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# Toward an ecocentric leadership as stewardship framework: Insights from fostering transformative partnerships and collective practice

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**Abstract**

In response to the escalating ecological crises, this article introduces *ecocentric leadership as stewardship* as a transformative framework grounded in ecocentrism, relational ontology, and kinship. Transcending anthropocentric paradigms, the proposed framework is rooted in an understanding of humans as nature, emphasizing our interrelatedness with all forms of life and matter. This study—not originally designed as a research project—employs a mixed-methods design to explore the theoretical foundations and practical application of this leadership framework in transdisciplinary systems change initiatives. Phase 1 stemming from practice involves conceptual development through literature review and cooperative inquiry among the authors, integrating insights from ecocentric leadership, collective leadership, complexity leadership theory, and practical knowledge. It proposes a leadership framework rooted in ecocentrism and highlights its multidimensionality and systemic embeddedness. Phase 2—although intertwined—applies and refines the framework through a participatory case study of the World Ethic Forum and its partnership with the World Future Council, as well as a local village. Through cooperative inquiry, participatory action research, interviews, thematic analysis, and reflective practice, we examine how ecocentric principles foster transformative partnerships that move beyond hierarchical and anthropocentric worldviews. Findings suggest that ecocentric leadership as stewardship encourages co-responsibility for the commons, relational engagement, and context-sensitive governance. By situating leadership within an eco-social systems perspective, the study bridges theory and practice, offering a framework for addressing complex, interdependent challenges of the polycrisis. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of practicing and embodying connection to self, others, and nature as the preconditions for transformation

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leading to greater health for the whole. The article concludes with reflections on developmental learning edges and a proposal for future research, advocating iterative processes and collective practices as essential for evolving leadership paradigms fit for the polycrisis era.

#### KEYWORDS

collective leadership, complexity, cooperative inquiry, ecocentrism, organizational studies, relational ontology, transformative partnerships

## INTRODUCTION

In the conviction that anthropocentrism stands at the root cause of interdependent crises we currently face, the framework of ecocentric leadership as stewardship (ELAS) emerges as a transformative force underpinned by ecocentrism for a culture of care and kinship. Kinship, as understood here, goes far beyond the understanding of kinship as the social system of our family. Departing from a relational ontology of interconnectedness of the entire world, the concept of kinship relates to our eco-social family system, including animals, plants, rocks, and bodies of water (Van Horn et al., 2021). In our understanding, humans are nature themselves. Thus, building on eco- and kincentrism means that we humans are an integral part of the ecosystem, overcoming the human–nature dichotomy. As elaborated in Ritter et al. (2025), a conceptual lens grounded in an ecocentric ontology builds on different underlying cosmologies and leads to different epistemologies, collective practices, and tangible outcomes.

With the term stewardship, we refer to the ethical value of careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care (Merriam-Webster, 2024). This is especially important for safeguarding the continued health of wider ecosystems, the commons, as Ostrom (1990) and multiple other scholars pointed out. This is inspired by indigenous and earth-based communities, their millennia-old wisdom lineages, and locally rooted traditions. Recognizing the human role as stewards of eco-social systems highlights our co-responsibility: we possess both the capacity to destroy, nurture, and sustain ecosystems, enabling individual and collective flourishing.

By embracing an ecocentric lens, we are encouraged to transcend traditional notions of hierarchy, recognizing the intrinsic value of all elements within relational tapestries. This orientation aligns with relational leadership theory emphasizing leadership as a process of organizing through relational dynamics rather than individual authority (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 672). In light of the polycrisis (Miller & Heinberg, 2023), it becomes increasingly vital to move beyond dominant leadership models. Complexity leadership theory offers a useful framework, proposing that

leadership should not be understood solely in terms of position or formal authority but rather as “a complex interplay” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Highlighting the current state of scholarship regarding ecocentric leadership (Biswas et al., 2022; Pichlak, 2024; Western, 2019), we propose a conceptual framework and explore its application for transformative partnerships with the case of the World Ethic Forum (WEFo), having been the place of practice which informed this work and then, when surfaced, also having (partially) adopted our framework.

We then share our reflections and developmental learning edges and conclude with a proposal for further research on the contribution of this leadership approach in different settings, as this work can only be done in iterative cycles, with collective attention and transformative learning being paramount.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Acknowledging that this work was not originally designed as a formal research project, this study employs a mixed-methods approach combining literature review and cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008) with a case study designed in action research for transformation (ART) (Bradbury, 2022) to address two research questions:

**RQ1.** What essential principles constitute an ecocentric leadership as stewardship framework for transdisciplinary initiatives addressing complex ecological challenges?

**RQ2.** How can this framework be applied to foster transformative partnerships in transdisciplinary initiatives addressing complex ecological challenges?

In cooperative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2008), four types of knowing are distinguished: *experiential*, where we draw from being practitioners; *presentational knowing* or preconceptual resonance through a writing process, drawing also from intuiting significant patterns to

recounting story in the case study; *propositional knowing* by constructing an enhanced model of leadership; and lastly, *practical knowing*, resulting in application of how-to-do transformative partnership. The initial three types of knowing were engaged to respond to RQ1, while for RQ2, the fourth type became key.

Through ART, the three spaces—*relational*, *conceptual*, and *experimental*—were combined for knowledge creation aiming at relevant and applicable contribution: *relational* through exploring the conditions of long-lasting and transformative partnerships; *conceptual* by synthesizing reflection into writing; and *experimental* by testing the concept through application in transdisciplinary initiatives.

### Phase 1: Conceptual development (addressing RQ1)

The initial phase of conceptual development stemmed from the authors' joint experience working for the WEFo (practice-based setting) and involved a literature review aimed at identifying core principles of ecocentric leadership, beginning with the concept of “steward leadership” (April et al., 2013), “ecocentric leadership” (Biswas et al., 2022; Pichlak, 2024; Western, 2019), and later “collective leadership” (Arkedis et al., 2023). In approaching the concept of ecocentric leadership, the literature review examined existing theoretical contributions and assessed the extent to which these frameworks transcend anthropocentric assumptions, rather than serving as sustainability-oriented extensions of them.

Recognizing the persistent gap between academic theory and practitioner insight (Arkedis et al., 2023) and the lack of a leadership framework rooted in ecocentrism, we propose a novel framework which builds on existing work. This theoretical enhancement was carried out through iterative cycles of dialogue and critical reflection, designed to integrate scholarly analysis with *experiential knowing*, fostering a more holistic and praxis-oriented understanding of ecocentric leadership emphasizing relational dynamics, reciprocity, and the cultivation of transformative partnerships.

### Phase 2: Applied exploration (addressing RQ2)

This phase tested and refined the ecocentric leadership framework through a case study of WEFo, *practical knowing* focusing specifically on its partnership with the World Future Council (WFC) and a village. WEFo served as both a subject and site of inquiry for exploring how ecocentric principles translate into practice.

