

# Generati: The Art and Science of Sustainable Leadership

THE INTERVIEW - [This transcript was made from an interview conducted in 1999]

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## **David Wright (Wright)**

Today we're talking with Mike Jay. Mike coined the word "generati" to capture art and science of sustainable leadership. This generativity concept of leadership helps managers answer key questions about the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" of "being, doing, having, and becoming" every day. I'm talking with Mike about what it takes to be a generative managerial leader in the rising uncertainty of twenty-first century complexity.

Mike, welcome to *Yes You Can!*

## **Mike Jay (Jay)**

Thanks, David. It's great to be a part of this project with you.

## **Wright**

How do we begin to understand what it means to be a "generative managerial leader"?

## **Jay**

I think it will be helpful if I start by describing the leadership terrain that generati addresses. We all pay lip service to the radical acceleration of change in all areas of technology, but yet we often lose sight of its ongoing intensification and the fierceness of its effects and challenges.

Many of us remember our first reading of Alvin Toffler's book, *Future Shock*. He gives the example of the curve of improvements in the speed of transportation and the shortening of the time periods between them. First, there was the camel caravan around 6000 BC at eight miles per hour. Then, around 1600 BC, the chariot came along and could go twenty miles per hour. Cultures had plenty of time to assimilate the effects of the chariot and return to a steady state, because it took about thirty-five hundred years for the steam locomotive to reach one hundred miles per hour, in the 1880s AD. But this time, there was not a long period for society to assimilate the increase and return to a steady state because only a century later, the increase of speed traced an accelerating curve with human beings orbiting Earth in a space capsule at eighteen thousand miles per hour.

Now this was the goal of the founders of our science. Francis Bacon urged us to gain power over nature to improve our lot; Descartes urged us to become masters and possessors of nature. But here's the kicker—it's the success of their grand vision that fostered an ever-increasing acceleration of change that has created the terrain for the new leadership. That acceleration is now creating change in such short periods of time and of such magnitude, diversity, and complexity that it's overwhelming our ability to predict and plan on the basis of knowing. Leaders must now deal with future shock on steroids.

So how can we cope with these conditions of complexity and necessary *unknowing* in a successful way? That's what generati is designed to help us achieve.

### **Wright**

You've been known to introduce this idea of generative leadership by asking the tongue twister of a question: "How will who lead whom to do what, when, where, and why?" Would you answer that for our readers?

### **Jay**

Well, let's begin that by trying to help readers find their place in the framework of this language. This concept of generati and generativity on the part of managerial leaders may sound paradoxical, as if I'm telling them to be less like leaders. The reason is that we're entering a new and most difficult leadership environment, and this is going to call for a somewhat different paradigm of the great leader. I haven't fully

*Yes You*

introduced this concept before, although it's been emerging from my work over the last twenty-two years. I've kept thinking it can't be this simple. What I've found in testing it over time is that it *is* relatively simple. But it's not easy.

**Wright**

So let's unpack this starting with the "who" and "whom." Who do you think needs to be the generative leaders in the twenty-first century and who are the followers? Is it just in the business and professional worlds where generative leadership is needed or are there other arenas where it also applies?

**Jay**

That's a great question to start with because it takes us to one of the major differences between the two leadership paradigms. It is this radical acceleration of change that is forcing a revised leadership model upon us. When things were less complex and change was less constant, we used to be able to designate a leader, assume he or she could know enough to make the guiding decisions, and everyone else became a follower. Now we're *all* going to have to perform leadership functions. The message of this book is, "yes, you can." This begs the question, who is "you"? Is it the individual or the collective you? In what arenas will generative leadership be necessary for success? In the business and professional worlds or the world of individuals in their normal, everyday lives? As the old joke says, "The answer is yes." Leadership is going to have to come from everywhere.

**Wright**

Well, let's finish setting the stage by asking the question of "why?" I guess what I'm really asking is "why now?"

