



Kathleen Curran, Randal Joy Thompson
& Jane Feng

The
FOUR
FORCES

Igniting Emergent Generative Team
Leadership in a Complexponential World
(Inspired by Nature and the Tao)

THE FOUR FORCES

As someone who has served as Director of Engineering, Director of Six Sigma, Director of Operational Excellence, and General Manager, I have led teams through the challenges of transformation, innovation, and complexity. In today's fast-moving, complexponential world, we need leadership models that are as dynamic and human as the environments we navigate. *The Four Forces: Igniting Emergent Generative Team Leadership in a Complexponential World*, is exactly that.

The authors' deep understanding of systems thinking, human dynamics, and emergent leadership gives this work a level of credibility and insight that few can match. By grounding leadership in the forces of intent, hope, care, and love, the authors offer a transformative path forward, one that empowers teams to lead with authenticity, resilience, and purpose. This book is not just timely – it is essential.

—*Mehdi Javidinejad, P.E. MBA*

Chief Executive Officer, KJS-Chromatic
Former Director of Six Sigma, Director of Operational
Excellence, and General Manager

So much has changed in recent years, including environmental changes, new technologies, and changes in government. All of these factors have created a new world that we have never experienced before. Consequently, there have been significant shifts in organizational realities before, during, and after the pandemic, which had an unprecedented impact on leadership. This EGTL book is timely and insightful. It proposes a team-led leadership approach to challenge decades of traditional leadership by focusing on “team connections” instead of “heroic authority.” Readers will gain valuable perspectives that can inform and support their work.

—*David W. Jamieson, PhD Editor-in-Chief,*
Organization Development Review

Professor Emeritus, University of St Thomas

What most of us know about leadership is now only half-true. Covid, remote work and self-directed teams have brought us an emergent form of team leadership driven by four key socio-emotional forces. This thoughtful book explains the new paradigm and how to thrive within it.

—*Vince Thompson*

Venture Capitalist

*Author of Ignited: Managers! Light Up Your Company and Career:
For More Power, More Purpose, and More Success*

Who needs another book on leadership? There are tens of thousands of journal articles, academic and popular books, typologies, conceptual frameworks, checklists, and more, that often leave one bewildered about what is crucial to know. There is literally a top for every pot.

But it turns out we really need this book. Why? Because it describes how fundamental socio-emotional relationships within small groups can generate leadership that drives learning and creative action. Leadership is an ongoing process to respond creatively to continuous environmental change. The emphasis on emergence of leadership at the team level harkens back to Kurt Lewin's seminal work and the earliest days of research on leadership. In this important way, Emergent Generative Team Leadership closes the loop between historical foundations and ever-emerging change.

—*Charles McClintock*

Past Director of the Institute for Social Innovation
Dean Emeritus, Fielding Graduate University

The Four Forces is a timely and profound guide for those seeking to lead not from control, but from connection. The book reimagines leadership as a collective, generative force powered by intent, hope, care, and love. In a world of relentless complexity and change, it offers a deeply rooted yet fluid model

of team-based leadership that honors emergence over hierarchy, wholeness over fragmentation. A must-read for those ready to build living, evolving organizations that thrive like ecosystems: adaptive, relational, and wise.

—*Devin P. Singh*

Associate Professor of Religion, Dartmouth University

Founder and President of Leadership Kinetics

Author of *Divine Currency: The Theological*

Power of Money in the West (Stanford 2018)

“Emergent Generative Team Leadership in a Complexponential World” is a timely and thought-provoking exploration of how leadership must evolve to meet the demands of our rapidly changing world. Kathleen Curran, Randal Joy Thompson, and Jane Feng offer a compelling framework that not only explains the “what” and “why” of adaptive leadership, but also delivers a practical “how” for teams striving to be more resilient, innovative, and responsive. I was especially drawn to the book’s deep dive into the shifting dynamics of business and the urgent need to rethink how we manage, collaborate, and lead. This is an essential read for anyone committed to building agile, empowered teams ready to thrive in complexity.

—*Justin Collingwood*

GM and Certified Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, Neovia Logistics

I am inspired by Curran, Thompson and Feng’s EGTL model. It is not just a timely contribution to the conversation about how teams and work are evolving – it’s a critical blueprint for navigating the unprecedented complexity of the change. And the book illuminates a profound truth: the future belongs to teams, not just leaders. Rooted in deep purpose and sustained by the socio-emotional forces of Intent, Care, Hope, and Love, the authors unveil a powerful shift from hierarchy to human-centered ecosystems. As someone who has studied and supported high-performing teams across

sectors, I can say without hesitation: this is a leadership framework that will empower many nextgen organizations. It's bold, actionable, and inspired.

—*Dan McGurkin, PhD*

**Award-winning Leader and Team Development Expert who
has developed/coached thousands of teams and communities**

Co-author of *Culture and Teams* (2016),

Current Opinions in Psychology

This book offers a deeply refreshing perspective on leadership – one that is holistic, process-oriented, and grounded in the rhythms of nature and the wisdom of the Tao. It goes beyond traditional hierarchies to embrace emerging, relational forms of organizing, where leadership is co-created through intention, care, hope, and love. For managers who aspire to make meaningful contributions beyond self-interest, this work provides both inspiration and practical guidance for cultivating generative teams in an increasingly complex world.

