

“Every word we use, every question we ask, and every strategy we suggest is an act of leadership, influencing the actions of others around us. By bringing new attention and intention to these daily micro actions, we can influence change toward the tipping point we want—a world of full spectrum flourishing.”

How Will You Choose to Lead?

Three Leadership Principles and Practices for Net-Positive OD Impacts

By Lindsey Godwin

Abstract

Conceptualizing the field of Organizational Development (OD) and the work we do within it as acts of leadership, this article proposes that we bring specific attention and intention as leaders toward the creation of a world of full spectrum flourishing. The term Net Positive OD Leadership is introduced to denote the intentional act of influencing organizations and communities to collaboratively develop their system-wide capacity for the effectiveness and vitality of every stakeholder it touches, including employees, suppliers, communities, customers, and even future generations and the planet itself. Drawing upon the inspirational work that emerged at the 2023 International ODN Summit, three guiding principles coupled with three specific micro-level daily leadership practices are outlined as a primary framework for Net Positive OD Leadership.

Keywords: net positive OD leadership; earthshot OD; micro-leadership; full spectrum flourishing; mirror flourishing

On Monday June 12, 2023, I had the honor of standing before colleagues from around the world at the 2023 International OD Network (ODN) Summit where, along with my colleague and Appreciative Inquiry thought-leader, David Cooperrider, we had been invited to provide an opening provocation for the first day of the event (2023 International ODN Summit—OD Network, n.d.). Pulling inspiration from our recent *OD Review* article, “Our earthshot moment: Net positive OD for the creation of a world of full spectrum flourishing” (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2022), I read the same quote from Jesper Brodin, CEO of IKEA, and Halla Tomasdottir, CEO of the B Team, with which we began that article.

We are in a critical decade, maybe the most important one for humankind . . . climate change has accelerated and converged with multiple global crises: a once-in-a-century

pandemic, widespread economic turmoil, a reckoning on race, democratic backsliding, mass migration, the crisis of social media, and rising inequality alongside diminishing trust in public institutions . . . the clock is ticking, future generations are counting on us, and “history has its eyes on us.” How will you choose to lead? How will history remember you? (Brodin & Tomasdottir, 2021)

Part premonition, part invitation, this quote lays bare the macro-level challenges that we face as a global community and the consequences if we do not solve them. Although the forewarning is important, it is the invitational aspect that I want to highlight. In recognition that the only way we will address these macro challenges is through individual and collective action, their quote ends with a question, or rather a call to action: “*How will you choose to*

lead?” This question echoed throughout the summit as we came together as an OD community over the next three days, united by the rally cry of event’s theme: “Addressing the Challenges of Now!” (2023 International ODN Summit—OD Network, n.d.). Engaging in three action-oriented tracks—Adaptive Action for Sustainability, Human Flourishing, and Earthshot OD—we rolled up our sleeves to tackle these leadership challenges as a professional community of practice, envisioning and designing a myriad of inspiring actions.

But then something happened. We all went home.

While I have no doubt that the inspirational work we began at the summit will continue to unfold and grow in the days ahead, the question remains for us as OD practitioners and scholars as we step back into our individual practice and work: *How will we choose to lead?* I invite an expansion of this question to also ask ourselves as a field: *How will we influence others to lead?* To begin answering that question, this article frames the field of OD and the work we do within it as acts of leadership. Drawing upon the inspirational work that emerged at the 2023 International ODN Summit, I outline three guiding principles coupled with three specific micro-level daily practices that we can intentionally apply as OD practitioners to “lead from the future” (Scharmer, 2009). Such micro-practices are necessary to both complement and cultivate the macro-level interventions we need to address the challenges of now.

Toward What End?

Net Positive OD Leadership

To begin, we must first ask the question that has launched a thousand theses: *What is leadership?* More than 25 years ago, Benis and Nanus (1997) claimed that there were already over 850 definitions of the term in circulation. A quick Google search would suggest that number has exponentially increased over the years. While tracing the history and multifaceted variety of leadership definitions and theories is a thesis in and of itself and beyond the scope of this piece, clarifying the gestalt of the leadership domain is an important foundation

to lay for the current discussion. In a review of leadership definitions, Reed, Klutts and Mattingly (2019) summarized that, “the most common definitions of leadership involved motivating others toward the achievement of a specific goal and leading organizational change” (2019, p. 7520). These characteristics are seen illustrated in Yukl’s often-cited classic definition, which posits leadership as “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (2006, p. 8).

