

**THRIVING LEADERSHIP –
REALITY OR UTOPIA?**

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Summary: The article examines the conditions for leadership and team thriving. The goal is to detail and extend a theory of ‘thriving leadership’ based on an analysis of Bulgarian and international research in this field. Leadership theories are analysed in support of thriving leadership, examining in detail its layers - individual (coaching, communication, leadership, emotions and change), team (leadership as a dynamic phenomenon of group dynamics, global cross-cultural and virtual teams, and the question of meaning and purpose] and organizational (The “Bulgarian dream” and B-Corporations movement]. The author's thrive matrix is presented, explaining the inner conditions for personal leadership thriving.

Keywords: leadership; thriving leadership; organization; team; sustainability; leader; intrapersonal transformation; purpose

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Introduction

In recent years, leadership as a phenomenon has been the focus of increasing scientific research. Since the beginning of the new millennium, numerous scholars have conducted quality reviews of leadership theories in several prestigious academic publications, including *The Leadership Quarterly*, *The Administrative Science Quarterly*, *American Psychologist*, *Journal of Management*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Process*, *Organizational Science* and *Personnel Psychology*, and others.

The topic of thriving leadership, where leaders are at their best and achieve the organizational purpose, vision, and strategic goals with ease, and how this helps inspire and lead their organizations towards sustainable thriving, has been the author's research interest for the past ten years. In this study, an attempt has been made to develop a theory of thriving leadership. The theoretical framework is based on the analysis of classical and emerging leadership theories, including biological approaches to its study (neuroscience and epigenetics), as well as practical work and observations on the personal transformation of leaders and teams.

Thriving leadership is a holistic form of leadership that includes:

- A healthy and harmonious relationship leaders have with themselves. This is reflected in their internal integration (harmony with their essential nature – their core) and their followers (how they feel with the leader and how they are influenced by them).
- The leader's relationship with their followers. It should involve thriving relationships based on trust, nourished by healthy communication focused on growth and the realization of organizational vision and purpose, as well as behaviour aligned with organizational values.
- The way these multi-dimensional relationships impact the achievement of sustainable organizational thriving and influence the social (society and culture) and physical (nature and natural resources) environments.

Therefore, the realization of thriving leadership begins with the leader's relationship with themselves. Self-knowledge and self-improvement are focused on achieving inner harmony, which in turn requires self-awareness and clarity regarding personal development goals. In this sense, it can be argued that thriving leadership unfolds from the inside out, which is a factor in its sustainability.

When talking about sustainability and internal change, special attention should be given to the context in which leaders have been managing in the past two years, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, and its connection to the first component of thriving leadership. During a pandemic, crisis management comes into play, focused on immediate survival in crisis conditions. This, however, is a short-term perspective. As Martin Reeves states in the introduction to the recently released collection "Harvard Business Review": "In conditions of constant urgency and stress, perspectives and time horizons shrink. This hinders the deeper and broader thinking required for effective crisis response, recovery from it, and rediscovering one's own business once it is over. Returning to longer-term and broader thinking will not happen by default. One of the key roles of leaders now, once the initial shock is behind us, is to legitimize and encourage the expanding of perspectives" (Reeves, 2022, loc 106).

The leader's internal state of stress narrows the focus and perspective and hampers the widening of the horizon which can lead organizations to prosperity after the initial shock. This redirects attention back to the internal state, the ability for self-reflection, self-management, emotional regulation, emotional flexibility, and finding inner peace. According to Reeves, the place to seek new solutions for unfolding leadership, team, and organizational potential is "*holistic thinking about the crisis and its consequences*" (Reeves, 2022, loc 114).

Slowing down (withdrawing from the situation, self-regulation, reflection), and creating space for achieving inner harmony and clarity is the first step in a crisis situation. Only from a position of inner calm can a leader inspire and encourage their followers, seeing the holistic picture and how the crisis can actually serve as a stepping stone for new opportunities.

The topic of the holistic nature of leadership as a phenomenon has been addressed by Panayotov (2015). According to him, it combines three components that form unity, interdependence, and mutual conditioning.

The first component is the "integration" of various sciences such as management, anthropology, political science, etc., which determine the research focus in the following sequence:

- Leadership and personal characteristics;
- Leadership and power relationships;
- Leadership as a behavioural and social phenomenon.

The second component integrates personal, transactional, transformational, charismatic, and clinical paradigms, while the *third* component encompasses organizational and business, economic and political leadership. This component refers to the transfer of interdisciplinary and integrated approaches shaped by practical research and described in the literature.

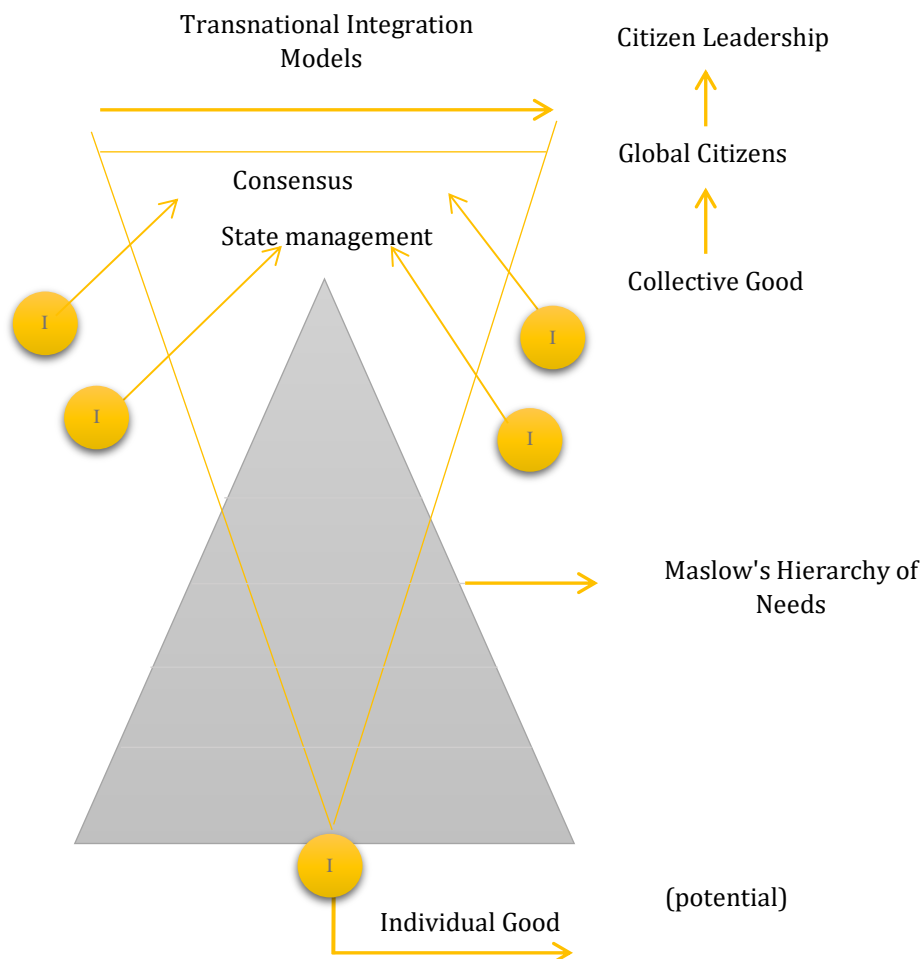
What is observed is the integration of individual (personal) with relational (interpersonal) approaches, involving exchanges and interactions between people (i.e., the second component of thriving leadership - the leader's relationship with followers). The third component also includes the contextual element - the organizational, political, and economic environment, which is a "product" of the phenomenon of "leadership."