—*Yih-Teen Lee, PhD*

Professor, Department of Managing People in Organizations

Academic Director, IESE Executive Coaching Unit

Academic Director, Eurofirms Foundation Research

Fund on Leadership for Embracing Inclusion

A core principle in coaching is that the coachee is complete, resourceful, and whole. As mentioned in the book, *The gardener said: "I don't force the flowers to grow. I remove what stops them."* Emergent Generative Team Leadership is an invitation to consider the same about teams. The organization, as a terrarium of teams with shared purpose, is ripe for a shift in team leadership, team evolution and team outcomes. Team members leading with Emergent Generative Team Leadership principles and tools evolve from acting as obliged members of a team with imposed goals to stewards of the organization, stewards who deliver felt and desired results. In "feeling" their purpose and seeding the ground for future organizational sustainability,

teams move beyond assembled group structures to communities of practice: Creating, building and stewarding. With real world case studies, Emergent Generative Team Leadership pulls from multiple disciplines to make you challenge your current leadership assumptions and undertake concrete steps to operationalize team leadership with a new, provocative, potentiated lens, the kind that leads to change.

—*Enza Cignarella*, MBA, PPCC, ACC Biopharma
Executive & Leadership Development Coach, Quebec, Canada

I know firsthand the limits of traditional command-and-control hierarchies. In my work over the past three decades, I've seen teams design processes, policies and practices that crumble under disruption. *The Four Forces* offers exactly the fresh paradigm we need. Curran, Thompson, and Feng draw on the wisdom of nature and the Tao to show how Intent, Hope, Care, and Love can fuel team-led teams in ecosystems that adapt, innovate, and thrive amid uncertainty. The authors ground their insights in real-world examples that confirm what practitioners instinctively feel: human connection is our greatest renewable asset. Emergent Generative Team Leadership (EGTL) provides a powerful alternative: harnessing socio-emotional energy to generate agency at every level.

Whether you're managing global supply chains, leading cross-functional initiatives, or exploring organizational theory in your doctoral research, this book will change how you think about leadership. EGTL isn't a vague ideal – it's a practical, research-backed framework for igniting collective intelligence and resilience. *The Four Forces* is an essential guide for procurement professionals, academic scholars, and any leader committed to transforming chaos into opportunity.

—*Cheryl Harris*
Senior Vice President, Procurement, Allstate Insurance

An insightful book that clearly describes and analyzes the necessary future of leadership: the combination of accountability and emotional traits. Creating value and purpose for people and their organizations! Congratulations to the authors.

—*Jérôme de Grandmaison* VP, Talent Management,
Product Lines & Functions, Alstom

Emergent Generative Team Leadership in a Complexponential World is a reimagining of leadership that challenges outdated paradigms of command-and-control leadership, and offers a compelling alternative: team-led ecosystems where leadership emerges through relationships, shared purpose, and collective agency.

EGTL introduces a transformative model rooted in four socioeconomic forces, Intent, Hope, Care, and Love.

Although these forces are often overlooked in traditional business leadership, they are presented not as passive and soft ideals, but powerful, renewable sources of energy that ignite team cohesion, innovation, and resilience.

The ideas proposed through the EGTL model draw from insights and lessons learned through the COVID-19 pandemic, the ever-increasing global market complexity, and the introduction of AI and Gen AI into the workplace. EGTL maintains that business can unlock untapped human potential to achieve both business and human outcomes simultaneously and sustainably.

For leaders seeking to navigate the *complexponential* realities of today and tomorrow, this work is not just insightful, it is essential.

—*Lucian Blackburn*
COO, Royal Case Co., Inc.

In a world wracked by uncertainty and enduring permacrisis, we need to draw deeply on our human qualities to stay resilient and to thrive, despite the hardships and challenges we face. In *The Four Forces: Igniting Emergent Generative Team Leadership in a Complexponential World*, authors Kathleen Curran, Randal Joy Thompson and Jane Feng have done us a great service in charting a way forward for people at work as they struggle through difficult times. That way forward is thoughtfully and sensitively described, whereby teams draw on their own inner strengths of intent, hope, care, and love to achieve a level of shared resilience, innovation and strength that command and control type leadership can never achieve. Through writing this book, the authors have created a rich and valuable resource for the better understanding of self-led and self-managed teams – while at the same time invoking the power of compassionate and profound human relationships, something that has never been more needed. Readers of the book will

draw inspiration not just from those four superpowers of EGTL (Emergent Generative Team-led Leadership's intent, hope, care and love), but from the underused leadership power of curiosity too! So exercise your curiosity and dive into this excellent book – its Tao-inspired call to action will refresh and energise you and surely help to deepen the connections you have with co-workers, team members and vital stakeholders.

—*Michael Jenkins*
CEO, Expert Humans

THE FOUR FORCES

Igniting Emergent Generative
Team Leadership in a
Complexponential World
(Inspired by Nature and the Tao)

By

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

DOUG KIRKPATRICK

In an era where disruption is the only constant, *The Four Forces: Igniting Emergent Generative Team Leadership in a Complexponential World (Inspired by Nature and the Tao)* by Kathleen Curran, Randal Joy Thompson, and Jane Feng emerges as a transformative manifesto for leadership in the 21st century. This book is not just a response to the cataclysmic challenges of our time, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, but a visionary call to reimagine how we lead, collaborate, and thrive in a world defined by complexity, uncertainty, and rapid change. Drawing on the profound wisdom of nature and the Tao, the authors introduce Emergent Generative Team Leadership (EGTL), a relational model that harnesses the socio-emotional forces of intent, hope, care, and love to ignite human potential and drive organizational success.

As we navigate the complexponential landscape, shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), global interconnectedness, and shifting societal values, this work offers a roadmap for leaders and organizations seeking to transform chaos into opportunity.

