



Entrepreneurial

A POLYCENTRIC LEADERSHIP TRAIT

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Entrepreneurial as a Foundational Theme of Polycentric Leadership

Executive Summary

Polycentric leadership (PCL) is an emerging theoretical model designed to address leadership challenges in complex, globalized, and multipolar environments (Handley, 2020). Defined as a decentralized approach that empowers multiple centers of influence while sustaining coherence through shared values and mission, PCL offers an alternative to hierarchical and control-oriented leadership paradigms. The model is articulated through six interdependent themes: charisma, collaborative, communal, relational, entrepreneurial (formerly freedom), and diverse (Franklin, 2016; Handley, 2020).

Within this framework, entrepreneurial leadership refers to the intentional granting and stewarding of agency, initiative, and adaptive experimentation within a polycentric system.

Rather than emphasizing control, predictability, or uniformity, the entrepreneurial theme prioritizes innovation, contextual responsiveness, and empowered action at the margins. This paper argues that entrepreneurial leadership is essential for polycentric effectiveness, enabling adaptive capacity, missional innovation, and sustainable growth in volatile and uncertain environments (Handley, 2020; Ostrom, 2010; McChrystal et al., 2015).

I. Introduction to Entrepreneurial Leadership in a Polycentric Framework

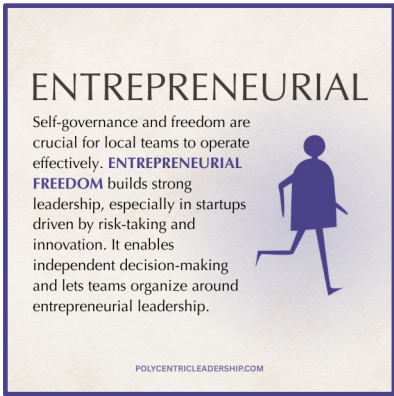
Leadership in complex systems increasingly requires the capacity to respond creatively to emerging challenges that cannot be anticipated or managed through centralized planning alone. Rapid cultural change, technological disruption, and global interdependence demand leadership models that foster innovation and adaptability across distributed networks (McChrystal et al., 2015). Polycentric leadership responds to this challenge by distributing authority and agency across multiple centers of influence. Within this system, the entrepreneurial theme plays a critical role by ensuring that leaders and communities are empowered to act, experiment, and innovate within aligned missional boundaries (Handley, 2020).

Entrepreneurial leadership enables initiative without fragmentation, creativity without chaos, and freedom without loss of coherence. Theologically, entrepreneurial leadership reflects a vision of human agency as participation in God’s ongoing mission, where creativity, risk-taking, and stewardship are understood as faithful responses to God’s call (Woodward, 2013; Pierson, 2009). Organizationally, it draws from research on adaptive leadership, innovation, and polycentric governance, all of which emphasize the necessity of localized initiative for system-wide resilience (Ostrom, 2010; Johansson, 2004).

II. Defining the Entrepreneurial Theme in Polycentric Leadership

In polycentric leadership, entrepreneurial refers to the capacity and permission for leaders and communities to initiate action, pursue innovation, and adapt practices in response to contextual realities (Handley, 2020). Entrepreneurial leadership is not synonymous with individualism or unchecked autonomy; rather, it is disciplined freedom exercised within shared values, relationships, and mission. Three defining characteristics of the entrepreneurial theme emerge from the literature (Handley, 2020):

1. Distributed agency and initiative
2. Adaptive experimentation and innovation
3. Missional risk-taking within shared boundaries



Distributed Agency and Initiative

Entrepreneurial leadership decentralizes initiative, recognizing that innovation often emerges from the periphery rather than the center. Polycentric systems intentionally empower leaders at multiple levels to act without awaiting centralized permission, enabling rapid and contextually appropriate responses (Ostrom, 2010; McChrystal et al., 2015). This distributed agency reduces bottlenecks and dependency on senior leadership while increasing ownership and engagement across the system (Handley, 2020).

Adaptive Experimentation and Innovation

Entrepreneurial leadership encourages experimentation as a normal and necessary aspect of leadership practice. Rather than enforcing uniform solutions, polycentric systems allow for multiple approaches to emerge, be tested, and refined through learning (Johansson, 2004). Organizational research consistently demonstrates that systems capable of experimentation are more innovative and resilient, particularly in environments characterized by uncertainty and rapid change (Fayad et al., 2024).

Missional Risk-Taking within Shared Boundaries

Entrepreneurial leadership involves risk, yet such risk is bounded by shared mission, values, and relational accountability. Polycentric systems enable leaders to take calculated risks without threatening the integrity of the whole (Handley, 2020; Ostrom, 2010). This balance between freedom and accountability distinguishes entrepreneurial leadership from both reckless individualism and restrictive bureaucratic control.

III. Theological and Conceptual Foundations of Entrepreneurial Leadership

The entrepreneurial theme of polycentric leadership is grounded in a theological understanding of vocation, stewardship, and participation in God's mission. Scripture portrays God's people as sent, empowered, and entrusted with responsibility to act creatively in diverse contexts (Matthew 28; Acts 13).

Trinitarian theology further reinforces this vision by depicting divine action as both ordered and dynamic, characterized by shared purpose and differentiated activity. This theological framework supports leadership models that encourage initiative while maintaining unity (Zscheile, 2007). From an organizational perspective, entrepreneurial leadership draws on theories of innovation, complexity, and adaptive leadership. Polycentric governance research demonstrates that systems allowing localized experimentation outperform centralized systems in managing complexity and uncertainty (Ostrom, 2010; Aligica & Tarko, 2012).

IV. Entrepreneurial Leadership as a Catalyst for Polycentric Effectiveness

Entrepreneurial leadership functions as a catalytic force that enables polycentric systems to remain adaptive, innovative, and missionally responsive (Handley, 2020). Enhancing Adaptive Capacity by empowering leaders to respond directly to local conditions, entrepreneurial leadership increases the system's capacity to adapt to change. Polycentric systems thus avoid stagnation and remain responsive to emerging opportunities and threats (McChrystal et al., 2015).

Fostering Innovation at the Margins

Innovation frequently arises at the margins of organizations, where leaders are closest to contextual realities. Entrepreneurial leadership legitimizes such innovation and integrates successful practices into the broader system through collaboration and learning (Johansson, 2004).

Preventing Overcentralization and Dependency

Entrepreneurial leadership counteracts tendencies toward overcentralization by reinforcing the legitimacy of initiative at multiple levels. This reduces dependency on senior leaders and strengthens overall system resilience (Ostrom, 2010; Logan et al., 2011).

V. Conclusion:

Entrepreneurial Leadership and Polycentric Vitality

The entrepreneurial theme is indispensable to polycentric leadership. While communal, collaborative, and relational themes provide cohesion and trust, entrepreneurial leadership supplies the adaptive energy necessary for innovation and growth (Handley, 2020).

Entrepreneurial leadership reframes freedom not as independence from community, but as empowered participation within a shared mission. Grounded in theological vision and supported by organizational research, it enables polycentric systems to navigate complexity through distributed agency, disciplined experimentation, and missional risk-taking (Aligica & Tarko, 2012; McChrystal et al., 2015). As leadership contexts continue to evolve in unpredictable ways, the entrepreneurial dimension of polycentric leadership offers a robust framework for sustaining vitality, responsiveness, and long-term mission 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

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