

Relational

A POLYCENTRIC LEADERSHIP TRAIT

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Relational as a Foundational Theme of Polycentric Leadership

Executive Summary

Polycentric leadership (PCL) is an emerging theoretical model developed to guide leadership practice in complex, globalized, and multipolar environments (Handley, 2020). Defined as a decentralized leadership approach that empowers multiple centers of influence while sustaining coherence through shared values and trust, PCL addresses the limitations of hierarchical and individual-centric leadership models. The model is articulated through six interdependent themes: charisma, collaborative, communal, relational, freedom (entrepreneurial), and diverse (Handley, 2020).

Within this framework, relational leadership refers to the prioritization of trust-based relationships as the primary medium through which leadership authority, influence, and coordination are exercised. Rather than viewing relationships as secondary to structure or strategy, the relational theme positions interpersonal and intergroup connections as foundational to effective leadership in polycentric systems. This paper argues that relational leadership is not merely supportive but essential for sustaining trust, facilitating coordination, and enabling adaptive capacity in distributed leadership environments, thereby enhancing the overall resilience and efficacy of polycentric models (Handley, 2020; Kanter, 1994; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

I. Introduction to Relational Leadership in a Polycentric Framework

Leadership in complex systems increasingly depends on the quality of relationships rather than positional authority. As organizations and mission movements become more networked and less hierarchical, leadership influence flows primarily through relational pathways—trust, credibility, shared history, and mutual respect (Uhl-Bien, 2006; McChrystal et al., 2015). This shift underscores the inadequacy of traditional top-down approaches in environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, and interdependence.

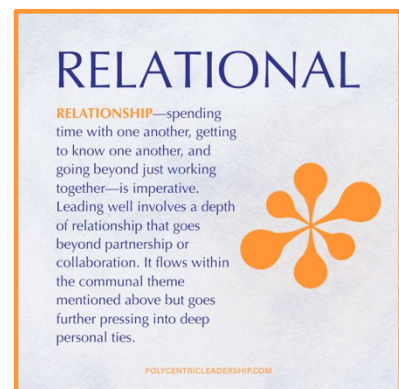
Polycentric leadership explicitly recognizes this shift by embedding relationality as a core leadership theme rather than a supporting skill (Handley, 2020). In polycentric systems, leaders operate across boundaries of culture, geography, organization, and sector, often without direct authority over one another. In such contexts, relationships become the primary means of coordination, accountability, and alignment, serving as the glue that binds diverse actors into a cohesive whole.

Theologically, relational leadership reflects a biblical vision of leadership grounded in covenant, mutuality, and love of neighbor, echoing the communal ethos of early Christian communities (Zscheile, 2007; Woodward, 2013). Organizationally, it aligns with relational leadership theory, social capital research, and network governance studies, all of which demonstrate that trust-rich relationships are indispensable for sustained collective action, innovation, and resilience (Putnam, 2000; Ostrom, 2010).

II. Defining the Relational Theme in the Polycentric Context

In polycentric leadership, relational refers to the intentional cultivation and stewardship of trust-based relationships as the central mechanism of leadership influence (Handley, 2020). Relational leadership emphasizes presence over position, influence over control, and mutuality over command, fostering environments where leadership emerges organically from interconnected networks.

Three defining characteristics of the relational theme emerge from the literature (Handley, 2020):



1. Trust as the foundation of leadership influence
2. Relational accountability and mutual submission
3. Boundary-spanning relational capacity

Trust as the Foundation of Leadership Influence

In polycentric systems, trust functions as the primary currency of leadership. Leaders are followed not because of formal authority but because they are trusted, credible, and consistent (Kanter, 1994). Trust enables decentralized actors to act autonomously while remaining aligned with shared goals, reducing the need for rigid oversight and allowing for greater agility.

Empirical research in network governance demonstrates that trust reduces transaction costs, accelerates decision-making, and enhances cooperation across organizational boundaries (Ostrom, 2010; Carlisle & Gruby, 2019). In mission contexts, trust is particularly critical due to the high relational and cultural complexity involved, where misalignments can undermine long-term impact (Handley, 2020). Without trust, polycentric systems risk fragmentation, but with it, they unlock exponential collaborative potential.

Relational Accountability and Mutual Submission

Relational leadership reframes accountability as something embedded within relationships rather than enforced through hierarchy. Leaders remain accountable to one another through mutual submission, transparency, and shared moral commitments (Zscheile, 2007). This relational approach cultivates a culture of humility and interdependence, where power is shared rather than hoarded.

This form of accountability discourages isolation and abuse of power, which are common risks in highly centralized or individualistic leadership models. Studies of leadership failure consistently point to relational breakdown and lack of accountability as precursors to ethical collapse, highlighting how relational voids can lead to distrust and systemic dysfunction (Kanter, 1994; Logan et al., 2011).