The genesis of EGTL lies in the leadership void exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis that laid bare the inadequacies of traditional command-and-control hierarchies. As fear and uncertainty gripped the world, conventional leaders, unprepared for such complexity, often floundered. Yet, in this void, something extraordinary emerged: self-organized groups from community volunteers delivering food and making vaccine appointments for the elderly to corporate teams coalescing around shared purpose. The authors highlight how these groups, driven by a collective spirit, didn't merely survive but thrived, leaping forward to create new realities rather than retreating to old norms. This phenomenon revealed a shift from task-focused to relational

priorities and forms the empirical backbone of EGTL. It is a testament to the power of human connection in the face of adversity.

At its core, EGTL redefines leadership as a process, not a position. It is a dynamic, team-led approach that emerges from relationships, fueled by the four forces. Intent provides vision and purpose, aligning teams toward a shared goal. Hope fosters optimism, turning uncertainty into a canvas for possibility. Care builds empathy and trust, creating psychological safety. Love, perhaps the most radical inclusion, cultivates deep connection and commitment to the collective good. These forces, often sidelined in the utilitarian language of business, are reframed as renewable, limitless energies, human superpowers that drive resilience, innovation, and cohesion. By tapping into these universal emotions, EGTL offers a leadership model that is both profoundly human and exceptionally effective.

The authors' argument is clear: traditional management structures, designed for predictability in less turbulent times, are mismatched for today's complex world. Hierarchies that prioritize control over collaboration stifle agility and miss opportunities to harness the creative power of disruption. As Ravi Kumar, CEO of Cognizant, advocates retiring command-and-control models, EGTL offers a framework for teams that think critically, experiment boldly, and adapt swiftly. These teams, catalyzed by the four forces, create adaptive ecosystems akin to natural systems like forests or coral reefs, where interdependence and resilience enable flourishing amid change.

What sets this book apart is its seamless integration of philosophy, evidence, and practice. The authors draw on Tao's principles of flow, balance, and interconnectedness, mirroring the fluidity of EGTL teams that navigate obstacles like water. They invoke nature's ecosystems, where symbiosis and adaptability ensure survival, to illustrate how organizations can foster organic, sustainable structures. This philosophical grounding is complemented by practical insights, such as how to cultivate the four forces, restructure leadership, and measure both human outcomes (e.g., belonging, purpose, trust) and business outcomes (e.g., efficiency, innovation). The result is a holistic vision that bridges the artificial divide between employee well-being and organizational performance.

For businesses, the implications of EGTL are profound. In a world where 70% of employees crave meaningful work ([Gallup, 2023](#)), EGTL aligns with the demand for purpose-driven cultures. By fostering psychological safety,

collective problem-solving, and change agility, it enhances engagement and retention while driving creativity and sustainability. Companies like Spotify and Zappos offer glimpses of similar approaches, but EGTL's emphasis on socio-emotional forces sets it apart as a uniquely human-centered framework. The authors are careful not to present EGTL as a panacea, instead proposing a symbiosis between human capacities and organizational goals, consistent with Tao's emphasis on harmony.

The authors acknowledge challenges. Organizations entrenched in hierarchical cultures may resist embracing emotions like "love" in the workplace, viewing them as unprofessional. Scaling EGTL across large, siloed companies requires significant investment in training for emotional intelligence and collaborative skills. Measuring the impact of socio-emotional forces on profitability may also face skepticism from data-driven leaders. The authors anticipate these hurdles, offering practical steps, such as starting with pilot teams or fostering incremental cultural shifts, to ease the transition. Their ecosystem metaphor reinforces this flexibility: just as nature adapts gradually, so too can organizations evolve toward EGTL.

The book's core conclusions resonate as both a critique and a call to action. First, command-and-control is obsolete, failing to address modern complexities. Second, disruption is fertile ground, creating spaces for new leadership forms to emerge. Third, team-led ecosystems thrive in complexity, offering agility and resilience. Fourth, the four forces unlock untapped potential, driving collective flourishing. Fifth, leadership is relational, emerging from team interactions. Finally, integrating human and business outcomes is essential for sustainable success. These insights challenge leaders to rethink not just how they lead but why they lead, prioritizing connection over control.

As we stand at the precipice of further disruptions, AI's exponential growth, geopolitical shifts, and evolving workforce expectations, igniting *The Four Forces* is a timely guide for navigating the unknown. It invites leaders to cultivate intent by aligning teams around shared purpose, hope by celebrating possibilities, care by fostering empathy, and love by building deep trust. These practices, rooted in universal human experiences, are accessible to any organization willing to embrace change. The book's practical tools, from vision workshops to holistic metrics, empower leaders to operationalize EGTL while its philosophical depth inspires a broader rethinking of leadership's role in society.

This is not a book for those content with the status quo. It is for visionaries who see disruption as an opportunity, who believe that human connection is the key to unlocking innovation, and who dare to lead with heart as well as mind. Igniting the four forces is a clarion call to transform organizations into ecosystems where teams flourish, purpose drives performance, and uncertainty becomes a catalyst for growth. As you turn these pages, prepare to be challenged, inspired, and equipped to lead in a way that is not just adaptive but profoundly transformative.

The future of leadership is here, and it begins with the four forces.