As embedded researchers within WEFo's leadership, we employed ART, co-designing interventions, facilitating reflective processes, and documenting their outcomes. Our dual role as practitioners and researchers enabled deep contextual insight, while reflexive dialogue helped address and mitigate bias. While we did not follow conventional protocols for participant recruitment or formalized consent due to the embedded nature of our practitioner roles, we maintained transparency toward both WEFo colleagues, WFC, and dialogue throughout the research and writing process. For all quotes in this paper, explicit consent was obtained. Reflexivity was central to our inquiry, documented through iterative writing, shared journals, and recorded discussions, which served as data and analysis. This approach aligns with participatory methodologies that prioritize lived experience, co-authorship, and ethical responsiveness over predefined methods.

Thematic analysis guided iterative refinement of the framework, informed by empirical findings and relational ontology. Thus, we are involved in defining and applying the intervention and are more than mere observers of the case. As part of the WEFo, we co-initiated partnerships, observed through interviews, looked at tangible outcomes, and then reflected on the partnership and its transformative potential.

The study drew on (a) semi-structured interviews with WEFo's co-founder and discussions with two WFC representatives assessing their experience regarding transformative partnerships. (b) Participatory reflection: regular sessions among the WEFo leadership circle supported collective sense-making and ongoing adaptation of the framework. (c) Action-oriented observation: researchers documented decision making, conflict resolution, and emerging outcomes across two pilot partnerships.

The four ways of knowing occurred cyclical and thus keep on mutually informing one another. This is due to taking a practitioner's approach. There were continuous feedback loops between conceptual development (Phase 1) and practical application (Phase 2), ensuring that the evolving framework remained grounded in theory and real-world complexity, with findings from each cycle informing subsequent practice and framework refinement. Focusing on aligning both relational ontology and on-the-ground challenges, the result is a more robust, ecocentrically aligned framework for transformative partnerships.

## LITERATURE

Ecocentric leadership emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature and the interconnectedness of humans and the natural environment, fostering a paradigm shift in

organizational practices from an anthropocentric to kin- and ecocentric stance. In the 1990s, Paul Shrivastava championed the attempt of an onto-epistemological shift in organization studies toward ecocentrism (De Figueiredo & Marquesan, 2022a, 2022b). Through his work, he challenged traditional organization–environment relationships by proposing ecologically centered management practices to minimize environmental impacts. While Shrivastava initially championed radical ecocentrism, his later work reconciles environmental concerns with pragmatic business practices (De Figueiredo & Marquesan, 2022a, 2022b). The notion of ecocentric leaders who act as role models and inspire voluntary environmental behavior among employees by leveraging psychological green climate was taken up by Biswas et al. (2022). Their approach underscores the importance of leaders modeling eco-friendly behaviors, which employees emulate through motivational and informational strategies. Pichlak (2024) proposes an analytical framework for ecocentric leadership, integrating a synthesis of 22 leadership theories. Her framework identifies five core domains—character, characteristics, people practices, institutional practices, and outcomes—emphasizing that ecocentric leadership is value-driven and context-dependent. It highlights the interplay between leaders’ personal values and organizational contexts that shape strategic decision-making processes. However, we see two aspects missing: (A) the approaches do not situate themselves in the context of a collective leadership paradigm (Arkedis et al., 2023), in which leadership is seen as something relational that emerges rather than personified by an individual leader. Collective leadership is both a lens (a relational way of being) and a practice that cultivates group capacity to navigate complexity. Key attributes include shared purpose, power sharing, systems thinking, and relational engagement (Arkedis et al., 2023). Evidence suggests that collective leadership interventions enhance team effectiveness, improve work quality, and foster systemic transformation by building social capital and minimizing collaboration barriers (Arkedis et al., 2023). (B) In the above approaches, humans are still seen as different and separate from nature, and no onto-epistemological shift toward a radical ecocentrism is being proposed. Western (2019) introduces Eco-Leadership as integrating social and environmental concerns alongside commercial objectives and thus remains in the three pillar paradigm of equally valuing people, planet, profit, and thus anthropocentrism. Western (2019) writes about Ethical Eco-Leadership as “[...] practices by avant-garde and progressive leaders [...]” and thus again stands for a person-centered approach rather than a collective approach to leadership.

Relational leadership, as explored by Steenkamp et al. (2022), emphasizes adaptive governance structures that foster trust, cooperation, and societal value creation

within multi-stakeholder partnerships. Relational leadership integrates informal elements such as character and values with formal governance mechanisms like rules and procedures. Trustworthiness and recognition emerge as critical components for effective partnerships addressing Sustainable Development Goals. While there are many elements from which we can learn here, it lacks the ecocentric grounding.

Lastly, (C) April et al. (2013) with “Steward Leadership” developed a framework based on case studies, statistically valid data and years of experience teaching MBA programs and consulting globally. This provides a valuable basis, although stemming from an anthropocentric and leader-centric perspective.

The literature reviewed highlights the limitations of current leadership frameworks in transcending anthropocentrism grounded in relational ontology. April et al.’s (2013) Steward Leadership model provides a valuable framework based on empirical data but lacks an explicit ecocentric stance. By integrating insights from so-called ecocentric leadership (Biswas et al., 2022; Pichlak, 2024), relational paradigms (Steenkamp et al., 2022), collective systems thinking (Arkedis et al., 2023), and Shrivastava’s ecocentric management perspective (De Figueiredo & Marquesan, 2022a, 2022b), we propose an enhanced conceptual framework that connects stewardship explicitly with ecocentrism.

We also build on the work of organizational leadership (Senge, 1990), complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), and systemic leadership (Tate, 2009), which focuses on a whole-systems approach to leadership. Senge, with his seminal work “The Fifth Discipline,” also emphasizes learning within an organization so-called learning organizations. Combining this with transformative learning as coined by Mezirow and further developed especially in contexts of sustainability transformations (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2022) means that people coming together around guiding questions need safe-enough spaces where they can engage in processes of meaning making in liminal spaces, emerging due to strong edge emotions triggered through novel experiences.

Being inspired to deepen the understanding of collective leadership, we strongly resonate that all individuals involved need to be aware of their own perspectives and inner conditions as they shape their environment or, in the words of O’Brien, “The success of an intervention depends on the inner condition of the intervener” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 7).

We define stewarding as a collective practice and actions that flow between individuals and their context, shaped and held by all stakeholders. We call that the “social field,” referring to the entirety of the social system, emphasizing the source conditions that shape patterns of thinking, conversing, organizing, and

ultimately leading to practical outcomes (Scharmer et al., 2022, p. 5). The Steward Leadership concept is characterized by values of caring, involving others in decision making, and promoting a continual improvement of one's abilities.