The organizational environment can be defined as an epigenetic factor. In a biological aspect, epigenetics means "beyond genes," i.e., control over them is not exerted by the DNA itself, but by messages coming from outside the cell - from the environment. Every atom, molecule, cell, tissue, and system in the body functions at a level of energy coherence, resulting from the state of the individual, whether conscious or unconscious. The external environment that triggers a specific gene expression can be trauma, temperature, altitude, toxins, bacteria, viruses, while the internal environment includes emotional, biological, neurological, mental, and even spiritual states. In an organizational context, the environment within a company - leadership, culture, relationships - influences the expression of human potential, innovation capacity, and competitiveness. The organizational environment can be favourable or unfavourable for teams. It determines to what extent they will be able to achieve their goals and unleash their potential. The focus is intentionally on the team rather than the individual because the purpose, vision, and strategic goals of the organization can be achieved through interaction and exchange among people in a healthy environment provided by the leader.

Panayotov critically analyzes the way the fifteen global challenges facing leaders are arranged in the annual report "Human Future under the Millennium Project," where global ethics is placed in the fifteenth and last position. According to him, "reserving the fifteenth place for global ethical issues implies a complete misunderstanding of the contemporary context in the development of human societies, whereas they should be leading in this increasingly complex, open, and dynamic world of human interactions... embedding global ethics, supporting the value connection with humanity beyond

national, regional, and local boundaries, but also 'producing' models for transnational cooperation, is an important prerequisite for multiplying effects in addressing the other components of the thus-formed system of fifteen global challenges" (Panayotov, 2015, p. 46).

The author provides an excellent synthesis of the interdependence between individual and collective well-being, presenting the intersection between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the inverted pyramid, where the foundation is collective well-being (see Fig. 1). The foundation of collective well-being is the self-realization of the individual - the leader. Only when the leader has found this internal integrity and harmony, stemming from the unfolding of their own potential, and serves a purpose greater than their personal interests, can we speak of laying a stable foundation for collective social good. According to Panayotov, organizational collective good means organizational sustainable thriving that leads to a positive organizational influence on the surrounding social and physical environment.



Source: Panayotov, 2015, p. 48.

Figure 1. Assessing Power and Global Leadership - possible parameters for a theoretical and practical concept

From what has been said so far, it follows that the context in which organizations exist necessitates the need for the development of a new form of leadership, which is holistic. This form, which I define as "thriving leadership," is further derived and substantiated in the presented study.

Thriving Leadership - Individual Level

The leader as a coach

In the context of thriving leadership, the individual level is the first layer from which the change towards sustainable organisational thriving begins. Let's assume that the leader is thriving and has achieved the desired level of self-realization. They have found inner peace, have a clearly defined purpose that transcends their personal interests, and work in an organization that provides them with the opportunity to unleash their potential and fulfil their purpose. The leader most likely has unfolded their potential with the help of a mentor-coach, who has been their companion on the path to self-construction.

When speaking about a leader, it most often refers to the person, to the individual as a combination of qualities, attitudes, and values that shape them as such, but also as a process and action. Leadership is a phenomenon, and as defined by Hadzhiev [2015], it is a dynamic phenomenon. According to him, "*leadership is a phenomenon of informal personal relationships, i.e., there are no formal procedures for appointing a leader, and no measures are envisaged for their administrative affirmation*" (there, p. 172). This interpretation by Hadzhiev confirms the second theoretical component of thriving leadership, namely thriving relationships with followers.

The context in which contemporary organizations exist calls for a new approach to leadership - the coaching approach¹. It is far from the command-and-control approach of management used in the already past industrial era. Now, in the "era of imagination" - a new era beyond the information age, creativity and imagination are the main generators of economic significance, where competitive advantage is built on the unfolding of human creativity. In conditions of team synergy, innovation is achieved. Creativity and the potential for innovation can be unleashed through the coaching approach because it requires deep connection with others, intuitive listening, and based on that - asking quality questions that lead to insights and motivation for action by the individual or the team in the organization.

According to the classic study by Goleman on leadership styles, published in the *Harvard Business Review*, leaders rate coaching as their least favourite style. Their explanation is that they simply do not have time to engage in the unfruitful and tedious work of helping people grow. In a study by Herminia and Scoular, 3761 executive directors assess their

¹ *Coaching is a new approach that is defined by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking creative process that inspires them to unleash their personal and professional potential.*

coaching skills, and then their assessments are compared to those of the people they work with. The study shows that 24% of leaders significantly overestimate their abilities, giving themselves a rating above average, while their colleagues place them at the bottom of the scale (Herminia & Scoular, 2019).

These results clearly indicate that the implementation of leadership through a coaching approach requires the appropriate mindset, patience, belief in the sustainability of the approach, a high level of self-awareness, and humility. A leader can adopt this approach and create an environment for its implementation in the organization when they themselves have experienced its power through their own personal transformation towards thriving. The fundamental question that logically arises is: what is the organizational capacity to create coaching organizational cultures?

According to Herminia and Scoular, in order for an organization to build such capacity, it is essential to clearly articulate the answer to the "why" question. Transforming coaching into a force within the organizational culture begins with understanding why this approach is necessary, how it affects organizational sustainable success, and how it aligns with critical strategic objectives and organizational purpose and values. If such an approach was "imposed," for example, by the human resources department without understanding its significance, it would lead to a counterproductive effect. Once the question of the meaning of the coaching approach is clarified, the next step is to proceed with "behaviour modelling." This is extremely important because backing words with actions is the most sustainable and inspiring way to influence and attract followers.

Behaviour modelling is a driving force. According to some studies, when people are uncertain about what behaviour is appropriate, they often copy the actions of others, especially if those individuals hold power and high status. Therefore, it is natural for people to look to the behaviour of leaders in times of uncertainty and rapid changes. If this behaviour manifests as trust in colleagues and the use of dialogue as a means to find solutions and unfold personal and team potential, it becomes a prerequisite for organizational thriving (Herminia & Scoular, 2019).