By such a conceptualization, the entire field of OD is one of leadership. OD has been defined as “the interdisciplinary field of scholars and practitioners who work collaboratively with organizations and communities to develop their system-wide capacity for effectiveness and vitality” (Smendzuik-O’Brien & Gilpin-Jackson, 2021). From the earliest days of the field until now, facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives is at the very heart of OD. Perhaps not surprisingly then, leadership (conceptualized as the act of influencing and facilitating others) is threaded throughout the Global OD Competency Framework™ (Global ODCF). This framework outlines the five major capabilities and 15 competencies needed for proficiency as an OD practitioner, including leadership-specific skills such as systems change leader, results-oriented leader, and self-aware leader (*Global OD Competency Framework—OD Network*, n.d.).

Building upon the notion that the entire field of OD is one of leadership, and therefore we as OD practitioners act as leaders every day by influencing others to align with and achieve specific goals, we need to ask ourselves another crucial question: *Towards what specific ends do we want to influence and facilitate?* After all, Scharmer (2013) reminds us that “successful leadership depends on the quality of attention and intention that the leader brings to any situation. Two leaders in the same circumstances doing the same thing can bring about completely different

outcomes, depending on the inner place from which each operates.”

In our “Earthshot OD” article mentioned above, David Cooperrider and I propose that we, as an OD field, should not take a neutral stance in our attentions and intentions given the earthshot mission moment we face today as a human family (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2022). Rather, we contended that the ultimate “north star” of OD should be the enabling of a world of “full spectrum flourishing.” This is a world where “organizations and economies can excel, all people can thrive, and nature can flourish, now and across the generations” (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2011, pg. 737). Specifically, we proposed that the concept of “Net Positive OD” become a “new horizon and standard for the field of OD where the aim of every touch point with an organizational system is to create an organization that improves the well-being for every stakeholder it touches, including employees, suppliers, communities, customers, and even future generations and the planet itself” (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2022, pg. 40).

The notion of Net Positive OD adds an intentional direction for OD’s already stated aim of working, “collaboratively with organizations and communities to develop their system-wide capacity for effectiveness and vitality” (Smendzuik-O’Brien & Gilpin-Jackson, 2021). Specifically, Net Positive OD clarifies (or perhaps elevates) what “effectiveness” and “vitality” means. Using Net Positive OD as a guiding premise for our work would suggest that the “effectiveness” and “vitality” outcomes we are striving towards become measured against well-being metrics for all stakeholders—both within and beyond—the organization. Just as a GPS needs coordinates to ensure that we arrive at our intended destination, so do we as a field need a superordinate goal to provide a unifying direction to our actions. The notion of Net Positive OD provides the field a purposeful trajectory to ensure we are continually moving toward a specific outcome—an outcome where not only the organization, but the world is better off because of our work. As such, I define Net Positive OD Leadership as *the intentional act of influencing organizations*

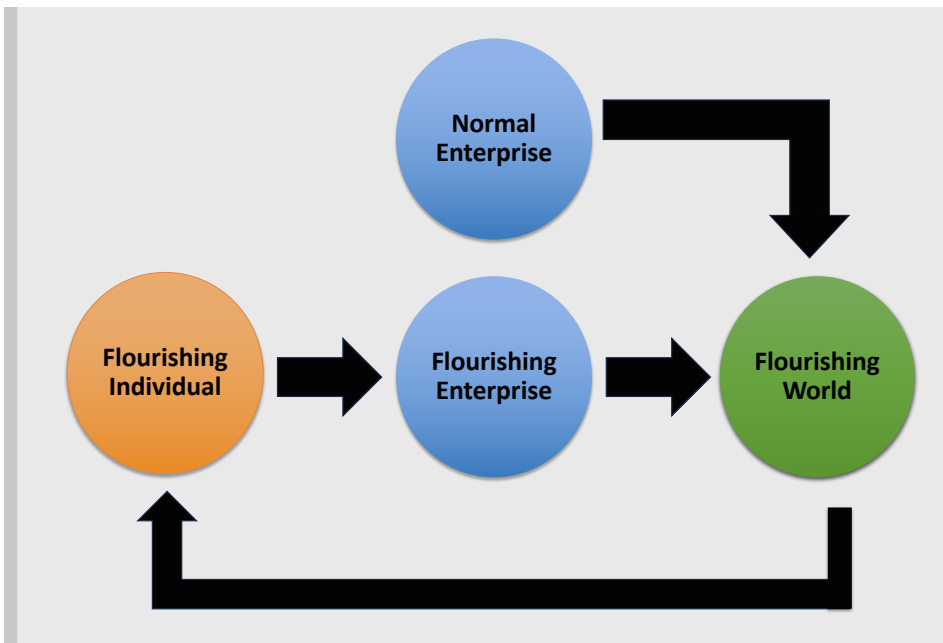


Figure 1. Mirror Flourishing Conceptualization based on Cooperrider & Fry (2012)

and communities to collaboratively develop their system-wide capacity for the effectiveness and vitality of every stakeholder and ecosystem they touch.

