

Eight Emerging Lessons: From Coronavirus to Climate Action



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Checking the temperature of a passenger arriving at the international airport in Hong Kong. The city, like Singapore and Taiwan, has made headway in containing Covid-19. (Ph. credit: Hannah Mckay/Reuters)

As 100 million people in Europe are in lockdown, the US seems to be completely unprepared for the tsunami that is about to hit. “We’re about to experience the worst public health disaster since polio,” says Dr Martin Makary, professor at Johns Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School of Public Health. “Don’t believe the numbers when you

see, even on our Johns Hopkins website, that 1,600 Americans have the virus. No, that means 1,600 got the test, tested positive. There are probably 25 to 50 people who have the virus for every one person who is confirmed. I think we have between 50,000 and half a million cases right now walking around in the United States.”

Having returned to the US from Europe on the last plane before the travel ban kicked in two days ago, I feel as if I have traveled backwards in time. Which is exactly what people report when they arrive in Europe from East Asia now. You feel as if you're moving backward in time, back into an earlier state of awareness, which the country of departure had already moved past. Here are my eight takeaways.

1. The Coronavirus Disruption is a Harbinger of Things to Come

COVID-19 has further opened up our current state of disruption and, interestingly, has accomplished more to reduce CO2 emissions within weeks than all climate conversations combined have done in years. While some disasters, like hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis, tend to bring out the best in people (pulling folks together), pandemics tend to do the opposite, as columnist David Brooks argued recently. The virus holds up a mirror in front of us. It forces us to become aware of our own behavior and its impact on the collective, on the system. That mirror gently invites us to make a few personal sacrifices that benefit the whole — to shift our inner place from *ego* to *eco*.

2. Your Behavior Changes the System

If the coronavirus crisis has brought home anything, it's that we — each of us, separately and together — can change the system. Remember how distant that strange virus from Wuhan seemed to many of us when it first hit the headlines in early January? That was just a few weeks ago. It's a powerful demonstration of our current global condition of interconnectedness. We are many. We are one. Now we need to slow the spread of the virus, to flatten the curve, to avoid the massive, unnecessary suffering of those among us who happen to be the elderly, the uninsured, the working poor who live from paycheck to paycheck, the folks who are alone and without any safety net. Self-isolation and social distancing are not about you; they're about protecting the people who are especially vulnerable. In short: Your behavior changes the system. Your mindful behavior is needed to avoid a breakdown of the system.



A worker sanitises Ponte della Paglia bridge on St. Mark's square as a measure to fight against the coronavirus contagion in Venice, Italy (Ph. credit: Manuel Silverstri/Reuters)

3. Two Levers: Timely Government Response and Data-Based Citizen Awareness

To slow the spread of the virus we need to change our *collective* behavior. We can accomplish this in two ways: through (a) timely government response and (b) testing-based citizen awareness and action. China, after a slow start, navigated the pandemic by relying mostly on the former (draconian lockdowns, quarantine, and social distancing, including movement surveillance of the entire population), which worked surprisingly well. Italy (and now also Spain) pursued an approach that for an extended period was weak on government action — both in terms of control measures and testing. But if you have no effective regulation and no reliable data when facing a pandemic, it's like running in the forest while blindfolded. The result is massive suffering and death among vulnerable people, for instance when older people in need of care are turned away from hospitals. That is the very path the US now appears to be on.

A third group of countries, however, seems to have found a middle way. Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea all have had noteworthy success in navigating the pandemic without imposing draconian controls or citizen surveillance. South Korea

significantly slowed the spread of COVID-19, and Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan succeeded in preventing a massive outbreak in the first place. As of today, March 16, Hong Kong has 141 confirmed cases, Singapore has 212, and Taiwan has 53. How did they do that?



Commuters wearing masks in precaution of the coronavirus outbreak are pictured in a train during their morning commute in Singapore. (Ph. credit: Reuters File Photo)

It seems they succeeded in different ways that, nevertheless, share three strategies: (1) reduce arrival of new cases (travel restrictions), (2) prevent transmission between known cases and local population (quarantines), and (3) suppress silent transmission by reducing contact in the community (increased hygiene, social distancing, self-isolation).