**Jay**

Let's go back to the differences between the old and new leadership contexts. In the old context, to put the matter more simply than it ever actually was in practice, leadership emerged because we had a clear problem and it was stated in a clear context. The leader made a decision, people followed, and that was the way the problem was taken care of. Some leaders were better than others, some problems were

harder to come to grips with than others, some crises were unforeseen, and some outcomes created destruction of large population groups, but none of these “problems” were big enough or difficult enough to change the basic model.

Today, with twenty-first century complexity and the acceleration of fundamental changes, plus the expectation that these will continue to grow exponentially, it appears that we are confronted with more than a mere difference of degree in the problems for leadership. We’re confronting a difference in kind. The magnitude of uncertainty and the potential impact, in particular, of our outcomes has crossed a line. *The only thing certain is that, more and more, nobody knows or can know what’s coming next and that’s a different kind of paradigm to operate in.* So how does the leadership appropriate in this context emerge? What must be different in the new leadership that enables it to sustain not only itself, but also human well-being?

**Wright**

So is generative leadership the domain of a talented few or are there skills and competencies that can be nurtured and developed?

**Jay**

Well, let’s look first at some indicators of generative leadership. Such leadership has to take a certain array of resources and be able to facilitate a direction and goal for people to follow. It has to be able to frame its immediate solution in such a way that it doesn’t cause more problems than it solves or use up more resources down the line. And more generally, it has to prevent further negative outcomes. In this leadership terrain we can’t think only about growth. Growth and capitalism have been wonderful vehicles to give people who never before had them chances to become a part of mainstream society in all countries. Yet the resource commitment to do that is becoming so high, we need to find a different source of sustainability.

When that subject comes up, most leaders haven’t thought through how to unpack it. I’ve come to unpack it two ways. Given that now we don’t know what we don’t know, we need to become personally, organizationally, and socially resilient. In other words, we need to design and build structures and practices that allow us to bounce back efficiently, effectively, and sustainably when we meet an unanticipated problem. And we have to become generative. This means being prepared in our structures and

*Yes You*

practices to generate resources that will carry us forward when we don't have access to all the usual resources.

**Wright**

So how might these two competencies—resilience and generativity—play out in today's complex business environment? Will you give me an example from the business world you move in as a coach?

**Jay**

Well, here's an example of one type of problem. I come back to the difficulty of knowing, in such rapidly changing conditions, what long-term investments I need to make in my organization. If you are an airline executive right now, how in the world would you know how much to charge for fuel in three years? There isn't even a border where one side is all old leadership terrain and the other all new leadership terrain. In most cases, the demands are mixed together in complex and sometimes invisible ways. There are times, as a problem emerges, when you can look at what earlier leaders have done and project that forward as a model. But this can be misleading if the context has changed. And here are just a few other factors that feed the fallibility of prediction: Digital technology has increased the speed and reach of communications. No one can hide from what is happening elsewhere in the world. With so many people connected so quickly, global cultural links and social patterns form and dissolve in the blink of an eye, and this happens in unpredictable ways that are both stabilizing and destabilizing. Information technology increasingly updates and makes obsolete what we think we know (the unknown can come disguised as the known). Not knowing is the key problem we are facing as business leaders, professional leaders, CEOs, or political leaders at this juncture in history.

Here is the question I've worked to answer over a long period of time: what can you do if you get into an unforeseen set of circumstances that are also unclear and turbulent? You think you know where you're going and bang! Just when you get everything moving in that direction, the winds change and you're forced in another direction. You can't change this growing tsunami of complexity, but you can alter the way you, your business, your professional practice, your area of political responsibility, even your family *interface with it*. I've built a conceptual toolkit that includes best practices to help anyone work in a sustainable frame of leadership and learn how to

generate the resources he or she needs. If you as a leader are going to emerge, or I'm going to coach you to develop resilience and generativity, what is it you've got to have in your toolkit? I've come to think of these "tools" as five meta-competencies: attention, intention, alignment, capability, and coaching.

**Wright**

So how do these five competencies fit into the resilience-plus-generativity equation?