A focus of ELAS expands to serve the planet as a larger ecosystem not only another human or social group but also a more extensive, living ecosystem, in line with different wisdom traditions and philosophies. We refer, for example, to Buddhism as a traditional wisdom perspective, and Topa and Narvaez (2022) describe that “The Indigenous worldview [...] is not a matter of perception or conception alone, but of experiencing and being. It is more of a ‘world-sense’ because it involves dozens of senses and a coordinated way of moving through the world.” We further draw inspiration from Ubuntu as a worldview (e.g., Wiredu, 1996) rooted in African philosophy and culture, which entails the belief that one's humanity is defined and fulfilled through relationships with others realizing that it has been over-generalized and deserves much more analysis to get to a deeper understanding (Steenkamp et al., 2022). Practitioners of ELAS strive to pass on what they steward to future generations in a better state than when received and contribute to the regeneration of ecosystems.

## ECOCENTRIC LEADERSHIP AS STEWARDSHIP FRAMEWORK

We propose the ELAS framework (see Figure 1) grounded in ecocentrism. To the nine dimensions of April et al. (2013), we add Layer I—Ecocentric Ontology as a grounding layer. As an additional dimension, #A, we added—Connecting with land, place, and the subtle—highlighting that “we are of the land” and in close biophysical intraconnection with our surroundings. The 10 dimensions of ELAS can be understood as stepping stones, building on one another, but should not be seen as a linear causal process, rather as important ingredients to work within ecological transformation.

Our framework, which emerged out of a two-year cooperative inquiry process, incorporates adaptive governance structures grounded in relational ontology while prioritizing our intraconnectedness in decision-making processes. It emphasizes collaborative approaches that engage diverse stakeholders in addressing systemic and ecological challenges. By synthesizing these perspectives, we aim to contribute to the leadership discourses with a practice-informed theoretical foundation for collective leadership practices that integrate ecological responsibility and transformative partnerships.

We start with the grounding Layer I and then introduce each dimension and emphasize what is necessary from an ecocentric stance.

### Layer I: Ecocentric ontology

Repatterning from an anthropocentric toward an ecocentric worldview is a core aspect of our work on ELAS. We see Layer I (Ritter et al., 2025) as the precondition. We suggest the corresponding action logic as “making explicit the ecocentric worldview and relational ontology.”

Ecocentrism, recognized as one of the four principal philosophies of nature (alongside anthropocentrism, pathocentrism, and biocentrism) appears to imply, through its terminology, the presence of a central point of reference. However, it is often alternatively referred to as holism, precisely because it resists the notion of a singular center, emphasizing instead the interdependence and intrinsic value of all components within the ecological whole.

### #A: Connecting with land, place, and the subtle

*Connecting with land, place, and the subtle* is to us crucial to begin with when entering into any organizational collaboration. Intentionally relating is where major shifts toward an ecocentric worldview can germinate from. This dimension is preliminary for an ecocentric worldview becoming an embodied practice that is context-sensitive and fosters relationality with all involved—humans and more-than-humans (e.g., plants, animals, mountains, rivers). Therefore, the action logic of this additional dimension is “Honoring and working with our interspecies connection and the geographical place we find ourselves in.”

The profound reciprocal intraconnection needs to be enlivened by connecting with land, place, and the subtle. This understanding is supported by nature practices (e.g., Kimmerer, 2020; Sägerser & Förster, 2025), drawing on indigenous sources. Thoreau (1854), Bateson (1991), and others who explore the profound reciprocal interconnections between humans and the more-than-human world, deconstructing separation, also work toward this. This enables a deep sense of belonging and entails engagement with people and actors embedded in the place.

Consequently, for example, rivers and mountains are valued as kin, reestablishing our bonds as responsible partners as humans.



**FIGURE 1** Ecocentric leadership as stewardship approach.

Following Arkedis et al. (2023, p. 15), leadership should “... draw upon the strengths and knowledge of local leaders and ... align the leadership work to these.” More-than-human voices can also be included through rituals.

Engaging with land, place, and the subtle begins a more profound journey that enables a sense of belonging as a key ingredient to embodying stewardship. Acknowledging and nurturing these intrinsic connections offers preconditions for moving toward a culture of care and kinship. In this potentially transformative space, the scars of the past and perpetuating separation patterns also get addressed, healed, and transcended.

## #B: Personal mastery

The action logic from “Personal growth and enhancement: abilities and capabilities” is adapted to “Commitment to a continuous practice of inner work.”

Personal Mastery requests continuous practice and humility, including “to embrace a more holistic approach, to embrace subjectivity and spirituality” (Western, 2019, p. 278). This work cannot be done alone, and building individual and collective capacities as an ongoing commitment is paramount. It requires reflective practitioners who approach their actions and those of peers with a loving

and critical perspective. This results in a continuous process of adapting and transformative learning. In an ELAS, we consider it to be essential to

1. co-create and co-hold safe enough spaces (Singer-Brodowski et al., 2022) where the relationships between humans and more-than-humans are based on mutual commitment, compassion, trust, and shared risk,
2. work with trauma dynamics (Maté, 2009) on a personal, inter-generational, and collective level,
3. look at trauma healing and conflict transformation from both a perspective of neuroscience (e.g., Singer & Engert, 2019) and wisdom traditions and philosophies (e.g., Topa & Narvaez, 2022), and
4. explore and work on dismantling colonial and internalized patterns (Förster et al., 2024)

As this kind of work addresses deeply rooted issues, it is essential to include wider ways of knowing to contribute to navigating complexity (Ritter & Zamierowski, 2021) collectively with care and compassion, laying the foundation for new ways of relating, interacting, and perceiving the world as an interdependent system of systems. These diverse ways of knowing help us question our perception and gain more insights through more subtle signals and impulses, similar to our cognitive capacities (Heron & Reason, 2008; Rajagopalan, 2020).

### #C: Personal intention

The dimension title was adapted from “Personal Vision” to *Personal Intention*. As visions are projections on how the future could become “if, ...,” they often prevent us from being available and present for unfoldings that emerge in the very moment. Emergent processes contain, however, crucial information for the pathway and steps ahead. Having an explicit collective intention for an undertaking helps to be open to what wants to happen rather than what we want to happen, yet, at the same time, have a clear direction for what and toward what we align our shared resources.

The action logic was adapted from “Clarity of vision and commitment through action” to “Clarity of intention and commitment through being and acting.” How we are present and embody our attitudes and values, ethically and responsibly, is of great importance (Pichlak, 2024). It can be considered work to cultivate our aptitudes and foster individual and collective practices to ensure alignment of personal and shared intention guided by our “joint ontological north star.”