Because Singapore is an island, travel restrictions were relatively easy to impose. Only three days (!) after the Chinese authorities alerted the world about the outbreak in Wuhan, Singapore started to refer incoming travelers from Wuhan for further assessments and possible isolation. Later, travelers from affected areas were placed under mandatory quarantine, facilities were swiftly converted to serve this function, and

all who lost workdays were compensated by the government. Much effort has been made to trace the contacts of people known to be infected. Large gatherings have been suspended, yet schools and workplaces remain open.

Taiwan, also an island, first continued to allow travel from China, inspecting and screening travelers on incoming flights. Only after the first case from China was reported did Taiwan ban (most) incoming flights from China. Taiwan recommends self-isolation and home quarantine, even when public facilities remain available. School was canceled, but only for two additional weeks after the holidays.

Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region of China, shares a border with the mainland that used to be crossed by approximately 300,000 people per day. It chose yet another approach. Rather than entirely blocking people from affected regions from entering, it focused on preventing transmission within the community with mandatory self-quarantine for all travelers from China, among others. It also mandates social distancing. Civil servants work from home. All schools remain closed and all classes are conducted online. Plus, the Hong Kong government proactively shares information with its citizens. For example, the government is publishing building-level maps showing where people were infected, when they were there, and how they contracted the virus, so that everyone can see the unfolding social map and adjust their behavior accordingly.

In summary: These countries have navigated the epidemic using a combination of testing, transparency (active citizen information), and citizen awareness guided by a timely and proactive government response. In other words, by *not* running while blindfolded. Instead, they slowed down, paused, and took off their blindfolds in order to see what was going on. They are sharing information transparently. And they are moving together more mindfully, more intentionally, and as more collectively aware populations.

CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE: One Map, Many Pathways

TIMELY
GOVERNMENT
RESPONSE



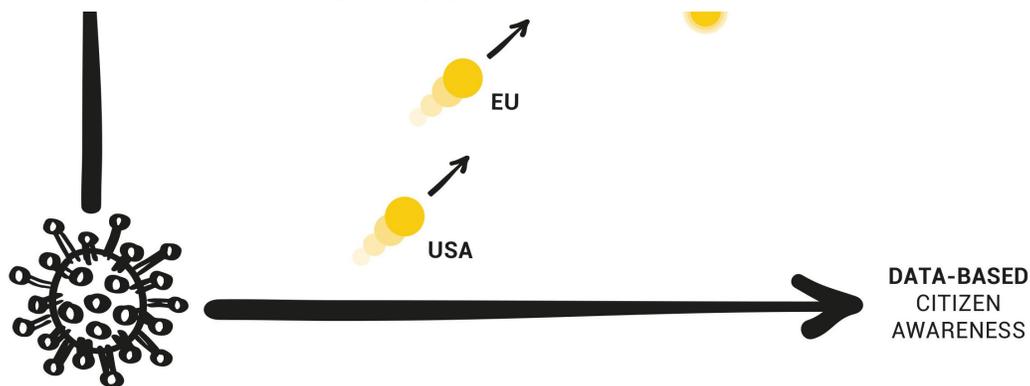


Figure 1. Coronavirus Response: One Map, Many Pathways — visual by Olaf Baldini

Figure 1 summarizes these observations. The two axes track the two approaches: timely government response, and data-based citizen awareness. You can see China’s journey at one end of the spectrum (led by government action). And the journey of the US (and Italy) on the other (led by citizens, due to the lack of timely government action). But what’s interesting is the middle path: the journey taken by Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea. One thing that sets them apart is their history; they had the “benefit” of the SARS outbreak in 2002–2003, which led them to upgrade their institutional readiness.