The traditional order of operations the field has held as a mental model for effecting positive change is challenged when we first start with a focus on cultivating a flourishing external world beyond the organization challenges. Typically, we (implicitly or explicitly) approach the steps for creating positive change in an organization as: first focus on helping individuals within an organization personally flourish → this will then help the enterprise to flourish → once the enterprise is flourishing, it can then turn its energy toward building a more flourishing world beyond itself. So, naturally a next question we may ask is “Why would we choose to lead this way?” Beyond the clichéd sentiment that it is simply the right thing to do, there is increasing evidence to suggest that as we lead organizations to focus on creating effectiveness and vitality “out there” in the world beyond their own walls, individual and collective effectiveness and vitality also flourish within the organization itself. This mutually reinforcing loop is called the “mirror flourishing effect” and refers to the “co-flourishing or growing together that happens naturally and reciprocally to us when we actively engage in or witness the acts that help nature flourish, others flourish, or the world as a whole to flourish” (Cooperrider & Fry, 2012, p. 8). Illustrated

in Figure 1, mirror flourishing offers a mechanism through which we can intentionally lead differently by beginning our work via influencing organizations to first focus on creating flourishing out in the world, and that in return will create flourishing within the organization.

Having touched upon the “What?” and “Why?” questions of Net Positive Leadership, we must now turn to the ever-important question of “How?”

Three Guiding Principles for Net Positive OD Leadership

To begin to answer the question of “How do we lead toward Net Positive OD?,” I highlight here three themes that emerged at the 2023 International OD Network Summit, which include (1) Radical Inclusion, (2) Radical Collaboration, and (3) Radical Regeneration.¹ While this is by no means an exhaustive list (and is a list I hope we continue to develop as a field), it is a robust foundation for a preliminary set of principles we can use to guide ourselves as Net Positive Leaders. Of note, the adjective “radical” is apropos for each of these principles, as the word comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning

1. These themes echoed throughout the 2023 ODN Summit and were explicitly articulated in our *Earth Shot OD Track* by our track co-designer, Dr. Ronald Fry as a lens through which we could begin to measure our ongoing project planning. (2023 International ODN Summit—OD Network, n.d.)

“root” and is used to describe an “action relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something” (Merriam-Webster, 2003). Taking each of these ideas in turn, I offer an initial conceptualization of each as a principle for affecting the fundamental nature of our practice as Net Positive OD Leaders.

Radical Inclusion

The quest for inclusion is one that many of us are on within our OD practice. The notion of ‘radical inclusion’ has been defined as “a commitment to keep fighting for everyone to be included, no matter who they are, where they come from, and how they show up” (Sengeh, 2003). Similarly, Laura Nathan suggests that radical inclusion goes beyond simply accepting or celebrating diversity and means “actively seeking out and embracing individuals from all walks of life, regardless of their backgrounds, identities, or experiences” (Nathan, 2003). As these two emerging definitions suggest, radical inclusion is a verb that entails committed action to actively seek out and include *all* individuals, especially those who have been marginalized through existing (often colonized) practices, policies, and traditions.

In the spirit of true radical inclusion, some have also begun to suggest that we not only seek to include all people, but also all of nature in our work. For example, a recent special issue of the *Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner Journal* focused on the topic, “Appreciative Inquiry for Life: Working with Nature in a Time of Ecological Crisis.” In the opening article, guest editor Joeri Kabalt writes, “What if we choose even more radically to place all of life—including the more-than-human world—at the centre of everything we do? What might it look like if we made more space for non-human voices? How can we work more explicitly with and in nature?” (2023, pg. 3). Beyond the cases highlighted in that special issue, Kabalt and others began a movement of “OD for Life” whose “maniflexo” states, “And so we choose to be guided by a narrative that says: what we are developing in our organizational development work is life’s ability to thrive. (Our

work must include cultivating thriving (within) our lives, the life of our organizations and communities, (and) life within the more-than-human community. This, above all else, must be at the center of our every engagement and every conversation” (OD for Life, n.d.)