**Jay**

We've got a couple of sets of factors moving in the conversation now. Let me give an example of the generative and resilient use of the meta-competency of "attention" and then relate it to "when" in our question that defines the profile of a leadership situation. There's a certain thread in popular ideas about leadership that writes off the most important use of attention. It's captured in the saying, "There's no 'I' in 'team.'" (That's a pun, folks.) The only vowels in "team" are "e" and "a." But it also means to say that for any collaborative project to work, you have to drop the "I" for the good of the project as a whole. Well, there *is* an "I" in "generative team" and more than one "I" in "resilient team." A generative and resilient organization, including its named leaders and everyone who shares leadership functions in the new leadership terrain, must be composed of well-developed "I"s. This is the powerful instrument that a generative team and a resilient team bring to produce the most effective, efficient, and sustainable collaboration.

Generative and resilient leaders, while giving all necessary attention to the task at hand, simultaneously keep their attentive awareness on their own processes of thinking, feeling, and acting. They spontaneously monitor how they are handling the practices and conditions that allow them to do their job and model generative leadership for others. If I'm going to develop resilience and generativity, I have to take care of myself in order to take care of what is happening around me. Can I take care of my information? Can I keep my energy up and the energy of others up? Do I know how to message what it is I'm doing so others can recognize a teachable point of view in it? Do others see me taking responsibility for how I act? This being, having, doing, and becoming of the "I" is the first thing we have to pay attention to and take care of, because insofar as any of us are leaders, everybody is looking to us for cues. We need to

model how to be generative and resilient when people look to us in these circumstances of pervasive and highly consequential uncertainty. The very first part of generati is accepting the responsibility for our “I” and taking care of it and, in this context, the “when” is always now. The right “when” emerges from the product of all the factors that the designed allocation of attention delivers to us and how they bear on our relation to our tasks and the well-being and effectiveness of the people around us.

Let me just briefly add that in terms of the meta-competencies, this *attention* is guided by our *intention* and in turn guides our ongoing adjustment of our intention as our work unfolds. They are intimately intertwined and inform each other.

### **Wright**

So now we’ve got the “when.” How about the “where”?

### **Jay**

We said that the “when” depends on the context of the unfolding project and setting, and because change is so rapid, we frequently can’t predict the “when” with reliability before it emerges. The same thing is true of the “where”—the end state we want to reach through the project, the realized goal. The “where” is defined for us as leaders within a multi-factored context of linked short-term and long-term goals. But here’s the question: how do you define, move toward, and achieve, let’s say, a desired ten-year goal if you can’t predict the major part of the context at five years out, to say nothing of eight years out, and ten years seems a different world if your only certainty is a collection of uncertainties?

Let’s look first at the old leadership terrain and contrast it with the emerging new terrain. When there is a relatively clear and gradual shifting of the environment, anyone can put a stake out there and say, “Go from here to there,” with perhaps small course corrections as circumstances change. But in the new terrain of endlessly accelerating complexity and change, we can’t put a stake in the ground, look at it over a period of time, and have it stay there. For that, we’d have to be able to define the shape of the “where,” even though the context that will require it doesn’t yet exist and keeps changing unpredictably. It may also turn out to be unnecessary despite the sunk costs and the R and D and production hours. Leading will be more like driving a car toward an intended destination blindfolded, because where the destination is and the

way to reach it is constantly shifting in unpredictable ways. You can't simply map and prepare for it.

So what *can* you do? Well, as I put it before, if you can't run faster than the tsunami of complexity and novelty, you can change the way you prepare to *interface with the certainty of uncertainty*. You can understand what your tools are, including your unique character, natural motivations, and talents. More fully, you can know what your personal and organizational identity is and how that identity is manifesting intention through a purpose. The "where" is not yet fully knowable in the sense of possessing a particular form. It is a *potentiality* that exists within you. It is part of your strategic intention—your compass direction that is in some respects provisional. It is captured in the ways you measure how fast you are approaching the realized "where"; how you accelerate or decelerate or shift direction, depending on changing contexts; how you operate in terms of purpose, though the form of its eventual realization may be different than the form you anticipated.