Another beneficial factor may be less evident. They all share a Confucianist cultural background. For centuries they have placed a premium on quality education and on sending the most talented people of each generation into government, not into business. The famous essay by Confucius, *The Great Learning*, articulates this foundation by observing that, in order to change the world, you first need to cultivate your interior condition as a human being. They share a cultural context that focuses on harmony between the external and interior. That is precisely what’s at issue when you think about how to integrate government action with individual action. What are the interior conditions that, if in place, could integrate both of these levers or axes and move our disaster response pattern from the bottom-left to the top-right?

4. We Are Faced With a Choice

The coronavirus situation provides an opportunity for all of us to pause, reset, and step up. COVID-19, like any disruption, essentially confronts each of us with a choice: (1) to freeze, turn away from others, only care for ourselves, or (2) to turn toward others to

support and comfort those who need help. That choice between acting from ego or acting from ecosystem awareness is one that we face every day, every hour, every moment. The more the world sinks into chaos, desperation, and confusion, the greater our responsibility to radiate presence, compassion, and grounded action confidence.

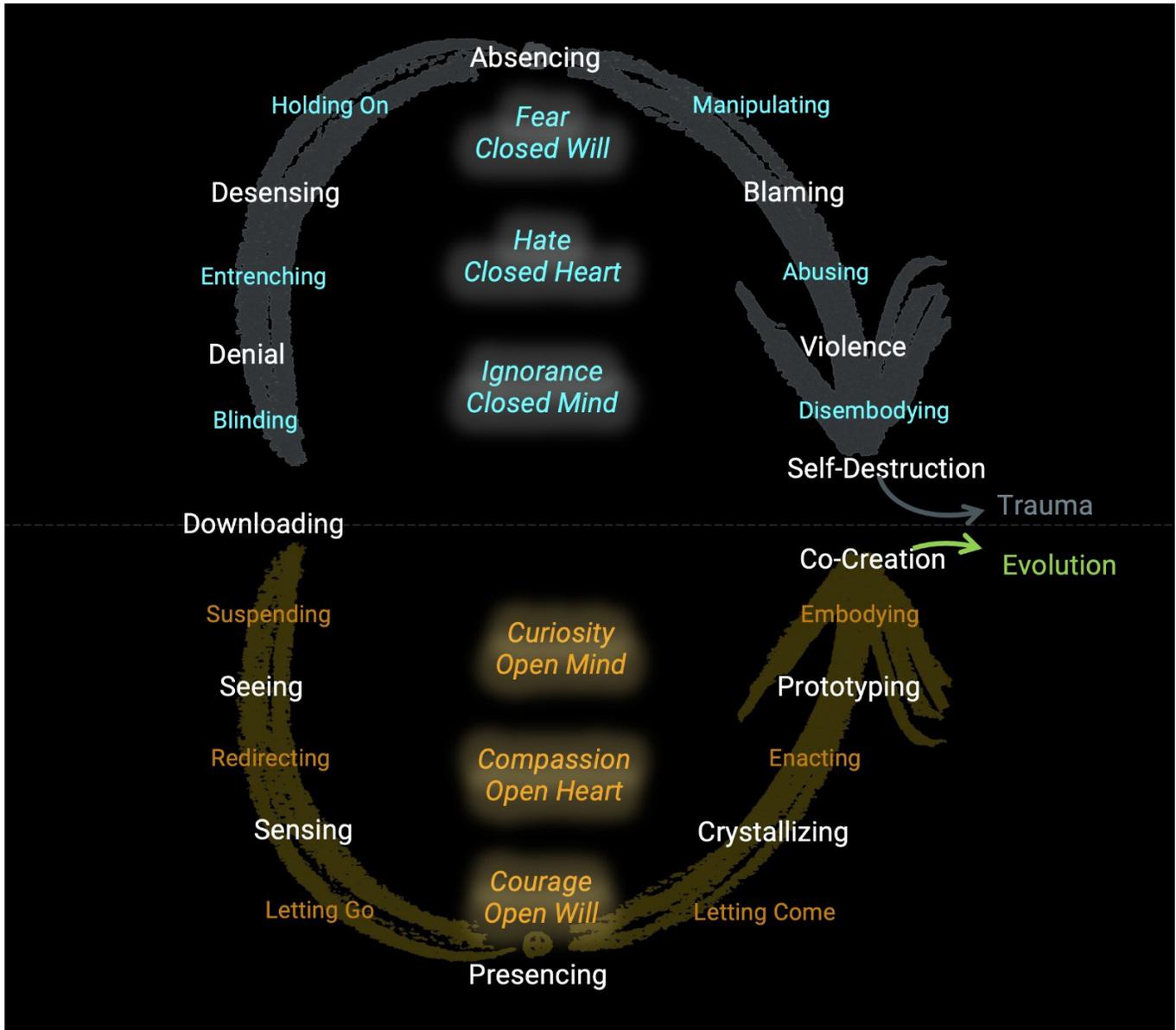


Figure 2: Two responses to disruption — two social fields

Figure 2 summarizes this choice by depicting the two different social fields that we can choose to embody through our actions, through our relationships, and through our thoughts. In the upper half of the figure you see the “freeze” reaction, which tends to amplify *ignorance*, *hate*, and *fear*. In the lower half you see the “opening” response, which tends to amplify *curiosity*, *compassion*, and *courage*.



Thank You Ovation in Spain - to thank and support hospital workers

from **Presencing Institute**

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Video by kind courtesy of Ctgn

Even though the physical social distancing is necessary now, it doesn't mean that our *interior* condition should be frozen. In fact, over the past few days we have seen very moving examples from Italy and Spain of how physical distancing can be responded to by inspired compassion and empathy. As a citizen from Spain shared over the weekend: "Earlier today there was a call on social media in Spain to go out to balconies and windows at 22:00 [10 p.m.] to give a huge ovation to thank and support hospital workers. It's 22:05 and I can hear the roar from the other side of the closed double glass windows."

