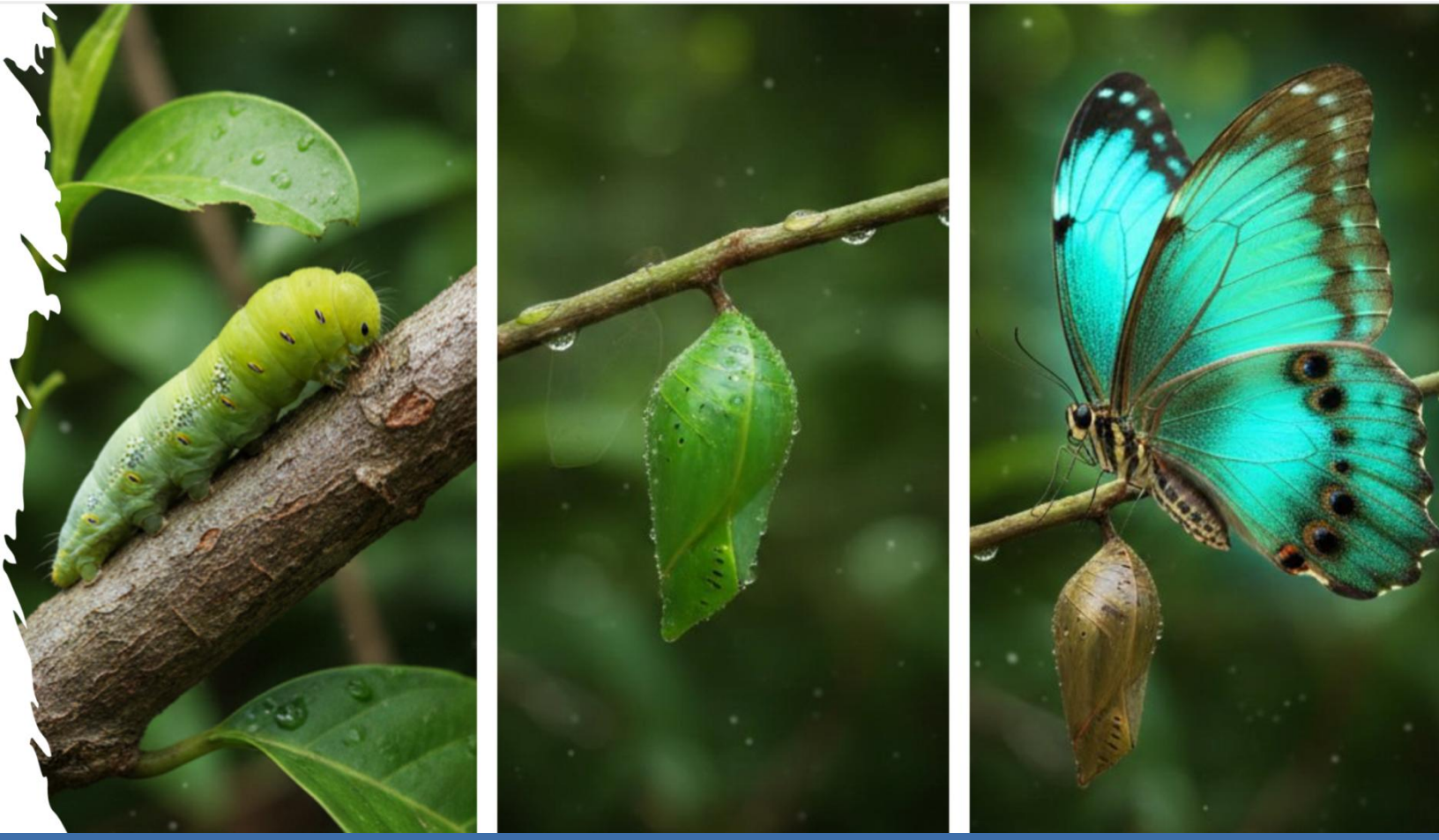
IMAGO
Global Grassroots



Imaginal Leadership in Practice

A Field Guide for Threshold Moments

Zachary Green, Johanan Rivera

July 6, 2026

Table of Contents

Imaginal Leadership in Practice

A Field Guide for Threshold Moments

Zachary Gabriel Green & Johanan Rivera

This guide is a companion to the theoretical proposition: *Imaginal Leadership: Empathy, Inner Work, and Leadership in a Liminal World*. That piece develops the conceptual architecture, the biology of metamorphosis, the argument about liminal conditions, the critique of existing leadership frameworks, the account of empathy as structural adhesive. This guide translates that architecture into four practitioner questions and the disciplines that address them.

