

Management Education and Humanity's Transition to a New Civilization¹

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*We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history,
a time when humanity must choose its future.*

—Preamble to the Earth Charter

The proper purpose of any human institution is to improve the lives of the people who depend on it. If we support that proposition, then is there any place for a purely private-purpose corporation? The question becomes especially urgent as society faces a growing threat to human survival.

This paper posits that the private-purpose corporation, and the neoliberal ideology that affirms it, are major drivers of the social and environmental destruction we daily witness. If that is the case, then what might be essential features of business institutions that would better serve humanity? What might be the role of a Theory of Community. And what might that mean for the education of future business leaders?

This paper provides a broad framework for exploring those questions. It addresses foundational issues relating to human well-being, describes the growing momentum for moving societies toward an ecological civilization, and notes the Earth Charter as a valuable source of ethical principles. Finally, it identifies the outcomes the formal institutions of an ecological civilization must serve and concludes with five design principles that these institutions will need to honor to support lives of diversity, beauty, creativity, and meaning for all.

Not so long ago, humanity was fragmented into isolated societies organized around widely varied human cultures and institutions. Some met the needs of all in a balanced relationship with nature. Others created cruel divisions between brutal rulers and enslaved masses. The differences along that spectrum demonstrate that we are a species of many possibilities.

Over the past few decades, the revolution in air travel and communication technologies has brought humans together as a highly interconnected and interdependent species with significant knowledge of the range and consequences of our cultural and institutional

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choices. These developments now position us as a global species to create together—by conscious collective choice—a world of peace, shared resources, beauty, material security, and spiritual abundance for all.

We have chosen, however, a different path. As humanity’s cultural and institutional fragmentation has given way to an interconnected global society, we have embraced money as our defining common value, competition for power and resources as our dominant mode of relating, and private-purpose, profit-seeking transnational corporations as our defining institutions. This set of choices puts humanity on a path to environmental and social collapse and potential self-extinction. The institutions of higher education—and particularly schools of management—have a crucial role to play in helping humanity navigate a change of course.

A World of Possibility Gone Tragically Wrong

Five dominant global trends put us on track to become the first species on Earth to choose its own extinction.

1. **Life Destructive Technologies.** Our nuclear, carbon energy, genetic modification, and artificial intelligence technologies give us the capacity to destroy Earth’s ability to support life. We continue to increase the numbers and potential impacts of those technologies in disregard of the consequences.
2. **Extreme Inequality.** We tolerate a growing wealth gap that reduces ever more people to lives of desperation as a few engage in profligate consumption far beyond any need. Oxfam estimates the financial wealth of twenty-six billionaires now exceeds that of the poorest half of humanity.
3. **Consumption Beyond Earth’s Ability to Sustain.** The Global Footprint Network calculates that we consume at a rate 1.7 times what Earth’s regenerative capacity can sustain. Yet we cling to growing consumption to grow GDP devoid of concern for the costs to life or for who benefits as our defining economic goal.
4. **Corporate Influence on Government and Public Policy.** We facilitate the growing economic and political power of profit-maximizing transnational corporations dedicated to the private purpose of growing the financial assets of the world’s already richest individuals.
5. **Loss of Institutional Legitimacy.** We experience the rise in political demagoguery that follows when institutions lose legitimacy for lack of capacity to address society’s essential needs.

These trends are predictable consequences of institutional choices based on a deeply flawed meta-narrative that ignores our essential nature as living beings, misrepresents the sources of our well-being and happiness, and denies the higher possibilities of our human nature. The transformation we are now called to navigate will require a profound rethinking of how we structure and manage the institutions by which we organize our relationships—most particularly our economic relationships—with one another and Earth.

To Name Our Shared Dream

As we seek a path to the transformational changes we must now navigate, it is useful to name the future we seek. Latin Americans speak of *vivir bien* and *sumak kawsay* (good living), a commitment now enshrined in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. South Africans speak of *ubuntu* (humanity), often translated as “I am because we are.”