5. The Decline of Trump and Far Right Populists

How one responds to disruption — by freezing and *turning away* or by opening and *turning toward* — is both a personal choice and a collective one. Over the past four years, we all have seen an enormous uptick in the freeze reaction by whole countries, brought on by Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Salvini, Modi, Johnson. The list goes on. Although Trump has gotten away with telling more than 16,000 lies since taking office, this time it may be different. In "normal" times, you can get away with a lot of nonsense because for some it's less consequential and sometimes even a bit entertaining. But in times of disruption, the very same behaviors (denial, desensing, absencing, blaming, destroying) come together as a powerful engine of accelerated self-destruction. When that dynamic becomes apparent, when catastrophic breakdowns will result as a direct consequence, the mood will shift and the Trump presidency may soon be history — if the election takes place on schedule this year.

Even though I will use Trump to illustrate these behaviors below, I do not mean to imply this only goes for America. Boris Johnson and many others embody similar blind spots of their leadership. My general point is about the underlying mindset, which is one of *avoiding* reality — that is, science and data — rather than *embracing* it when the going gets tough. Clearly, this mindset is on a collision course with reality as we speak.

According to Andy Slavitt, Medicare and Medicaid administrator in the Obama administration, hospitals in the US could be overrun by coronavirus cases in little more than a week and result in a “tsunami-like” escalation that would leave tens of thousands in need of inpatient medical care, but unlikely to receive it. Some experts even suggest that more than 1 million could die in the US from the coronavirus.

Here is how we can view this leadership failure through the lens of Absencing (see figure 2):

Denial: “The original sin is Trump’s months-long denial and his dismantling of public health and response infrastructure,” said Andy Slavitt. While it took Singapore and Taiwan about three days to respond to the virus outbreak in early January, Trump didn’t take action until this last week. Testing kits are still mostly unavailable. In other words: we are still tightening the blindfold instead of ripping it off. In contrast, Angela Merkel has bluntly warned that two-thirds of Germans will likely contract the virus.

Desensing: Trump refused to provide necessary care for American citizens on the luxury liner Grand Princess so that “his” coronavirus numbers wouldn’t grow once those passengers left the ship. He continues to keep demonstrating this complete lack of empathy and compassion.