### #D: Fostering relationships and transformative learning

The dimension title “Mentoring” was adapted to *Fostering relationships and transformative learning*. Collaboration and co-creation go beyond mentoring. When working on societal change and fostering transformative partnerships, building relationships between different parties to enable collective transformative learning is a key task, which includes considerations of decoloniality (Förster et al., 2024). In transformative processes, power relations and dynamics must also be addressed and transformed. Thus, (dis)empowerment forms a key lens through which to examine partnerships (Avelino, 2021). When speaking of transformative partnerships, distinguishing them from other forms of partnerships, we refer to capacities that help us revisit whether our partnerships are indeed transformative for all involved, for example:

1. Maintaining connection, also when tensions arise and bearing liminality (Sägesser et al., 2024)
2. Making transparent and addressing (hidden) power relations and dynamics, mechanisms of (dis)empowerment
3. Fostering generative solutions that enhance both partners and their respective networks and engaging in joint processes of meaning making
4. Seeing each other as teachers and learners simultaneously
5. Exploring embodied spirituality, or in the words of Western (2019, p. 279), “to re-engage as humans on a journey, to share stories, and rediscover mythos and the shared leadership spirit.”

The action logic from “Paying attention and responding to the needs of others” was also adapted to “Caring for mutual relationships across diverse stakeholders and creating alignment in diversity.” When collaboratively working on deeply ingrained and transversal patterns, the care for mutual relationships is vital for purposes, such as:

1. Being in inquiry and exploring the roots of the current symptoms from different angles, perspectives, and experiences
2. Approaching complex challenges by paying attention and being responsi(ve)ble to a wide range of signals coming from diverse corners of the ecological system
3. Continuously learning, adapting, improving, and upgrading
4. Genuinely honoring diverse perspectives and working on shared alignment where all requests and needs are acknowledged and included

## 5. Welcoming vulnerability and sensitivities in ourselves and others (see also #G)

### #E: Valuing diversity and sharing power

The action logic was adapted from “Purposefully seeking out and valuing different inputs and people” to “Purposefully seeking out, valuing and connecting different voices and perspectives.” Building on the action logic of “Fostering relationships and transformative learning” further underlines the importance of inclusion, diversity, and equity and enhances collective practice spaces to learn the art of being with “both and more.” Only this can enable a multi-perspectivity to arise and to address deeply rooted issues in a more differentiated light, creating a shared understanding to move to an ecocentric perspective. For transformational partnerships, it is vital to balance between louder and more silent, younger and older, more voices from across the globe, and seek ways to include, especially, more-than-human voices (e.g., representation of legal personhood of rivers as in New Zealand). Thus giving space to a transversal approach with all its unlearning, relearning, and transformative learning entailed. A key is to go beyond disciplines, embracing a transdisciplinary approach that facilitates onto-epistemological shifts (Max-Neef, 2005), allowing for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). By going through the repatterning, the often sensitive topic of sharing power needs to be addressed (Arkedis et al., 2023, p. 15). This with the intention to collectively address the preconditions for dismantling colonial and internalized unhealthy patterns in groups, building on #B.

### #F: Working with clear guiding questions

The dimension title “Shared Vision” was adapted to “Working with clear guiding questions,” moving from a vision-based perspective to an inquiry-based approach to processes—see also dimension #C. This means moving away from solutionism (Morozov, 2013), acknowledging that there lies beauty in not having the answers yet, and being comfortable with holding the questions. Working with a clear guiding question ensures intentionality in actions and decisions and ensures that endeavors are anchored in inquiry. This entails exploring with curiosity, compassion, and care, grappling with known unknowns and being open to uncertainty and unknown unknowns. An inquiry-based approach is vital for engaging in transformative work and partnership, including exploring hidden aspects or unresolved festering dynamics. Working with clear guiding questions, upgrades from vision-based to inquiry-based processes.

The action logic from “Clarity of vision of, and commitment to a just society” was adapted to “Shared inquiry and commitment to inter-generational, intra-generational, and inter-species justice” to further enhance the approach into a more collective perspective and being inclusive of different generations of humans and their interrelationality as well as the relationship with more-than-human beings. Here, cues are taken from Arkedis et al.’s focus on common challenge and shared purpose (2023, p. 15).

Also, Rockström et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of shared inquiry and commitment to justice across generations, within generations, and among species to maintain a safe and sustainable global ecosystem. They highlight decision making as a critical aspect of navigating this complexity. Making decisions can be intimidating, as consequences of our actions are met with fear or might be faced with power-over dynamics (Avelino, 2021). Effective decision making in a polycrisis requires continuous evaluation, openness to change, and responsiveness to evolving needs and uncertainties, rather than rigid future projections (see #C). This adaptive approach enhances the capacity to act as transformative partners.

### #G: Taking risks and embracing complexity

The dimension title from “Risk Taking and Experimentation” was adapted to “Taking Risks and Embracing Complexity.”

The capacity to navigate complexity with a certain sense of ease can only surface when individually and collectively risk-taking and humbleness are embraced in the eyes of complexity that our minds might never understand all at once. Then, a sense of surrender for the work at stake replaces the potential anxieties, doubts, or other internalized sabotaging mechanisms.

We build here, especially on the work of Spiller et al. (2015) with their work on “Wayfinding Leadership,” the ability of people in leadership roles and their respective teams to navigate through complex and uncertain environments with groundedness, shared values, and calling upon wider ways of knowing to co-guide the shared intention toward fruition and meaningful action. This notion, which we also built in ELAS, highlights the importance of guiding and nurturing the process rather than exerting traditional hierarchical control. It encompasses a set of skills that call up the capacities and enable everyone involved to navigate ambiguity, adapt to changing circumstances instantly, and make informed decisions in the face of uncertainty.

We adapted the action logic from “Courageousness from openness to new ideas” to “Bravely navigating uncertainty and ambiguity and giving space to

emergence.” As the Cynefin theory suggests, the “causal relationships [of components] are entangled and dynamic and the only way to understand the system is to interact” (Snowden & Zhen, 2021, p. 16). Hence, embracing complexity involves adopting a more flexible and iterative approach, allowing for experimentation, learning, and emergent solutions. Similarly, Theory U (Scharmer, 2009) names a threshold moment where dropping assumptions, letting go, and emptying oneself are paramount to navigating uncertainty and ambiguity. Bravely embracing—especially in transformative partnerships—allows space for emergence and taking risks, ultimately leading to the ability to navigate complexity across systems. As Arkedis et al. pointed out, “Leadership challenges often exist across multiple levels and boundaries of systems and differences” (2023, p. 15).

### #H: Vulnerability and maturity

The action logic from “Being authentic and open to learning from others” was adapted to “Acting from a place of connection and being open to learning.” Authenticity and openness are sourced from a place of connectedness: to self, others, the world, and the subtle.