Reading the theoretical piece deepens the logic here, and the logic here enriches the reading there. Each stands on its own.

1. What Imaginal Leadership Is

Imaginal Leadership is a theory and practice of guiding human systems through genuine transformation: the kind that requires altered values, identities, and ways of working together, alongside new structures. Its central claim is that transformation emerges from within; the leader's work is to create and protect the conditions in which a system's own latent capacity for change can finally organize itself into something new.

The word imaginal is biological in origin, and the distinction from imaginative matters. In the metamorphosis of insects, imaginal discs are clusters of cells present since the larval stage that carry the encoded blueprint of the adult form (the wing, the eye, the antenna) long before the conditions for their development exist. They survive the dissolution of the larval body, activate when the organism is ready, grow toward one another, and self-organize into the adult structure through their own developmental logic. Imaginal Leadership names this same process in human systems: the activation of latent developmental potential that has been present all along, waiting for the conditions in which it can finally become what it always was capable of being.

Liminality describes the condition: the in-between state when old forms of certainty, role, and belonging have loosened, and new form has yet to gather. The imaginal process describes what is happening inside that condition: the active, organized work of carrying latent potential forward and building toward new structure. A liminal system and an imaginal system are at different stages of the same passage: the first has entered the dissolution; the second has found the conditions for what was latent to begin organizing. The leader's work is to move the system from the first toward the second.

Human organizations, families, communities, and societies undergo something analogous. Periods of genuine transformation involve real dissolution. Old forms of certainty, role, and belonging loosen. What comes next remains invisible for a time. In that liminal in-between, something is happening that is easy to miss: the system's imaginal capacity (the people, relationships, and practices that carry the latent pattern of what it is capable of becoming) is becoming available to organize into new form. Liminality is the field condition. The imaginal process is what leadership attends to within it.

The leader's task in that period is to hold the conditions in which that self-organization can happen: to hold, rather than to design or to accelerate.

These four questions are what that practice looks like when it is working.

Question 1: How Do I Know When I Am in a Liminal Condition?

The first challenge is recognition. Most organizations experience their liminal periods as dysfunction: slower decision-making, intensified conflict, surprising emotional reactions, meetings that feel off, conversations that go underground. Leaders are trained to correct these symptoms rather than read them as signals of a threshold condition worth inhabiting.

Liminality is the dissolving of the old form before the new form has gathered. It carries a particular quality of disorder: the feeling that the maps no longer correspond to the territory. People retain clarity about what they used to do and find themselves uncertain whether it still applies. They sense a replacement coming without being able to see its shape. In that uncertainty, human beings do predictable things, and knowing those predictions is among the most practically useful things a practitioner can carry.

Figure 1: What Liminality Looks Like in the Room

What You Observe	What It May Signal
Meetings are more polished; real questions go underground	People are managing the surface because the depth feels unsafe
Small disagreements become disproportionately charged	The conflict is carrying something larger than its apparent content: often identity, belonging, or unspoken loss
A particular person or subgroup becomes the focus of sustained criticism	The system is externalizing its anxiety; scapegoating is a group-level defense against uncertainty
People perform confidence that exceeds what they actually feel	The culture has communicated that expressed uncertainty reads as incompetence; the real state of the system has gone underground
Decisions are made and nothing changes	Compliance without genuine transition; the system has agreed on the surface while withdrawing underneath
Sudden intensity around seemingly procedural questions	Role and identity are unsettled; people are contending over process because the deeper losses have yet to be named

These signals, taken alone, mean little. Together, and especially when they represent a departure from how this group usually functions, they are worth taking seriously as indicators of a liminal condition requiring a different kind of leadership response.