PREFACE

The COVID-19 pandemic was cataclysmic. Fear, confusion, chaos, and the sad reality of death permeated people's consciousness everywhere. Unprepared and sometimes in denial, our heroic leaders floundered. They lacked the necessary know-how to cope with complexity and deploy resources in the space of uncertainty. Crucial needs went unfulfilled; a leadership void appeared. We noticed something remarkable happening in response to this leadership void. Self-organized groups around the world spontaneously converged and emerged to meet unmet needs at the community level. Groups picked up laundry, delivered food, made friendly phone calls, made COVID-19 vaccine appointments online for the elderly, and undertook many other helpful acts. In the words of a co-founder of one of the groups, "The response from the public is overwhelming It shows us what is possible when we prioritize simple compassion. People are self-organizing with incredible efficiency, respect, and creativity" ([Lynch & Khoo, 2020](#), para. 4).

Other self-organized groups saw the pandemic as an opportunity for reflection and for creating a transformed post-pandemic world. These included Otto Scharmer's GAIA journey that united over 10,000 people globally, Jeremy Lent's Deep Transformation Network, Kathleen Allen's journey of regenerative leadership founded on the principles of nature, and many others.

The corporate context was equally active. Corporate teams, whose leaders were distanced by the pandemic, coalesced into stronger, more focused, and caring teams and shifted their values to a more collective orientation, as the team development assessment tool, Squadify™, indicated. Pre-pandemic and mid-pandemic scores showed a distinct shift in priorities from task focused to relational driven. All these groups, instead of wanting to bounce back to the old way of being and doing, wanted to leap forward to a new reality ([Curran & Thompson, 2022](#)).

The leadership void, chaos, and the adaptive challenges of the pandemic sparked an inflection point that catalyzed a process of generativity, that is, the creation of new images, metaphors, and physical representations that have two qualities:

they change how people think so that new options for decisions and/or actions become available to them, and they are compelling images that people want to act on Generativity includes the processes and capacities that help people see old things in new ways.
([Bushe, 2019](#), p. 142)

We noted that a different kind and structure and process of leadership, built from intent, comprised of vision and deep purpose ([Gulati, 2022](#)), accountability, agency, and conscious choice, was transforming the rampant uncertainty into a creative space for generating team-led teams who in turn generated crucial initiatives and solutions. In fact, team-led teams were emerging as well as thriving more purposefully and effectively than anyone imagined possible. We called this relational construct of leadership Emergent Generative Team Leadership (EGTL). We initially introduced EGTL in our chapter “From Uncertainty to Transformation: Emergent, Generative Team Leadership from the Void” in Fielding Graduate University Publication, *Driving social innovation: How unexpected leadership is transforming society* ([Sonnet et al., 2022](#)).

EGTL was initially inspired by the global pandemic, which shone a spotlight on the inadequacy of conventional leadership in many circumstances. We cannot wait for another crisis like a pandemic to become conscious of the need to adapt to new ways of leading and learning. Disruptions such as the increasing influences from artificial intelligence (AI) and generative AI (Gen AI) as well as other global complexities compel the same need for resilience and growth.

We also cannot assume that stability will be delivered by conventional authority. Such stability is fragile, crumbling, and imploding on a global level. Rather than trying to shore up stability imposed by hierarchical structure, a new kind of leadership is needed, one that is better suited for the inevitable state of a complexponential world and continual disruption, one that is based on the strength, power, and sustainability of relationships, and that restructures for greater balance among team capacities and capabilities.

Although first evidenced during the pandemic, we argue now that EGTL is an exceptionally effective approach to strengthen team cohesion and productivity, as well as to flexibly adapt to and leverage the increasing complexity, uncertainty, and turbulence that characterizes our complexponential world at present and will continue to do so in the future. We developed a simulation for teams to experience a mindset shift from “me” to “we,” the mindset required for EGTL and to notice how the four forces, intent, hope, care, and love, ignite their connection. The teams in Asia and the United States who experienced the simulation remarked that it helped them to understand how connected teams emerge and to recognize the socio-emotional forces that bound them together.

When exploring how organizations could create the context so that EGTL would naturally emerge and the way that teams and individual team members would practice and sustain EGTL, we noted that nature functions with emergence and generativity and offers a useful perspective for understanding how emergence and generativity function in teams. We also noted that the Taoist philosophy posits a worldview that recognizes continual change and incorporates emergence and generativity, so we explored how Taoism provides inspiration for EGTL. We considered that several Taoist mindsets add valuable insight to the perspective and development of practices for building team-led leadership and may inspire teams to adopt the attitude and skills necessary for success in our turbulent world.

In *The Four Forces: Igniting Emergent Generative Team Leadership in a Complexponential World (Inspired by Nature and the Tao)*, we embark on a journey that transcends conventional notions of leadership and invites us to embrace a deeper, more holistic understanding of our roles as stewards of organizational dynamics and social change. The socio-emotional forces that underlie all our relationships, including in teams, come to the fore as critical elements that account for the success or not-success of teams. Heretofore, largely focused on task rather than emotion, we are now required to expand our vision in order to effectively cope with the rapid change and complexity before us.

Who We Are

We come from different professional and personal experiences, which when bound together provide a comprehensive view of organizations, teams, and leadership. All three of us met as students at Fielding Graduate University,

where we earned our PhD in Human and Organizational Systems. We are all Fellows at Fielding's Institute for Social Innovation, conducting research on various organizational and leadership topics. Our professional experiences include working in contrasting ways with government, private sector multinational and other companies, and non-governmental organizations in countries around the world, leading to an understanding of different world-views, different operating systems, and distinct cultures.

Kathleen Curran is a global coach, facilitator, and boundary-spanning strategist. Founder of Intercultural Systems, with 25 years of professional experience across Asia, she specializes in catalyzing the intersection of intercultural competencies, leadership, and global strategy in support of individual, team, and organizational global leadership development with the concomitant inclusive mindset and practices.