Absencing: All disruptions enable profound moments of “letting go” and “letting come.” Any leadership that activates this deeper level of humanity is completely missing in the case of Trump. Recent examples include his initial refusal to buy existing testing kits that were developed by Roche and that would have solved the testing problem months ago, as well as his attempt to offer “large sums of money” for exclusive access to a Covid-19 vaccine, developed by the Germany-based biopharmaceutical company CureVac. The leadership of the company declined the offer citing the ethical aspiration to serve the entire global community, rather than just one country exclusively.

Blaming others: All Trump’s announcements so far have been guided by the mindset that the source of the problem is “them,” not “us” — despite the strong evidence that the virus has long been spreading domestically in the US. Calling the outbreak a “foreign virus” has helped him justify a number of travel bans, which in the beginning have certainly been helpful. However, the same mindset also made it increasingly impossible to leverage the other two critical strategies: to prevent the transmission between known cases and local population, and to suppress silent transmission by social distancing and self-isolation.

Destroying: Trump continued to lose the trust of European allies by blindsiding them with the announcement of the travel ban and by trying to buy exclusive access to the vaccine, which would have excluded the rest of the world from accessing it. Trump has been very reliable in his attacks on governmental and multilateral institutions — from dissolving his own CDC task force in the White House because it originated from the Obama years, to pulling out of the Paris Agreement, eroding the trust in these institutions exactly when we needed them most.

All these behaviors add up to a pattern of decision-making that moves us towards accelerated self-destruction. The more this becomes visible, the more likely this old model will hit a wall, and the more possible it will be for a new pattern of social collaboration to emerge. It doesn’t mean that Trumpism is already done. But it’s about to hit a wall far more visibly and tangibly than we have ever seen before.





We have a choice — visual by Rachel Hentsch

6. The Rise of Data-Driven Awareness-Based Collective Action

The coronavirus crisis is prompting us to improvise new ways of collaborating and coordinating. Data-driven Awareness-Based Collective action (D-ABC) operates by attending to a situation together, and then adjusting one's behavior accordingly. Another way of describing this type of governance is to coordinate by letting go and letting come, based on what we are seeing together: letting go of previous plans, and letting come what is about to emerge.

In 2008, during an earlier moment of disruption in the financial world, we saw most major organizations suddenly switch to a different mode of operating. They had to abandon the annual plans and quarterly targets that were set before the financial crisis, and instead pay full attention to the situation as it unfolded and adjust their behavior accordingly. It's a skill and capacity that we urgently need in many other areas of social and environmental crisis today.

In times of business-as-usual, we tend to “outsource” the coordination of our systems to external mechanisms, such as the *visible hand* of government regulation or the *invisible hand* of the market. In times of disruption, however, these mechanisms tend to break down. When that happens, we, the key players in the systems that we co-enact, need to come together to co-sense and co-shape the future as it emerges. In other words, our attention and intention need to quickly align with what is actually happening in the moment. Learning to connect in a more conscious and intentional way may well be the most significant gift that emerges from this crisis. The functioning of this new way of fluid coordinating seems to require two important enabling conditions:

- Accurate information about what is happening in the moment; and,

· A holding space that helps people to act for the well-being of the whole, allowing them to move from ego to eco.

This new collective capacity will be crucial in addressing many other areas of crisis in the years to come, from climate action, biodiversity, and refugee questions to social justice and well-being for all.

7. The Conversation We Need To Have Now: Reimagining Our Civilization

Each disruption has two sides: the things we need to let go of, and the things that are about to emerge. On the letting-go side of things, it's interesting to see how quickly we can adjust as a global community. Suddenly, we find that more than half the meetings we tended to fill our schedules with, may not be as necessary, as essential as we deemed them, after all. *So why do we keep ourselves busy with stuff that is not essential?* That's a great question to ask.

The next question might be: *If we let go of everything that is not essential — what's left?* It's another great question (or “mantram”) to meditate on. Whatever the answer is that emerges for you from this contemplation, keep it in your heart.