The ruling party of China has built into its constitution a commitment to ecological civilization and declared that “nature should be respected, adapted to, and protected....” In 2015, the Parliament of the World’s Religions issued a Declaration on Climate Change that closed with these words:

“The future we embrace will be a new ecological civilization and a world of peace, justice and sustainability, with the flourishing of the diversity of life. We will build this future as one human family within the greater Earth community.”

Ecological civilization seems a fitting name for a future that fulfills humanity’s long denied dream. *Ecological* is broadly inclusive of all living beings. It puts the focus on the capacity of living organisms to self-organize in diverse, interlinked, and intrinsically symbiotic relationships to create the conditions essential to life. *Civilization* evokes the depth of the cultural and institutional transformation required to create a human future that is truly civil.

Use of the term civilization needs a cautionary note. Imperial rulers have long used the term to legitimate expropriation of the lands and labor of peoples who were often more civil than themselves by dismissing them as “uncivilized.” A civilization that features civility among all parties on more than a very local scale is a human aspiration yet to be fulfilled.

Misdirection of Neoliberal Economic Theory

The institutional system that imperils humanity’s future is guided and legitimated by an elitist ideology known as neoliberal economics that ignores our nature as living beings, our need for love and meaning, our need for community, and government’s necessary role in securing and protecting community interest and the well-being of the whole.

The twisted logic and values of neoliberal economics are burned into our consciousness through carefully chosen and constantly repeated memes— “economic growth,” “the free market,” “free trade,” “multinational corporations,” and “limited government.” Each is a code phrase that prioritizes private financial gain over public community interests.

“Economic growth” prioritizes market transactions that grow GDP over self-care and gifting that do not. “The free market” signifies freedom for corporations to do whatever maximizes profit, free from public rules and oversight. “Free trade” means unrestricted corporate access to the world’s cheapest labor and resources to maximize profits by selling in the most affluent markets. “Multinational” corporations (as contrasted to “transnational” corporations) suggests that corporations that do business in several nations are rooted in and dedicated to serving each, which obscures the reality that they accept no allegiance to any nation or peoples. “Limited government” translates into low

taxes and dependence on privatized services available only from profit-maximizing corporations to those who can afford what these corporations choose to charge.

The neoliberal economics that now dominates economic policy globally found its trial implementation in the economic development strategies advanced by the World Bank, IMF, and other international development agencies that drove the recolonization of Africa, Asia, and Latin America following formal decolonization after WWII. The explicit objective of these strategies was to drive people off the lands that provided their means of livelihood and convert them from contributing members of self-reliant farming and hunter/gatherer communities that controlled their own means of production into hired farm and factory laborer generating profits for a corporate owner class. Of course, neoliberal economists did not express their agenda in quite these terms. They talked instead of creating jobs and growing GDP. What they didn't mention was that for most people—though they lived longer due to improvements in health related to immunization, modern sanitation, and other modern public health technologies—the actual quality of life declined for most people.

The most powerful impact of economic development led by neoliberal economists was to advance a process begun by Africa's early colonizers who realized that to control native populations, they needed to make them dependent on selling their labor to their colonial masters. During the earlier colonial period this was achieved by imposing taxes that could be paid only with the coin of the colonial master.

In the case of post WWII development policies, newly decolonized countries were enticed into a similar dependence by foreign loans that could be repaid only in foreign currencies earned by exporting the products of domestic labor for the benefit of foreign consumers—with each intermediate exchange generating profits for an elite owned corporation.

Real development strengthens peoples' ability to make a secure and fulfilling living as members of a community that controls its own resources. It is especially important to secure the ability of the poor and excluded to meet their own needs through their own productive efforts. A small amount of external help can be very useful, but too much intrusion of foreign funding—especially loan funding—can prevent real development and even break down the existing capabilities of a people to sustain themselves.

Poverty—generally defined as a lack of money—is not the defining issue. Members of high functioning traditional societies often had access to adequate food, clothing, shelter, and other essentials of a decent life with no need for money. Truly beneficial development will build the capability of people to function as healthy communities to better meet their own needs with local resources. The distortions introduced by foreign “assistance” are illustrated by this excerpt from the original 1995 edition of *When Corporations Rule the World*.

