

Liberatory Leadership Framework



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Acknowledgements & Gratitude

Liberatory Leadership Framework

Published by Leadership Learning Community
(a fiscally sponsored project of PossibilityLabs)

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Funder Partner:

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Land Acknowledgment

The land many of us are on was, and is, tended by indigenous communities—this practice of acknowledging our past and present invites solidarity with indigenous sovereignty movements. We also want to recognize that Indigenous leadership has been purposely excluded in America and beyond, and there is a need to restore our contract with the land itself. With that, we acknowledge that this report was written on the following lands: Lanape/Canarsie, Ohlone, and Ho-Chunk Nation/Teejop.

Welcome and Gratitude

After decades of study and practice of leadership and race, LLC has come to believe in the importance of layering on another focal point: liberatory leadership. We intend for this framework to provide practical guidance for applying liberatory leadership within yourself and your organization. We hope to inspire, inform, and equip you with perspective, wisdom, and tools to lead in just and joyous ways. And finally, and mostly, we hope this framework serves as a mirror and springboard for your most liberatory visions and possibilities. Thank you for joining us in this conversation. We look forward to hearing your thoughts and ideas.

We extend deep gratitude to our advisors and inspirers - your partnership, time, and wisdom have been key in shaping this framework. Thank you to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for the resources that enabled the development and sharing of the framework.

Our Liberatory Leadership Framework reflects Leadership Learning Community's organizational learnings and our organizational language, which pulls from metaphors and images that reflect our connection to and inspiration from the natural world. We often refer to natural networks, pollinators, waterways, roots, and flowers. We offer you language that has helped us connect our organizational practices to what we feel is regenerative, grounded in wisdom, and playful. We hope these offerings bring you as much joy as they have brought us!



With gratitude, Ericka Stallings, Iman Mills Gordon,
Sadie Hassan, Nikki Dinh, Alexandra Urdaneta

Photo by: Amira Maxwell

Background

Leadership Learning Community (“LLC”) is a national organization focused on leadership field building for equity, justice, and collective liberation. We work with changemakers worldwide by inviting leaders, particularly those from historically excluded communities such as Black, Indigenous, immigrant, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and people with disabilities, to live out the compelling vision of liberation - one which seeks power, joy, and thriving for all people. To do this, we facilitate and encourage the unlearning of oppressive structures, the engagement of communities of practice that create new cultural norms, and the development of tools and frameworks that allow us to align our values and actions. Together, we create spaces for leaders to run, fund, and study practices that are rooted in collective liberation (rather than systemic oppression). **We call this liberatory leadership.**

In 2021, in collaboration with our sister organizations in the Liberatory Leadership Partnership (“the Partnership”), we embarked upon an iterative process of writing a working definition of liberatory leadership.

In conversation with and drawing from the work of several liberatory practitioners who have been leading this work for many years, the Partnership articulated a definition of liberatory leadership. It also included an explanation of what it feels like to embody liberatory leadership. The Partnership’s high-level definition reads as follows:

“Liberatory leadership theory and practice invite us to lead from a place of love, wholeness, and interdependence. By valuing celebration over competition, we are able to access possibilities that can only emerge in community. The practice of liberatory leadership flourishes when we create space for rest, when we address power differentials in service of justice, and when we center those at the margins within our organizations and our work.”

Context

Our own Liberatory Leadership framework builds upon the Liberatory Leadership Partnership's definition and it also roots the definition in the soil, flora, and waterways of LLC's work. **To us, the guiding principles of Liberatory Leadership explored in our framework are informed by our values:**



Love & Joy
Healing & Inner Work
Collaboration & Interdependence
Learning & Experimentation
Abundance & Generosity
Liberation & Freedom

These values feel embodied and core to how we experience liberatory leadership, not just as a leadership development practice, but as a relational practice that is part of a larger story of transforming ourselves to be able to transform systems. Our framework is also informed by our experiences

learning from and alongside liberatory practitioners, funders, network members, as well as the nonprofit leaders in our communities of practice and affinity groups, our internal organizational experiments, policies, practices, our conversations in conferences, trainings, webinars and through exploring facets of liberatory leadership in our annual virtual learning series on Liberatory Leadership, Play, and Mending.

Liberatory Leadership Resources

- [Leading with Love: On the Culture of Care at Leadership Learning Community](#)
- [Our Mending Padlet](#)
- [Our Funders Briefing Padlet](#)
- [On Rest](#)
- [Meet Me On the Desert](#)
- [Spell for Conscious Executive Director Relationship Building](#)
- [Play as a Liberatory Practice](#)

By studying alongside all of you through experimentation and play, we have experienced the magic of living in liberatory leadership from many places. Practicing liberatory leadership is delicate. It can be hard to define and sometimes feels elusive, but when it is experienced, it is undeniable. We've celebrated when things go as we imagined and have taken opportunities to reflect, regroup, and replan after trying something new that didn't go quite as planned. These learnings have enabled us to articulate tools and practices that make liberatory leadership more concrete. We hope this framework offers a definition and practical application of liberatory leadership steeped in an understanding of our work and our engagements with the broader field. We hope you see yourself, hear your voice, read your experience here, and use this framework as a tool to continue the conversation as we work towards actualizing our collective freedom through liberatory leadership.



Definition

Our Definition of Liberatory Leadership

We believe that liberatory leadership means taking responsibility for collectively transforming our freedom dreams into reality by freeing ourselves from oppressive and limiting self-beliefs, harmful interpersonal practices, and divesting from and changing systems of harm that rely on domination and extraction. For those of us leading from within movements and organizations, this means creating, refining, and uplifting life-giving policies, structures, and practices that combat oppression in our organizations and our communities. Our working definition is informed by our organizational policy and practice experiments, our ongoing dialogue as part of the Liberatory Leadership Partnership, our desk research, and our interactions with the broader field, such as LaShawn Route Chatmon ED of the National Equity Project¹.

¹ Chatmon, LaShawn Routé, Wade in the Water: Leadership Imperatives for Turbulent Times

The **systems and structures** that uphold our society are steeped in oppression and White supremacy

Centering our full humanity - love, beauty, wholeness, joy, mutuality, and connection- sustains us and fosters liberatory transformation



Liberatory Leadership is an iterative process to dismantle oppressive structures & rebuild just, sustainable, life-giving and liberated structures.

Why

Rather than holding up liberatory leadership in comparison to or against equity-centered leadership, we think of liberatory leadership as a means of re-envisioning existing equity-centered policies while innovating new liberatory practices. We believe liberatory leadership offers the field a different orientation toward social justice leadership. This orientation shifts our attention towards the iterative, prefigurative, and (im)possible in order to build power for transformation while addressing power asymmetries. Where the language of equity describes the experiences of those moving toward transformation within a system, the framing of liberatory leadership shifts our attention away from existing systems toward the iterative creation of new systems alongside the ones we have and the ones we have yet to build. That is to say: we need equity-focused practices that address current conditions AND, through liberatory leadership, we believe we can shift systems so radically that

something completely new emerges. Our hope here, then, is to offer a framework of sorts for how we, as leaders, can live into the prefigurative values a liberatory future demands by practicing daily a leadership ethos that is just, life-giving, sustainable, and iterative.

In order to create a more just and equitable society, liberatory leadership invites leaders to prioritize the power of historically excluded communities, challenge traditional power dynamics, and operate with the values of love, wholeness, and interdependence in our communities, organizations, and movements rather than grounding in mainstream leadership practices that rely on systems of domination and labor extraction. Without offering a prescriptive leadership development model, liberatory leadership invites leaders to adopt a learning stance to operationalize a vision of collective liberation.