Boundary-Spanning Relational Capacity

Relational leadership in polycentric systems requires leaders who can build and sustain relationships across boundaries of culture, theology, organization, and sector. These boundary-spanning capacities enable collaboration and coordination in diverse networks where authority is dispersed (Wei-Skillern et al., 2016). By bridging divides, such leaders mitigate silos and amplify collective intelligence.

Such leaders function as relational bridges, translating values, mediating tensions, and fostering trust across difference (Handley, 2020; Aligica & Tarko, 2012). This capacity is not innate but cultivated, demanding intentional practices like active listening, empathy, and cultural humility to navigate the inherent tensions of polycentric environments.

III. Theological and Conceptual Foundations of Relational Leadership

The relational theme of polycentric leadership is grounded in Christian theological anthropology and Trinitarian theology. Scripture portrays leadership as inherently relational, rooted in covenantal commitments and embodied presence rather than positional dominance (Zscheile, 2007; Woodward, 2013). This perspective challenges authoritarian models, emphasizing leadership as a communal endeavor reflective of God's relational nature.

The doctrine of the Trinity offers a profound relational vision: distinct persons existing in eternal communion, mutual indwelling, and shared purpose. This vision challenges hierarchical and transactional models of leadership, offering instead a paradigm of relational authority grounded in love and mutual glorification, where unity arises from diversity without subordination.

Organizational scholarship reinforces this theological insight. Relational leadership theory emphasizes leadership as a social process co-created through interaction rather than a set of traits possessed by individuals (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Social capital research similarly demonstrates that dense relational networks correlate with higher performance, resilience, and innovation, providing empirical validation for the theological imperatives (Putnam, 2000; Adler & Kwon, 2002). Together, these foundations position relational leadership as both spiritually mandated and practically effective.

IV. Relational Leadership as a Catalyst for Polycentric Effectiveness

Relational leadership serves as a catalytic force that enables polycentric systems to function effectively despite decentralization and complexity (Handley, 2020). It transforms potential chaos into coordinated synergy, amplifying the model's strengths.

Facilitating Coordination without Coercion

Relational trust allows leaders to coordinate action without reliance on formal authority. Shared relationships enable rapid alignment, informal problem-solving, and adaptive responses to emerging challenges, as seen in high-stakes environments like military operations or global missions (McChrystal et al., 2015). This non-coercive approach fosters ownership and initiative across the network.

Enhancing Resilience and Conflict Navigation

Strong relationships increase system resilience by enabling constructive engagement with conflict. In polycentric systems, disagreement is inevitable; relational leadership ensures that conflict becomes a source of learning rather than fragmentation, turning diversity into a strategic asset (Logan et al., 2011). By prioritizing relational repair, leaders build systems capable of withstanding shocks.

Sustaining Long-Term Leadership Networks

Relational leadership supports continuity beyond individual leaders by embedding leadership capacity within networks of trust. Movements grounded in relational capital are less vulnerable to leadership transitions and organizational disruption, ensuring enduring impact (Pierson, 2009; Wei-Skillern et al., 2016). This sustainability is crucial for mission-driven endeavors spanning generations.

V. Conclusion: Relational Leadership and Polycentric Coherence

The relational theme is foundational to polycentric leadership. While structures distribute authority and collaboration coordinates action, relationships provide the trust and moral coherence that hold polycentric systems together (Handley, 2020). Without robust relational foundations, decentralization risks devolving into disarray; with them, it becomes a powerhouse of innovation and alignment.

Relational leadership reframes leadership as a shared, trust-based process rather than an individual role. Grounded in theological vision and supported by organizational research, it enables leaders to navigate complexity through presence, mutual accountability, and boundary-spanning trust (Aligica & Tarko, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). As leadership contexts continue to grow in complexity and diversity, the relational dimension of polycentric leadership offers a robust framework for cultivating resilient, ethical, and missionally aligned leadership ecosystems, inviting practitioners to invest deeply in relationships as the key to transformative impact.

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About the Author



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Joe Handley is currently CEO of A3 and serves ex-officio on the Board of Directors. Rev. Handley is a seasoned mission leader with over 30 years of global experience. Born and raised in Southern California, he received a B.A. in psychology and an M.A. in theology from Azusa Pacific University. In 2020, he completed a Ph.D. in intercultural studies from Fuller Theological Seminary. Joe served nine years at Azusa Pacific University as the founding director of their Office of World Missions and director of one of the first multi-national high school mission congresses in Mexico City in 1996. In 1998 the Lord called him to Rolling Hills Covenant Church where he served as the Global Outreach Pastor and shortly thereafter as Associate Pastor for Outreach Ministries. In July of 2008, Joe answered God’s call becoming the fourth president of A3, a developer of Christ-like leaders seeking to accelerate Christ-centered movements around the world. You can find his articles at polycentricleadership.com and a3leaders.org/.



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