So far I've been speaking of the "where" metaphorically as the end state that manifests our intention and realizes our purposes. I should also mention a *geographical* shift of "where" that introduces a new context affecting the realization of our intentions and purposes. In a world that is shifting its polarity clearly now toward Asia and away from the West, you're going to start to see "where" change dramatically in every sense. How will we change ourselves *here* for a market that is *there*? What will this mean to the complexity of our context? To return to the metaphorical use, how will we be sustainable while using fewer resources and at the same time reach an effective and efficient "where" whose character no one can fully predict?

### **Wright**

So I'm guessing the "how" is the piece that ties all this together?

### **Jay**

The "how" is closely related to a third meta-competency, "alignment." Three questions are key to judging alignment: "What does this project *require* for successful completion?" "What is our available *capability*?" and "How can we *close any gap* between these two factors?" These questions are scalable. You can ask them of an individual or organizational project, of a local or multinational project. Insofar as you know the requirements, know the available capability, and know what is necessary to close the



gap between them, then you know the “how.” But, we now must follow this pattern, as we have for each of the elements we’ve discussed, in the framework of accelerating complexity, change, and uncertainty. So we must guesstimate our requirements for the time being and assess our available capability in awareness and that some of its elements may emerge as incomplete or irrelevant as we move ahead. We also have to be very flexible and at times innovative about how we close the gap between requirements and capability. This area, too, surfaces the question, “What does a leader have to do to practice and model sustainable, resilient, and generative leadership to bring together the people who are looking for leadership and to understand how to get into and stay in alignment?”

There’s a competitive game or sport some readers may be familiar with called “orienteering.” I think it’s a remarkably apt workshop exercise to give people a sense of understanding of what it’s like to function in the kind of environment I’ve been describing. The participants can be individuals or longstanding or newly constituted teams. As they start, those participating as individuals, or the leaders in the case of teams, are given a compass. Both at the beginning and along the course, participants are given enigmatic clues that take them through one stage to the next clue and next stage. Some participants may have a gift for decoding these, while those who don’t have to find other ways to advance themselves or their teams. All the participants head out with a compass. They don’t know where they’re going, but can look at the compass and see their direction and know what the compass heading was and know what they’re finding along the way. To me, the leader who is sustainable and resilient and generative is going to have to have a good compass and look at the stars, look at the landmarks, look at what’s around, and get information from a lot of people to understand how to get to the end of the course. Someone knowledgeable has to set out the course and clues with an eye to what you know about the participants. When it’s done as an exercise, the debriefing can be illuminating for everybody.

Wright

Last we have the “what.” What does generative leadership all add up to?

**Jay**

Let me start with a few words about the process called “emergence.” In emergent systems, the thing that arises from the original parts can have properties that are

different from the properties of the parts. For example, people bake cakes every day. They take specific amounts of flour, eggs, yeast, spices, and some kind of liquid, mix these ingredients together, and place the mixture in an environment that will expose it to a certain degree of heat for a specified length of time. At the end of the process, they remove the mixture from the heat. What emerges has a texture, fragrance, taste, and often a color different from any of the separate ingredients.

Emergent properties are often nonlinear, that is, there's not always a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship between the actions a leader takes, the resources the leader uses, and what happens to the mix over time. Sure, in short periods there may be, but short periods aren't the key framework. The key is how I make long-term investments in leadership, allocate resources that are scarce and expensive, and set prices looking ahead.

Earlier, I talked about the relationship between the requirements of a job and the capability of the individual or organization to do that job; and in any areas where the capability doesn't match requirements, the need to find a way to close the gap between them. In my resilience and generativity training, one way we teach how to close the gap is called "scaffolding." When you look at a building that is being built or a process that is being constructed, one of the most important pieces is not the structure itself, it's the scaffolding. A primary function of leadership for emergence is to create the structures and conditions for positive emergence to occur. Perhaps I should say here that even with the fundamental focus on emergence, organizations will continue at some levels to have low-level management and support functions that will most effectively be handled when carried out by standard templates for intended results. But high-level leadership will increasingly have to be the kind I've been describing because of the degree of complexity and increasing rate of change in our global environment. These circumstances will force us to choose between adaptation and dissolution. Of course, people working at any level will have greater well-being and productivity with resilience and generativity training.

