

Tap the Power of Natural Leadership

Lewis Frees PhD & Ann Frees

There is a form of leadership that largely goes unrecognized and untapped in most organizations. This form of leadership is Natural Leadership and can be practiced by anyone from anywhere at any time. Natural leaders foster, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors in the people with whom they work that create high engagement, great and customer satisfaction. Natural leaders:

- Make the right things matter most
- Happy positive open-hearted attitudes
- Trigger the best instincts of others
- Create boundaryless connection
- Trust emergence

Most people who practice this form of leadership don't even think of themselves as leaders. They just do it. They are naturals. Usually when we think of naturals we think of people who are born with unusual or innate talent. When this talent is combined with excellent circumstances for development, people become what Malcolm Gladwell has called *Outliers*,ⁱ people who stand out because of their unusual success. Name any area about which expertise is required and there are naturals who seem to have a special talent for it. Among these naturals, there are those who, thanks to life circumstances, stand out among the rest.

We all know stories of child prodigies such as Felix Mendelssohn who wrote beautiful music as a child that would ordinarily be typical of a mature composer. He had the good fortune to be born into a family that fostered, nurtured and helped him to develop the natural talent he already brought to the table. Great athletes seem to be both physically and neurologically wired for their greatness and when this is combined with an environment that encourages practice and development, the result is the Michael Jordan's and the Williams sisters of the world.

Natural Leadership is different. Most have the hard wiring to do it. For many this natural ability is nurtured, fostered, developed, and encouraged from early childhood and as a result the ability is well developed by adulthood. Others are not so fortunate. Life's circumstances may have been so toxic they feel no inner access

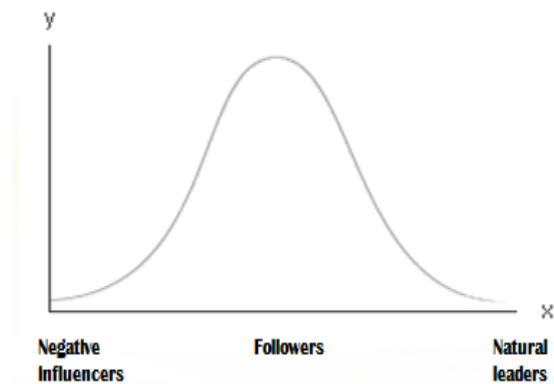
"It is not the mountains that we must conquer, but ourselves."

Sir Edmund Hillary

to those natural inclinations. For most of us, this form of leadership can eventually become natural no matter where we currently land on a continuum from negative influencer to Natural Leader.

As the bell shaped curve in figure 1 below illustrates most people in a typical organization are somewhere in the middle. ⁱⁱ

Figure 1



Followers are powerfully influenced by the moods, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of those they work with most closely. The word follower, in this context has nothing to do with whether people are in positions of formal leadership. It refers to the inclination to mirror the dominant culture of which they are a part. A follower mirrors others. Any follower can learn to become a Natural Leader.

This tendency to mirror is hard wired in our brains through what Marco Iacoboni describes as mirror neurons. Our brains respond to others' behaviours and thoughts almost as though we were engaging in those actions or thoughts ourselves. He has shown that we are vastly more interconnected than we often wish to acknowledge. ⁱⁱⁱ The ability to trigger the best instincts in others, even when they exhibit toxic behaviors and attitudes is therefore a true act of leadership because it shifts the predominant mirroring interchange. Thus, if we wish to change a culture the natural leaders can be a powerful resource even though in most organizations their potential goes largely untapped. This results in missed opportunities for organizational success and beneficial results to customers. A leader creates the mirror as does, incidentally, a negative influencer.

The challenge

The challenge is to make Natural Leadership the norm. So, what is it that causes some people to be natural leaders, others to be followers and still others to be negative influencers? Natural leaders are engaged in two ways. They are high achievers...engaged themselves. But they also promote the achievement and performance of everyone within their scope of influence. Their achievement comes not at the *expense* of others but rather *in concert* with others. This distinguishes natural leaders from other high achievers who, in order to accomplish their own ends, undermine others in their path. The very act of degrading others erodes the spread of engagement in an organization. Natural leadership is not about competition for power or influence or control within an organization. In fact, it is not about *any* achievement that comes at the expense of others or limits others ability to be motivated, thrive, and succeed. Consequently, natural leaders are spreaders of engagement. They foster it by their very presence.