What

Liberatory leadership is an invitation to live out the compelling vision of collective liberation through the transformation of ourselves, our communities, and our institutions. It draws on numerous personal, organizational, and community practices that invite us to assess, reflect on, unlearn, and discard relationships that center power based on supremacy, division, and dominance by inviting in models based on equity, community, and self-determination.

As a practice rooted in self-love and right relationship with others, liberatory leadership facilitates the power, joy, and thriving of all people by maintaining that we must do just work in just and joyous ways.

How

Liberatory leadership empowers leaders to:

- Center those at the margins of our organizations and our work.
- Challenge traditional power dynamics by emphasizing the importance of love, wholeness, and interdependence.
- Commit to ongoing learning and self-reflection.
- Build community and develop relationships of trust and respect so that you and others can model vulnerability, make mistakes, and reciprocate grace.
- Create space for healing and rest.

- Establish and invest in spaces for dreaming and imagination that honor multiple ways of knowing, learning, and perceiving.
- Interrogate how race and power interact with our work.
- Empower individuals and communities to take collective ownership of their struggles by working together to create solutions that address the root causes of injustice.
- Remain responsive to changing conditions by naming dynamic tensions and acting cooperatively, especially in the face of conflict.
- Identify and create room to practice new, values-aligned, constructive ways to navigate conflict.

- Continuously align and re-align our words with our practices by treating staff and partners in ways that reflect the image of justice we strive to create in the world.
- Cultivate a work culture that encourages inner healing, modeling integrity, and remaining accountable for your words, intentions, and actions.



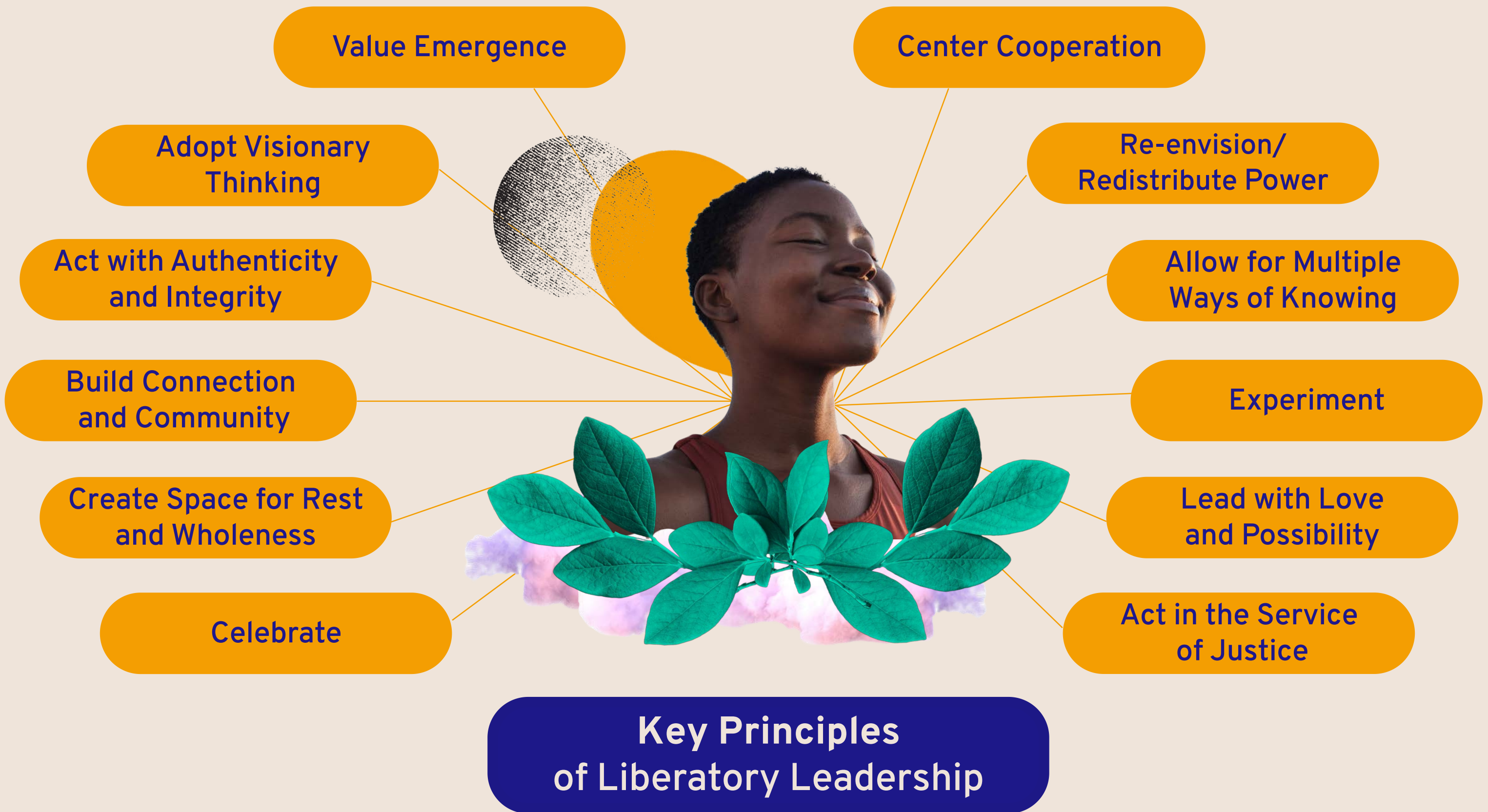
Adopting a Liberatory Leadership Practice

Key Principles

Liberatory leadership practice begins with grounding in liberatory principles. **The Key Principles of Liberatory Leadership** we offer are foundational ways of being that help us operationalize our values and live into a leadership practice that is just and accountable. The principles help to differentiate liberatory leadership from dominant practices in the ecosystem. These principles hinge on actions that are essential to transforming leadership at the individual and institutional levels, and which advance our work of transforming the world. These key principles help illuminate new ways of engaging with ourselves, each other, and our work that facilitate growth, joy, wholeness, and integrity in our leadership practices.



Monica Dennis
Liberatory Leadership Framework
Advisor



Key Principles

Value Emergence

Embrace new and emerging forms of leadership that are prefigurative ⁽²⁾, imaginative, and not bound by previous practice.
Name dynamic tensions and embrace dialectical or both/and thinking.

Adopt Visionary Thinking

Imagine futures full of possibility and liberation.

Act with Authenticity and Integrity

Discover and lead as one's true, powerful self.
Align words and actions to ensure what we say is consistent with what we do.

Re-envision Redistribute Power

Transform common views of power and leadership structures and address power asymmetries.
Reflect on, unlearn, and discard harmful patterns. Continuously reevaluate and abandon practices that perpetuate white supremacy, division, and dominance, and adopt practices that call forth collective freedom, justice, and thriving.

² We use the word “prefigurative” to describe efforts to act in ways that presume a world defined by collective liberation rather than the world of inequity we currently live in and to create new approaches rather than replicating problematic pre-existing models.

Build Connection and Community

Build connection, community, and right relationship between individuals and the collective.

Create Space for Rest and Wholeness

Value and create space for rest and prioritize wholeness, healing ⁽³⁾, and well-being.

Center Cooperation

Decenter competition to foster interdependence, collaboration, and collective leadership.

Allow for Multiple Ways of Knowing

Allow for and value diverse ways of knowing and understanding. Connect to legacy and ancestral work, and recognize and honor the work and wisdom of those who came before.