Her client partnerships have included FedEx, ExxonMobil, BP, Cisco, Novartis, NXP, Alstom, and Salesforce, among other Fortune 500 corporations; her collaborations in Singapore, Malaysia, India, Greater China, South Korea and Japan focus on the design and facilitation of emerging and senior executive global leadership development programs, with a special emphasis on global talent development initiatives in communities where the companies operate. She has frequently been the Asia lead faculty on multinationals' internal leadership development learning journeys and presently consults on intercultural management reinvention strategies for future readiness.

A scholar-practitioner, she combines expertise in corporate leadership development and academic instruction. As faculty, University of Houston Downtown, MBA program, Leadership concentration, she connects theory with practice, inspiring students to stay relevant by engaging critically with global business challenges. Her teaching portfolio includes leadership, strategy, managing organizational behavior, delivering business results, and business ethics. In addition to her PhD and MA from Fielding Graduate University, she earned a Master's in Intercultural Communication and BA in Linguistics, both from the University of Texas at Austin.

Her published works include: (1) *From Uncertainty to Transformation: Emergent Generative Team Leadership from the Void* (2022), co-authored with R. J. Thompson; (2) Responsible, relational, and intentional: "A reimagined construct of corporate-commons leadership," in *Reimagining Leadership in the Commons: Shifting the Paradigm for a More Ethical, Equitable, and Just World*, (2021), edited with R. J. Thompson and Devin Singh;

(3) Global identity and global leadership: Knowing, doing, and becoming – differently, in *The Study and Practice of Global Leadership* (2022), edited by Gama Perucci; (4) Global identify tensions for global leaders, in *Advances in Global Leadership*, Vol. 12 (2019); Developing global resonance for global leadership, in *Leadership and Power in International Development: Navigating the Intersections of Gender, Culture, Context, and Sustainability* (2018), co-edited by R. J. Thompson and J. Storberg-Walker.

Randal Joy Thompson is a global citizen who has assumed leadership positions in all regions of the world, first in a government bureaucracy and then in small businesses and non-governmental organizations. As a Commissioned Foreign Service Officer, she led intercultural teams in countries including Cameroon, Morocco, Romania, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus. Her teams delivered services to and helped build the capacity of local government and non-government organizations in these countries. While working for small private businesses and non-governmental organizations, she led local teams in Iraq, Afghanistan, Morocco, Liberia, Nigeria, Ghana, Myanmar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and El Salvador, and completed short-term consulting assignments in many more. In addition to her leadership responsibilities, she designed and implemented trainings, facilitated appreciative inquiries and team building retreats, led program evaluations, and provided organizational coaching to leaders around the world. As a Performance Improvement Technologist for the International Society for Performance Improvement, she helped improve the performance of organizations in different cultural settings. She also founded Dream Connect Global, a networking company to support individual and communal dream making.

She became supportive of team-led teams when she was required to leave her El Salvadoran team and return to the USA during the pandemic. Her team self-organized, each team member began manifesting leadership behaviors, and the team led the project without needing her to lead or manage them. She became a coach, being consulted when the team wanted her advice or to review and approve documents that the client required. In more recent years, she has focused on researching leadership. In addition to her PhD and MA from Fielding Graduate University, she earned an MBA from the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago, an MA in Political Philosophy from the University of Chicago, an MA in Biblical Exposition from Capitol Bible and Graduate School, and a BA in Philosophy from the University of California, Berkeley.

Her major publications include: (1) *Disrupting the Default: Perspectives on Gender, Power, and Emergent Technology* (2027, forthcoming), co-edited with Christine Haskell and Catharyn Baird; (2) *Women Embodied Leaders: Peacebuilding, Protest, and Professions* (2024), co-edited with Lazarina Topuzova; (3) *Changing Realities for Women and Work: The Impact of COVID-19 and Prospects for the Post-pandemic Work World*, (2023), co-edited with Chrys Egan and Tina Wu; (4) *From Uncertainty to Transformation: Emergent Generative Team Leadership from the Void*, co-authored with Kathleen Curran (2022); (5) *Co-creating a Collaborative Equitable World Through Responsible Proleptic Global Leadership* (2023), co-authored with Devin Singh; (6) *Reimagining Leadership on the Commons: Shifting the Paradigm for a More Ethical, Equitable, and Just World* (2021), co-edited with Kathleen Curran and Devin Singh; (7) *Proleptic Leadership on the Commons: Ushering in a New Global Order* (2020); and (8) *Leadership and Power in International Development: Navigating the Intersections of Gender, Culture, Context, and Sustainability* (2018), co-edited with Julia Storberg-Walker, which won the Human Resource Development R. Wayne Pace HRD 2019 Book of the Year Award. In addition, she has published many articles and book chapters on leadership.