During a visit to South Africa in January 1992, I used a hypothetical example to illustrate the deception involved in the implementation of neoliberal economic theory. By the time of my visit, the era of apartheid had come to an end, and the country was preparing for a transition to black rule. I was struck by the strict demarcation of living space that isolated the black population in remote

townships. Although this was not a surprise, the lack of evidence of economic activity in the townships was.

There were neither modern commercial centers nor the myriad shops, stalls, and street vendors that are ubiquitous in poor neighborhoods in most of the world. It was then that I realized the full extent to which the economy had been designed to ensure that blacks remained wholly dependent on the white urban economy. Developing black entrepreneurship seemed an obvious and necessary goal toward the creation of a fully integrated society.

The World Bank was especially aggressive among the foreign aid donors pouring into the country with offers of assistance. One of the few blessings of apartheid was that because of the resulting international sanctions, South Africa had accumulated very little foreign debt. With its abundant resources, it was, from an international banker's perspective, an "under borrowed" country. The World Bank was thus drawn to South Africa like a bear to honey. Among other projects, the Bank was proposing a large loan for housing in the black townships. Everyone agreed that housing was a critical need. The question was how that need might best be met. Consider three hypothetical options:

Option 1. The World Bank provides a major foreign exchange loan for housing. The proceeds are used to import foreign building materials and construction equipment and to hire foreign contractors to build completed housing tracts. South African blacks will have new houses within a fairly brief time. Apart from temporary employment, however, few if any new local capacities will be developed, and there will be little impact on the local economy, until it comes time to generate the foreign exchange to repay the loan. Then the country will need to boost its exports, a task that will justify measures favoring the white firms that are in a position to reach out to export markets. Others will face austerity, particularly the poor blacks whose public services will be cut back.

Option 2. The World Bank provides a major loan for housing. The foreign exchange proceeds from the loan are exchanged for South African rand at South Africa's Central Bank, and the rand are used to contract large white-owned domestic corporations to build the housing, using local labor and domestically produced building materials. The black communities get their housing and some temporary employment, the white economy gets a major boost, and the country gets a one-time temporary injection of foreign exchange that may be used to import luxury goods or arms for the military or to transfer assets of white South Africans to foreign accounts. The dependence of the black economy on the white economy remains intact. The international economic dependence of South Africa increases. The loans must be repaid in foreign exchange, with consequences the same as those in option 1.

Option 3. South Africa graciously thanks the Bank for their visit, declines their offer, and puts them on the next plane back to Washington. Local funds are mobilized from the existing excess liquidity of the domestic banking system to finance black housing. Programs are put in place to provide training for black South Africans in a variety of entrepreneurial and technical skills. Incentives and

support are provided to encourage the formation of small black firms to produce doorframes, bricks, and basic plumbing and electrical fixtures and to provide construction contracting services.

Because the technologies and materials involved in low-income housing are quite basic and are readily available in South Africa, there is virtually nothing for which foreign exchange is needed and thus no legitimate reason to incur foreign debt. With this option, the black population gets its housing plus new skills, new economic power, new sources of livelihood, and a start toward a thriving black-controlled economy. A system is in place to build and maintain housing as required. The white economy would also benefit, as it would necessarily be the source of some of the materials and services. There would be no new foreign debt to repay.

Of the three options, only the third would create new black capabilities, begin to equalize economic power, and strengthens economic self-reliance. It is the only option that can be considered truly developmental. The greater the involvement of foreign aid agencies, especially the World Bank or a regional development bank, the less likely it becomes that option 3 will be chosen, because it gives the foreign funder little, if any, role.

Of course, South Africa is something of a special case in the extent of its domestic resources and technical capabilities. There is, however, scarcely any country in the world that does not have the resources and technology needed to provide its people with their basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care--if these are national priorities.

Foreign aid, even grant aid, becomes actively anti-developmental when the proceeds are used to build dependence on imported technology and experts, encourage import-dependent consumer lifestyles, fund waste and corruption, displace domestically produced products with imports, and drive millions of people from the lands and waters on which they depend for their livelihoods. All of these are common outcomes of World Bank projects and structural adjustment programs.