Experiment

Willingness to adopt a learning stance, keeping what's fruitful, transforming or discarding what is not.

Act in the Service of Justice

Commit to actions that promote justice and self-determination. Center the most marginalized by prioritizing those historically excluded within our communities, organization ⁽⁴⁾, and work. Adopt a willingness to take risks to challenge and change the status quo. Act with the intent to repair past harms and to prevent or mitigate future harm from racism, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression.

Celebrate

Value joy, beauty, pleasure, and thriving.

Lead with Love and Possibility

Lead with care, compassion, and openness to potential.

⁴ We are defining “Organization” as any structure used to organize collective goals and activities. It does not have to be a formal non-profit.

“But it’s not just about increasing the absence of oppression. It’s also about practicing something else in its place. It’s about increasing liberation.”

-Mia Birdsong,
How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family,
Friendship, and Community

Reflection Questions

- Have you experienced some of the **Key Principles of Liberatory Leadership** in your practice?
- Are there other principles you would add?
- Are there certain Key Principles that feel more readily attainable than others? Can you name some of the perceived roadblocks to adopting these principles? Are there ways to get around those roadblocks?
- What material action can you take toward each of the key principles?

“To practice active hope, we do not need to believe that everything will work out in the end. We need only decide who we are choosing to be and how we are choosing to function in relation to the outcome we desire, and abide by what those decisions demand of us.”

-Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba,
[Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care](#)



Adopting a Liberatory Learning Stance

At LLC, one of the practices that has transformed our leadership and the way we approach problem solving has been adopting a learning stance⁽⁵⁾ and an evaluative mindset. We approach the practice of liberatory leadership as a continuous learning loop, an iterative process that allows us to learn from our successes, failures, and questions. Therefore, the learning stance is both foundational and woven throughout all elements of liberatory leadership practice. In alignment with this experience, we are not offering a prescriptive model of liberatory leadership because it is inherently prefigurative. We encourage you to try your own experiments, learning by doing and creating as you go.

As a prerequisite for liberatory practice, a learning stance allows us to be open to new strategies, practices, and policies while leading with curiosity.

This stance recognizes that we must take action. It simultaneously allows us to acknowledge that while mistakes can be deeply consequential, they are often inevitable and valuable as they offer opportunities to learn and to refocus our efforts when our results fall short of our expectations.

We know that this is easier said than done. In addition to increasing vulnerability and sometimes feeling risky, a learning stance requires us to accept that there is much to learn about topics we may believe we have mastered or where we assume the answer is already set. Here are some of the conscious relationship agreements⁽⁶⁾ we hold to make it feel safe to actively experiment in our work:

- Recognize that perfection isn't realistic and shouldn't be the goal.
- Embrace partially formed thoughts - "raggedy" thinking.

5 Compasspoint, [Grappling with Feedback: Lessons in Trying, Failing, and Trying Again](#)

6 Conscious Relationship Agreements, sometimes referred to as group or community agreements, are the agreements, processes, or conditions we require to be in relationship with one another. LLC's use of Conscious Relationship Agreements, was influenced by the team at [Coaching for Healing, Justice, and Liberation](#) (<https://healingjusticeliberation.org/>)

- Assume nothing and ask questions.
- Ask for and practice grace by showing vulnerability. In doing so, you make it easier for others to do the same.
- Taking responsibility for the impact of our actions or inactions.

As you explore what it means to develop a liberatory leadership practice, we invite you to remain curious, reflect, challenge our assumptions and your own, and act with a spirit of discovery.

"We have to study how to be tender
with each other until it becomes habit."

–Audre Lorde

Reflection Questions

- How open and committed are you to profound change?
- Do you believe a liberated world is possible?
- What conditions enable you to feel you can safely and actively engage in experimentation?



Chinyere Tutashinda
Liberatory Leadership Framework
Advisor

Components of the Liberatory Leadership Cycle of Practice

The Cycle of Practice illustrates our understanding of liberatory leadership as a process of preparing, assessing, acting, learning, unlearning, and refining. It is a loop that asks us to exercise our exploration and experimentation muscles while we value steady growth and curiosity over urgency and maintaining the status quo.

Additionally, a strong liberatory leadership practice hinges on grounding our strategies and actions in the **Key Principles of Liberatory Leadership** [pg. 14-17] and **Adopting a Liberatory Learning Stance** [pg. 20-22], which we explore in the sections above. In this section, we will introduce a high-level overview of the liberatory leadership practice cycle.

Prepare the Ground, Tend to the Soil

- Assess your current conditions.
- Get clear on the values you want to uphold.
- Intentionally name your goals and prepare the soil with the nutrients it needs to bear the fruit you hope to share.



Taking Action, Plant and Grow

- Develop liberatory ideas by constructing and prefiguring new values-aligned practices, structures, strategies, policies, and ways of being.
- Move to action, and put your liberatory ideas and concepts into practice.
- Build liberatory structures of accountability and support.

Learn, Refine, Harvest, & Compost

- Learn interdependently and ask questions.
- Refine and adjust your strategies and actions, keeping what works and releasing what does not.
- Celebrate.

In the following sections, we offer examples of how to live into each part of the cycle. Along the way, we remind you to maintain a liberatory learning stance and apply it as a lens you use throughout all parts of the cycle of practice.

Prepare the Ground, Tend to the Soil



Prepare the Ground, Tend the Soil

Before growing anything viable, we must tend to the soil and prepare it for a productive harvest. As Robin Wall Kimmer says, “Weeding and care for the habitat and neighboring plants strengthens its growth.”⁽⁷⁾

Liberatory leaders co-create conditions that make joy, liberation, and thriving possible and inevitable. This section will explore how to “prepare the ground” for liberatory leadership by anchoring in core values and key liberatory principles while operationalizing our values and leading authentically. Another way to

think of core values is as the minerals and vitamins needed to enrich the soil so that whatever fruit grows from that soil (e.g., our actions, commitments, and strategic visions) are sourced from nutrient-dense and hardy soil that can withstand seasonal shifts and changes.

“Where there appears to be only dirt, there may be the root system of some kind of insistent thriving.”

-Camille Dungy

⁷ Wall Kimmerer, Robin, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants

What does it look like in action



Prepare the Ground,
Tend the Soil

Assess the current soil conditions

Get curious about your ability to initiate transformation, including the resources and opportunities you have to facilitate change and the potential challenges. Note the questions, insecurities, worries, excitement, and interest that might exist. Be mindful of where you have agreement and where there might be misalignment. Look backward, if relevant, and explore how your history, experiences, and traditions related to change might impact your efforts. Pay attention to the external conditions in your ecosystem which may impact your efforts. Once you understand the current state of affairs, you can begin setting intentions for transformation.



Assess the current soil conditions

Name your goals with intention
and prepare the soil

Get clear on the values you
want to uphold

What does it look like in action



**Prepare the Ground,
Tend the Soil**

Assess the current soil conditions

● Name your goals with intention
and prepare the soil

Get clear on the values you
want to uphold

Name goals with intention. Prepare the soil

Name your goals with intention and prepare the soil with the nutrients it needs to bear the fruit you hope to share. Make your goals actionable by clarifying the impact you hope to have on the people, institutions, communities, and ecosystems you care about.

Naming intentions aligned with the Key Principles of Liberatory Leadership and in partnership with your values offers clarity of purpose. New articulations allow us to access different ways of thinking, and explicitly naming our intentions can help to reorient our thinking and the subsequent action steps. Additionally, sharing our intentions publicly can serve as an accountability check and present new learning opportunities.

