpose* in a future they designed.

So, ask yourself: If your organisation could evolve like a living being... what would you do differently tomorrow?