Interrelational ontology suggests an interdependence between our state of being and our engagement in the world. Hence, how we engage with the world influences our way of being. It is a continuous process of balancing personal and collective aspects of being and doing that inform and influence each other. It is important to recognize and incorporate different wisdom traditions and philosophies, such as, Ubuntu (Steenkamp et al., 2022) or the Rainmaker. The Rainmaker story is one of an older man being called to a region in China that suffered from a great drought, and through being there cultivating a state of centeredness (the inner and outer being interconnected), it eventually rains again, and the natural order is re-established. It speaks of the great paradox of “... there is no causality [and yet], the two things simply belong together ...” (Sabini, 2022, p. 211). These two examples of philosophies belonging to different cosmologies emphasize interdependence and permeability. We approach stewardship from an understanding that *what* is done is equally important as *how* it is done. For entering into transformative partnerships, allowing vulnerability seems a critical ingredient that (a) allows us to mature, (b) is a token toward establishing trust-filled bonds and connections beyond just the functional roles and tasks, and (c) fosters a sense of belonging, ending a false sense of separation (Western, 2019, p. 271). The mirroring effect between the so-called inner and outer, the “personal” and the “collective,” is present in every interaction in an ecosystem.

### #I: Raising awareness

We adapted the action logic from “Championing stewardship and the common good” to “Embodying leadership as stewardship and showing up collectively for the common good.”

In our eyes, ELAS speaks to a key responsibility of practitioners and transformative partnerships to care for and protect life in all its expressions—human and more-than-human—and to create the preconditions for life-affirming actions. Becoming aware and sensitizing oneself and the broader network toward an ecocentric worldview is essential.

From an ecocentric perspective, raising awareness entails creating processes and practices for entering into a deeper relationship with the surroundings, leading to more compassion and care by understanding the importance of seeing oneself as part of and thus protecting living systems. As Sägerser and Förster (2025) conclude, there is ample evidence that the recognition and awareness of the human embeddedness in ecosystems are key for our flourishing within the planetary boundaries. Clarifying from which perspective and, therefore, the awareness we act and relate was also highlighted by the International Panel for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2022) that “people conceive of or relate to nature in multiple and often complementary ways: living from, with, in, and as nature.” Raising awareness and creating spaces that deepen the relating and stewarding can be brought forward through various ways, such as education, experience-based learning, transformative partnerships, and transcontextual learning inspired by, for example, Art of Hosting (Sandfort et al., 2012), Generative Scribing and Social Field Resonance (Ritter et al., 2023), audio-visual, and storytelling formats.

### #J: Embracing uncertainty and open results

We adapted the dimension title from “Delivering Results” to *Embracing uncertainty and open results*, as we see it as a crucial contribution to our Leadership as Stewardship approach to shift from the attitude of wanting to achieve a specific result to an attitude that accepts and embraces uncertainty and complexity (see also #G) keeping a certain openness to the exact manifestation of our intention (see also #F) and the respective objectives. Instead of trying to find a single correct answer or solution, it encourages exploring multiple perspectives and diverse viewpoints to better understand complexity.

We adapted the action logic from “Demonstrating commitment and urgency through delivery” to “Demonstrating commitment and urgency through perseverance.” With

perseverance, we include the idea of thinking in extended time arcs, specifically the next seven generations and the safe and just Earth system boundaries (ESBs) (Rockström et al., 2023).

This extended time frame allows for in-depth exploration, reflective learning, and the cultivation of shared wisdom, leading to meaningful actions and practices. This is a contribution to the ongoing evolution of our ELAS framework. We understand that the typical Western way of meeting urgency makes us, collectively speaking, want to accelerate our reactions to urgent issues—a rather fix-and-fight approach. We suggest not closing our eyes mindlessly to the urgencies at hand but instead leaning into an attitude of—in the words of Akomolafe (2021)—“the times are urgent, let us slow down.” When slowing down, we can start to understand and maybe even relate to the deeper root causes and issues below the surface with great shared awareness and compassion for the urgency at hand. From this widened understanding, we may accelerate, leapfrog, or continue steadily with greater clarity and stay, as suggested in #F, adaptive in complex situations, leading to greater coherence (Guenther, 2022) in the social field. The concept of coherence in social fields (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023; Scharmer et al., 2022) underscores the importance of considering the interconnectedness of the social system in transformative change. Field coherence is characterized as a dynamic state between individuals, their work, and life contexts, fostering genuine connections with the broader environment. Emphasizing the need to listen to the social field, the approach aims to enable transformative change by radiating qualities, attracting support, fostering co-creation, and addressing underlying root issues. Coherence indicators include trust, care, easeful collaborations, and inclusive participation, facilitating collective responsibility and the realization of full potential in both individual and societal contexts.

## Multidimensionality of the framework

The ELAS framework can be viewed as nested within a conceptual lens (Ritter et al., 2025); see Figure 2. The conceptual lens is a double funnel, where the central layer is I: Relational Ontology—Ecocentrism. Underlying this are diverse cosmologies—ways of understanding the origins, structure, and nature of the universe, along with humanity’s place within it, shaping a relational ontology grounded in an ecocentric perspective. Embracing such a worldview involves recognizing and valuing these varied cosmologies, including creation narratives that encompass physical, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions.

The relational ontology: ecocentric worldview as Layer I forms the ground from which ELAS stems and is

practiced. Moving up and outward, the dimensions #A–#J are nested and traverse the three layers: II, Multiple Epistemologies; III, Relational Fabric in the Pluriverse; and IV, Collective Practices and Collective Capacities leading to ultimately V, the Visible Outcomes and Actions. Hence, there is a multidimensionality to the proposed framework of Ecocentric Steward Leadership.