The Three Levels on which We Operate

The generative force of Natural Leadership stems from the seamless integration of the three levels on which we all operate. Level one consists of our behaviors and actions. Level two is our thinking process including the interpretation of our experiences which leads to the development of many of our beliefs. Level three, the foundational level consists of our drive to express/live-out or fulfill our own best version of our essential selves. Each of us has a unique version of ourselves that we are attempting to fulfill... our essential self. Often we are not even aware that this is the drive or nudge behind many of our actions. We often use the word destiny to describe this awareness of our inherent value and the path that it implies. But destiny seems to distort the principle because it implies that our pathway is already out there in front of us simply to be followed. Actually, we are always inventing the path as we seek fulfillment. The path of Natural Leadership is a life journey.

We each have the natural inclination to seek those conditions that are suited to our own fulfillment, and to the fulfillment of others. Certain elements of this essential self are intrinsic: our value, worth, safety and love, which exist by virtue of being alive. They don't have to be earned. They are hard wired...not just in humans but in all mammals.

So why isn't everyone a full blown Natural Leader? From the earliest moments, we're getting signals from our parents about whether we're here to fulfill our own value or theirs, whether we

have great worth intrinsically or we have to do all kinds of things to earn it including competing with others. Whether we are safe or whether we are constantly at risk and vulnerable. Whether we are worthy of love and therefore can safely express our love, or whether the world is one of derision. The list goes on and on. It is here that many unrecognized beliefs embed themselves.

When these basic intrinsic qualities are countermanded by the environment around us, whether by our parents, spouses, siblings or friends, bosses or colleagues, we can lose our sense of personal connection to them. Yet whether we're aware of it or not, at any point in our life our desire to fulfill our basic value and express it with creativity and joy, our awareness of our own worth, our knowledge that at the deepest level we are safe and our natural ability to love are always within us ready to be accessed.

This is the journey of Natural Leadership. It is natural because it has been there all of the time. We have just lost track of it. It is a form of leadership because by their very presence natural leaders influence those with whom they interact.

The Five Attributes of Natural Leadership

There are five core attributes that are demonstrated by a Natural Leader:

1. Natural Leaders instinctively make the right things matter most.
2. They approach life with an open heart and are continuously replenishing their essential sense of the goodness of life. As a result, they are happy people.
3. They see and therefore signal the best natural inclinations in others and as a result make them better at what they do. Both their performance and personal initiative actually improves.
4. They create boundaryless connection with others from a context of appreciation and understanding and they foster that quality of connection among others.
5. They trust and therefore do not attempt to over-control or manipulate the forward flow...emergence... of people moving together to achieve a common outcome. Each of these core attributes is explored below.

Make the Right Things Matter Most

A core difference between Natural Leaders and negative influencers is that they follow their natural inclination to express the most authentic fulfillment of their own value and worth, *and that of others* for its own sake. When the right things matter most, people

instinctively seek to express the very best version of themselves and to continuously move forward on their journey. They are motivated by their own fulfillment more powerfully than by external rewards. One of “the right things” is the authentic expression of the essential and unique self and that of others. Whether it is writing code or implementing strategy, it is these things that drive engagement.

The right things are always a source of significance that is inclusive rather than exclusive... no us versus them. You know they are the right things when they create a natural inclination to foster the value and worth of others. They do not draw boundaries, as though their particular value is greater than that of another...not professional, hierarchical, intellectual, social, on and on the list can go...not my group versus yours. None! This is what distinguishes Natural Leaders from followers or negative influencers. Negative influencers believe that expression of their own value must come at the expense of others. They reverse what matters most. Authenticity takes a back seat to comparison as the standard by which they measure themselves.

When the right things matter most, everything else that matters falls into place. This is the case both for an organization and for each of us as individuals. Notice what happened when ALCOA made the right things matter most. Paul O’Neill was a natural leader. When he became the new CEO at the then ailing ALCOA he stood before an introductory meeting with his investors and stock analysts and immediately proceeded to stun them. Rather than making the usual promise to boost profits and lower costs, he said that he intended to make Alcoa the safest company in America. He was going for zero injuries. The investors stampeded for the door. One recalls rushing to the nearest pay phone (yes, this was before cell phones) and telling his twenty largest clients to sell immediately.

Within a year, Alcoa’s profits hit a record high and that was only the beginning: market capitalization increased by \$27 billion and annual income quintupled over the next few years. The drive for safety had transformed the level of engagement at every level, including the line workers who could now stop the line if they saw equipment defects. Process improvement was introduced everywhere because it created a safer workplace. The union which had a toxic relationship with management was now working side-by-side with management to protect employees because of their commitment to employee safety.^{iv} Even the quality of the product dramatically improved. Alcoa had been overtaken by foreign competitors in the quality of aluminum that it was producing.