What does it look like in action



**Prepare the Ground,
Tend the Soil**

Assess the current soil conditions

Name your goals with intention
and prepare the soil

● Get clear on the values you
want to uphold

Get clear on the values you want to uphold

Articulate a shared definition of values: Once you've named your values, take time to come to a collective understanding of what those values mean so that everyone is on the same page. Make sure to really listen and consider how people's upbringing, life circumstances, and positional power inform their understanding of the values they articulate while prioritizing a common understanding that works for the group's good.

Align your values with the Key Principles of Libratory Leadership: Once you've named your values and collectively articulated what they mean, clarify which Key Liberatory Principles they map onto. For example, you may value "Collaboration" and understand it as "collective resource sharing" and associate that with the liberatory principle of "Build Connection and Community." Taking the time to make those connections clear to yourself and others helps you both hold and embody your liberatory vision.

What does it look like in action



Prepare the Ground,
Tend the Soil

Assess the current soil conditions

Name your goals with intention
and prepare the soil

● Get clear on the values you
want to uphold

Get clear on the values you want to uphold

Return to your core values and liberatory principles regularly: Keep your values at the forefront of your work. Name the particular values you are leaning into as part of your planning, action, and reflection practice. Rooting strategies and practices in liberatory principles as part of our everyday work helps us remain accountable for our intentions, strategies, and practices.



Adopt a learning stance: Remember that a learning stance is foundational to all parts of the liberatory leadership practice cycle. Prepare to engage in continuous learning by assessing risk, asking for help, and embracing redirection.

Another tool that LLC uses is anchoring our language. Our organizational language and metaphors are often rooted in the earth; we talk about natural networks, pollinators, and remaining “rooted” or “grounded” in our values as if they were the soil beneath our feet--anchoring your values in liberatory principles that resonate with you will help you remain connected to them as you try to actualize them.

Reflection Questions

Identifying Your Liberatory Values:

- What factors would allow you to fully express your true self and lead from a heartfelt, whole, joyous, and just place?
- How can you translate those factors into organizational or collective values?
- What are your core values? Which of these values are aligned with the Key Liberatory Principles?
- Do you have an articulation of your values that you need to adapt to make them more liberatory?

Reflection Questions

Assessing Your Soil and Embodying Liberatory Values

- Think about your soil. How possible does aligning with liberatory practice feel?
- Think of a time when you last made a values-aligned choice: What conditions made alignment possible?
- Think of a time when you made a misaligned choice and needed to course correct. What conditions made aligning with your values difficult? If applicable, what made course correction or realignment possible?

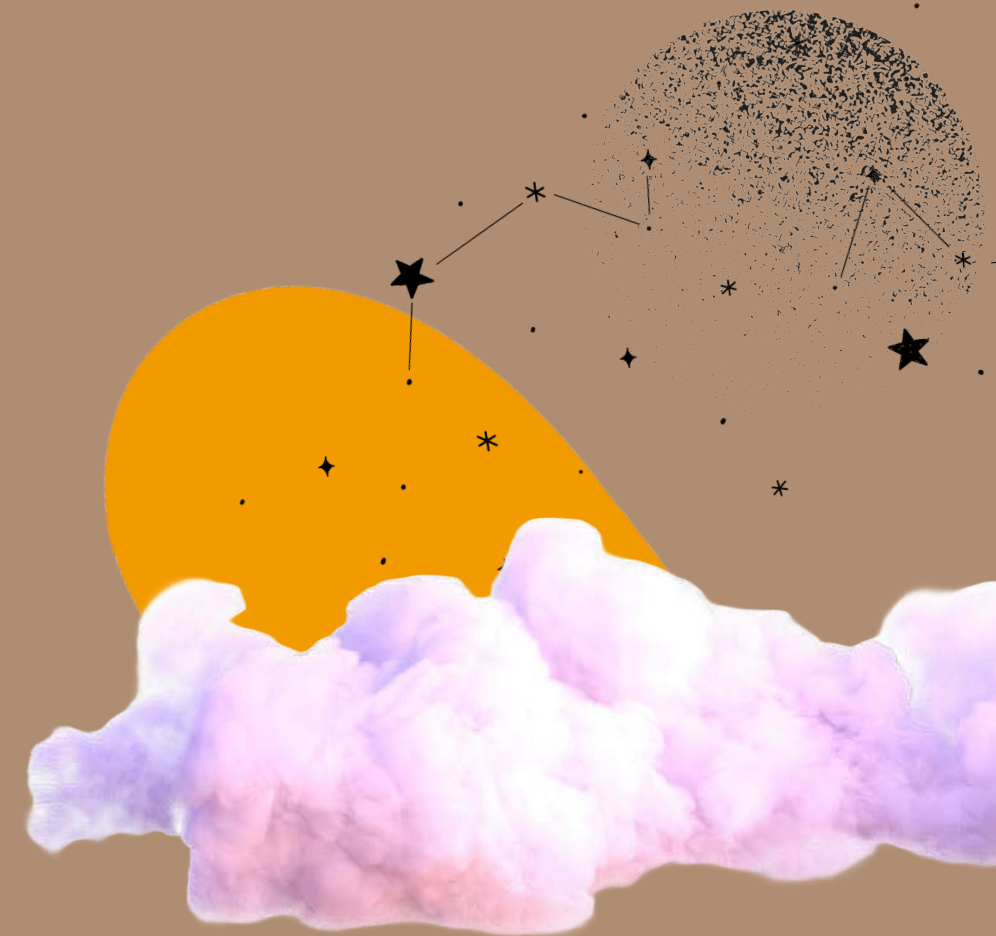


Dr. Zuri Tau
Liberatory Leadership Framework
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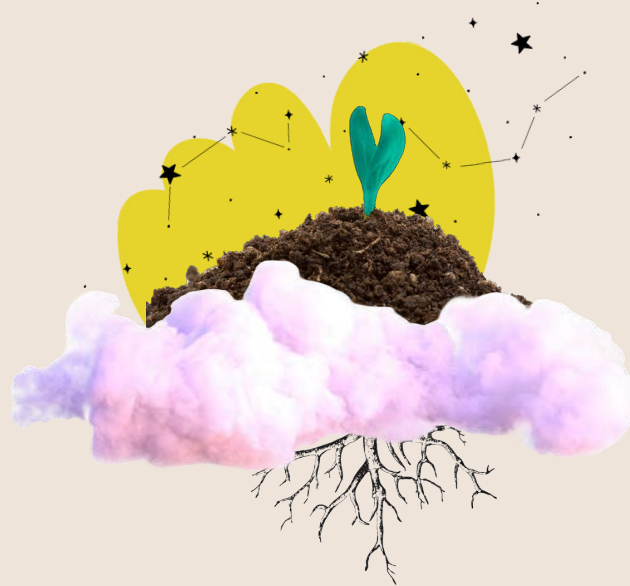
Vision Exercise

Start by taking a deep breath in and out. Close your eyes and imagine yourself launching into the multiverse where you are lightning-fast and can hover over the present, past, and future as you please. You catch glimpses of what has been, what is, and what will be as you're traveling. You wave to loved ones and beloved community from your life so far. You smile as you pass future people who you will get to know and enjoy later in your life. In this future space, your liberatory visions are realized...

- What do you feel? What do you see?
- What do you see here as it relates to leaders? (Do you have a vision or aspiration of leadership that you are working to build and/or become?)
- How do leaders act, and what do they practice now? (Do you have a vision of a practice for what supported and full POC leadership looks like? Maybe a feeling if not a visual.)
 - How do you want others to engage with this work?
 - How do you invite others into this visioning space with you?