The Difference that Changes the Practice

Once you can recognize a liminal condition, one question changes everything: Is this a problem to be solved, or a threshold to be inhabited?

A problem to be solved calls for diagnosis, intervention, and resolution. You identify the obstacle, remove or address it, and the system returns to function. Most leadership training is organized around this mode, and it serves a wide range of challenges well.

A threshold to be inhabited calls for something different. The disorientation is the system doing the work of transformation. Premature resolution is the primary danger. The practice shifts from fixing to holding; from answering to attending; from driving toward certainty to protecting the space in which something new can gather.

William Bridges, whose Transitions Model remains the most useful map of these dynamics, put the core distinction plainly: change is situational; transition is psychological. Organizations routinely manage the situational event (the restructuring, the merger, the strategic pivot) while failing to provide the conditions in which genuine psychological transition can happen. The result is

structural change without actual movement: the new arrangement in place, the old way of being still operative underneath.

Imaginal Leadership adds a further distinction. Beyond recognizing that transition is psychological, it asks: what is actually happening inside the psychological in-between? The biology offers an answer. The liminal in-between is a period of maximum invisible activity, when the system's imaginal capacity is finally able to activate and begin to organize. The leader's first task is to recognize that something is happening that deserves attention and a quality of presence distinct from management.

One practical sign that the imaginal process has begun: people who have been quiet start speaking, carrying a quality of knowing that stops a room. They are often the people the org chart would overlook: mid-level, or at the margin, or holding knowledge that the existing structure had no name for. When those voices surface and the room is spacious enough to receive them, something is gathering. The liminal condition made it possible; attending leadership makes it legible.

Question 2: What Does Inner Work Actually Look Like as a Daily Discipline?

Inner work is the practice most often mentioned and least often developed in leadership frameworks. It appears as an acknowledged necessity (leaders need self-awareness, emotional intelligence, the capacity to regulate under pressure) and then disappears into individual responsibility, individual therapy, or individual coaching, as though naming the concept were sufficient to produce the practice.

What practitioners deserve instead is the most practically important knowledge: what does this actually look like, before and during the moments that require it?

Before the Room: Processing as Preparation

The single most consistent finding from practitioners who work from this orientation is this: the inner work happens before the meeting. A leader who enters a difficult room still carrying their own anxiety about the strategic shift, their own grief about what is being lost, their own irritation at the person most likely to destabilize the conversation, that leader will find that the room feels it, even if nothing is said. The group is extraordinarily sensitive to the leader's interior state. What the leader has yet to metabolize in themselves, the group will be asked to carry.

Processing before presence is a discipline with specific practices:

Name your own stake. Before entering a room where you will be holding others through uncertainty, ask: what am I hoping for? What am I afraid of? What would I prefer to avoid? These are the interior landscape you need to know before you can navigate it with some degree of choice.

Locate your defensive impulses. Under pressure, most leaders have characteristic patterns: rushing to resolution, increasing control, becoming distant, over-explaining. Know yours. Recognizing when you are in them is the first act of choice.

Process in relationship, alongside solitude. The colleague you call before the meeting. The thought partner who asks you the question you are avoiding. The brief conversation that lets you say what you actually think before you have to hold what others think. This is deliberate use of relationship for the purpose of arriving prepared.

During the Room: Attending Without Absorbing

In liminal periods, the group generates anxiety, projection, and displaced conflict at elevated levels. The leader who can remain present without becoming a container for the group's anxiety, remaining regulated rather than either absorbing the field or deflecting it, changes the temperature of the room through presence alone. This is the effect of the inner work done before arrival, showing up in real time.

Two practices are worth naming as in-the-moment disciplines:

Track the room as a system. Who is speaking and who is silent? Where is the energy pooling? What is the conversation circling without landing? What is the room carrying that has yet to be named? These are group-level signals: they tell you something about the collective state of the system that no individual statement fully captures.

Name what is real. Bringing into the room what the room has been carrying in silence is among the most powerful and most underused acts available to a leader. The intention is to honor the tension, to signal that the room is spacious enough to hold what is actually happening, not to resolve it prematurely.