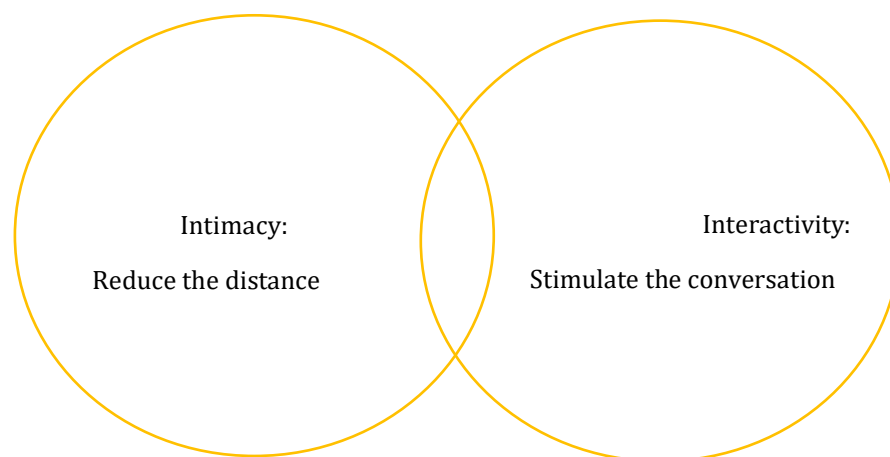
The authors believe that the third important stage in this process is building organizational capacity. This is called the "ripple effect," which is created by top leadership teams, reaches functional (team) leaders, and, through them, all members of the organization. In other words, sustainable organizational transformation starts with the power, belief, and quality of the inner work done by leaders at the highest level. Herminia and Scoular also define the next step in building organizational capacity as removing barriers. According to them, the main barrier is fear (especially during performance reviews) - the fear of being accused of making mistakes or failing. Fear is an emotion connected to survival. It is unhealthy and prevents individuals from unleashing their creative potential. In this regard, the authors provide an example of how a leader-coach can create a different environment by refining the questions asked and thus help overcome this barrier (Herminia & Scoular, 2019).

Therefore, it can be summarized that the coaching approach requires self-awareness, patience, curiosity, humility, and a growth mindset of the leader. These important characteristics drive quality communication, which is the key to human growth and thriving.

Leadership and Quality Communication

Communication is the exchange of information with the purpose of building and maintaining positive, harmonious, and fruitful relationships, making it a relational process. In the context of coaching, specialists in the UK often use the term "to gel" in relation to communication, which, in my opinion, implies a strong bonding between people, resulting from an exchange based on trust, respect, empathy, and a desire for joint achievement of a common goal.

Groysberg and Slind argue that traditional communication in organizations needs to give way to a more dynamic and refined process of communication, with conversation being the most important element. They conducted a study focusing on the state of organizational communication in the 21st century (Groysberg & Slind, 2012). Based on conversations with 150 individuals from over 100 companies, the authors developed a model of leadership called "organizational conversation" (Figure 2).



Source: Drawn up by the author after Groysberg & Slind, 2012.

Figure 2. Dimensions of organizational talk

In the cited study by Groysberg and Slind, it is found that leaders gain the trust of their followers when they have mastered the art of deep listening to people at all levels of the organization, engaging in direct and unfiltered conversations with them, and striving to earn their trust. Without trust, there can be no intimacy. However, trust in organizations is increasingly difficult to earn, which is why leaders must be authentic, sharing, and demonstrate their qualities. The authors believe that quality organizational conversation cannot take place without listening. When a leader listens and genuinely seeks to understand their colleagues, to connect with them, and to hear about their concerns and aspirations, they hold in their hands the most valuable asset for unlocking the organization's potential – knowledge about people and trust.

Another dimension of the leadership style "organizational conversation," according to them, is stimulating a genuine dialogue: "In the best case, personal conversation is an

equal-opportunity endeavour. It allows participants to share their own perspectives during the discussion. As a result, they can contribute their own ideas – and actually their hearts and souls – to the conversation. Organizational conversation encourages employees to participate in generating the content that makes up the company's story" (Groysberg & Slind, 2012, p. 7).

Figure 3 illustrates how, by practicing the four elements of organizational conversation (intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality), leaders can overcome the old model of corporate communication and unfold a new one where communication is personal and direct, leaders value authenticity and trust, engage in conversations with employees, relinquish control, focus on content, and the organizational culture nurtures two-way communication. Employees actively participate in the exchange of organizational messages, clear and carefully explained agendas underlie communication, and the strategy takes on an unambiguous form as a result of cross-functional conversations.

| Intimacy | Interactivity | Inclusion | Intentionality |
|---|---|---|--|
| How leaders connect with employees | How leaders use communication channels | How leaders develop organizational content | How leaders communicate strategy |
| The Old Model: Corporate Communication | | | |
| Information flows primarily from the top down Tone is formal and corporate | Messages are broadcasted to employees Printed newsletters, announcements and speeches dominate | Senior managers create and control messages Employees are passive consumers of information | Communication is fragmented, reactive and ad hoc Leaders use statements to achieve strategic alignment |
| New Model: Organizational Communication | | | |
| Communication is personal and direct Leaders value trust and authenticity | Leaders speak to , not at employees Organizational culture fosters interaction that is mutual (back-and-forth movement) and face-to-face | Leaders relinquish control over content Employees actively participate in creating organizational messages | Communication is based on a clear agenda. Leaders carefully explain the agenda to employees. Strategy occurs on the basis of cross-organizational conversation |

Source: Groysberg & Slind, 2012, p. 9.

Figure 3: Elements of Organizational Conversation

New approaches to leadership - genuine dialogue, listening, interest, intimacy, involvement, coaching people to unleash their potential - align with thriving leadership. As mentioned, this is a relational approach that starts with the leader's relationship with themselves, which naturally influences relationships with people in the organization.

Is it necessary for leaders to lead people?

The question "Why should someone be led by you?" posed in the article by Goffee and Jones provokes every leader and stirs up concern and uncertainty. Leaders cannot exist without followers, and followers must be gained. That's why the focus of the author is on those qualities that naturally attract sincere followers, such as the leader actively and consciously revealing their vulnerabilities, demonstrating authenticity; being a "sensor" and intuitively gathering sensitive information; managing people with "tough empathy," caring for them and their work with dedication, providing what they need to be at their best; daring to be different, showcasing their uniqueness. These additional qualities are complementary since every leader should necessarily have vision, energy, authority, and the ability to set strategic direction (Goffee & Jones, 2022). However, in my opinion, the most important characteristic that determines how a leader's potential unfolds is energy.

Bruce D. Schneider² talks about the so-called energy leadership. A leader who can understand their core energy, which is the root cause of their actions, and consciously raise it, can achieve inner freedom and remarkable results by stimulating individual creativity and team synergy, leading to the full realization of people's and teams' potential. Energy, emotions, and consciousness form the core from which intrapersonal and interpersonal transformation begins. This change can be accelerated by transforming human energy through holistic coaching, which addresses the cause (the root), rather than behaviour (the surface), and contributes to the thriving of the leader and teams, and organizational prosperity.