During my November 2019 visit to South Africa I hope to learn what South Africa subsequently actually did in response to the housing and other developmental needs of black communities. I assume it was most likely some combination of options 1 and 2.

The neoliberal economic theory that guided international development efforts in most low-income countries gradually spread high income countries as well as the deceptive memes—"economic growth," "the free market," "free trade," " multinational corporations," and "limited government" became an ever more pervasive global public mantra.

Management Education and the Theory of the Firm

Business schools have embraced a specialized extension of the neoliberal narrative called the [Theory of the Firm](#). This theory is presented as an objective, values-free explanation of how large corporations make decisions—not how they should make them. However,

the theory embraces the neoliberal assumption that a firm's only responsibility is to maximize financial returns to shareholders, and it is embraced by most teachers of business management as setting the standard by which corporations *should* make decisions. Business schools generally take it as their mission to teach students how firms best achieve the profit maximization outcome.

As a legal entity, a corporation is the creation of the government that issues its charter. By long standing legal precedent, this charter facilitates the concentration of wealth and power while shielding owners from liability for harms caused. If a corporation's management sacrifices profit for a larger societal good, current law supports action by private financiers to buy them out and eliminate this expropriation of the shareholders' presumed entitlement.

Government's purpose is to serve the common good. Using its legal authority to serve the purely private interests of a tiny already highly privileged minority is a misappropriation and abuse of government power. This suggests the private-purpose corporation is an inherently illegitimate institution. The more transnational its reach and the greater its freedom from liability of its owners and managers for harms done to others, the less legitimate it becomes.

The Theory of the Firm can serve a critically important function by directing attention to the fact that the decision makers in society's now most powerful institutions accept no responsibility for the well-being of their workers, their customers, nature, or the national interests of any country. Framed in this manner, the Theory of the Firm reveals the need for immediate and decisive corrective action to rid itself of this deadly misappropriation of power.

Business educators concerned with improving lives need to educate an audience far wider than the conventional classroom to the existential threat that the private-purpose corporation poses to society. Their expertise will also be required to craft a metanarrative and supporting memes to frame the nature and purpose of the legally mandated institutions of an ecological civilization and a theory that frames how they are best structured and managed to fulfill that purpose. We could call such a theory the Theory of the Community grounded in a living Earth narrative that embraces the rapidly deepening scientific understanding of life and how it organizes to create and maintain the conditions essential to its own existence.

A Living Earth Narrative

To find our way to true human well-being, we must begin not with how the firm—or even the society—should organize, but rather with how natural living systems organize. It is here that we find essential clues to how we must learn to organize as human communities living in symbiotic relationship with the living Earth on which our existence depends.

The scientific community is discovering that complex living organisms exist only in multi-species communities that self-organize to create and maintain the conditions essential to their existence. Rather than organize as centrally controlled hierarchies, they organize as self-organizing holarchies—symbiotic wholes that work together as whole

parts to create and maintain yet greater wholes. These processes serve as the foundational frame for a living-systems meta-narrative.

Our own bodies provide our most intimate example. Each human body is a self-organizing community of tens of trillions of ever-adapting, individual, decision-making living cells that create and maintain the body's essential organs and beneficial microbiotic colonies. Together these interdependent parts manage constant exchanges of energy, nutrients, water, and information to create and maintain the body that serves as the crucible of our consciousness and the instrument of our agency.

Each of the body's cells constantly balances its own needs with those of the body on which own existence depends. While accommodating the continual reproduction and death of individual cells, changes in temperature and varied inputs of food, air, and water the community of organisms that expresses itself as the human body protects itself from an endless variety of toxins and pathogens. When the body no longer functions as a community to manage these processes, we declare it dead as it begins to decay.

Simultaneously, the living body responds to instructions from our conscious mind in ways that require complex coordination by individual cells to redistribute energy to contract and relax muscles as required to move the body in response to our preferences. We lack even the language to adequately describe the complexity of these processes. Yet they all play out with so little effort on our part that we take them for granted and feel no need to attend to them.