Take Action, Plant and Grow



**Take Action,
Plant & Grow**

With clarity on the liberatory values and principles that we want to center, it is time to develop strategies, structures, and practices to realize our liberatory vision. Actualizing our collective freedom and thriving starts with transforming ourselves and extends to transforming our organizations and the broader ecosystem. How we engage, learn, and grow as we build new structures and practices is as important as our actions toward transformation. As liberatory leaders, we are charged with reimagining our strategies and actions as we shift from and

counter the oppressive practices of the dominant culture. Equipped with our values, principles, vision, and knowing, we move toward action and try new ways of being.

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

- Arundhati Roy

What does it look like in action



Take Action,
Plant & Grow



Develop liberatory ideas and vision

Move to action

Build liberatory structures of
accountability and support

Develop liberatory ideas and vision

Take time to dream and imagine what true liberation could look like. Create one or multiple powerful visions of liberation. Think about the possibilities that a liberatory approach can unveil. Nurture this vision as it evolves, gaining strength and clarity along the way.

Make space to experience Liberation. To inform our actions and aid our decision-making, at LLC, we routinely ask, “Does this feel liberatory?” However, without liberatory experiences, there is nothing to use as a reference. This is why returning to your core values as a touchstone is essential while leaning on other tools such as Liberated Zones ⁽⁸⁾.

8 Tchume, Trish Adobea, and Aida Cuadrado Bozzo, Calling in & up - 6: Creating a Liberated Zone,
<https://www.callinginandup.org/pedagogy-guide/6-creating-a-liberated-zone>

What does it look like in action



Take Action,
Plant & Grow

Develop liberatory ideas and vision

● Move to action

Build liberatory structures of
accountability and support

Move to Action

Experiment with new practices. Create, construct, and prefigure new practices, structures, strategies, policies, and ways of being. Revise and rework pre-existing approaches to align them with liberatory values and vision(s). This prefigurative approach allows us to practice now, often on a smaller scale, what we hope to achieve on a larger scale in the future.

Assess risk. Perform the due diligence necessary to ascertain the risk associated with acting in new and different ways. You will be able to predict some, but not all, risks. Make sure your assessment includes a buffer zone for the potential hazards that you may not have been able to predict. Most importantly, be mindful of the risks of inaction and be willing to take the risks required by change.

Act. Once you have developed liberatory ideas and assessed risk - take action - invest in your ideas, and provide the care and attention a new idea needs to be actualized.

What does it look like in action



Take Action,
Plant & Grow

Develop liberatory ideas and vision

Move to action

Build liberatory structures of
accountability and support

Build liberatory structures of accountability and support

Cultivate spaciousness. Slowing down allows us to catch up with ourselves. When you build in spaciousness in your day and agenda, you give yourself time to reflect and reassess, and allow space for valuable feedback. Spaciousness offers us the opportunity to reground on purpose and center the transformation we seek to achieve in the world.

Accountability. Outside the dominant culture, accountability can be loving and non-punitive. Accountability provides opportunities to align with our shared values and clarify our commitments, boundaries, expectations, and responsibilities. As liberatory leaders, we can build accountability structures and practices that create space for authenticity, trust building, and reciprocity.

Ask for Help. Part of taking responsibility for what matters to us is asking for help to grow our skills and capacities to do transformative work. Asking for help normalizes vulnerability as core to the practice of collaboration; it allows others to support us on our learning journeys while reaffirming that there is no need for shame as we are all learning through our successes and mistakes.

10 Liberatory Leadership Strategies and Supporting Practices

In this section, we offer organizational strategies and supporting practices to help operationalize your liberatory vision. If our goal is collective liberation, we must identify the interpersonal and organizational tools that can help us catalyze transformation.

There are many ways to practice liberatory leadership. The chart below shares ten liberatory leadership strategies that we have found crucial to our work as liberatory leaders. We developed these strategies through our research, virtual learning spaces, and collaborative work with other liberatory leaders. Some of this visioning is captured in our 2024 report, Leadership and Race: A Call to Each Other, Exploration of the Current Leadership and Justice Landscape and Recommendations for Action ⁽⁹⁾, where leaders name not only the liberatory world they are building, but the strategies that have helped them build alongside each other. We want to re-emphasize that how we learn, grow, and care for others and ourselves as we build new structures and

practices is just as important as our actions toward that transformation. To that end, we offer a list of supporting practices directly stemming from the liberatory leadership strategies.

We encourage you to think of the supporting practices as pillars of practice that help you operationalize structural changes. For example, one way to embed inner work as a liberatory leadership strategy within your organization and leadership practice is to operationalize daily/weekly/or even monthly reflection. Another way would be to model alignment between your words and actions by incorporating frequent opportunities for feedback in your work with others, and creating non-punitive avenues of accountability for teammates.

⁹ Stallings, Ericka and Mills Gordon, Iman, Leadership & Race: A Call to Each Other, Exploration of the Current Racial Justice Landscape and Recommendations for Action, <https://leadershiplearning.org/publications/leadership-race-a-call-to-each-other/>

Liberatory Strategies and Practices

Strategies

1. Commit to learning and experimenting

(Related Key Principles: Value Emergence, Experiment, Allow for Multiple Ways of Knowing)

2. Dedicate time and resources to unrestrained imagining and dreaming

(Related Key Principle: Adopt Visionary Thinking)

Practices

When exploring a new policy, strategy, practice, or activity, frame it as an experiment. Identify learning questions, and at the end, or a defined point, use the learning questions to assess the experiment and articulate what you might retain or change based on what was learned.

- Facilitate experimentation, cultivate curiosity, and adopt an evaluative mindset.
- Incorporate reflection into your work and your leadership practices.
- Invite in diverse ways of learning, perceiving, and communicating.

Establish intentional dream spaces: spaces of imagination and dreaming.

- For example, LLC uses the reflection question, “If our collective liberation was achieved and the work was complete, what would you do?” a variation of an offering introduced to us by Aisha Shillingford of Intelligent Mischief⁽¹⁰⁾. We’ve used this at advisory board meetings, staff meetings, stakeholder meetings, and broader ecosystem gatherings to create an opportunity for members of our community to envision liberatory possibilities.
- Regularly dedicate time to broaden your scope and identify ways to make your work and leadership increasingly liberatory. At LLC, we ask ourselves, “How can this policy or practice be more liberatory?”

3. Commit to both internal and external alignment of values and practices

(Related Key Principle: Act with Authenticity and Integrity, Decenter Competition)

Internally align practices and policies with liberatory values, and externally assess if actions advance liberation or not.

- Practice just work in just and joyous ways. By this, we mean that how the work of liberation is practiced is also important, not just the transformative impact that we seek. One way to ensure this is to set liberatory values as a metric when developing, creating, and modifying policies. For example, “How will x policy allow us to do just work in just and joyous ways?”
- Resource liberatory work by committing financial resources for tools, activities, and resources that promote liberation.
- Internal example: Salary transparency is an increasingly common way that the hiring and recruitment process can be improved. [See our blog](#) for other ways in which the LLC has added a liberatory lens to our recruitment process.
- External example: Speak up: When you see a wrong, use your voice to name it and call attention to it so that those working against it know they are not alone and that your power is aligned with theirs. At the time of this framework’s publication in 2025, we are experiencing a rise in authoritarianism and an erosion of democratic norms, institutions, and corresponding protections. Many of the values and practices espoused in this framework are being vilified and attacked. As leaders committed to liberation, it is our responsibility not to be silent observers and instead to call out the oppressive actions we witness and call to each other to counter, undo, and transform them.