It turned out that greater attention to safety in a product that is dangerous to produce drove the elimination of equipment

malfunctions which were a chief cause of poor-quality aluminum. The pouring system was redesigned when splashing molten metal was injuring workers. As a result, Alcoa also lost less raw materials in spills

Notice all the elements of corporate success that followed as a result of O'Neill's choice about what mattered most: record setting profitability, product quality, market share and corporate unity including that of labor/management relations. It increased employee engagement at all levels because what now mattered most to Alcoa, mattered to them. It sent the signal to everyone that the company valued its employees. What mattered most...safety...became an inclusive source of significance that drove success in everything else that mattered!

A core difference between Natural Leaders and negative influencers is that natural leaders follow their natural inclination to express the most authentic fulfillment of their own value and worth, and that of others for its own sake. When the right things matter most, people instinctively seek to express the absolute best version of themselves and to continuously move forward on their journey. They are motivated by their own fulfillment more powerfully than by external rewards. One of "the right things" is the authentic expression of the essential and unique self and that of others. It is these things that drive engagement.

The right things are always a source of significance that is inclusive rather than exclusive... no us versus them. You know they are the right things when they create a natural inclination to foster the value and worth of others. They do not draw boundaries, as though their particular value is greater than that of another...not professional, hierarchical, intellectual, social, on and on the list can go...not my group versus yours. None! This is what distinguishes Natural Leaders from followers or negative influencers. Negative influencers believe that expression of their own value must come at the expense of others. They reverse what matters most. Authenticity takes a back seat to comparison as the standard by which they measure themselves.

When we cannot experience our value, worth, safety and love, mayhem can ensue. In the work place, the wrong things can consist of behaviors intent on destroying, manipulating, controlling, stereotyping, or degrading others. All of these behaviors destroy engagement

We know from the science of mirroring and from research on the influence of social networks why toxicity takes its toll in the workplace. We easily pickup and mirror it when in the presence of others for whom the qualities of safety, value, worth and love...the connection to the essential self has been frustrated and/or

destroyed. In those moments we are followers, which is why toxicity so easily goes viral. The Natural Leader's path is to make the right things matter most no matter what is being mirrored from the environment. He/she is the mirror even in the presence of negative influencers.

POSITIVE, HAPPY, OPEN-HEARTED ATTITUDES

Natural leaders have positive affect: feeling grateful, upbeat, expressing appreciation and liking. Negative affect represents the unpleasant end (e.g., feeling contemptuous, irritable; expressing disdain, disliking)

Natural leaders are not only fun to work beside but this positive affect exerts a subtle but powerful impact on performance. Notice how you feel in the presence of someone who is authentically open-hearted and upbeat. Notice how easy it is to find those same feelings within you. Then notice the way in which it affects your sense of connection both to the natural leader who embodies these qualities and to other people with whom you work or your family or friends.

Open heartedness creates community and in the work place that translates into business results no matter whether outcomes are focused on high quality patient experience, innovating with new products, connecting with potential customers, or delivering any service.

Natural Leaders know that no one else can make them happy or contented or open hearted. They know that happiness is connected to the very thoughts that they choose and that they are the only person that chooses those thoughts. They know that the choice of what they think is the one area in which they have absolute freedom and control.

Followers on the other hand tend to feel vulnerable to the behaviors of others. They therefore want to be with people who make them feel well and...naturally...often get irritated when they are around people who trigger them into directions they don't wish to go.

Negative influencers often tend to view the positive affect of Natural Leaders with skepticism.

Positive attitude affects the range of behavioral options that people bring to everything from designing strategy to customer experience and safety. All of this powerfully influences the diversity of thought that drives innovation and the ability of teams to work together seamlessly.

Both happiness and negative moods have been shown to spread to three degrees of separation. It is not only picked up by people in direct contact with a person in a bad mood. It also spreads to the next person and the next. And happiness matters. A wide field of research demonstrates the impact of affect. Positive attitudes heighten the ability of a group to deal with complex ideas and to formulate out-of-the-box solutions. Such attitudes have been shown to widen the scope of attention^v, broaden behavioural repertoires^{vi}, and increase both intuition^{vii} and creativity.^{viii} Marcial Losada has developed a mathematical model that shows what happens on business teams when a 3-to-1 ratio is reached between positive vs. negative attitudes as registered in actual behavior. At 2.901-to-1, a tipping point is reached when the team shifts into the creative elaboration and exploration of ideas vs. one that derails its ideas.^{ix}

Positive attitude also affects the range of behavioral options that people bring to everything. All of this powerfully influences the diversity of thought that drives innovation and the ability of teams to work together seamlessly.