Jane Feng has worked in multinational settings for over 25 years as an internal human resource/OD professional/executive in three US multinational corporations (MNCs), including Coca-Cola, Intel, and PepsiCo and as an external OD consultant primarily to US and German MNC clients such as Baxter, Vector, and Quick-Mix. Living in Shanghai, she is currently a Regional Advisory Partner at August Leadership, a global search and leadership consulting firm headquartered in New York. Examples of her engagements include *Building Compliance Culture Across APAC*, *Revamping HR System*, *Change Management for APAC Integration*, *Leadership Development*, and *Organization Diagnosis*. Since 2017, she has published seven articles summarizing her learning and explorations, three of which received the Best/Outstanding Article Award of the year. These include: (1) Practicing OD consulting in China: Engaging the roots of Chinese culture with five maxims (2021), 2022 Organization Development Journal (ODJ) Award for Best Article of 2021; (2) Applying the Taoist way of thinking in dialogic consulting: Following the client's way with three maxims (2022), 2023 OD Network Award for Outstanding Article of the Year; and (3) Practicing OD in China by engaging

metaphors for change (2023), 2024 OD Network Award for Outstanding Article of the Year. In addition to her PhD and MA from Fielding Graduate University, she earned a BS in Mechanical Engineering, Shanghai Jiao Tong University and an MS in Human Resource Management focusing on Organizational Behavior (OB) and Organization Development (OD), Shanghai Jiao Tong University. She was a Board Member of the National Training Laboratory from 2004 to 2008. She continues to apply Taoist principles and perspectives in her organization development work as well as in her research. She is an active member of the OD Network.

Doug Kirkpatrick spent his early career in the manufacturing sector with The Morning Star Company as a Financial Controller and Co-founder of the Morning Star Self-management Institute. He has served on a number of boards, including the Association for Talent Development, the world's largest talent development association with 35,000+ members in 120 countries, and the Leadership Institute for Development, Education and Research to develop leaders throughout the Americas. He now engages with Corporate Rebels, Vibrancy, Great Work Cultures, Semco Style Institute, Responsive, Business Agility Institute, World Management Agility Forum, and other vibrant organizations and leaders to co-create the future of management. His company, Open At Scale, is the creator of Beacon™, a tool that coordinates distributed teams at scale and speeds decisions without meetings. His talks have spanned the globe from Africa to Siberia and beyond, including the Global Peter Drucker Forum. His books have been published in eight languages, including Amazon bestsellers *Beyond Empowerment: The Age of the Self-managed Organization*, and *The No-limits Enterprise: Organizational Self-management in the New World of Work*.

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INTRODUCTION

NATURAL PROCESSES OF THE ECOSYSTEM

In the heart of the dense Belum-Temengor Tropical Rainforest, light filters through emerald layers and mist rises from the forest floor. A vibrant hornbill eats the fruit of a fig tree high in the canopy. Hours later, while resting on a moss-covered branch, the bird releases the seed in its droppings. It falls, spiraling through vines, past bromeliads cradling water to land in a small clearing on the forest floor.

WHY HERE?

A great kapok tree once stood in that very spot. When it fell, sunlight pierced the understory for the first time in decades. A gap opened. Not emptiness, but invitation. The seed begins to stir. Fungi awaken, breaking down the fallen wood into nutrients. Tiny insects till the soil. The seed swells, cracks, and sends down a taproot. It grows because the rainforest is not a place of separation. It is a conversation.

Mycorrhizal fungi thread through the soil, connecting the new seedling to older trees nearby. These underground networks pass sugars, minerals, and even warnings. The young plant is nourished by more than sunlight and rain. It is fed and strengthened by relationship, by the living web beneath its roots. Trees transpire moisture into the air, creating clouds that return as rain. Insects pollinate. Birds spread seeds. Leafcutter ants farm fungus. Even decay plays a sacred role. Death is not an end here, but a cycle that fuels rebirth. Nothing is useless. Nothing is alone. Each plays a part in maintaining the delicate, dynamic balance of the powerful whole.

Similarly, a coral reef functions as a self-sustaining web, where every creature, no matter how small, is part of the whole. Its health depends on diversity, interdependence, and the attentive work of maintaining a dynamic equilibrium, adapting to change, and reinventing the reef with newcomers. When these relationships are intact, the reef hums with life. But if one link is strained, if warming seas bleach the coral, if overfishing removes key species, or if pollution clouds the water, the whole system falters. In this intricate ecosystem, resilience is not about strength alone, but about relationship. The reef reminds us that thriving comes from mutual care, not dominance.

Nature highlights the cyclical and dynamic, regenerative processes of an ecosystem. Interestingly, the etymological root *ecos* is derived from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning *home*. An ecosystem, therefore, is a home on the broadest level of analysis. Clearly, the intent of an ecosystem is not survival of the fittest through competition for resources. Instead, the core intent of the ecosystem is continuity through reciprocity, thriving by contribution in the context of a larger system. Through ongoing relationships, the above examples illustrate the aim to sustain life through dynamic balance and interdependence.

The ecosystem metaphor is not just germane to nature. It is relevant to every business organization. The question is, to what extent can you control the ecosystem and/or work intentionally within it?

While the picture of an ecosystem appears to be peaceful, logical, and humming along, another fact of life must be considered: What happens when disruption occurs in all corners of an ecosystem, as it does consistently?

SYSTEM DISRUPTIONS AND GROWTH

True for every organism and organization on earth, with growth comes change and the need to adapt, to change with resilience. This cycle is graphically illustrated by the S-curve or growth curve, as was first formally described by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1969), a pioneer of systems theory. The growth curve models how living systems grow, not in a straight line, but in a dynamic, self-regulating pattern. Charles Handy (1994) in *The Empty Raincoat: Making Sense of the Future* called the Sigmoid Curve, another name for

the S-Curve or growth curve, as the “the Pathways through Paradox, a device for finding balance between contradictions” (p. 80).

The curve begins with a slow initial phase as the system gains traction (lag phase), but where momentum and resources are challenged, it then enters a period of rapid, exponential growth as conditions support expansion (log phase). Eventually, growth slows and stabilizes as the system encounters limits, like nutrient availability, space, or competition, reaching a carrying capacity where inflows and outflows balance (stationary phase).