After the Room: Repair and Replenishment

Organizations that treat holding as a leadership function and build no structures of repair and replenishment for those who do it will exhaust the people who carry it. Inner work requires reciprocal relationship, genuine rest, and organizational cultures that recognize relational labor as real work, labor with its own cost and its own claim on institutional attention.

After difficult threshold work: debrief with a thought partner. Name what the room gave you to carry. Let it be received. In a leadership team, build the practice of collective reflection as organizational hygiene rather than therapy. The team that regularly pauses to ask what is happening in this system, and what that is asking of us, is building shared holding capacity and distributing the weight rather than concentrating it.

Question 3: Does My Organization Have a Holding Environment, or Only Individuals Who Hold?

This question is the one most practitioners do not know to ask, and the answer changes what is possible.

A holding environment is a structured relational field. The accumulated norms, practices, and cultural conditions within which people can name difficulty, surface real tension, and remain in relationship through disagreement without the whole collapsing. Its presence allows genuine transition. Its absence means that the work of holding concentrates in a small number of individuals who eventually exhaust, leave, or stop.

The Diagnostic Questions

These questions can be used individually as a reflective practice or collectively as a team inquiry. They are a mirror.

Figure 2: Diagnostic Questions

Question	What a Strong Answer Looks Like
What happens when someone names a real problem in a meeting?	The problem is engaged. The person who named it is trusted rather than quietly marked as difficult.
What does the organization do after a rupture?	Repair is part of the fabric, addressed explicitly. Damage is acknowledged before the system moves on.
How does the culture relate to uncertainty?	Uncertainty is named as information. Leaders can say "I don't know" and retain authority.
Who carries the relational labor of this organization?	The answer is distributed. When it concentrates consistently in particular people, often those with less formal authority, the holding is being performed by individuals rather than held by the organization.
What happens to someone who brings honest feedback that leadership finds uncomfortable?	Honest feedback is genuinely welcomed and acted on, rather than received warmly and penalized privately.

The Distinction that Matters Most

Individual acts of holding (the colleague who stays in contact with someone's grief, the leader who names what the room has been avoiding) can temporarily create the felt experience of a holding environment even when the structural conditions are absent. They serve as a bridge, and bridges have a load limit.

The colleague who holds the team through a strategic shift, year after year, with the organization developing none of the structural conditions that would distribute that work, that colleague eventually exhausts, leaves, or stops. The system benefits from what they built while remaining structurally unable to build it.

Building a holding environment is an act of organizational design. It asks: what practices does this system have for naming difficulty and honoring the person who names it? What happens after rupture: is repair part of the fabric, or does the system move on and leave the damage unaddressed? These are structural questions requiring structural answers.

Where to Begin When the Environment Is Absent

A practitioner reading this carries the authority to begin wherever they are. At the scale of a team, an individual can begin to shift the culture of a meeting: through the quality of their listening, through the willingness to name what is real, through the questions they ask before the group moves too quickly past what has just happened. These are small acts of holding that, accumulated across time and relationship, begin to build the relational infrastructure of a holding environment.

Finding others in the organization who share that orientation (across functions, across levels, across the formal lines of the org chart) allows something larger to form. In the language of the biology: the imaginal discs are finding each other. They grow toward one another along the chemical gradients the organism generates when it is ready for transformation. In human systems, those gradients are the practices of honest relationship: the conversation that names what everyone has been feeling and no one has yet said, the willingness of two people to reflect together on what their system is actually doing alongside what it says it is doing.

A concrete imaginal practice at this stage: map the discs in your own organization. Name (privately, or with a trusted partner) who in this system carries knowledge, relational fluency, or developmental capacity that the existing structure has yet to fully use. Who has been doing

holding work with no institutional recognition for it? Who speaks across levels, translates across difference, or sustains the conditions for others to function well, with none of that appearing in a job description? These are your organization's imaginal discs. The holding environment is built by finding these people, honoring what they carry, and creating the conditions in which they can finally work together rather than in parallel.

Organizational cultures change through the slow accumulation of practices that make different kinds of conversation possible: through individual commitment that becomes team discipline, through team discipline that becomes organizational template. The discs find each other. Gradually, and then all at once.

Question 4: What Does Active Emergence Look Like as a Leadership Practice?