Living Earth is itself a complex holarchy of symbiotically interconnected whole-part eco-communities. Each community is comprised of countless species engaged in the continuous exchange of energy, nutrients, water, and information to regenerate soils, aquifers, streams, and rivers, sequester excess carbons, toxins, and other wastes, capture, utilize, and share solar energy, purify air, and stabilize weather and temperatures amid constantly changing external temperatures and available supplies of water, nutrients, and energy. These self-organizing processes simultaneously control individual species populations to maintain the multi-species diversity balance essential to overall ecosystem health.

Just as each cell of the body is part of a larger interdependent whole called "self," we humans are part of a larger interdependent whole called Earth. We humans, however, have come to relate to Earth more as parasites than as responsible, contributing, interdependent members of the community on which we depend. We have embraced the private-purpose corporation as a favored institutional instrument of our parasitism. Earth appears to be mobilizing to rid itself of the parasite that now threatens its ability to maintain itself as a living being.

We can resist Earth's self-defense and risk further destruction of Earth's ability to recover from our presence. Or we can choose to transition from being Earth exploiters to being Earth healers.

Human institutions are human creations. Legitimate institutions serve the whole and are accountable to the communities that create them to improve the lives of those who depend on them. When an institution fails to fulfill this purpose, the community has the *right* to eliminate or transform it. When a human institution threatens the well-being of

the community, the community has the *obligation* to eliminate or transform it. Breaking up and redistributing corporate power and resources in ways that serve people and planet presents an extraordinary challenge. We must put our minds immediately to the task of thinking through how it might be accomplished.

Institutions to Serve the Ends We Seek

Humans do not live by narratives alone. We create institutions that align our collective behavior with our narratives.

Contemplating the design of the formal institutions of an ecological civilization begins with articulating the outcomes we seek. At the most fundamental level, we seek a global society that meets the essential material needs of all people while restoring and enhancing the health and productivity of Earth's natural systems. Fulfillment of this goal will require institutions, including the institutions of business and economy, that support four systems outcomes.

1. **Earth balance**—the imperative to bring humanity's total environmental burden into balance with the capacity of Earth's generative systems. Immediate action is required to eliminate non-essential consumption—including the preparations for and the destructive consequences of war. Longer term action is required to create institutional and physical structures that make doing the right thing easy and enjoyable—for example designing urban environments to make the essentials of daily living such as work, housing, entertainment, shopping, and essential services readily accessible by mass transit, biking, or walking in safe and pleasant neighborhoods while discouraging or eliminating use of automobiles.
2. **Equitable distribution**—the imperative to achieve a just and equitable distribution of wealth and power. Immediate action is required to stop the further concentration of wealth and power while advancing its long-term redistribution, restoring the commons, and connecting the rights of ownership with their corresponding responsibilities.
3. **Life-serving technology**—the imperative to make technology choices that strengthen rather than impair life's regenerative capacity. Immediate action is required to eliminate the use of harmful technologies. Longer-term action is needed to further the develop and application of life-serving technologies.
4. **Democratic accountability**—the imperative to assure that all institutional power is accountable to living communities of people and nature in service to the well-being of the whole. Immediate action is required to block further concentration of corporate power, while taking longer-term steps to secure the accountability of governments to the people, break up existing concentrations of corporate power, and establish rules that assure corporate accountability to the communities in which they do business.

The design and management of ecological civilization's supporting institutions is appropriately grounded in our rapidly expanding knowledge of the organization of healthy natural systems as discussed above. This calls us to transition from hierarchical

institutions that facilitate the exploitation of people and Earth to holarchic institutions that facilitate bottom-up self-organization for the well-being of all.

Toward a Theory of the Community

A Theory of the Community will make life its defining value and securing and advancing the well-being of life its defining purpose. Two clusters of principles can guide institutional design and management: ethical principles and structural principles. The ethical principles of the institutions of an ecological civilization are well framed by an international document called the Earth Charter.