Radical inclusion is not a destination but rather an action we can choose to take with every interaction we have and every interaction we influence others to have through our OD work.

Radical Collaboration

Collaboration is already at the root of our work as OD professionals. Radicalizing collaboration invites us to think beyond finding new ways for individuals to cooperate and to find ways to get entire industries and fields to work collectively toward Net Positive ends. As Gerg Trogeman, Manager for UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub summarizes: “the scale of uncertainty and complexity of today’s development challenges needs a different level of ambition and courage (. . .) No organization, government or any other single entity can navigate the complexity and uncertainty we are facing today on its own” (2023). This sentiment echoes Kirsten Dunlop, CEO of EIT Climate-KIC, who said, “Radical uncertainty requires radical collaboration” (2020).

The practice of radical collaboration is beginning to grow in different areas. For example, the American Hospital Association has proposed that radical collaboration is the “one unmistakable quality” required if we are to successfully transform healthcare (2023). In another example, Cornell University now has a site dedicated to showcasing how their faculty are “reaching across disciplines to tackle society’s most complex challenges and to make breakthrough discoveries.” As they state, “these radical collaborations—collisions of thoughts and perspectives from vastly different fields—lead to unexpected and unconventional solutions and deepen our thinking” (Cornell University, n.d). Radical collaboration is fueled by courage and curiosity as we seek to actively engage in transformative, boundary-pushing partnerships to drive innovation and change collectively.

Radical Regeneration

In his pre-summit remarks on “Leading from the Future as it Emerges,” Otto Scharmer argued that a challenge we face today is that we are trying to solve 3.0 challenges with 2.0 frameworks and response patterns (2023 International ODN Summit—OD Network, n.d.). Across his work, Scharmer has detailed what he calls a need to shift from “ego-system economics,” which are based on extractive and false linear assumptions, toward “eco-system economics,” where we recognize

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the circular living systems we are a part of and the need to operate in with a spirit of regeneration (Scharmer, 2022). It is this regenerative and ecosystem centric mindset that is the ‘operating system’ he suggests we need to solve the global crises we face today.

A regenerative mindset is beginning to appear in a variety of industries today. For example, the practices of regenerative agriculture are on the rise. This has been defined as farming practices that:

“aim to improve the ecological conditions of a farm while also producing food . . . (including practices) that rebuild soil, substantially diversify desired species on the farm, fix soil carbon, radically decrease run-off and leaching of soil nutrients, and whose overall intended effect is to create systems that draw down carbon and eliminate practices that pollute” and also positively affect the “livelihoods for farmers and farmworkers” (Day & Cramer, 2002, p. 586).

In short, everything and everyone is better off because of the farming practices.

Extending this principle to our work in OD, radical regeneration entails embracing transformative approaches to rejuvenate and revitalize organizational systems, as well as the communities and natural environments within which we operate. Imagine that the organizations you work with, the people within them, and around them, and the natural environment are all better off because of your OD work.

Taking these three principles as a preliminary guiding framework for Net

Positive OD Leadership, I invite you to now ask yourself: *How would your OD practice evolve if you put radical inclusion, radical collaboration, and radical regeneration at the root of all you do?*

Putting the Principles into Practice: Micro Actions with Macro Impacts

While we have examples of what it looks like for OD to act as an agent of ecosystem change at the macro levels (see for example: Bartunek & Mohrman, 2022; Cooperider & Godwin, 2022; Cooperider et al., 2013), we do not yet have many examples or discussions on what this work looks like at the micro, every-day level. Yet, we know that our “use of self,” which is “the conscious use of one’s whole being in the intentional execution of one’s role for effectiveness in whatever the current situation is presenting,” is key to creating impact (Jamieson, Auron, & Schechtman, 2010, p. 9). As such, bringing our attention and intention to our use of self will be critical

to achieve the outcomes we want as Net Positive OD Leaders.

Consider for a moment the most common daily practices you engage in with clients and colleagues as an OD practitioner. What are regular actions into which you can intentionally integrate Net Positive OD Leadership principles? I propose that three of the most impactful micro actions we take as OD practitioners that we could begin to evolve to create macro impacts are (a) the words we use, (b) the question we ask, and (c) the strategies we suggest.