This question addresses the most common misreading of this framework. Holding the in-between is demanding, invisible, continuous work, and it has a specific orientation that distinguishes it from waiting.

In the biological image, imaginal discs grow along chemical gradients, signals the organism generates in response to its own readiness for transformation. The process is active at every moment, even when it looks like stillness from the outside. The butterfly whose cocoon is opened early, to spare it the struggle of emergence, loses precisely the resistance it needs to develop the strength in its wings to fly. The assistance that removes the difficulty removes the capacity along with it.

Active emergence in organizational life has a parallel logic. The leader's task is to attend: to develop an eye for potential rather than product, to recognize early signs of something organizing before it can be named, to create the conditions in which what is latently present can finally become what it always was capable of being.

The Imaginal Disc Question

The single most practically powerful question this framework generates is this: who in this system carries what the new form needs?

Every organization in genuine transformation has people holding knowledge, relational skill, and developmental potential that the existing structure has yet to fully activate. They are often away from the center, the people whose contributions have been legible as temperament rather than strategy: the colleague who is good with people, the mid-level manager who holds pressure from above and below simultaneously, the community member who has been metabolizing complexity for years and receiving no institutional recognition for it.

These are the imaginal discs. The leader practicing active emergence learns to identify them, create the conditions in which they can find each other, and protect those early connections from being dissolved by the institutional gravity of the existing structure before they have had time to organize into something new.

But identifying the discs is not the same as activating them, and the biology is instructive about the difference. In metamorphosis, the discs do not begin to grow in conditions of safety. They activate under attack. The larval immune system registers them as foreign and moves against them; they must survive that assault, continuing to develop under pressure, until they are strong enough to out-compete the response. It is in metabolizing the immune reaction that the discs grow toward one another and differentiate into the structures of the adult form.

The organizational parallel is uncomfortable and important. A new coalition, a new way of working, a new configuration of authority will provoke a reaction from the existing system. That reaction is not evidence that the emerging form is wrong. It is part of the developmental sequence, the system's immune response to something it cannot yet recognize as its own. The leader's instinct is often to protect the fragile new thing by removing the friction around it. But the friction is doing work. It is frequently the pressure of being questioned, resisted, or misread that draws the imaginal discs toward one another, that turns scattered individuals who each carry something the new form needs into people who recognize each other and begin to act together. The practice is not to manufacture conflict, and not to rescue the emerging form from all of it, but to help what is forming survive the response long enough to metabolize it into something more durable than it could have become in conditions of ease.

Three Practices of Active Emergence

Listen before structuring. In any major organizational transition, conduct genuine individual listening before structural decisions harden, attending to what people are carrying, what they are proud of, what they fear losing, and what they sense is possible that has yet to be named. Return what you hear to the collective as a mirror: here is what we heard across these conversations. What do you notice? This practice slows the process in precisely the places where conventional change management moves fastest. That slowness is the work. It is the difference between a transition the system can genuinely inhabit and one it will perform on the surface while resisting underneath.

Hold strategic tensions long enough to feel their full weight. Most organizational transitions surface genuine competing values: between relational depth and operational scale, between mission fidelity and financial sustainability, between the intimacy of what was and the demands of what is coming. The practice is to hold these tensions in genuine collective engagement long enough for the group to feel what they are actually choosing between, rather than collapsing them into false resolution. Premature synthesis produces scar tissue. Genuine tension, held long enough, generates creative response and often reveals that people living at the organization's edges have been holding both sides of the tension simultaneously, far longer than the leadership conversation has acknowledged.

Design for emergence. Build containers that can hold experimentation, learning, and contradiction long enough for a more durable pattern to form. This requires remaining genuinely open to outcomes that cannot yet be predicted, and may not initially be preferred. Concretely: establish temporary structures, cross-functional working groups, or protected spaces that operate alongside the formal hierarchy long enough for new relational patterns to develop. When those groups produce something (an idea, a practice, a way of working), give it institutional support before the existing structure's gravity closes around it. Trust that the system contains more imaginal potential than the current structure has learned to recognize.