4. Do the Inner work

(Related Key Principle: Act with Authenticity and Integrity)

“Inner work is our individual and collective practice of nurturing health, vitality, clarity, and wholeness in ourselves as individuals and as groups.”⁽¹¹⁾

- Make liberatory coaching available to team members, e.g., Coaching for Healing, Justice, and Liberation⁽¹²⁾
- Utilize mind-body practice, such as Courageous Practice⁽¹³⁾ (formerly known as Forward Stance) in your work.

5. Build, shift, and share power

(Related Key Principle: Re-envision/Redistribute Power)

Crafting a liberated reality requires us to build individual and collective power, recognize the power we hold, and reimagine how power can be exercised differently in our organizations and the world at large. Gathering the alliances, relationships, and resources to secure the mechanisms of self-determination. By reexamining our relationship(s) to power, we can explore how we can build, shift, share, and ultimately exercise liberatory power, which is the ability “to create what we want to see in the world.”⁽¹⁴⁾ We can practice this transformation by examining how power asymmetries are expressed in our collective spaces.

- Learn about power mapping and assessment.⁽¹⁵⁾
- Reflect on our power.
- Organize and build collective power.
- Incorporate collective leadership models⁽¹⁶⁾
- Incorporate shared and distributed leadership practices. (See LLC blog)⁽¹⁷⁾

¹¹ Change Elemental, Centering Inner Work, <https://changeelemental.org/centering-inner-work/>

¹² Center for Healing Justice and Liberation, <https://healingjusticeliberation.org/>

¹³ Forward Together, Forward Stance, <https://forwardtogether.org/forward-stance/>

6. Invest in trust and relationship-building

(Related Key Principle:
Build Connection and
Community)

Collaborate deeply and often. Build intentional collaboration into seemingly unconventional aspects of your work. For example, LLC has applied an ecocentric lens to the hiring process by inviting similar and/or allied organizations to share job postings and inviting candidates who were not hired by LLC the opportunity to access a pool of similar job postings from others in the ecosystem.

- Create liberatory spaces.⁽¹⁸⁾
- Experiment with deep transparency.
- Try on interdependence by partnering with values-aligned entities. (e.g., collective fundraising, collaborative research.)
- Ask for and offer help.

7. Embrace conflict

(Related Key Principle:
Decenter Competition)

Liberatory leaders practice generative conflict⁽¹⁹⁾, where conflict becomes an opportunity for learning, growth, and reconnection. Develop conflict transformation capacity via skill training and hiring external support, e.g., Marquita James (See Our Mending Series)⁽²⁰⁾.

14 Suarez, Cyndi, Effective Interactions: Supremacist Power and Liberatory Power | Non-Profit Quarterly

<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/effective-interactions-supremacist-power-and-liberatory-power/>

15 Othering & Belonging Institute, Power Analysis, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/power-analysis>

16 Marshall, Ashley, Coleading as an Act of Rebellion | Non-Profit Quarterly

https://nonprofitquarterly.org/coleading-as-an-act-of-rebellion/?mc_cid=b2bc23fb6e&mc_eid=55cb4a5c5e

17 Leadership Learning Community, Distributed Leadership <https://leadershiplearning.org/tag/distributed-leadership/>

18 Tchume, Trish Adobea, and Aida Cuadrado Bozzo, Calling in & up - 6: Creating a Liberated Zone,

<https://www.callinginandup.org/pedagogy-guide/6-creating-a-liberated-zone>

8. Focus on Liberatory Impact

(Related Key Principle: Act
In Service of Justice)

Liberatory leaders must focus on the transformation they seek in the world, not just in our organizations or just ourselves.

- Align your Theory of Change and Strategic Agenda with Liberatory Principles.
- In assessing risk, include the risk of inaction.
- Reflect on impact: Ask, “How is or will the community/ecosystem/world be more liberated due to our actions?” and “How do our actions undermine racism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression?”

9. Incorporate play to cultivate a culture of joy and facilitate innovation

(Related Key Principles: Value
Emergence, Allow for Multiple
Ways of Knowing, Lead with
Love and Possibility)

Play can serve as a means to introduce breathing space and relief into our routines, stimulate curiosity, and recapture the joy that oppressive systems, structures, and experiences constantly try to steal from us. By integrating play into our work, we can retrieve some of the joy these systems have taken from us while fostering space for new ideas to emerge. See LLC Blog on Why Play Matters.⁽²¹⁾

- Recapture play and levity by adding games to meetings and gatherings. See more examples here.⁽²²⁾

19 Tchume, Trish Adobea, and Aida Cuadrado Bozzo, Calling in & up - 7: Leaning into Generative Conflict
<https://www.callinginandup.org/pedagogy-guide/7-leaning-into-generative-conflict>

20 Leadership Learning Community, Mending Series, <https://leadershiplearning.org/tag/mending/>

21 Dinh, Nikki and Stallings, Ericka, 6 Reasons Why Liberatory Leaders Need to Take Play Seriously,
<https://leadershiplearning.org/6-reasons-why-liberatory-leaders-need-to-take-play-seriously/>

22 Leadership Learning Community, Play As A Liberatory Practice,
<https://leadershiplearning.org/webinars/play-as-a-liberatory-practice/>

10. Adopt A Culture of Care

(Related Key Principles:
Create Space for Rest and Wholeness, Lead with Love and Possibility, Celebrate)

Liberatory leaders center care and connection and value pleasure, thriving for themselves and others. See Oasis: Culture of LLC ⁽²³⁾ and Leading with Love: On The Culture of Care and Repair at LLC ⁽²⁴⁾

- Model vulnerability and make space for feelings.
- Offer and receive grace.
- Celebrate progress and wins.
- Prioritize well-being with retreats, sabbaticals, and slowing down.
- Utilize support from others, including coaching and consulting.
- Examine urgency. Be mindful of grind culture
- incursions and actively counter them.

23 Stallings, Ericka, Oasis Culture of LLC, <https://leadershiplearning.org/oasis-llc-culture/>

24 Mills Gordon, Iman, Leading with Love: On The Culture of Care and Repair at LLC, <https://leadershiplearning.org/leading-with-love/>

Reflection Questions

- How can these strategies and supporting practices help you operationalize your liberatory vision?
- What other liberatory strategies are you employing or exploring?
- What, if anything, do you find challenging about putting liberatory strategies into action? What other support would you need to do this work?
- What is a risk you can take to put liberatory values into action?
- Is there an experiment you might try?



Trish Adobea Tchume
Liberatory Leadership Framework
Advisor

Learn and Refine, Harvest, and Compost



Learn & Refine, Harvest & Compost

Tending to a liberatory vision demands seasons of labor and seasons of rest; part of our work is to make time to reflect, learn from our actions, and celebrate our wins. A crucial component to realizing our liberatory visions is taking the time to understand the impact of our actions, and integrate our learnings into future structures and practices - to intentionally continue to build on the work we have completed. We reflect and refine. We slow down to celebrate our labor, codify what we have learned to incorporate it

into future planning, enjoy our harvest, and share what we have learned with our community.

We invite you to unpack your learnings, curiosities, and newfound questions as you Learn, Refine, Harvest, and Compost.

“The periods preceding and following an uprising are precious for composting the uprising’s cicada shells through reflection, sensemaking, and healing. They are critical spaces for transforming our despair, seeding joy, deepening analysis and relationships, and building toward our next opportunity to shift toward a world of love, dignity, and justice.”