Discern and Trigger the Best Instincts in Others

Instincts are our natural inclination to think and act in a way that fulfills our essential selves. Triggering best instincts therefore refers to the ability to sense and act upon those instincts in ourselves, and to interact with others in a way that connects them to the best in themselves.

On January 15, 2009, a US Airways plane went down in the Hudson River after losing both engines thanks to a flock of geese. Everyone survived and there were no critical injuries. Ferries and tour boats swooped in and gathered the frigid people.

Here is the way one of the ferry passengers described what happened. "We were strangers, but everyone moved together to do what had to be done. We had no blankets, so we shared coats. At first we could just pull one person out at a time with a rope. We realized that this would take too long because people were getting numb in the frigid water so we improvised a way to get three people at the same time."

Saving passengers now mattered more than anything else. They worked collectively. They improvised, adjusted and innovated in spite of differences that no doubt, ranged over the political, religious, educational, and professional spectrum. Many of those differences would have under other conditions put them at odds with each other. Who knows what signals were quickly exchanged among people on the boats. But we do know that those signals,

combined with the heightened intensity of the moment triggered a reset. Natural leaders are re-setters.

Best instincts range from our ability to love and experience appreciation to our own resourceful use of our mental acuity. A core difference between natural leaders and negative influencers is in what they focus upon in both themselves and others. That focus becomes a trigger, bringing forward the best or the worst natural inclinations in others. It influences values, attitudes and behaviors, and it also affects intellectual prowess and individual effectiveness.

Studies show that the signals that we send through thin slices (which are signals that are sent and received in a fraction of a second and as a result of mirroring,^x) dramatically affect the mental acuity of others. For example, a group of Dutch social scientists decided to see if simply focusing on soccer hooligans vs. a college professor would affect the outcome of a “trivial pursuit” competition between two groups of college students. Those who focused on a college professor chose the right answer on just over 57% of the questions. Those who focused on soccer hooligans answered just over 42% correctly. That’s a 15% difference in outcome caused by nothing more than a difference in focus. A college professor represents reasoned thought. Soccer hooligans, of course, are the epitome of chaos. What is the optimal version of a thinker and problem solver? The Trivial Pursuit experiment triggered the way students think by creating two different models. For the students, it was a college professor. Focusing on a professor triggered the circuits, the innate capabilities within each of them that were aligned with that trait. Therein lies the power of signals.

The ability for others to think and behave from within the context of the best version of their essential selves is directly affected by the ability of the natural leader to trigger their best instincts. Quite literally, triggering the best instincts of others makes them better at what they do both individually and as teams. Natural leaders powerfully influence whether teams are riven with divisiveness or bonded with mutual respect and appreciation and even whether they fend off or welcome diversity of thought.

Create High Quality Connection

Natural leaders are connectors because they value the fulfillment of others. They foster this fulfillment not only in their direct relationships. They also foster connections between others. They develop similar attributes of connectivity in the day to day activities of the workplace that Ferry passengers experienced as they

pulled people from the water after the US Airways flight went down in the Hudson River.

All of the usual differences became trivial. Natural leaders promote connections that transcend hierarchical and profession differences. They know that we're all in it together and that their own identity is enlarged not compromised by the contributions of others. Rather than feeling submerged or lost as a part of a larger collective they experience the larger collective as contributing to their own individuality and uniqueness.

High quality connection among those who are highly engaged requires both self-awareness and an understanding of the way in which both tight and loose social networks can be leveraged to foster high engagement.

This connection is of a higher more inclusive order than all of the divisive polarizing disconnections that occur between people...a sense of connection between people in which all feel part of one system.

What we all know intuitively has been corroborated by extensive research: our social networks have a powerful influence on our habits of thinking and behavior.^{xi} Studies have shown that this same dynamic occurs among people even with habits as difficult to shake as smoking. Nonsmokers influence others to three degrees of separation. Researchers discovered that, "There is a kind of synchrony in time and space when it comes to smoking cessation that resembles the flocking of birds or schooling of fish."^{xii}

Studies show that our social networks powerfully influence not only our habits but also our beliefs and attitudes. James Breckenridge has devoted considerable research to the psychology of terrorism. He is convinced that negative information is more contagious and "stickier" than information that is upbeat. He has shown that it explodes out more rapidly and is more difficult to turn around once it has momentum.