The explanation of energy, emotions, and consciousness is crucial for understanding holistic coaching, which works precisely with this "material." People thrive when they live in an inner space of high-vibrational energy, referred to in literature as a high level of self-awareness. In today's world, neuroscientists are capable of tracing the electrochemical energy flow in the brain that contributes to initiating actions (this also applies to every thought, emotional response, and behaviour that generate reactions or energetic consequences). Practitioners in the field of positive psychology find that if the root of thoughts and emotional reactions is understood and personal perspective is purposefully shifted towards a more optimistic direction, the generated energy can be transformed and redirected. In his concise research review titled "*Your Core Energy*

² Bruce D. Schneider is the founder of the Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching (iPEC). He is the author of the books "*Relax, You're already Perfect, Uncovering the Life of Your Dreams: An Enlightening Story*" and "*Energy Leadership: Transforming Your Workplace and Your Life from the Core.*" His groundbreaking theory on levels of consciousness is embedded in the transformational process known as "*Core Energy Coaching™*," which serves as a tool for assessing the *Energy Leadership Index™*.

Determines Your Life Potential," Waldorf points out that internal energy stems from six dimensions of human experience - spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, social, and environmental, each of which can support or hinder the flow of energy passing through the human body and consciousness (Waldorf, 2018).

In Schneider's model, there are two types of energy - anabolic and catabolic. The first is constructive, expansive (heart-centered, warm), empowering, creative and beneficial for everyone. The second, in contrast, is destructive, draining, or repelling and works to the detriment of individuals. The key to achieving physical and emotional well-being and good performance is to reduce destructive catabolic energy while simultaneously unleashing a natural flow of anabolic energy. By accumulating more of this energy, a leader develops readiness to forgive, display empathy, calmness, joy, and enthusiasm. They gain a better understanding of possibilities and choices available to them and more successfully develop their creative abilities, intuition, teamwork skills, synergy, continuity, and wisdom.

Leadership, emotions, innovation, and change

The topic of energy naturally leads to the leader and their emotions. What is an emotion? The simplest and widely known definition of an emotion is "energy in motion." Brown and Dzendrowskyj share, *"Whatever 'emotions' are, most organizations think they are best kept out of sight. They get a bad press. They are seen as the source of irritating irrationality in others – though, oddly, never in oneself. They are certainly not the province of analytical minds. How strange is that, when it is emotions that define our existence and every action? They are the source of all directed action. They give meaning to all experience and colour and definition to life. Separate the word as e=emotion and it becomes immediately clear that energy impels action. How even stranger is it that embedded forever in the word is a truth that has only recently been observed?"* (Brown & Dzendrowskyj, 2018, p. 26).

In this part of the research, an attempt is made to define the relationship between emotions and a leader's capacity to create an environment where teams can be truly innovative and reach those new solutions that will propel the organization forward with its innovations. As Alkalay points out, *"The abilities to create, develop, perceive, and implement innovations are the most effective means of dealing with the challenges of eroding complexity and change"* (Alkalay, 2015, p. 94).

In my personal practice, I often encounter leaders who want their organizations to be more "innovative," and the first question we discuss is, *"What is the environment in the organization like for nurturing, incubating, and unfolding new ideas?"* The misunderstanding of how a person functions from a neurobiological perspective also leads to an inability to create an environment for innovation. A stressed individual and a team constantly pressured to meet deadlines and juggle multiple tasks cannot focus their energy on creating innovations that will enhance the organization's competitive advantage. In this sense, innovation requires a shift in attention from one's own "egositystem" (connected to survival emotions), which according to the London Protocol

of Emotions³ are fear, anger, sadness, disgust, guilt) to the "ecosystem," encompassing all stakeholders (love-trust, joy-enthusiasm).

Alkalay emphasizes that the transition from ego- to ecosystems involves creating a different environment for learning and innovation. It is a new way of thinking that connects leaders and people with the realities of the larger system. Due to this awareness, innovations in recent years have been oriented more towards new business models or changes in the entire system. This requires cross-functional collaboration, as well as collaboration with stakeholders outside the organizational system (Alkalay, 2015). It is noteworthy that in Alkalay's exploration of the U-model (Scharmer's innovation model), the stages of innovation are first connected to personal change and then to interpersonal change. These stages are:

- *Joint initiation* (revealing shared intentions): stop and listen to others, try to understand what life wants from you.
- *Joint sensing*: observe, and observe..., connect with people and places to sense the system as a whole.
- *Connecting with the future*: connect with the source of inspiration and will, find a quiet place and allow inner knowledge to emerge.
- *Joint creation*: choose a prototype of the new among living examples, explore the future through action.
- *Joint development*: implement the new in ecosystems - it facilitates the action in relation to the whole.

In the context of the innovation environment, it should be noted that emotions and intuition are a key prerequisite for the unfolding of the inner environment.

As mentioned, innovation leadership is primarily based on the personal transformation of leaders, managers, innovation team members, and agents of change. According to Alkalay, they should acquire innovative competencies such as:

- abilities for associative and systemic thinking;
- self-awareness and knowledge of their identity;
- observation skills;
- empathic and generative listening skills;
- skills for leading constructive dialogue;
- ability to perceive the possibilities offered by the upcoming future and learn from it.

³ *Sorting out the Emotional Muddle - insights from neuroscience on the organizational value of emotions*, see <https://www.developingleadersquarterly.com/fb/Developing-Leaders -issue-29-Spring-2018/30/>

The next level includes skills for working in interdisciplinary, multicultural, and virtual teams and expert communities (Alkalay, 2015).

Scharmer defines the process of individual transformation as a combination of open mind, open heart, and open will. It starts with becoming aware of and discontinuing the patterns of the past, gaining a clear view of things, sensing from the foundation (inner sensing), letting go of the old, and connecting with the source, which opens the path to the new and crystallizes the vision and goals.

Today, "leadership," "emotions and emotional intelligence," "change," "adaptation,"... are frequently encountered concepts in business circles. Bancheva integrates these concepts into a dynamic component for the thriving of leaders, teams, and organizations: *"Successful change requires not only the technical competence of managers, but also sensitivity in regard to the political and human changes in organizational life... It should be noted that a company can only change when the people in that organization are committed and flexible about change. This can be achieved through exceptionally strong leadership, expressed in sensitivity to the environment, capturing its pulsations, and creating a vision for change. And most importantly - sensitivity to human issues and dimensions of change within the organization. This is a difficult process, but it can be rewarding if managed wisely and effectively"* (Bancheva, 2015, pp. 186-187).