-Trish Adobea Tchume,
The Wisdom of Cicadas

What does it look like in action



**Learn & Refine,
Harvest & Compost**

Learn

Learn with others & ask questions - this doesn't need to be a solo expedition. Learn and share with peers, teammates, and allies; benefit from and contribute to collective learning. Embrace collaboration, co-liberation, and interdependence.

Solicit Feedback - We're all figuring this out; we won't get it perfect the first or the 20th time.



Learn

Refine

Harvest

Compost

What does it look like in action



Learn & Refine,
Harvest & Compost



Refine

Ask questions as you refine and adjust your strategies and actions.

Recenter in values as you refine and adjust your strategies and actions. Dedicate time and energy to regular and purposeful reflection on the alignment between your work and the liberatory values and principles you have committed to.

Assess impact. Explore what’s different in your life, organization, and community as a result of your liberatory efforts.

Re-Assess Risk. Look at which anticipated risks materialized and which did not, and inquire about any new risks you can take. Be attentive to the risks of both action and inaction. Be willing to take the risks required by change.

What does it look like in action



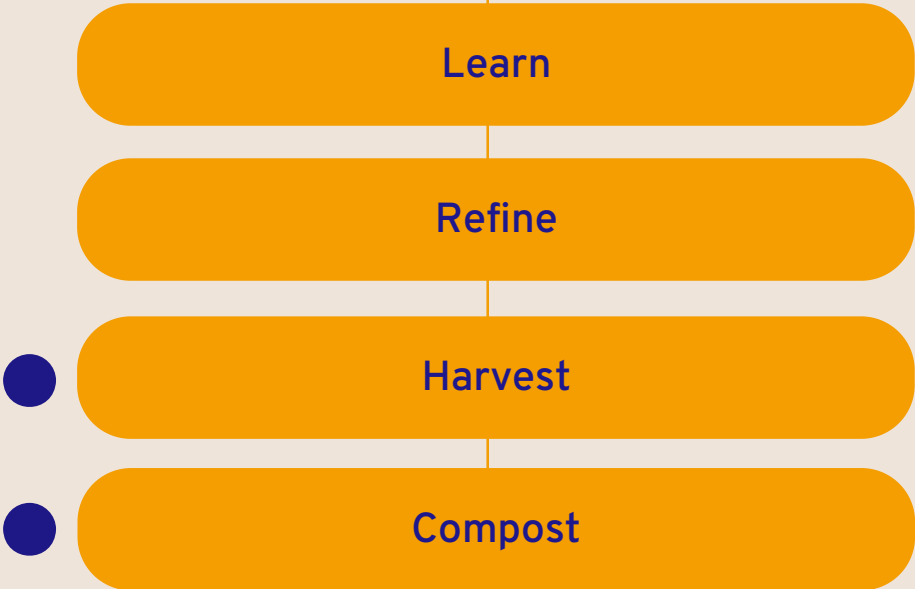
Learn & Refine,
Harvest & Compost

Harvest

Celebrate success. Center joy and honor achievements when you have successfully moved your work in more liberatory ways. Share your successes and learnings with the broader ecosystem.

Compost

Release what doesn't serve us. We may feel attached to policies and practices that are not working for us or that are not aligned with liberatory leadership. Part of the work entails learning to let go. This process may create more space, new resources, or unexpected opportunities.





Adopt a learning stance: Remember that a learning stance is foundational to all parts of the liberatory leadership practice cycle. Prepare to engage in continuous learning by assessing risk, asking for help, and embracing redirection.

Spend time with the Learn, Refine, Harvest, Compost grid on the next page and reflect on how it might support you in your liberatory vision.

Remember, liberatory leadership requires that we honor the continuous learning loop. Once we have learned, refined, harvested, and composted, it is time to return to Preparing the Soil with our new understandings.



Learn

Harvest

Refine

Compost

Take an evaluative stance, reflect, and distill learnings.

Supportive Practices

- Participate in a community of practice.
- Engage an advisory committee to help you think through some aspects of your work.
- Add regular reflection opportunities to your workflow.
- Incorporate evaluation and learning capture mechanisms into your projects.

Reflective Questions

- What helped you align with liberatory principles?
- What worked?
- What could be improved upon?

Clarify and iterate relational and organizational practices that optimize connection, well-being, and energetic alignment.

Supportive Practices

- Keep what works.
- Get rid of what doesn't.
- Modify what needs tending to.

Reflective Questions

- What systems do you have in place to iterate on successful policies and practices?

Celebrate and share what you have produced/created/completed.

Supportive Practices

- Create feedback loops among teammates.
- Build in periods to pause and acknowledge the labor that has created the harvest.
- Share your learnings with the community.

Reflective Questions

- How can you operationalize joy as part of your harvest?
- How can you share your harvest with the broader community?
- Can you incorporate intermittent rest periods as an acknowledgment of labor and preparation for the next steps?

Utilize past learnings to enrich the soil for future endeavors. Composting happens naturally over time.

Supportive Practices

- Dedicate time blocks to rest and reflection.
- Hold sessions exclusively dedicated to learning and assessment.

Reflective Questions

- What needs to fall away?
- How can past learnings/failures be useful to new beginnings?
- How can you use fallow time to sow seeds for future fruit?
- Are there things that no longer serve a purpose that you can release?

Reflection Questions

- Have you already practiced any of the processes listed in the quadrants?
- If so, how can you build upon your current efforts?
- If not, what is one step you can take to incorporate cycles of learning, refining, harvesting, and composting into your liberatory leadership practices?



Elissa Sloan Perry
Liberatory Leadership Framework
Advisor

How to Support Liberatory Leadership

Liberatory Leadership Supports & Conditions

We work to align our leadership with liberatory principles so that our practices will reflect the liberated world we are trying to bring into being rather than replicating the world of inequity and harm we are trying to transform. Adopting a liberatory leadership approach is a fundamental departure from standard leadership practice. When exposed to the concept, leaders often find the invitation to embrace love, joy, and wholeness attractive and wish this for themselves and their organizations. Unfortunately, the aspiration to practice liberatory leadership alone is not enough. Leaders must undergo a transformation to truly embody and implement liberatory principles within our organizations. As part of this transformation, leaders must do the inner work to challenge their own biases and assumptions. This entails adopting

new practices, cultivating fresh mindsets, and embracing habits and behaviors that align with the core tenets of liberatory leadership.



Kharyshi Wiginton
Liberatory Leadership Framework
Advisor

However, most leaders don't have the time, capacity, or mental/emotional bandwidth they need to fully initiate this transformation because their resources are overwhelmingly invested in the work of mitigating harm, filling in the gaps left by government, providing essential services, standing between their communities and danger, and enacting systemic change. Moreover, transformation, under any circumstance, is complex and taxing work. "Learning something new also takes up a large amount of resources... and it can be harder to do in times of poor health or high stress."⁽²⁵⁾ We need to be in good shape to accomplish this transformation. **This doesn't mean that we have to wait until we are fully healed before we can do liberatory work, but it does mean that our healing and well-being should be constantly tended to.**

If leaders are not adequately supported, they won't be able to do the deep liberatory transformation work while also accomplishing their core mission work.

"BIPOC leaders are being asked to simultaneously dismantle the past, survive in the present, and create an alternative future."