With continual disruptions, adaptation sprouts, resilience nourishes, and new growth curves begin. The key, clearly, is to recognize or better yet anticipate changes triggering a needed response. What makes the S-curve profound is that it reflects how living systems grow differently from mechanical ones. Growth is not infinite; it is shaped by context and constraints, essential yet intentionally minimal constraints that limit the potential of overgrowth by weeds and help to discern which to trim and which to watch ([Compo, 2022](#)).

The curve captures the self-regulating intelligence of ecosystems, cells, and even human systems like organizations. It reminds us that sustainable growth does not accelerate forever. It emerges, peaks, and evolves into a new dynamic equilibrium, or gives way to a fresh curve through renewal. In this way, the S-curve offers not just a model of biological growth, but a metaphor for life’s cycles of emergence, flourishing, and transformation. This regenerative cycle requiring adaptation is not always smooth, linear, or recognizable. Missing the curve is a real possibility and something seen among organizations every day.

THE VITAL VOID

Starting on a new trajectory is also not immediate nor fast. When a new cycle begins, there is always a space, a pause, an exclamation point, a comma, or a question mark, a breath during which the ecosystem reorders itself. We call the new trajectory the “vital void.”

It is in this vital void that *something* crucial emerges. *Vital* is used intentionally, as the etymological root of the adjective is *vit*. Of Latin origins, *vit* means *yearning and wanting*. In other words, *vital* adds the potential of life to the void. The emergent *something* could be a new discovery that allows

for generating changes that affect the growth potential of the ecosystem, or it could be a predator taking advantage of this moment of imbalance. In any case, there is a space where the old makes way for the new.

The void is frequently depicted as chaos, as the less-defined new *something* brings uncertainty, which can produce complex exponential challenges because they are dynamically, generatively, and socially complex (Kahane, 2007). A dynamically complex challenge is one in which the cause and effect may be far apart in space and time, thus, a potential inflection point may not appear to be urgent or understandable in the moment. The cause could appear as an isolated event or one with no context, while the effects could be lagging indicators. In either case, the dynamics are difficult to see holistically. For example, when the global pandemic seemed to suddenly appear, even when it was a surprise we should have seen coming, and the number of infected patients was increasingly identified in multiple locations, decisions were made without the impacts being understood for an undetermined amount of time. This example also illustrated the generatively complex challenge in which the unfolding of the event occurred in unpredictable and unfamiliar ways. As a result, people involved saw the event differently from each other, creating a socially complex issue such that problems became stuck, as well as perspectives polarized.

Clearly, the vital void that was created by the abdication of conventional leadership during the global pandemic was not empty; rather, it was the source of possibilities. As in the jungle and the reef, a disruption often creates what looks like a void, but instead is the creation of space for new opportunities to emerge.

SO, WHAT IS THE POINT OF ALL THIS FOR YOUR BUSINESS TODAY?

Conventional command and control hierarchies, functional and operational structures, as well as people management metrics so common today, were developed in less turbulent times, albeit with the aim of reducing uncertainty, increasing predictability, and managing financial and human resources. The present environment in which we are now, however, imposes different demands. For example, we are more technologically connected than ever before, but all kinds of indicators suggest that we feel less humanly

connected, a phenomenon that is causing disengagement, loneliness, and low productivity in the workplace. As such, the conventional methods may be the shoulders we have stood on in order to see where we think we should go, but they are proving to be less suitable today and certainly not optimal for tomorrow. They are not the methods needed for future-readying our organizations.

Now we are being challenged to meet changing expectations ... which keep changing. Even trickier, values and methods of creating value differently have also emerged from the void. How do we handle the fecundity of the void, which offers possibilities but for which to truly leverage, demand a paradigm shift. Simply put, the void cannot be avoided. Triggered by external forces such as changes in supply chain, geopolitical shifts, and advancing technology, as well as changes within systems, processes, structure, and management, surprises disrupting the established process are experienced every day and may appear to give way to perceived chaos. Like so many others, Ravi Kumar, CEO of Cognizant ([Snyder, 2025](#)), argues that command and control should retire and create autonomous team-led teams who think critically, are right where the action is, love to experiment, and enthusiastically believe that they care for and need each other.

But that is not the vital part of this phenomenon.

The vital, life giving shift sparked by the void is the stirring up of these uber-uncertain conditions that inspire the emergence of a new and different kind of leadership, Emergent Generative Team Leadership (EGTL), a team-led team leadership that is composed of individuals catalyzed by four socio-emotional forces: intent, hope, care, and love and fused into a collective unit in relationship. The four forces ignite the capacity for teams to self-manage, self-power, as well as self-lead with greater autonomy, innovation, agility, and resilience. Teams formed through and by the four forces ensure that the stability, resilience, and innovation of the team are stronger than any command and control or rigid hierarchy could ever build.

What we see emerging from the void, clearly, is more than increased authenticity or improved skills for engagement, as conventional leadership, team formation, and performance models have taught us. We see the need to pause and recognize that with more continual change, disruption, and surprise, it is time to look closely and with clear eyes: adapt and let go of what got you here because that method, structure, and strategy may not be

what will get you on the growth trajectory you want. If our environment is uber-unpredictable, then the agile, emergent generative ecosystem approach is better suited for complexity.