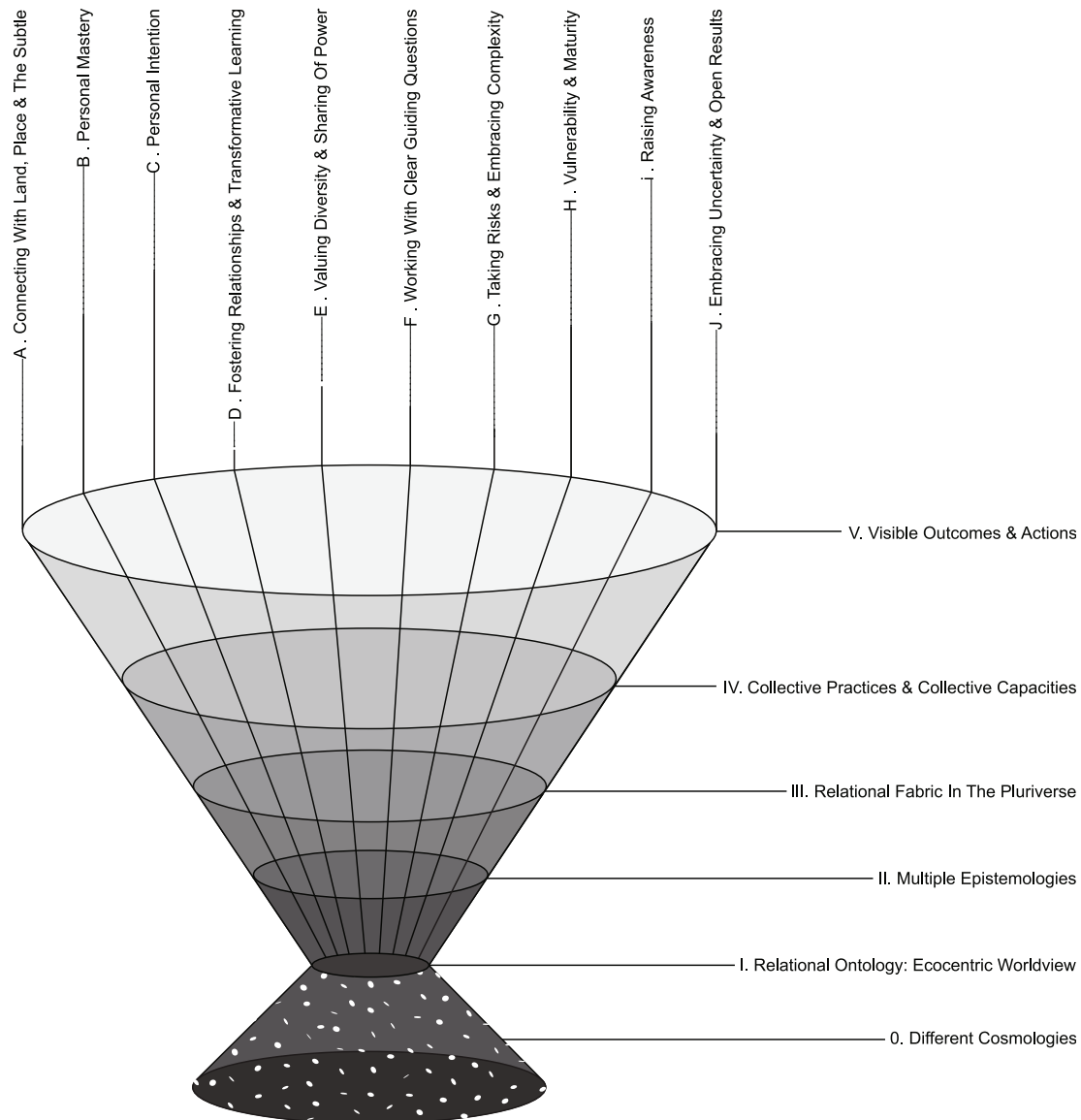
## WHY AN ECOCENTRIC LEADERSHIP AS STEWARDSHIP FRAMEWORK MATTERS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

To explore the above-introduced framework with a real-life example, we introduce our case study—the WEFo—followed by applying the Ecocentric Stewardship as Leadership framework to essential transformative partnerships and the learnings and insights that emerged from this commitment in the described case study.

### Case description: World Ethic Forum background and context

WEFo (2024), which serves as a case, was initiated to weave together diverse approaches and best practices from across sectors, places, and scales toward an ethic grounded in ecocentrism. WEFo brings together people in a transdisciplinary setting, in yearly in-person gatherings, and in collaborating throughout the year online on different thematic strands. The Firekeeper Circle forms the main organ with 60+ global thought and action practitioners (diverse decision makers, artists, activists, practitioners, community and initiative leaders, as well as active citizens and researchers) already working from an ecocentric worldview and knowing both the challenges and the potential stemming from such an ontology. Over the coming years, WEFo sees itself growing into a decentralized knowledge and wisdom hub, fostering a culture of care and kinship through education and mutual learning, information and storytelling, and transformative partnerships and actions.

The WEFo especially focuses on the layers below the visible realm (Ritter et al., 2025), where mindsets, worldviews, and ontologies are cultivated, informing our context-sensitive decisions and actions. It asks, “How do we come to a new responsibility and life-affirming relationship with ourselves and the Earth, practicing and translating it into meaningful actions in diverse cross-sectoral and trans-contextual themes?” The WEFo understands itself as an ongoing inquiry process on the aforementioned questions supported by action research



**FIGURE 2** Ecocentric leadership as stewardship nested in conceptual lens.

for transformation (ART) inspired by the work of Bradbury (2022), who suggests that “... action research for transformation (ART) invites change leaders and educators to help make transformations happen ...” Through ART, the WEFo fosters a collaborative approach for actionable insights on collective practices and collective capacities to enable significant and systemic shifts toward transformative partnerships.

However, while working toward a shared and higher intention, we grapple with the growing sense of division in the world. Within that, we see ELAS as a vital approach to contribute to systemic change in and across sectors and places through deepening alignment between partners and transcending the ingrained patterns of power abuse in collaborations and partnerships.

## Zooming into transformative partnership of the World Ethic Forum

Practicing ELAS, the WEFo has engaged in multiple partnerships to create a healthy and thriving network of actors and stakeholders dedicated to the transformation toward a culture of care and kinship across sectors, contexts, and scales rooted in the understanding of the importance of wholesome approaches. We would like to highlight two types:

1. Strategic long-term institutional partnerships
2. A local partnership with a village, its institutions, and its close connection to its land

We understand partnerships for transformation as dynamic spaces of reciprocal co-learning, where collective engagement unfolds as an explorative journey and profound sensing. Partnerships encapsulate a comprehensive and interconnected approach for navigating leadership and societal change. The essence of partnership, as understood here, aligns with the overarching concept of cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships between entities and individuals. These collaborative endeavors unite entities in a shared pursuit of common goals, accentuating collaboration and cooperation to achieve outcomes that transcend individual capacities. Guided by shared responsibility, interdependence, open communication, trust, and reliability principles, such transformative partnerships acknowledge that success hinges on our way of being, relating, and practicing together. This conceptualization positions partnerships as fluid, evolving relationships that necessitate continual commitment, care, and collaboration.

### Strategic long-term institutional partnerships

The WEFo has an institutional partnership with the WFC, recognizing the potential synergy between their emphasis on solutions and its own distinctive focus on ways of being and relating. This collaboration combines WFC expertise with WEFo's emphasis on holistic and relational approaches.

It became apparent early in the partnership that there were significant, and often also subtle, cultural differences in the way of convening, strategizing, and approaching societal challenges between the two organizations. The WEFo way of working was not fully compatible or directly understandable to all WFC members. By the end of the first year, it was recognized that while some members of the WFC found a vibrant connection with WEFo's approach, others were grappling with how such an inquiry-based approach, focusing on the ontological dimension, could lead to the urgently necessary shifts. Nevertheless, the profound impact of a respectful and mutual partnership became evident for both organizations. Engaging at a deep level allowed people from both organizations to witness each other's vulnerabilities, opening up to learning from one another and fostering meaningful encounters that left lasting effects on both entities. We reached out with the following questions to three members of the organizations:

1. Was there something, or were there things that have shifted in your approach to your work through your collaboration with the WEFo/the WFC?