And then, a third question to contemplate might be this: What if we used this disruption as an opportunity to let go of everything that isn't essential in our life, in our work, and in our institutional routines? How might we reimagine how we live and work together? *How might we reimagine the basic structures of our civilization?* Which effectively means: *how can we reimagine our economic, our democratic, and our learning systems in ways that bridge the ecological, the social, and the spiritual divides of our time?*

That's the conversation we need to have now. With our circles of friends. With our families. With our organizations and communities. If there is anything that I have learned from previous disruptions I've witnessed, such as the 2008 financial crisis, it is this: the same disruption tends to have a dramatically different impact on different organizations, depending on how the leadership — and people or change-makers in general — respond to that situation. Whether it's by turning away and freezing (i.e., operating from the upper half of figure 2) or whether it's by turning toward and opening (i.e., operating from the lower half of figure 2). I have also found that even within one

single organization some leaders might exhibit one of these responses (i.e., hiding from the situation), while others exhibit another (i.e., connecting to people in the moment of vulnerability). The difference in impact is tangible and profound: the first set of teams grow apart, while the others tend to grow together at levels of collective resonance not seen before.

Which brings us all the way back to the Confucianist roots of the Four Tigers: that the outer changes necessary today require us to tune into and activate our inner sources, the deeper levels of our humanity. Of course, these deeper roots are not bound by Confucianism; they are inherent to all our cultures, and they are dormant in each and every human being.

But are we able to activate these deeper sources of knowing? And how can we activate them not only at the level of the individual, but also at the level of the whole system? How can we upgrade the operating system in our various key systems? This clearly requires us to upgrade:

1. our learning infrastructures toward whole-person and whole-systems learning;
2. our democratic infrastructures by making them more direct, distributed, and dialogic; and
3. our economic infrastructures toward shifting from ego-system to eco-system awareness.

How might we use our present situation to slow down, to pause, and to connect with our deeper sources of stillness? Maybe what's called for now is a global moment in which everything and everyone stops for a moment of stillness, for a moment of connecting to source.

Whatever it is you choose to do — and *we* choose to do — in this moment, whether we freeze and turn backward or open up and lean forward, let's not forget that, in the words of the German poet Hölderlin, “where the danger is, the saving power also grows.”

Where the danger is, the saving power also grows. It's something I have experienced on several occasions. But it only works collectively if we slow down, pause, and take off our blindfolds to attend to the now. What actually emerges from the now? We may see the

beginnings of a new wave of hyper-localizing our economies, of supporting small farmers and producers who may be more resilient to supply chain disruptions. We may see the beginnings of a more intentional economy, one that — similar to CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) — is based on aligning economic activities around a shared intention for the future, namely, co-creating an ecosystem-centric agriculture, as opposed to extending the past based on ego-driven transactions.

8. School For Transformation: Activating Generative Social Fields

Many of us feel that we live in a time of profound change — change not only in terms of things ending, but also in terms of seeding and cultivating and growing a new civilization for the decades and centuries to come. That was true before the COVID-19 pandemic, and it will be true after. The question is how to respond to the current situation in ways that help this enormous potential for positive change to manifest?

How can we reimagine and reshape our various forms of movement-making in ways that allow them to embody the principles of planetary healing and societal renewal? How can we reshape our learning and leadership structures in ways that move the focus of learning from the bottom left to the top right of figure 3?

