



Leading with Dirt Under my Fingernails

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As a gardener, I've learned that my purposeful action does not always yield a definitive result.

I may walk into the kitchen on this August afternoon, holding a firm red tomato in my hand, delighted by my harvest. I'm proud of this tomato as if I created its aroma, smooth skin and juices within. But I know that what I really did was create the conditions last spring to support a healthy seed – minuscule, yet packed with possibility – so the seed could if all went well, become something delicious. I placed the seed in the sun-warmed ground and directed water and nutrients into the loamy soils I've been building in my backyard for 15 years. I pruned tree limbs casting shadows on the vegetable garden to optimize sunlight for the six-foot giant that I hoped this seed would become. I erected bamboo poles and a metal cage as infrastructure to support the plant, even when it was still only a few inches tall. I fed this sprout with compost and liquid seaweed. I planted basil nearby, knowing from years of brimming vegetable beds that these two would be loving companions. I dedicate hours of my summer weekends to tending and coaxing the growing plant as it took shape, long before the white flowers that will give birth to this red fruit had ever appeared.

These practices are acts not of creating a tomato, but of generating conditions that will help life, and this tomato, to thrive. This could be understood as the first law of nature, the essential strategy of all natural systems as they adapt and evolve. It's also the first principle of biomimicry: "Create Conditions Conducive to Life." In gardening, I am most successful when I embrace this strategy as my own fundamental practice. I have a sense of what I am hoping to bring forth. I step into a relationship within the context of my garden and offer all I can imagine supporting the process as it unfolds. I welcome the outcome with curiosity and mouth-watering appreciation. Some years I get nothing. This year, the harvest is huge.

My garden is one of my favorite teachers for my professional life as a biomimic, especially when facilitating groups and helping leaders, organizations, and networks achieve their ambitious goals. "Creating conditions" as my practice sets the stage to birth things that I couldn't have predicted in their specificity, outcomes that I could not have expected or conjured up on my own.

It calls me to have my attention on building collaborative relationships, fostering growth from the roots up, and coaxing each individual to thrive as themselves in order to optimize the purpose of the larger whole.

Why is this important to social innovation and to leading in these times?

Most of us have been taught that leadership is about directing, controlling, deciding, being in charge. Sometimes these actions are indeed necessary to foster and generate change. But increasingly in our complexly adaptive world, our role as leaders is to foster change from the bottom up – to set a context, support collaborative relationships, and create conditions conducive to that which we are aiming to influence. We are aiming to influence nothing less than sustaining the continuation of life on Earth.

I invite you to notice the ways that you're using your leadership to create conditions conducive to life. It may be what you do in your own garden, or in the context of the communities and systems of people that you influence. Perhaps it takes the form of reflecting back to someone that they've done a good job, and how. Maybe it's through resisting the impulse to tell your staff what to do, asking a provocative question instead. Maybe you can provide nutrients to a young person at the right time or coax their growth in a direction that serves the broader community. Maybe it's time to shift the direction of your company to be more ambitious in its commitment to sustainability.

In this time when the health of the planet, itself, is our most important goal, let's look for all the ways that our leadership can create conditions conducive to life.