2. And if so, what would have been these few things that may have shifted or even changed how you do your work, including, your gatherings?

The outcome of this reflection revealed that WEFo's commitment to highlighting both ecocentric and relational ontologies had a profound impact on the WFC, as underscored by the following quotes: "We strengthened our strategy by integrating the rights of future generations and nature as a new and major part of our operations." Franz-Theo Gottwald is a Supervisory Board member of the WFC. Further, Gottwald and Alexandra Wandel, Executive Director of the WFC, expanded, "We listen even more deeply than before to the voices of the youth in all our activities. We also focus more on the ethical implications of best future policies."

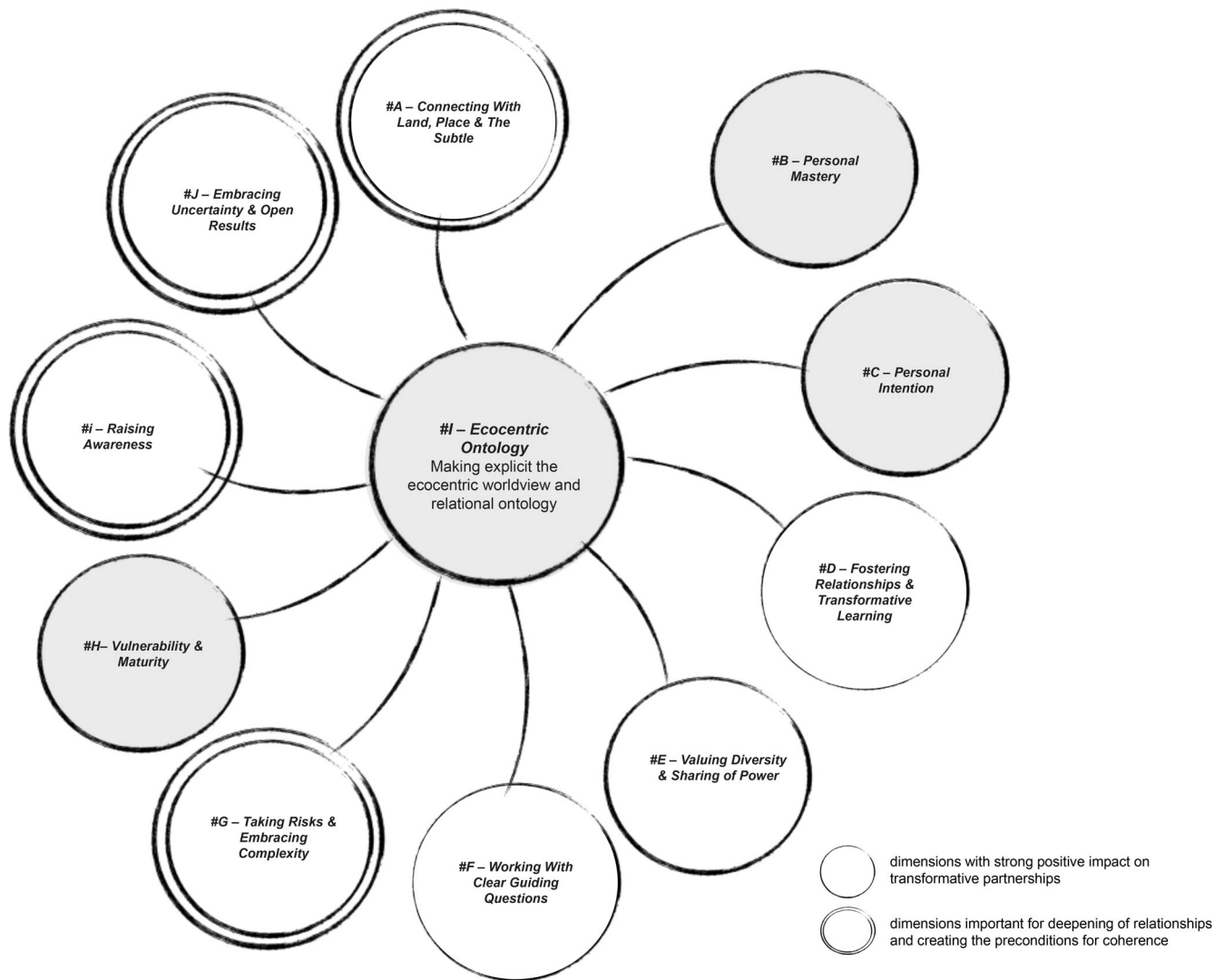
On the other hand, when asking Linard Bardill, Co-Founder of WEFo, about the effect of the partnership with the WFC, the following aspects of transformative partnerships were highlighted (original in German, own translation):

"Through the willingness of various members of the WFC to engage with our way of meeting at our Firekeeper meetings, the WFC brings important impulses into our circle. People with great experiences became part of exploring what we mean by a culture of radically shared aliveness. Through the openness of results and the willingness to hear and reflect on all voices equally, the WFC contributed and continues to contribute decisively to making a culture of kinship and care, of permeability and collective intelligence tangible."

He then further enhanced that, "When people who are used to having a significant influence on other people through their charisma and what they say are prepared to get involved in a circle in which all voices are heard on an equal base, this results in significantly increased focus and attention and enhanced co-creative power. This also has an impact on the outcome of the working groups. Contemporary ethics was thus addressed in a much more comprehensive manner. The field for the actual manifestation of new responses thus becomes a joint opening toward transformative approaches to urgent problems in economics, education, society, agriculture, health, etc."

Relating this to the above-explored ELAS approach, we see Layer I and mainly the dimensions #D-#F essential to be fostered together (see Figure 3).

Looking at how the partnership is described and understood by WEFo and WFC highlights that both parties recognize transformative momentum, which is only made possible in the coming together of both institutions under an umbrella of embracing a culture of care and kinship or ELAS. Although they emphasized different aspects of the approach during in-depth



**FIGURE 3** Transformative partnerships in ecocentric leadership as stewardship.

conversations and exchanges, we understood that all dimensions were present and appreciated by both partners. As action researchers, we ask ourselves, “What ingredients make this partnership transformative?” A preliminary conclusion is drawn from having a different ontological north star and another “how we do what we do,” moving from an anthropocentric to ecocentric approach.

### Local partnership with a village, its institutions, and close connection to its land

Aligned with the ELAS framework, which emphasizes the profound connection between land and place, WEFo actively sought partnerships to honor this dimension on various levels. One form of transformative partnership

was to invite a local citizen with deep multigenerational ties and still living in the respective village to join the Firekeeper Circle. This led to a vibrant exchange and empowered both partners to deepen their relationship to place and the local and international embeddedness as reciprocal learning. For example, local clay from the foot of the nearby glacier was worked into a flute by a villager. It was the sound of that flute that opened the WEFo Firekeeper gathering 2024.