The environment (organizational, social, ecological) is an epigenetic factor. The leader's adaptive qualities regarding the changing environment are key to thriving leadership. The only constant is change. Embracing this fact is a path to building the ability for rapid adaptation. Understanding the importance of the environment that leaders create in times of change contributes to this. If fear and uncertainty prevail, the epigenetic organizational factor is negative, and the expression of people's behaviour in the organization follows that trend. Conversely, if the leader accepts change calmly, the epigenetic organizational factor is positive, naturally leading to greater collective awareness and focus on finding solutions in a given situation. The leadership team is responsible for the environment it creates, which in fact is the emotional manifestation caused by high leadership self-awareness.

Humility (Level 5 Leadership)

In what way does the so-called Level 5 Leadership, as coined by Jim Collins, create a favourable epigenetic organizational factor? Collins studied 1,435 companies listed in the "Fortune 500" and found that only 11 of them had achieved and retained "sustained greatness" (i.e., over a period of 15 years, they have exceeded their stock market returns by at least three times through fundamental transformations). These companies stood out from the rest because each of them had a Level 5 leader (see Collins, 2022). According to Collins, such leaders combine humility with an exceptionally strong professional will. They often praise others, acknowledge the importance of external factors, and sometimes even luck, but they never put themselves first when achieving success. However, when results are poor, they usually blame themselves. To motivate others, they act quietly, calmly, and confidently, in accordance with inspiring high standards, rather than relying on their charisma. These leaders exhibit a strong

professional will - they do not tolerate mediocrity and resolutely address everything that needs to be resolved to achieve greatness while simultaneously creating successors in their desire to make their companies even more thriving in the future (Collins, 2022).

From what has been said so far, we can conclude that the organizational environment conducive to growth, potential development, and thriving of individuals and teams is stimulated and sustained by a leader at the top who is humble, dedicated, competent, a continuous learner, strong-willed and with inspiring and high standards.

Thriving Leadership - Team Level

The second aspect of thriving leadership is the leader's relationship with their followers – these are thriving relationships based on trust, nurtured by healthy communication, focused on growth and realization of the organizational vision and purpose, and based also on behaviour that aligns with organizational values. This aspect finds support in the four roles of the leader through the lens of the new paradigm, as presented by Hadzhiev (2015):

- *Pathfinding* – uniting the organization's holistic system and formulated goals (vision and purpose) with the needs of all interested parties (affected parties) through the strategic plan.
- *Aligning* - aligning the organizational structure, systems, and business processes with the goals set in the mission and vision to satisfy all interested parties.
- *Empowering* - when there is genuine alignment of goals and means, as well as overlap between personal and organizational objectives, synergy is achieved. It stimulates talent, perseverance, and patience in achieving common, aligned, and shared goals.
- *Modelling* - the final role is the core of this paradigm. It relates to *building trust, without which success is unthinkable. It is associated with the leader's conscience and finds expression in the performance-oriented organizational culture.*

Each of these roles corresponds to a specific leadership quality and is reflected in specific management practices [situation]. The common denominator among them is *trust* upon which the entire system of relationships in an organization is built. Trust is the emotion of success. It is at the foundation of building and transforming potential teams into thriving [high performing] ones. Success is associated with sustainability and unfolding, with openness and adaptation, with ease derived from the attitude that defines the energetic vibration of the leader and the teams. Influence is based on the quantum principle: *like energies attract*. The team is based on relationships. When they are toxic it is a pseudo-team, but they can also be thriving and lead to the sustainable functioning of thriving teams. The most important prerequisite for this is the leader – the successful one, working on their personal transformation, and serving as an inspiring example.

Leadership – a dynamic phenomenon of group dynamics

Teams are a direct result of the challenge to achieve organizational effectiveness. They stimulate the unfolding of human potential and, according to Hadzhiev [2015], play a

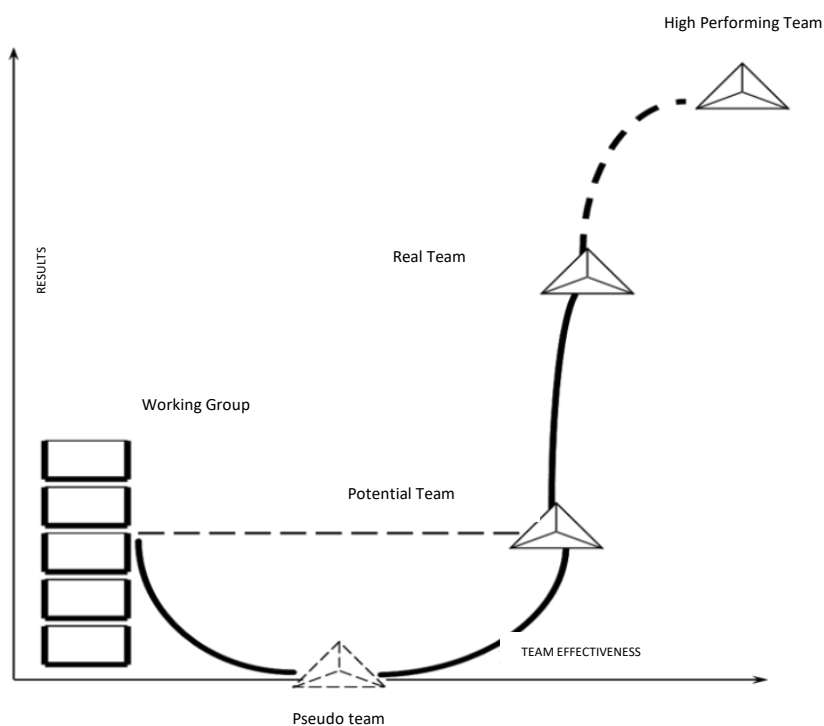
strategic role as a phenomenon of group dynamics. The author highlights three reasons that necessitate their use in organizations:

First of all, they bring together a group of specialists with additional skills and experience that typically exceed those of the individuals included in the team (synergistic effect).

Secondly, through joint setting of goals and methods, teams establish shared values and norms that support problem-solving and real-time initiatives.

Thirdly, teams provide a unique social dimension that enhances the economic and administrative aspects of their activities.

Hadzhiev [2015] argues that a truly engaged team is the most productive unit in management. *In my opinion, a high-performing team is achieved after reaching a certain level of engagement.* Working groups primarily interact for information sharing. When effective, they have the potential to transform into teams, but under several conditions such as: specific shared goals and outcomes, a unified approach, team values and norms. Pseudo-teams are the weakest and least effective structures among all groups. Interactions within pseudo-teams are uncoordinated, and goals are unrealistic and contradictory. There is a lack of a synergistic effect. Potential teams, on the other hand, exhibit low levels of engagement regarding goals and shared methods, but at least the focus is on results. **True teams**, on the other hand, involve trust, mutual accountability, and as a result, additional skills and identification with a meaningful common purpose, leading to unique achievements (see Figure 4).