When you try to answer these questions—How in the world can we think about things that nobody knows how to think about yet? How can we plan for things when nobody knows what is certain?—you approximate what is happening for leaders as we go forward more deeply into uncertainty and turbulence. If you really grasp this, it will make you very uncomfortable. It's this discomfort that compels you to ask: If I don't have enough resources to do the job, how do I generate them? How do I develop

*Yes You*

resources to handle such unpredictable circumstances? These are really questions about how individuals and organizations shape structures and processes that support emergent solutions. The answer is not to do what we spontaneously do when we are scared by some uncertainty, which is exert top-down, rigid control over the search for security, although there might be a temporary place for that. Long-term, emergent solutions come from collaborations, from conversations, from people with certain types of temperaments and backgrounds. They come from innovation. They come from people who are giving us feedback. They're even going to come from ideas we didn't think would work. They may come in part from autonomous machine intelligence. To return to my earlier metaphor, they're going to come from people working together with somebody bringing the eggs, somebody else bringing some flour, somebody else bringing sugar, and somebody else bringing milk. We're putting all that together and we're all baking a cake together. We won't know how it's going to taste as we would have with an old, familiar recipe. But at the same time, we're going to have to live with the cake. That's not an easy environment.

When you look at leadership and you look at "yes, you can," you begin to see that the present concept of leadership is going to have to shift. We're going to have to start looking at the process of molding it all together, so that we can stay resilient no matter what happens and so we can generate enough resources to get the job done. Putting this kind of scaffolding in place is what is needed in generative leadership.

### **Wright**

So is it possible to weave all these threads together into what you might say is a generative fabric?

### **Jay**

Yes. I will soon be publishing a brief, practice-oriented toolkit titled, *Flawless Living Handbook*. It will be followed by my more comprehensive book, *Flawless Living*. These books are designed to weave these threads together into a generative fabric. For our purposes here, I'm going to focus on the subjective threads in the fabric—*the ways you prepare yourself to interface with uncertainty*. So let me briefly come back to this toolkit I mentioned—the set of practices designed to help people learn key elements of sustainable, resilient, and generative formal leadership and informal leadership, which is increasingly important in the conditions of complexity. In terms of the meta-

competencies that we've been following through this conversation, the *Handbook* spends substantial time in the early chapters helping you define the precise shape of your identity and capabilities and how you use them to move through complexity and uncertainty with greater well-being.

What is your identity? What are you good at and poor at? What would you do even if you weren't paid to do it? Do you understand how you attribute meaning to everyday events, how your thinking functions, and what motivates and demotivates you? Do you understand your own developmental trajectory? And do you understand these same factors in the people you work with and live with and that their differences may be in strengths that complement your natural capability? Can you reach out and ask for help from those who have capabilities you do not have? What is your intention moving forward? Do you have gauges you're looking at to monitor your movement? Can you inform yourself, regulate yourself, and remain transparent to your awareness?

When you develop such self-knowledge and the accompanying skills, you will be able to integrate greater well-being into your life despite this increasing complexity and uncertainty. The *Flawless Living Handbook* provides a firm foundation for acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to live *your* life.

### **Wright**

So in wrapping up, how does a person get started in developing and employing generative leadership?

### **Jay**

There are things you can do, but to do them successfully requires that you keep in your mind the differences between what I've called the old and new leadership terrains. In the older terrain, the relation of input and outcome was somewhat simpler. It followed the law of cause and effect; and causes and effects were slower, more stable, and in most cases more certain. In the new terrain, change and complexity are accelerating so fast that you no longer have the previously reasonable expectation that what you start will have the same relevance down the road as when you started it. If you have the same expectations you had of the older leadership terrain, when you mapped out a goal and pushed it through step after step over time

to a prescribed result, what will happen? Now, more and more, new circumstances, resources, or processes will emerge and the original plan won't work out.