Reading the Morphogenetic Signals

Active emergence requires learning to read the signals that something imaginal is organizing before it can be fully named. In biology, imaginal discs grow toward one another along chemical gradients the organism generates when it is ready for transformation. In human systems, the equivalent signals are recognizable to a prepared eye.

Morphogenetic signals in organizational life include: a conversation that travels somewhere the usual conversations cannot; a working relationship between two people from different parts of the system that generates something neither could have produced alone; a question that surfaces in multiple rooms independently; a practice that emerges informally and spreads because it is meeting something real. These signals are the system generating the gradients along which its

imaginal capacity is beginning to organize. The leader who can recognize them, and who has the restraint to protect what is still forming rather than immediately institutionalizing it, is practicing active emergence.

A Note on Sequencing

The most common failure in organizational transformation is sequencing failure, the rush to structural resolution before the liminal in-between has done its work. An organization that restructures before the people living through it have been genuinely heard encodes something in the system's body: the memory of a bridge that collapsed before anyone could cross it. The next time a difficult transition is attempted, people hold back because the attempt has been registered as dangerous.

Active emergence is slower than conventional change management in the places where conventional change management moves fastest: the honest naming of loss, the surfacing of real tension, the protection of what is fragile and imaginal before it is exposed to the full pressure of the new structure. What it builds is more durable, grounded in what the system knows rather than what leadership assumed it knew.

A Note on Variation

These four questions are not a fixed sequence. No two organizations move through them at the same pace, and none arrives at the same result. Some organizations move through a liminal passage relatively quickly; others need far more in the way of environmental conditions (more holding, more time, more repair) before the same process can occur. The transformation of a small grassroots membership organization and the transformation of a large multilateral institution may draw on recognizably similar practices, and they will not look the same, move at the same rate, or arrive at the same form.

In metamorphosis, the same underlying process produces the monarch and the moth: different creatures, each fully realized, shaped by the particular gradients of its own development. What emerges from genuine transformation is meant to vary. An organization that has done this work does not come to resemble some template of the well-transformed organization; it becomes more fully itself. The biodiversity of expression (the range of forms that genuine transformation produces) is not a tolerable side effect of the work. From this framework's perspective it is among the most important things the work protects.

2. Moving Between the Imaginal and the Practical

A question that comes up whenever this framework meets practitioners is how the imaginal connects to the practical: how sensing what is forming in a system becomes the actual work of helping it form. The two are easy to hold apart, as though sensing what is imaginal in a system were an intuition that either visits a person or does not, and the practical were the separate business of running the meeting. In the work itself they are not separate, and neither one is enough on its own.

Consider an ordinary version of the moment. You are forty minutes into a meeting about a change everyone in the room knows is coming. The conversation is running on logistics, timelines, who will report to whom, which teams combine. It is moving briskly, almost too briskly. Something in you registers that the speed is not progress. The two people who will be most affected have gone quiet. A question gets raised and answered a little too quickly. You notice that the room is reaching for the easy resolution because the hard version of the problem has not been said out loud. That is you reading the signals that something imaginal is organizing, sensing what the room is carrying before anyone has said it.

What you do next is the practical, and it is a real choice among real options, not a single correct technique. You could let the logistics run their course and catch one of the quiet people afterward. You could name what you are sensing directly: "*we are moving quickly through this; I want to check whether we are getting past something we haven't said*". You could change the shape of the next twenty minutes, putting one question to the whole room and asking for a round, so that the people who have gone quiet are not left to volunteer themselves into a fast current. You could decide to do nothing yet, because the trust in the room is not sufficient to hold what naming would surface, and the more useful move is to build that holding first. Knowing which of these the moment calls for, and knowing how to do the one you choose, so that naming lands as an invitation rather than an accusation, so that the round opens the room rather than putting people on the spot, that is the practical repertoire. It is not a manual you consult. It is everything you have learned about how groups move, accumulated and integrated to the point where it is simply available to you, in the moment, as a sense of what to do with your hands.

And then the movement reverses. You make the move, and you watch what the room does with it. Its response (relief, resistance, a deepening, a deflection, the quiet person who finally says the true thing) tells you something you could not have known before you acted. The practical is how you test what you have sensed; the system's answer is what refines the reading. A practitioner is not someone who sees, and then, separately, does. It is someone in whom seeing and doing have become a single circulating motion, each one continually correcting the other. In this framework the practical is not what you transcend. It is the medium through which the imaginal becomes real.