First, recognizing the power of our words to shape our work and world has long been a part of OD practice. The notion that the very words we use reflect—and impact—our understanding of the world around us can be traced back to the anthropological work done by Franz Boas in the 1880s. More recently in our OD history, the assumptions of social constructionism (Gergen, 1995) have come to underpin Dialogic and Appreciative Inquiry-based OD approaches. So much so, that we often say that “words create worlds.” Appreciative Inquiry also suggests that “the very act of asking generative questions has profound impact in organizational systems; that inquiry and change are not separate moments” (Stavros, Godwin, & Cooperrider, 2016, pg. 96). Finally, much of our work as influencers in organizational systems comes in the form of putting words together to ask questions and suggest interventions that can be done with strategic impacts. *Table 1* (next page) begins to illustrate what the intersection of these three micro-level practices with the three principles explored above could look like in everyday leadership actions.

We Can All be Net Positive OD Leaders

Margaret Wheatly once defined a leader as “anyone willing to help, anyone who sees something that needs to change and takes the first steps to influence that situation” (2006). Today we need not even turn on the news, but rather simply look out our windows to see the things that need to change in our climate, our communities, and our connections with each other and the planet in which we live. Every word we use, every

question we ask, and every strategy we suggest is an act of leadership, influencing the actions of others around us. By bringing new attention and intention to these daily micro actions, we can influence change toward the tipping point we want—a world of full spectrum flourishing. The question that remains: *How will you choose to lead?*

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Table 1. *Examples of Net Positive OD Leadership Principles and Practices*

EVERY-DAY NET POSITIVE OD LEADERSHIP PRACTICES				
	Words to Use	Questions to Ask ¹	Strategies to Suggest	
NET POSITIVE OD LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLE	Radically Inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitioning from gendered language in the workplace (e.g., “chairman” or “man hours”) to inclusive language (e.g., “chair” or “person hours”) • Saying “systemically marginalized groups” instead of “minority groups” to recognize that minoritization is a construct imposed by one community on another, not an inherent descriptor of certain communities. • Challenging the use of terms like “Third World” or “Developing Countries” that perpetuate Western, white-dominant colonial perspectives² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whose voices are missing from this discussion? • What communities have we not yet engaged in this work? • What assumptions do we need to challenge about traditionally ‘dominant’ norms/colonialized thinking? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conducting Language Audits & Evolutions</i>: The creation of ongoing mechanisms to help the organization reflect, disrupt implicit biases, promote belonging, and ensure inclusivity through the language used throughout policies and practices • <i>Implementing Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement Strategies</i>: Actively inviting diverse perspectives from both within and beyond the organization, including representations of the natural environment, into strategic planning processes³
	Radically Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using phrases like “building on that idea” • Collective impact • Boundary-expanding partnerships • Interdependence • Boundaryless thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we shift our relationship with competitors to become partners? • How can we build psychological safety to encourage open sharing of ideas among diverse colleagues? • What other fields can broaden our perspectives and influence our thinking? • What insights can nature (aka biomimicry) offer for solving this challenge? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Designing for Boundaryless Co-LAB-oration</i>: Creating organizational structure and processes that build bridges across silos of expertise (within and beyond the organization), reducing barriers for knowledge sharing and support seamless real-time collaboration regardless of place, thus creating continual ‘labs’ of collaboration and learning • <i>Cultivating transformative alliances</i>: Seeking out collaborative opportunities with unusual partners (i.e., competitors, organizations from other fields, etc.) to pool knowledge, and amplify the impact of Net Positive efforts on a larger scale
	Radically Re-generative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewal processes • Revitalizing systems • Circular Economics • Stewardship Practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we ensure our work benefits both people and the natural environment? • What new possibilities arise by eliminating all forms of waste from our processes? • How can we design a system that is both effective now and adaptable to future needs? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Adopting a Circular Economic Mindset</i>: Shifting from a linear “take-make-waste” model to a circular economic approach, where you reuse, regenerate resources, and reduce waste for sustainable practices and environmental regeneration • <i>Creating a Culture of Regenerative Reinvention</i>⁴: Promote continual innovation throughout the organization for regenerative products, services, and processes that foster environmental and social benefits

1. For more examples see: Pavez, I., Godwin, L., & Spreitzer, G. (2021)
 2. See for example: Khan, T., Abimbola, S., Kyobutungi, C., & Pai, M. (2022)
 3. See for an example: Heath, R. (2023)
 4. See for examples: Zhexembayeva, N. (2014)

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