What's happening to us now is that it's just overwhelming because it's so easy to fall victim to the old paradigm where you thought that something was certain. Then you come to find out that those assumptions were flawed in this new world where everything is shifting under your feet. By not facing the emerging uncertainty and figuring out how to make some provision for it, *we* victimize *ourselves*. Avoiding this requires that you learn how to manage your own ego. Here we return to a question we treated in a different context earlier—the saying that there's no “I” in “team.” There is an “I” in “team” and even more in “leader,” but it's an enlightened “I” that is sensitive to the new circumstances.

Even as much as we want leaders who are confident and decisive, we also want people who can manage in this ambiguous environment. You're not going to be able to do that alone because your own view of reality is so small in comparison to the totality of what we're facing amid this uncertainty. So people are going to have to go after their own leadership ego—the one that asks what's in this for me?—and consider whether that precludes what's in it for everybody else. Am I egotistical enough to think that I know what's happening when, in fact, I could not possibly know? This facing up—this staring into the abyss and having nothing stare back—is something that I think is going to scare the hell out of a lot of people. That's why we're seeing more than half of the global 2000 companies shake out about every other year. That's the average right now.

I think one of the easiest steps to get started is to break down the meta-competencies—again, the five meta-competencies I've identified are attention, intention, capability, alignment, and coaching—into their component parts. In other words, there are things we can teach people and that you can learn that allow you to be more resilient and generative in an environment where nobody knows enough to be certain. So how do you get started?

You know, there was a book by Marshall Goldsmith called *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. It's the same kind of idea here. You may have spent a lot of your life getting to the point of being in a leadership position with a lot of people having confidence in you, only to find out that the acceleration of complexity, change, and uncertainty puts you in what seems an impossible situation.

How do you continue to lead? Well, the first thing is to admit that you don't know. The second thing is to begin to test all of your previous assumptions about reality. Then you need to make sure that you don't get CEO's disease, where people tell you what you want to hear instead of telling you the truth. You have to *believe* that you don't know and because you don't know, you're going to ask other people to help you.

In that regard, here's a takeaway about resilience: as uncertainty increases, the need for resilience increases. Well, then, how do you become more resilient? Research has shown that the number one key is the ability to reach out. Not only do you have to reach out, you have to reach back into yourself and understand clearly who you are, what your capability is, and where you'd better ask for help. It means understanding how you need to ask for help because you have a good relationship with who you are.

So to get back to one of your first questions, to a significant degree anybody can learn to become a generative leader. You do that and become more resilient by getting a handle on what you don't know, by becoming humble in terms of your own ego, and by reaching out to others for the testing of what is real. This sequence is the key, in my view. It's the first step toward generative leadership.

**Wright**

What an interesting conversation, Mike. You've given me a lot to think about, but I have to admit that you've got it in a logical order so I could follow it. Hopefully I can take these notes and really get into the substance of what you're talking about. It's been very, very interesting and I know our readers are going to get a lot out of it.

**Jay**

Well, thank you, David. I've never talked about this particular model so fully before. That's why I wanted to be a part of this project—to put a stake in the ground that is moving beneath our feet, not in the hope of establishing a stable target, but to say, look, there is something to be said about leadership yesterday and today.

*Yes You*

But there is also something to say about leadership tomorrow because it might not be the same. If we're going to start a dialogue on leadership, then let's start it with the understanding that leadership in our new circumstances has to be generative and has to be resilient in the ways, and for the reasons, I've spoken of here. That's the dialogue I think we need to start in terms of *Yes You Can*

**Wright**

Today I have been talking with Mike Jay about what it takes to be a generative managerial leader in the rising uncertainty of our times. Mike has coined the term "generati" to capture the art and science of sustainable leadership.

Mike, thank you very much for being with us today on *Yes You Can!*

**Jay**

Thanks, David.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Mike Jay is a professional business coach, consultant, and an award-winning United States Marine and collegiate athlete, he initially parlayed his leadership experience into agribusiness innovation and management success in medicine, hospitality, and business services. In 1999, he founded a world-class business and executive coaching system. Through more than ten thousand hours of coaching sessions, Mike has served business leaders in seven countries. He is consistently on the leading edge of leadership innovation, culture change, and *emergenics*—a field he created to explore the nature of creating fewer problems than you solve. Mike and has dedicated his life to generative leadership.