The process of drafting the Earth Charter began in 1987 with the Brundtland Commission's call for a "new charter" to set "new norms" to guide the transition to a sustainable human future. In 1996, Maurice Strong, who served as secretary-general of the 1992 UN Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, and Mikhail Gorbachev, former president of the Soviet Union, created the Earth Charter Commission, which they co-chaired with three other leaders from Asia, Africa, and South America.

At their invitation, theologian, philosopher, and philanthropist Steven Rockefeller led an international drafting committee that conducted a lengthy survey of relevant principles of international law and over more than three years engaged in worldwide consultations with thousands of people of diverse races, cultures, religious traditions, and political leanings. The product was the [Earth Charter](#), launched on June 29, 2000 at the Peace Palace in the Hague. It is a brief and inspiring declaration of fundamental, universally shared ethical principles.

The Charter calls on humanity to respect the inherent worth of all members of Earth's community of life, care for that community in all its diversity and interdependence and recognize the inherent individual and collective dignity of all people. It reminds us that freedom, knowledge, and power carry a corresponding individual and collective responsibility to care for the common good.

To fulfill that responsibility, the Charter affirms that we must secure Earth's living bounty and beauty, while creating democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful, celebrate diversity, and enable all people to achieve a secure, meaningful, and ecologically responsible livelihood now and for all generations to come.

As for principles of institutional structure, the Charter calls for strengthening "democratic institutions at all levels" to secure transparency, accountability, and participation in governance. It is also explicit in its call to "Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good and hold them accountable for the consequences of their actions."

These principles need further elaboration. To this end, I offer the following suggestions to apply to all institutions formally sanctioned by law:

- 1. The defining purpose of all legally sanctioned institutions is to serve life.**
Because life is their purpose, their performance is appropriately evaluated against metrics of healthy life function. Money and business are means—not ends.

2. **The principal units of organization are living communities of place.** All legally formalized institutions, including the institutions of business and banking, are properly grounded in, dedicated to serving, and accountable to the communities in which they function.
3. **The system structure is holonic, not hierarchic.** The system is composed of nested communities in which higher level organizational structures support and are ultimately accountable to self-reliant, self-organizing communities of place that maintain rule-based local markets populated by locally owned and accountable businesses.
4. **Resource flows are circular, not linear.** Human systems align with Earth's naturally recycling regenerative systems and facilitate the healing and enhancement of the latter to the benefit of all.
5. **Labor and capital are unified and equitably shared.** Worker and community ownership eliminate the separation of labor from ownership. Financial and spiritual rewards are shared among those who contribute. Absentee ownership is eliminated. Speculation and financial manipulation are prohibited.

The successful transition to an ecological civilization will require that we learn to meet our needs as intelligent, self-aware organisms in symbiotic partnership with the rest of Earth's community of life. The above institutional design principles provide an initial frame for addressing the institutional challenges at hand. If humanity decides to make improving lives a defining purpose of our institutions, the elaboration, refinement, and application of the principles of a Theory of Community may occupy organization and management scholars for generations to come.

Many among such scholars have long been concerned with facilitating self-organization within relatively small groups. Less attention has been given to facilitating self-organizing relationships among self-organizing groups with little or no dependence on formal hierarchies of authority—what we now must learn to do on a macro—ultimately global—scale.

It may be helpful to note that non-human organisms manage these processes with no evident equivalent of accounting tokens (money), authority structures (governments and corporations), or formal rules (laws and legal contracts). It is unlikely that humanity will abandon the use of these institutions. We need to dramatically redesign them, however, to serve the needs of an ecological civilization for which life is the defining value and money is simply a useful tool. It presents a major research challenge for schools of management.

Humanity has reached a defining choice point. We can embrace the vision of an ecological civilization grounded in the ethical principles of the Earth Charter and prosper in the pursuit of life. Or we can hold to our present course and perish in the pursuit of money.

This choice is eloquently captured by the Earth Charter's closing words.

Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.

The time has come to unite as families, communities, and nations in our common identity as members of Earth's community of life with a shared commitment to create a world of peace, beauty, creativity, and caring for all.

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