That research, however, assumes that Natural Leadership has largely gone untapped and that therefore the dominant source of mirroring is that of negative influencers. But a distinctive habit of natural leaders is that of *being* the mirror of all of the attributes of natural leadership echoing Gandhi's famous dictum: *Be the change you want to see in the world*. Natural Leaders not only create connections, but they are the dominant mirrors in those social networks. That is what makes them leaders.

Trust Emergence

Emergence refers to the tendency of any system to self-organize to achieve something that matters. The more something matters, the greater the multiple of self-organizing attractions that create emergence. This self-organizing dynamic attracts the people and events that align with what we have paid attention to and made matter. This phenomenon has been explored by biologists as they observe the leaderless self-organization of flocks of birds, schools of fish and countless other species as they move together toward a common destination or other joint outcome such as self-protection.

In addition to biologists, it has been studied by economists, physicists and experts in collective intelligence. One of the core principles developed by those who have studied the phenomenon of collective intelligence is that the phrase *the whole is greater than the sum of the parts*” is not just a platitude. Jack Granor, an investment expert started his classes of would be investment brokers by placing a jar of jelly beans on the podium and asking everyone in the class to write down their best guess about the number of beans in the jar. He then demonstrated to them that the average of the group was closer to the number in the jar than the best guess of any individual. He would then cite studies that the collective intelligence of investors was smarter than even the best individual professional analysts. Emergence is the natural tendency of any living system to create a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. That “whole” cannot be predicted by studying the parts. A core attribute of natural leadership, therefore, is the innate awareness that we all live in the context of each other...each attempting to fulfill our own value as we understand it.

There is a serendipitous quality to emergence. Events just seem to surprisingly appear. Even though they seem unrelated to each other or even to the outcome that we are intending to achieve. Who would have predicted that at Alcoa making safety matter most would have changed the bottom line so explosively, or cemented labor/management relations, or created a better product? Often it is only on reflection that we see the way in which events that seemed to be inhibiting our desired outcome, actually added a dimension that moved it forward. The challenge with emergence is that the dynamics of self-organization are mostly invisible to us. We see only the tip of the iceberg of multidimensional attractions.

It is our trust of emergence that enables us to take the kind of actions that flow forward without getting in the way. A few years ago, a group of researchers identified what they considered to be the top CEOs in the country and asked them each to identify the

three best decisions that they had ever made. They then asked them whether they trusted their gut or the analysis of data when making the decision. All said that they trusted their gut even when the analysis did not seem to corroborate their decisions. The researchers then asked the CEOs to identify their three worst decisions. All said they followed the data rather than their gut, even though their gut told them otherwise.

It is fear of the unknown that causes us to undermine emergence...all of the “what ifs”...the events that we don’t understand, that seem contrary to the outcome we are trying to achieve...even the setbacks that, upon reflection later turn out to have been moving us toward what matters most.

Each of the four attributes that have already been addressed in this paper: making the right thing matter most, triggering the best rather than the worst natural inclinations in ourselves and others, taking satisfaction and fulfillment in the ride...letting ourselves be happy and appreciative... and inviting connection, all work together to allow the self-organizing dynamics of emergence to attract the people and events that lead to a culture of high engagement in which natural leadership is the norm. For each of these attributes there are a set of habits which, if practiced, will move an organization forward on the path to natural leadership.^{xiii}

The self-organizing qualities of emergence can drive the spread of the attributes of natural leadership from natural leaders to followers and on to ever wider concentric circles of relationships. Eventually even the negative influencers who emerge and connect to the best rather than the worst that they have to offer individually and to the organization can make positive contributions.

ⁱ Malcolm Gladwell, Outliers, The Story of Success; Little, Brown and Company, New York, Boston, London

ⁱⁱ For a full exploration of the way in which natural leaders influence organizational performance see the White paper: Inside Out The Untapped Influence of Natural Leaders, by Lewis Frees PhD.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the work of Marco Iacoboni: Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others, 2009

^{iv} Charles Duhigg, The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business; Random House, New York pp 97- 100.

^v Herbricksen & Branigan, 2005

^{vi} *ibid*

^{vii} Bolt, Goschkey, and Kul, 2003

^{viii} Isen, Daubman, and Nowicki, 1987

^{ix} For a summary of the wide array of studies from which these findings are derived see Barbara Herbricksen and

^x Marcial Losada; Positive Affect and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing; American Psychologist, October 2005, pp 678ff

^{xi} See the book Connected by Nicholas A. Christakis, MD, PhD and James H. Fowler, PhD,

^{xiii} See the white paper by Lew and Ann Frees: The Habits of Natural Leadership