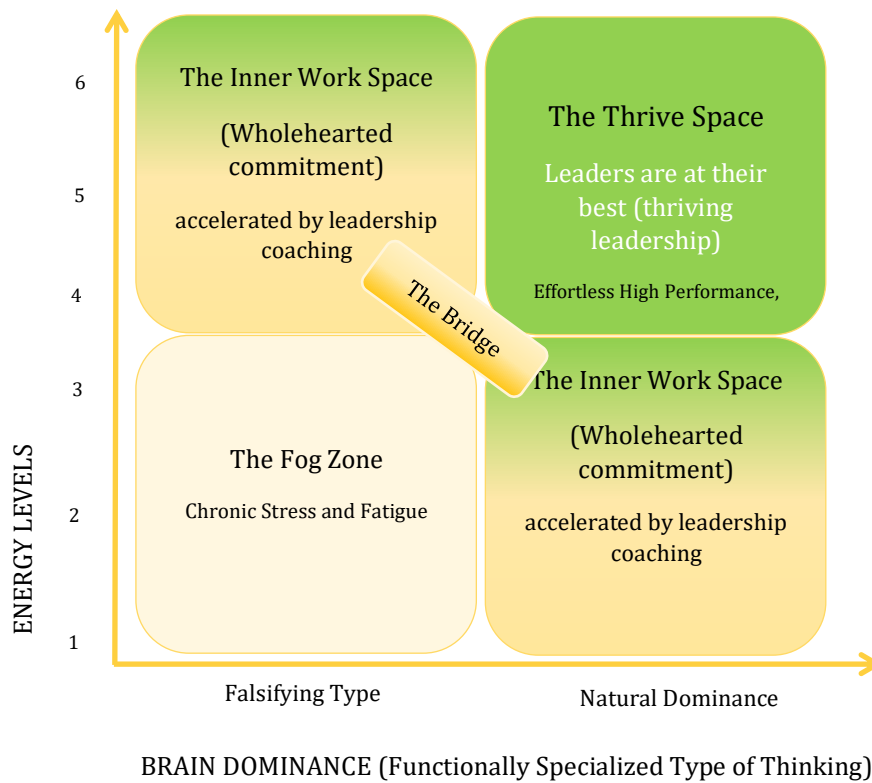


Source: Hadzhiev, 2014, p. 329.

Figure 4. Team Performance Curve

The high-performing team, also known as the goal-adaptive team, meets all the conditions of true teams but additionally, its members are deeply committed to sustainable organizational development. The role of the leader in building thriving goal-adaptive teams is that of an authoritative regulator of interpersonal skills, easily gaining followers. The leader treats team members as equals, values their merits, is an innovator, and publicly acknowledges their mistakes. With this type of leader, team members can realize their full potential. Hadzhiev [2015] defines leadership as the process of directing and motivating the team to achieve goals regardless of the situation. The leader must gain trust and secure collaboration from the team, make them work towards agreed-upon goals, and maximize the skills, talent, and energy of each team member.

Creating thriving teams depends on how the leader channels their own energy and shapes an environment (epigenetic factor) in which everyone harmonizes with each other based on understanding and inspiration from a meaningful purpose and vision for success. The team is multi-layered and complex because each individual within it is unique. This further emphasizes the need for an integrated holistic approach at the individual, team, and purpose levels. In John Adair's functional model, leadership functions unite the task, the team, and the individual into a whole. However, from my perspective, it is the meaningful purpose that serves as the unifying and inspiring element because an organization is a collection of interconnected teams that should first recognize and embrace the purpose before decomposing it into strategic goals and specific tasks. In other words, the approach is from the inside out (personal and team transformation) and from the outside in (looking ahead - vision, strategic intentions).



Source: Drawn up by the author.

Figure 5. Thrive Matrix[®]

In the presented figure 5, the *Thrive Matrix*[®] ⁴ for studying the intrapersonal transformation of leaders shows that the leader is in their best form, i.e., in the so-called Thrive Space, when suitable internal conditions are present, namely:

- 1] They possess a high level of self-awareness and high energy (reflected on the energy levels scale).
- 2] They utilize their natural brain dominance (functionally specialized way of thinking).

The energy levels introduced in the matrix are measured using the tool created by Dr. Bruce D. Schneider called the "[Energy Leadership Index Assessment](#)[™]." ⁵Examining the energy leadership index helps to deepen the understanding of how a person behaves and proceeds in various aspects of life. In other words, this index measures *leadership potential based on awareness* - how much the leader is aware of who they are and what their understanding of life is, their ability to lead themselves and others towards more effective, productive, and sustainable actions, as well as their engagement and

⁴The internal conditions for leader's thriving are displayed in the matrix. However, a limitation of the matrix is that it does not show the conditions for the thriving of leadership teams, which is subject of future research.

⁵Key Factor Revealed for Determining Success in Work and in Life , see <https://www.ipeccoaching.com/hubfs/iPEC-Key-Factor-Study-June-2013.pdf>

commitment to their role and tasks in the workplace and personal life. Last but not least, the index indicates the response to stress, so that it can be noticed and, if desired, modified. When the leader is in the "Fog Zone" (opposite to the Thrive Space), they are under chronic stress, resulting in low energy and underutilization of their potential.

Brain dominance is a functionally specialized type of thinking. It can be measured with the Benziger Self-Assessment Test of Brain Dominance. Benziger explains how human cerebral cortex "thinks" about the past, present and future, using the abilities of the limbic and primitive brain [reptilian system] to "supply" it with data and trigger thinking. Two intersecting fissures in the centre and along the length of the brain divide the cerebral cortex into four areas of equal size each of which has its own role and contributes differently to human life (see Table 1). Each of these areas act as specialized "software" that needs the right input to do its job. As a result, each person has a different way of receiving or accessing information and thinking about or processing that information (see Benziger, 2000).

Table 1. Modes of thinking

| Cortical Region | Benziger | Processing | Jungian Function |
|--|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Left Frontal (Anterior) Lobe | Frontal Left | Analytical | Thinking |
| Right Frontal (Anterior) Lobe | Frontal Right | Internal Imaging | Intuition |
| Left Posterior Convexity | Basal Left | Sequential | Sensation |
| Right Posterior Convexity | Basal Right | Feeling | Feeling |

Source: Benziger, 2000, p. 8.

The Law of Dominance, which governs your brain's internal dynamics, tells us that far from being born with hour equally available and equally strong thinking modes, each of us is born with:

- 1) One clearly preferred mode, in which we have tremendous natural speed and efficiency and
- 2) Three non-preferred modes, each of which is more difficult for us to use as they are substantially slower and less efficient.

When the leader does not utilize the natural preferred way of thinking, he falls into the group of so-called falsifying type.

Understanding the concept of brain dominance is important when choosing the "right" career path so that to achieve peak performance with ease. *This is essential for thriving*, as confirmed by Benziger. To know what one loves, one must listen to one's whole body and discover what brings pleasure while doing it (Benziger, 2000).