-Neha Mahajan and Felicia Griffin ⁽²⁶⁾

25 Lisa Feldman Barrett, university distinguished professor of psychology at Northeastern University. Footnote: <https://news.northeastern.edu/2020/12/01/your-brain-is-the-worlds-most-proficient-accountant-heres-how/>

26 Neha Mahajan and Felicia Griffin, *The Call of Leadership Now: BIPOC Leaders in a Syndemic Era*, Nonprofit Quarterly, April 20, 2023 <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-call-of-leadership-now-bipoc-leaders-in-a-syndemic-era/>

Individuals and organizations that are already overburdened should not have to function without adequate support. It is unreasonable to expect organizations and leaders, already dealing with harsh conditions, mounting threats, under-resourcing, and to continue to do more with less.

The following section outlines the ways that funders and the broader movement ecosystem support liberatory leaders.



Healing and Restoration

Centering the humanity of liberatory leaders and recognizing their need to heal from the same oppressive systems they are attempting to transform.

Supporting Activities

Building Oases: Leaders leaning into liberatory practice require relational, caring, joyful, and rejuvenating spaces of refuge to support their transformative efforts. Spaces that encourage leaders to play, rest, and reflect without requiring deliverables aside from restoration.

Providing Resources: Leaders also require leadership supports such as coaching, consultation, mentorship, mental health resources, research, models, case studies, new frameworks, skills, and thought partnership.

Supporting Funding Practices

Funding restorative retreat venues and third spaces for healing and restoration.

Funding sabbaticals, retreats, fellowships, and the corresponding services (e.g., consultants, facilitators, stipends, child care, interpretation, transportation, etc.).

Learning and Experimentation Opportunities

Imagining and creating a new world requires continuous learning and experimentation, as well as individual reflection and opportunities to learn alongside peers.

Supporting Activities

Learning Capture and Narrative Work: Documenting, memorializing, and storytelling related to liberatory experiments to capture and share successful models, challenges, and lessons learned. For the many leaders who have not experienced liberatory practice, there is a need to see and engage with new models of what works, liberatory narratives, and concrete examples of operationalizing liberatory vision.

Collaborative Learning Spaces: Offering praxis spaces for shared learning and support helps leaders move from liberatory theory to liberatory action. These “third spaces,” like Communities of Practice, help leaders to collaborate with other liberatory practitioners to sharpen their ideas and strategies. “If you’re an architect or a designer or a creative, so much of your job is imagining, ideating, daydreaming. You need space and time to do that.” ⁽²⁷⁾ As architects of a new world and designers of new ways of being together, liberatory leaders need the time and space for the creative dreaming, imagining, reflecting, and planning these collaborative spaces provide.

27 Rahaf Harfoush, author of Humane Productivity

Learning and Experimentation Opportunities

Imagining and creating a new world requires continuous learning and experimentation, as well as individual reflection and opportunities to learn alongside peers.

Supporting Funding Practices

Funding Learning and Experimentation: Liberatory leaders need to be in relationship with funding partners that are willing to accept the risk of transformation. That requires funders to put their risk tolerance in perspective relative to the real-life risks of people facing the brunt of oppression. Groups need the freedom to experiment, fail, and learn from what does and does not work for them. Additionally, Philanthropic partners support liberatory leaders when they fund engagement in external learning spaces.

When leaders are appropriately supported to join these spaces, organizations have the spaciousness to connect and learn while maintaining the resources needed to sustain themselves.

Financial and Material Resources

Liberatory leadership is not only the work of an individual leader. Cultivating the conditions that enable liberatory leadership requires support and investment from multiple stakeholders. Material resources are essential for successfully adopting a liberatory leadership approach. All of the supportive activities detailed in this document require financial investment.

Supporting Funding Practices

Providing Long Term General Operating Grants/ Flexible and Abundant Funding: Liberatory leaders need flexible, timely, and abundant funding to do the work of liberation. “Making do” is harmful both to organizations and to the communities they serve. By moving from resource constraints to abundance, organizations unlock their potential for excellence and increase their capacity to strategically advocate for truly transformative community solutions. In terms of flexibility, groups need to be free to do what they know best, which is getting their work done.

Abundant funding will ensure that leaders have the resources to do the healing, experimentation, and action described above in the ways that make the most sense for them, their communities, and their work.

Financial and Material Resources

Liberatory leadership is not only the work of an individual leader. Cultivating the conditions that enable liberatory leadership requires support and investment from multiple stakeholders. Material resources are essential for successfully adopting a liberatory leadership approach. All of the supportive activities detailed in this document require financial investment.

Supporting Funding Practices

Incorporating Infrastructure Support in Programmatic Grants: Leaders working to apply or sustain a liberatory lens may need to grow or adapt their internal systems to support their liberatory vision. Administrative structures are a critical part of operationalizing liberatory principles. Programmatic grants too frequently push transformative organizations to be excessively “lean,” and they consequently often lack redundancies that allow the work to continue when staff members are sick, leave, or need to take on new tasks. Very lean organizations also lack the back-end

administrative, operations, and human resources infrastructure needed to hire, retain, and support staff doing liberatory work. When making programmatic grants, supportive funding approaches create opportunities for organizations to resource critical infrastructure.

Reimagine Capacity Building

Too often we define capacity building in narrow ways, treating it as a synonym for training or skill development. Supporters of liberatory leadership intentionally align capacity-building offerings with the articulated needs of leaders.

Supporting Activities

Offering Targeted and Practical Support: Capacity Builders, intermediaries, and supportive organizations like the Leadership Learning Community offer support that concretely makes leaders' work more possible by incorporating equity funds, resources, stipends, and other tools for experimentation into programming. Intermediaries with the ear of philanthropy take the opportunity to speak up and articulate the resource needs observed in the sector.

Tending to the Caretakers: The consultants, coaches, facilitators, and space holders who make up the capacity building support net need care too. They are essential to the ecosystem and shore up the infrastructure of the social good sector. To support the overall ecosystem, we must ensure that the caretakers have opportunities to restore, learn, and grow so they have the full energy to continue to support leaders. Caretakers can't pour from an empty cup. Examples of support for caretakers include convenings to share observations and experiences, and gatherings that provide restoration, learning, and growth.

Reimagine Capacity Building

Too often we define capacity building in narrow ways, treating it as a synonym for training or skill development. Supporters of liberatory leadership intentionally align capacity-building offerings with the articulated needs of leaders.

Supporting Funding Practices

Listening to Leaders' Needs: Listen to the needs leaders express rather than making assumptions. Given the often asymmetrical relationship between funders and grantee partners, when funders offer capacity building, it is important to always examine whose needs are being met, the funder's or the organization's.

Resourcing the full depths of the work: It is often easier to get funding for the tip of the iceberg of leadership work, the immediately visible active efforts. However, the less visible work below the water's surface is equally important. Supporting liberatory leadership work includes providing sufficient funds to ideate, plan, implement, learn/evaluate, and refine practices, policies, and activities.

Reimagine Capacity Building

Too often we define capacity building in narrow ways, treating it as a synonym for training or skill development. Supporters of liberatory leadership intentionally align capacity-building offerings with the articulated needs of leaders.

Supporting Funding Practices

Offering support that concretely makes work more possible: Meaningful capacity building offers leaders new skills, mindsets, practices, and tangible resources, enabling them to lead differently, rather than simply adding to their workload. Capacity building succeeds by addressing the contextual challenges leaders face. True capacity building requires more than directives; it calls for providing leaders with the necessary resources to enact change.

Resourcing the Caretakers: Directing resources to care for the consultants, coaches, facilitators, and space holders who provide care for others is an essential part of cultivating a liberatory ecosystem.



Leadership Learning Community



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