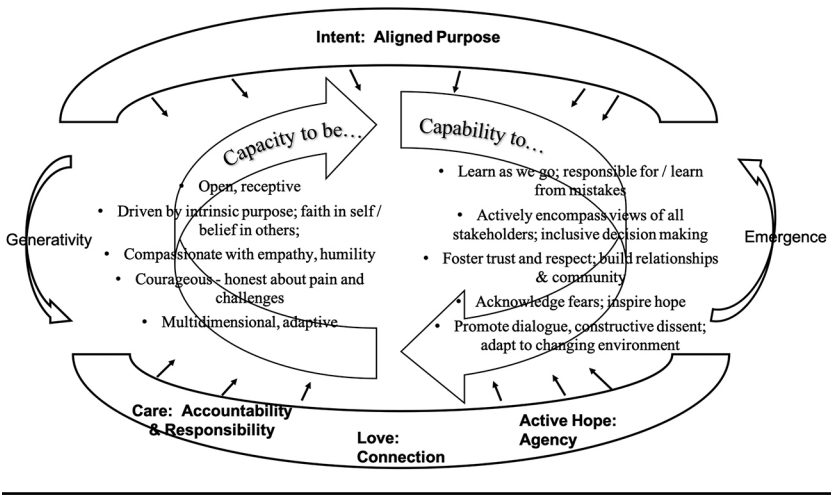
So, while the operational targets of a team and their technical tasks may remain the same, the way they are carried out is different when emergent generative teams prosper. The renewable, limitless human energy, even a superpower, ignited by the four socio-emotional forces, changes the whole ecosystem at the team level, and eventually at the teams-of-teams level and potentially beyond. The renewable energy ignited by the four forces encompasses and powers the leadership from a completely different source, which is in every human: intent, hope, care, and love. While these emotions are not the typical language of business, their essence actually is. Everyone has experienced them, even though we have somehow learned that such emotions do not have a place or permission in the workplace.

EGTL lives within an ecosystem. All parts contribute to a flourishing whole; all parts are necessary to complete the whole and, in the process, are greater than the sum of the parts. The outside-in part is the organizationally determined structure and systems that enable teams with self-organizing processes for communication, decision-making, use of technology, and other operational responsibilities, while the inside-out part is comprised of the four forces that fuse a team relationally more deeply than formal hierarchy ever could. The distinguishing part that EGTL brings to the whole comes from recognizing and tapping the emotional powers that inspire a new way of being and doing.

Integration is a key concept when understanding the power of the EGTL four forces. The etymological root of integration is *integer*, meaning whole or complete, as in a whole number that cannot be divided, or integrity that connotes wholeness in character without exception. Integration of the four forces, therefore, ignites undivided strength to the intent of each individual as they form a team, as well as the collective of the unit, believing, speaking, and navigating as one.

Principles and values embedded in EGTL compel individuals to shift their mindsets from the individualistic to the aligned collective, from fixed to growth, from static to dynamic. The urgency, complexity, interconnectedness of challenges, shared responsibility, adaptive responses, and aligned purposes foster a collective mindset so that team members become team leaders of themselves, collaborating, innovating, and navigating what seems to be

Fig. 1. EGTL in its Ecosystem Ignited by the Four Forces and Illustrating How Capacity Is Transformed into Capability.



chaos together for more effective problem-solving, resilience, and stability in the climate of uncertainty. EGTL is illustrated in Fig. 1.

THE INTENT OF THIS BOOK

The intent of this book is to provide the what, why, and how of emergent, generative team-led teams and the context, conditions, and culture an organization needs to create in order to cultivate a flourishing ecosystem in the state of complexity – in what feels like chaos – and within inevitable dynamic change. It is not to declare EGTL as the one solution. Consistent with the life of an ecosystem, drawing on the wisdom from the Tao and lessons from nature, we propose a symbiosis among human capacities and human capabilities, to nurture business outcomes such as customer satisfaction, efficiency, growth and profitability, speed, quality and innovation; and human outcomes such as equity and belonging, happiness, purpose and meaning, psychological safety and understanding, and overall, the sense of deep connection, in other words, to convert access to human socio-emotional superpowers into assets that propel our businesses forward with greater adaptability, resilience, and innovation.

OUR PROPOSITIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN READING OUR BOOK

Distilling the thinking behind EGTL, several core propositions emerge:

1. *Traditional command and control leadership is fundamentally mismatched with today's and tomorrow's business environment.* That sentiment is emerging from many corners. It is not original to this book. The *vital void* created by myriad large and small disruptions is revealing that conventional management structures are both inadequate and missing opportunities for navigating *complexponential* challenges.
2. *Disruption creates opportunity, not just crisis: The "vital void" is where innovation emerges.* What appears to be chaos or emptiness after disruption is actually fertile ground for new possibilities, spaces where new forms of leadership and ways of working can emerge, and where filling with the previous elusive order works against the norms of nature.
3. *Team-led teams create adaptive ecosystems that thrive in complexity.* The shift to EGTL enables organizations to function like healthy ecosystems, with both the capacities and capabilities to respond with agility to constant change. EGTL is clearly not just another idea for team development. It is an evolutionary response to the fundamental shift in how successful organizations must operate in an interconnected and rapidly changing business environment, actually, in a rapidly changing, technology-led world.
4. *The four forces – intent, care, hope, and love – fundamental to EGTL,* ignite limitless human potential and represent untapped renewable energy sources for converting uncertainty into collective flourishing, thus improving organizational performance. When teams are catalyzed by the four forces, they develop stronger stability, resilience, and innovation capacity than any rigid hierarchy could build. Because the EGTL teams are powered from within by these four forces, their relationship fortified infrastructure can navigate chaos while maintaining stability through relationship rather than control. The four forces are not about soft skills. They are about core human qualities that are within us all and have now been ignited to the betterment of people and organizations.