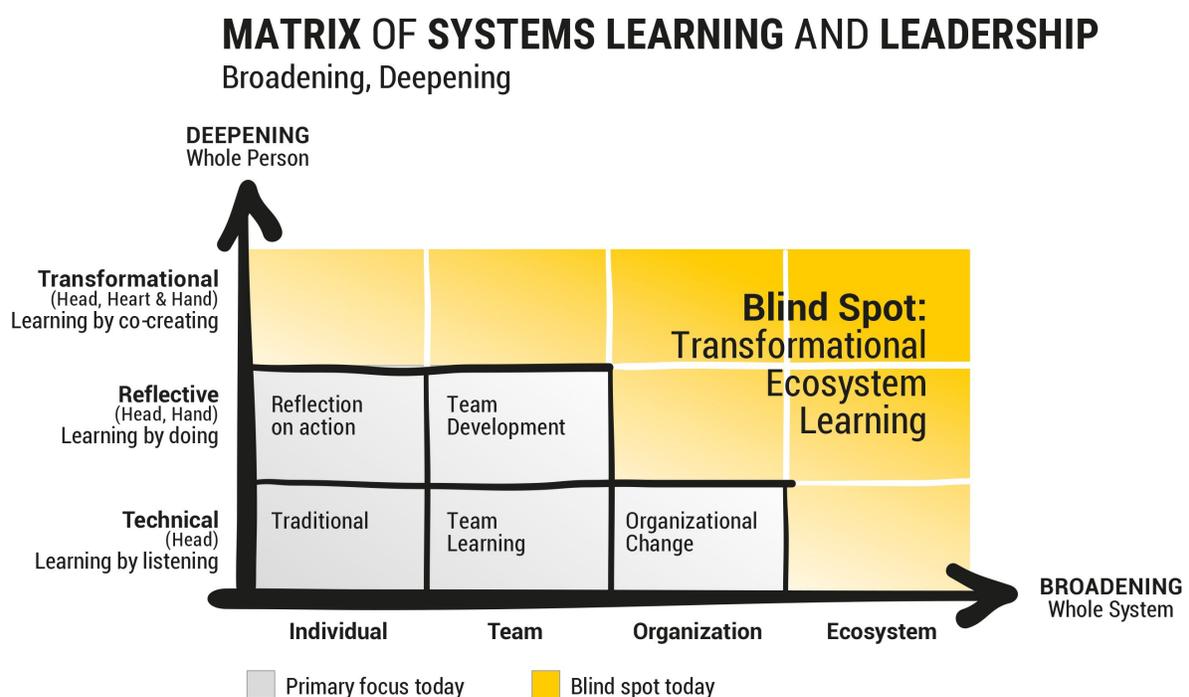


Figure 3: Matrix of Learning and Leadership

At the Presencing Institute, we have prototyped various proven formats for transformational ecosystem-based learning and leadership. Yet, to make these formats accessible at the scale necessary today will require a new platform and network of places — think of it as a School For Transformation — that focuses on activating generative social fields through providing vertical transformation literacy.



Figure 4: School For Transformation — Activating Generative Social Fields — visual by Olaf Baldini

This column has discussed the first learning experiences that we see emerge from the corona crisis and our responses to it. The landscape of our collective responses form an interesting field of possibilities. I identified the responses of the Four Tigers as interesting from a systems perspective, because it blends proactive government action with data-driven citizen awareness. From there, I explored the various interior conditions that can give rise to either a social field of co-creation (presencing) or one of self-destruction.

Which leaves us with the question: Now what? In my view, one of the most urgent priorities for the coming years is to cultivate these deeper conditions for our individual and collective actions in ways that are highly accessible, scalable, and modularized so that everyone can integrate them into their own movement building and learning infrastructures.

It is for this reason that, starting next week, my colleagues and I are going to offer an impromptu global learning infrastructure that is free, online, Zoom-based and yet designed in ways that will activate generative social fields among all of the participants throughout the coming weeks. The idea is to offer this infrastructure as a journey for change-makers from all sectors, systems, and cultures — a journey that will eventually result in a global, multi-local, multi-regional Forum, co-created among the participants later this year in July. The actual format of this journey and the Forum will evolve with and adjust to the situation that keeps unfolding around us, between us, and within us. It's an infrastructure that invites you to join with your whole Self and that is designed to be accessible to all, whether you want to join from home while in self-quarantine or in concert with friends and fellow change-makers in your local organization or community. If you are interested to join, sign up to this list to receive an invitation for the first session next week. The time to pause, to sense, to connect, and then act together is now.

On the levers for climate action: Soil; Democracy; Consciousness

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