Simultaneously, WEFo forged institutional partnerships with the local village’s government and administration and several locally anchored businesses. The local mayor was also invited to fully participate in its Firekeeper Gathering and thus become part of the circle. Even though the transformative characters in the latter were on a different level, a shift in, for example, communication and PR strategies (more nature-based) was witnessed alongside adaptability to more-than-human

needs (e.g., permission for dogs to enter buildings and having water available), increasing openness to what is necessary instead of insisting on fixed outputs (e.g., in year 2 from a process perspective the public event was not as important and thus postponed to a later year in a joint decision-making process).

Additionally, as part of WEFO's commitment to village partnerships, it engaged with the local community during the ViVa la Via street festival, rescheduled to accommodate the participation of the Firekeepers. It included rituals shared by Firekeepers from their lineages to more consciously connect with the more-than-human, for example, the land, the river, or the glacier. The above observations and stories relate mainly to dimensions #G, #i, #J, and #A from our ELAS framework (see Figure 3).

## DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

With the 10 dimensions (#A–J) of the “ELAS” framework, nested in the five layers of the conceptual lens, we bring back ecocentrism to Organizational Studies while practicing it continuously at the WEFO. The framework we presented here reflects our practice and experience with transformative partnerships in the light of the polycrisis thus far.

With our inquiry into how ELAS manifests in partnerships for transformation, we were able to add first insights into how these institutional and long-term partnerships have already transformed mindsets and actions for the ones involved. Having this approach as an explicit framework available to map the unfolding of partnerships helps us gain clarity in terms of key elements of our practice and differences from anthropocentric ontology.

Reflecting on WEFO's learning in these transformative partnerships, several aspects of the approach with a positive impact on the collaborations were used (Figure 3).

There is a further need for more refinement, for example, in how subtle power inequalities can be articulated or how more capacity for conflict resolution and trauma-sensitive approaches can be built, working with personal, inter-generational, and collective trauma dynamics (Maté, 2009). Also, the deepening of relationships and creating the preconditions for coherence as a larger group with the Firekeeper Circle needs further focus on the dimensions highlighted in Figure 3. #B Personal Mastery and #C Personal Intention were—not surprisingly—the dimensions least made explicit in the reflection on transformative partnerships. Similar to Layer I Ecocentric Ontology, we are convinced that it starts with ourselves. Thus, continuous personal practice and clarity of intention are essential.

Approaching this with humility, we are in a continuous process of practice both on ourselves and in the ELAS practice. This entails individual and collective practices acting from a place of connection to oneself, others, the world, and the subtle. One reflection on the exploration and proposition above is the importance of seeing oneself and other stakeholders as practitioners and, therefore, seeing the work at hand and the issues at stake as a continuous practice allowing our individual and collective capacities to refine. Practicing requires being mindful of and attentive to creating meaningful and regenerative impact for all parts of the broader ecosystems involved, both current and future generations.

In terms of transferability, we see the ELAS framework as offering a generative orientation that others engaged in practitioner research and transformative partnerships can adapt to their own contexts. While grounded in our experiences at the WEFO, the 10 dimensions and 5 layers are articulated in a way that invites inquiry for different organizational cultures. For example, practitioners might test how dimensions such as Embracing Uncertainty and Open Result play out in their own partnerships or explore how coherence-building practices translate to their own institutional endeavors.

In the context of practitioner research, we understand rigor as a deep commitment to reflexivity, contextual grounding, and ethical accountability to the respective ecosystems. This includes staying attuned to the often-unseen dynamics (e.g., power asymmetries or trauma residues) that also shape transformation processes. We invite others to build upon, challenge, and refine this framework, contributing to a shared field of inquiry that honors both scholarly depth and practical wisdom.

## CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings suggest that leadership grounded in ecocentric stewardship fosters co-responsibility for the commons, relational engagement, and context-sensitive governance, offering a promising foundation for addressing the interconnected challenges of the polycrisis. Indeed, we believe that this proposed approach to leadership is itself a lever for systems change. By situating leadership within an eco-social systems perspective, the study bridges theory and practice, providing a framework for navigating in increasingly complex environments. This contribution to leadership theory advances the application of Leadership as Stewardship, encouraging leadership as collective, distributed, and rooted in relational care for both human and more-than-human systems.

However, while the ELAS framework has shown value within the WEFo context, its broader applicability and long-term effectiveness remain areas for further research to examine the feasibility of this shift in diverse organizational contexts. Key questions for future inquiry include the following:

1. What are we inviting to learn regarding how we behave as humans in transformative partnership, also with more-than-human entities? How does that inform our actions?
2. How can a diverse group of people assume ELAS to be in practice together and enter transformative partnerships that enhance field coherence?
3. What are individual and collective capacities to deepen our relationship with each other, the natural world, place, and the wider ecosystem?

As leadership in the polycrisis era demands continuous adaptation and context-sensitivity, future inquiry must focus on developmental learning edges, iterative processes, and collective practices that allow for the evolution of leadership paradigms that are fit for addressing the urgent challenges of our time. Hence, this study advocates for an ongoing commitment to reflection and action. In advancing leadership theory, particularly in ecocentric and relational contexts, we highlight the importance of caring as nature, rather than simply caring for nature. Ultimately, the research calls for frameworks that encourage transdisciplinary collaboration and support the development of leadership paradigms equipped to foster transformation in a rapidly changing world.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Luea Ritter:** Conceptualization; methodology; project administration; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Anais Sägerser:** Conceptualization; methodology; project administration; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We, the co-authors, declare the following potential conflicts of interest associated with this work: (a) Institutional Affiliation: We acknowledge that the case described in this paper is conducted within the organization to which both authors are publicly affiliated, the World Ethic Forum. (b) Volunteering and Subcontracting: Although the World

Ethic Forum does not directly employ the researchers, we both are subcontractors, and although most of our work has been done through volunteering, there are instances where our work has been financially remunerated. (c) Mitigation of Bias: We have used the organization we are affiliated with as a case and thus described partially our own experience, practice, models, and work. This is entirely transparent within the paper. (d) Transparency and Accountability: The research for and writing of this paper has not been funded and has been undertaken in volunteer hours. We obtained consent from the organization as well as those we are citing directly (from World Future Council and the chair of World Ethic Forum) to quote them and publish this.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted under the auspices of the World Ethic Forum, which does not have a formal institutional review board. Ethical principles were followed throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring respect and dignity in all interviews and interactions. The research adhered to high ethical standards consistent with transdisciplinary and relational ethics frameworks that prioritize minimizing harm and fostering shared responsibility. Participants were fully voluntary and for all direct citations from interviews and conversations explicit approval was obtained. No ethical concerns were identified. The authors fully declare their conflicts of interest.

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