In order for a leader to reach the "Thrive Space", it takes internal and dedicated work on intrapersonal transformation related to better self-awareness and a change in attitudes, which naturally leads to an increase in energy (the internal emotional experiences). Wholehearted commitment is at the core of intrapersonal transformation toward thriving. To become a master in the field where one works, in a given skill or even in one's life, one must continuously invest sufficient amount of energy on the way to the "Thrive Space". Thus, they will be able to meet the inevitably arising challenges that require more energy and emotional resilience to overcome. This is also confirmed by the study of visionary leaders conducted by Kurt Wright, whose most important finding is related to commitment. The results of the study show that leaders performing at the level of effortless high performance are distinguished by wholehearted commitment to the process of intrapersonal transformation: a commitment that includes depth, permanence, and intuition (see Wright, 1998).

Global Intercultural Teams

The processes of globalization require leaders with new qualities, skills, and knowledge to work in an intercultural environment and in international teams. The awareness and sensitivity of leaders regarding cultural differences are essential to building strong and thriving teams. Blagoeva [2015] states that in an intercultural environment, the requirements for leadership skills become even more complex - maintaining interpersonal relationships based on trust, high professionalism, ability to understand what others strive for and balance the interests of individuals and the institution. There is consensus among researchers about this that developing competency in relation to another culture allows for powerful reflection on one's own worldviews. My own observations from specific work practices also confirm that the cultural aspect is crucial in understanding individuals.

According to Blagoeva's cited research, this includes:

- 1] Being aware of one's own cultural identity;
- 2] Being familiar with dominant cultural models;
- 3] Being able to determine one's own independent position, knowing that it is culturally influenced;
- 4] Strengthening self-confidence and seeking a range of models for interaction from such a position;
- 5] Cultivating interest and active curiosity towards otherness, as well as a sense of personal enrichment;
- 6] Forming tolerance and equality in interactions;
- 7] Ability to develop and maintain relationships and connections;
- 8] Ability to communicate effectively and adequately with minimal loss and distortion of understanding;
- 9] Ability to achieve agreement and collaboration with others (Blagoeva, 2015)

At the core of working with people from different cultures is the awareness of one's own cultural identity and the shared culture of dominant cultural models. Here, the significant contribution of Geert Hofstede to understanding intercultural processes [interculturality] should be emphasized. He conducted comprehensive research in over 50 countries to capture what is common and specific to all of them regarding these relationships, values, and beliefs of the employed that influence their work behaviour. In the context of building thriving teams, it is important to note that the key lies not in confrontation but in cultural curiosity and the search for synergy. As Blagoeva points out, aligning with Hofstede's model could help avoid many mistakes in this regard: "Only when differences are realized can we think of ways to build a bridge between them, so that both sides feel satisfied and gain from their collaboration" (Blagoeva, 2015, p. 207).

Leadership and Teamwork in a Virtual Environment

Pandemics, wars, and other social crises often create new attitudes, needs, and behaviour that need to be managed. Reeves and Fuller believe that imagination - the capacity to create, expand, and use mental models of things or situations that do not exist yet - is still a critical factor in forming new opportunities and finding new growth paths. Imagination is a capacity and resource that leaders will have to use more and more to ensure an environment for team thriving and flourishing of their organizations (Reeves & Fuller, 2022). According to the authors, 14% of companies with exceptionally high levels of performance both in historical and competitive terms, invest in new growth areas. Reeves and Fuller emphasize that organizations should facilitate the nourishment of collective imagination. The key here is to allow the development of new ideas to be shared in an early stage, to create forums for teams where the transfer of ideas can be facilitated freely and informally.

In the mid 90s of the last century, technologies were at a level where it was unthinkable to work with international partners in a virtual environment. It was not culturally conditioned either. Even in 2018, when I started working intensively with clients from the UK, coaching sessions to take place face to face was common practice, as this was valued more than virtual interactions, despite the fact that the results achieved in both personal and virtual sessions were comparable. The crisis, however, forced most people to realize that everything is possible.

According to a study by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), involving 250 international companies, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 90% of them have imposed travel restrictions, 84% have introduced flexible working plans, and 80% have created digital information hubs. Inevitably these measures are reflected in the use of virtual teams (see Reeves & Fuller, 2022).

In this regard Hadzhiev points out that in the business world they focus more and more on the *"need for teamwork grounded in consultancy as a basic factor for achieving a competitive advantage in an environment of high uncertainty"* (Hadzhiev, 2020, p. 271). Nowadays, especially over the last two years, leaders lead their organizations in an extremely uncertain and insecure environment. *"What was once an exotic requirement for employees to work in a virtual team is now a dominant daily activity"* (ibid., p. 275). According to Hadzhiev, the main barriers to working in a virtual team are born from

cultural differences and misunderstanding of the role and significance of communication and information technologies. For millennials the technological factor is not a hurdle but rather a natural and comfortable environment. However, for the older generations of leaders this is an extremely strong stress factor. It is important to understand that the virtual team is an *"evolutionary form of network organization"* and that its emergence is the result of two fundamental factors: globalization in a business context and the revolutionary development of technologies (ibid., p. 276).

Based on a comprehensive analysis, Hadzhiev defines virtual teams as: *"small temporary groups of people with complementary knowledge and skills, who work (communicate, interact, and form relationships) beyond spatial, temporal, and organizational boundaries through a network of communication technologies to achieve specific common goals and tasks, through an approach for which they hold each other accountable"* (Hadzhiev, 2020, p. 272).

Understanding the specifics of the operation of virtual teams is a factor for their adequate management. Against the backdrop of the complexity of the individual in the team, the overlay of factors such as virtuality and intercultural differences creates a complexity that requires high leadership skills. Teams are the basis of organizational thriving because all great achievements in history are product of inspired cooperation, involvement, collective intelligence, mutual complementation of strengths, will, and dedication, while virtual teams are a building element of future organizations.

The topic of meaning in a complex environment.

The reality where leaders operate today is multi-layered and complex, and therefore their tasks are largely creative. Modern challenges cannot be solved solely through linear, logical-analytical approaches. It requires leadership maturity, wisdom, intuition, and imagination.

Beyond cultural and technological aspects, there are dimensions of leadership that are fundamental regardless of the context. And the context will always change. These dimensions include humanity, virtues, the will and motivation for change, dedication to the purpose and vision of the organization, and most importantly: belief in the meaning of what is being done. Organizations that consciously and wholeheartedly create good for people and the planet are the organizations of the future.

Having a meaningful life purpose is a prerequisite and faithful companion to one's thriving. The topic of meaning has been thoroughly examined by the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl⁶ in his book *"Man's Search for Meaning"*

⁶ *Frankl is the founder of logotherapy (literally meaning "healing through meaning"). He explains why he used the term "logotherapy" as the name for his theory in the following way: "Logotherapy, or as some authors call it, the 'Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy,' focuses on the meaning of human existence and the search for meaning by individuals. According to logotherapy, the striving for finding meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force inherent in human beings."*

(Frankl, 2020). He examines a statistical study of 7,948 students from 48 colleges conducted by social researchers at Johns Hopkins University. In a preliminary report, which is part of the two-year study sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health in the United States, it is indicated that when asked "what they consider very important to them now," 16% of students answered "to make a lot of money," while 78% said their first task is "to find purpose and meaning in my life."