3. A Closing Note: Who Is Already Doing This Work

These four questions are entry points, offered in any order. You may find yourself most drawn to one. You may find that a single question, held seriously over time, opens the others.

One thing this framework insists on, and that practitioners deserve to hear plainly: you are likely further along than you think.

The capacity to hold ambiguity, to remain present under pressure, to attend to the relational field of a collective while also navigating its formal demands, this is a capacity that many people have been developing, often under conditions not of their choosing, for longer than any leadership development program has existed. Those whose positional or cultural location has placed them between worlds (between levels of a hierarchy, between the center and the margin, between the dominant culture and the communities it has yet to fully recognize) have often spent years doing precisely this work, in the absence of institutional language for it.

When this framework names something you have already been practicing, that recognition is the point. The theory serves the practice. And the practice, wherever it is already happening, is part of what the system needs to find its way through.

There is a question implicit in all this that practitioners reasonably ask: if the work is this particular to each person and each system, how does anyone learn to do it? It is not learned the way most leadership practices are taught. There is no curriculum that, once completed, certifies a person to hold others through transformation, and no point at which the work is finished being learned. What there is instead is practice, and the practice is learned by doing it, most often in the company of others doing it too.

Some of that learning happens through apprenticeship in the older sense: working alongside someone with more experience, watching how they do it, and then discovering how you do it. Where that relationship is available, it is a gift. But it is not a gate. The capacity this work draws on is not handed down from a single source; it develops laterally as much as vertically. Between

peers feeling their way into the same practice, in the pair who debrief each other after a hard session, in the colleagues who notice they are circling the same questions and begin to compare notes. This is the same dynamic the framework describes everywhere else: the imaginal discs find each other. Practitioners develop the way the systems they serve do, by finding the others who carry what the work needs and growing toward them.

The materials matter here too. The workbook, the frames, the questions offered throughout this guide are not a substitute for doing the work, but they are real support for building a practice of one's own. This is especially true for someone who does not yet have an experienced practitioner nearby. They are starting points, not scripts. What they cannot supply is the part that has to come from within the practitioner; what they can do is give that part somewhere to begin.

So, the recognition this guide opened with extends one step further. You are likely further along than you think, and you do not have to learn this in isolation, wait for permission, or find the perfect teacher before you begin. You begin by doing the work, with whoever else is willing to do it alongside you, and you trust that your form of the practice, when it comes from a real place, is not a lesser version of anyone else's. It is the biodiversity of expression the work depends on.

The imaginal discs are already present in the people who carry what this organization is capable of becoming, in the relationships that have survived the dissolution of previous forms, in the knowledge held quietly at the margin that the center has yet to learn to consult. The conditions that allow them to find each other, connect, and become what they always were: that is what this work is building toward.

Selected References

Anzaldúa, Gloria. Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Benyus, Janine M. Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature. William Morrow, 1997.

Bohm, David. On Dialogue. Routledge, 1996.

Bridges, William. Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes. Addison-Wesley, 1980. (2nd ed., Da Capo Press, 2004.)

Bridges, William. Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change. Perseus Books, 1991. (4th ed., Da Capo Press, 2017.)

brown, adrienne maree. Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds. AK Press, 2017.

Heifetz, Ronald A., Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky. The Practice of Adaptive Leadership. Harvard Business Press, 2009.

Kegan, Robert. In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life. Harvard University Press, 1994.

powell, john a. Racing to Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society. Indiana University Press, 2012.

Scharmer, C. Otto. Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges. Berrett-Koehler, 2009.

Turner, Victor. The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. Aldine, 1969.

van Gennep, Arnold. The Rites of Passage. University of Chicago Press, 1960. (Original work published 1909.)

Wells, Leroy, Jr. "The Group-as-a-Whole: A Systemic Socioanalytic Perspective on Interpersonal and Group Relations." In Advances in Experiential Social Processes, Vol. 2. Wiley, 1980.

Winnicott, D. W. The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment. International Universities Press, 1965.