Directing the topic of meaning in an organizational context, we seek an answer of the question: "How does the presence of a meaningful purpose contribute to people's thriving?"

According to Kevin Murray, the most powerful driving force in people is the desire to find meaning in life. Leaders who have a clear personal purpose that harmonizes with the organizational purpose are capable of inspiring their team. Inspired individuals are ready to unfold their potential and succeed because they connect with the meaningful mission of their organization. In his book "People with Purpose: How Great Leaders Use Purpose to Build Thriving Organizations," the author analyzes studies searching for the link between purpose and thriving (Murray, 2017). He examines the research of American organizational theorist and professor of organizational psychology and cognitive science at Case Western Reserve University, Richard E. Boyatzis, who is an expert in the field of emotional intelligence and behavioral change. According to Boyatzis, the progress in the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) allows us to trace what happens in the brains of leaders during their interactions.

Murray emphasizes that similar studies show that the first and most important thing leaders must do is to *build relationships that inspire and motivate others* to perform better, be innovative, and adaptive. Leaders who create harmonious relationships with those around them will perform much better than leaders who are incapable of doing so, as the latter repel and alienate their people, causing them to lose motivation. These findings from neuroscience confirm the fundamental reason why inspiring relationships are important: they facilitate openness to new ideas and the more social orientation towards others (Murray, 2017, p. 18).

In the cited book, Murray highlights that the emotional state of leaders is contagious and affects everyone around them, even when leaders try to hide their negative emotions. According to him, negative emotions are much stronger than positive ones and activate stronger neural pathways in their followers (Murray, 2017).

The leader's own purpose is a generator of high-vibrational energy. There is evidence that organizational success is possible when the organization has a meaningful purpose that its members identify with. The question is how leaders support this 'journey' towards organizational change that aims to unite the team around a meaningful purpose, vision, and values.

Murray also discusses how building trust among people is just one of the benefits for purpose-driven organizations. Global surveys among Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) show that most of them believe in the power of a meaningful purpose to transform and grow their organizations. In 2015, the 'EY Beacon' institute was established in Davos and its purpose is to support and advise businesses on how to integrate a meaningful

purpose into the core of their strategy. A study sponsored by the institute and conducted by the 'Harvard Business Review Analytic Services' (HBRAS) among 500 global business leaders highlights the perspectives of global CEOs regarding the power of purpose in fostering the growth and transformation of their organizations. The results show that they perceive the meaningful purpose as a huge but highly underestimated asset.

Thriving Leadership - Organizational Level

The Bulgarian Dream

Why the Bulgarian Dream? How can the made analysis serve leaders in Bulgaria? What is the ground for the development of thriving leadership as a holistic approach focused on the individual, the team, and the organization?

Panayotov shares that *'society cannot survive if it suppresses or detaches itself from its own roots. Just as a nation cannot thrive if it prohibits any criticism concerning its past, so will no nation survive while suppressing everything positive in its history'* (Panayotov, 2020, p. 43). The past is there for us to learn from it and extract positive experiences. Thriving is a state and process in which positivity intertwines with the cultural tradition of our roots. Panayotov defines the *Bulgarian Dream* as a 'positive concept that implies a symbiosis of meaning, action, and development' (ibid, p. 23). The call to the young generation of leaders is to consciously build the future of the nation and the organizations they create and lead through the prism of an experienced, shared, and meaningful individual and social experience. According to the author, this creates conditions for building mutual trust, social capital, and well-functioning governance.

As mentioned in previous sections of the study, the third component of thriving leadership is the way in which the presented multidimensional relationships impact the achievement of sustainable organizational prosperity and affect nature, social, and physical environment. This is also confirmed by Henze - he believes that the concept of sustainability *"rests on an understanding of values, whereby natural resources, as well as economic, ecological, and social factors, should be such that they meet the needs of both present and future generations. One of the most important findings regarding the discussion of sustainable development is that economic, ecological, and social issues should not be separated or pitted against each other"* (Henze, 2018, pp. 110-111).

The 'B Corporations' Movement

This is an alternative to the philosophy of Milton Friedman, who, in his popular essay 'The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits,' published in The New York Times about 50 years ago, argues that the role of a company is to maximize profits within the rules of the game (see Friedman, 1970). This alternative is proposed by the growing movement called B Corporations⁷(B Corp), which focuses on changing the economic system, particularly by fostering awareness and supporting leaders and

⁷See <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/programs-and-tools/b-movement-builders>

organizations to use their businesses as a force to do good⁸. The B Lab organization mobilizes supporters of B Corporations for collective action to address critical societal challenges and defines the standards that lie at the heart of the movement, relating to best practices in the social, management and environmental spheres. B Lab-certified corporations are leaders in the global movement for an inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economy.⁹

How does a company positively impact the environment and people? In the B Corp publication 'Board Playbook,' it is shared how purpose-driven businesses are increasingly seen as favourable for increasing shareholder value. The authentic commitment to achieving the organizational mission focused on people and planet well-being creates value for all interested parties including shareholders. Barstow and Fyfe share the conviction of the B Corporations movement that: *Waiting for voluntary change simply will not get us where we need to go fast enough to solve the challenges we face. To restore trust in capitalism — and for capitalism to be worthy of our trust — we must pull policy and regulatory levers to ensure that all companies and investors are responsible for the impact of their decisions on all stakeholders and the economic system as whole.* (Barstow & Fyfe, 2021, p. 38).

'The drive of the wheel' and the attraction of interest toward the new alternative to Friedman's philosophy requires strong leadership will and dedicated action. Action aimed at a fairer social, organizational, and ecological reality. This strong leadership is a characteristic feature of thriving leaders who inspire their teams to do good and lead their companies to sustainable thriving.

* **

Thriving leadership is a concept of leadership that is holistic and reflects emerging theories of leadership in the new millennium by integrating scientific knowledge. Leadership starts from within and unfolds in relationships not only with people within the organization (at individual and team levels) but also beyond the organization—with all stakeholders and the natural environment in which businesses operate. In this regard, leaders and leadership teams more than ever need to adapt, change, and create to ensure not only survival but also sustainable thriving for their organizations.

⁸ *B Lab is a nonprofit organization that has set out to transform the global economy for the benefit of all people, communities, and the planet.*

⁹ *Today, there are 7000 certified corporations globally, but unfortunately, in Bulgaria, there are only two companies of this type: "Neri Karra," certified in July 2022, and "Bio Bulgaria (Harmonica™)," certified in September 2022.*

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare

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