

What Life is Guiding Us to Do to Change Business Education

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Abstract

This article presents the Living Systems Framework as novel guidance to business education change and a case study of its application. Capturing the universal patterns of healthy living systems, it advocates for systemic change through conscious, life-affirming actions starting in business schools. Simply, effective transformation requires a shift from mechanistic to living systems thinking and doing.

Introduction

The current state of global well-being—marked by social, cultural, economic, and ecological decline—highlights an urgent need for this transformative change in business education. Despite numerous efforts, business education remains entrenched in outdated models driven by profit maximization and economic growth metrics that fail to recognize the interconnectedness of human systems with the global biological ecosystem, which is essential for fostering true societal health.

A case study of a seminar series conducted with a regenerative economics group is used to illustrate learning and applying the Living Systems Framework. The series comprised four sessions designed to build the legitimacy of, openness to, and practical understanding of the framework. Participants were guided through the complexities of integrating these principles into economic systems change, with a focus on practical implications and actions. Successes and lessons learned are discussed.

Taking the lessons learned from advising, coaching, and holding the seminar, planned next steps to change business education include applying the knowledge and approach with faculty in a specific business school setting and an organizing group for a conference on this topic.

So, what actually brings about business education change? And, in what direction must it change? This article offers answers to these questions by introducing a novel framework and discussing its application in advising, coaching, and learning environments.

The Problem

Despite the efforts of many thoughtful and passionate people and groups in the twenty-first century, a shift in business education appropriately responding to the unhealthy current state and trajectory of humanity is not particularly visible. Nor is this the case in familial, formal educational, and cultural learning environments.

In 2024, humanity is in a state of ill-health on all four of the social, cultural, economic, and ecological dimensions of well-being, and declining as evidenced by increasingly undemocratic elections, more polarizing conversations, the rising cost of living, and changing weather, plant, and animal patterns. Lived reality runs counter to the dominant narrative of progress.

Contemporary dominant influences elevating such existential risks to humans include laissez-faire economics and neoliberalism. Undergirded by free markets and limited government intervention, economic goals and governance collapsed into the maximization of singular financial metrics – profit in business and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in governments, especially in the 1980s. These ideas entered business school education slightly earlier in the 1970s and were integrated across the board in the 1990s.

These influences fail to recognize the interconnectedness of human systems with the global biological ecosystem and the collaboration within human systems that are essential for fostering true societal health. This knowledge of the requirements for healthy humanity and what brings about such system change is uncommon, and it does not sufficiently inform business school education about its change.

Living Systems Framework (LSF) as an Innovative Solution

To address these misses in economics, education, and change approaches, the Living Systems Framework (LSF), as shown in

Figure 1, was developed to capture the universal patterns that are present in all living systems that are healthy and how living systems change. It uniquely brings the patterns and processes that have brought about sophisticated life over 3.8 billion years into common human knowledge and action-taking for societal health. The framework itself can be viewed in three levels:

1. Living systems pursue life – do this in human systems,
2. Living systems have five aspects that afford them to do this, labeled *Perspectives* – tend to all five, and
3. Living Systems will display sixteen specific patterns, labeled *Requirements*, across the five *Perspectives* – bring all sixteen about in human systems and change them through co-evolution.

LSF Application: A Case Study

I apply the LSF in my systems change advising and coaching work. This means that people receive new-to-them living systems information that is customized to be palatable to them, that supports their ongoing developmental journey and action-taking, and that their actions really start changing things around them in the direction of system health. These people are developing their consciousness – their awareness, acceptance, and understanding – of themselves, their context, and the living and human systems they are in and building the capability to take systems-change actions that contribute to changing economics or education. They become the

butterfly. Seeing the transformations that result from this work, I regularly ask “Can this scale, and am I doing enough?”

This last question and the LSF informed a seminar series held with a regenerative economics group in an online community that is presented here as a case study. It is an example of holding a learning space for participants to develop consciousness and build capabilities as part of economic systems change. The series included four one-hour sessions over four weeks with twelve participants, working through the evidence informing the approach, developmental stages to application, implications, and integration.

Session one focused on building legitimacy for the living systems knowledge and approach. It was a group conversation framed by a collection of five key lessons that were experienced by the facilitator along the personal path to knowing that regeneration (change towards health) requires the development of consciousness and action-taking of self and others from the universal patterns that bring forth flourishing in living systems. Participants appreciated hearing about the journey of the facilitator, the real experiences informing the lessons learned, and the development of the LSF during PhD research in economics by the author. The group was primed.

Session two focused on building openness to learning the living systems knowledge and approach. It invited the progress of the participants through five stage gates of knowing that rationally support accepting the guidance of living systems in regenerative work, with sufficient discussion for participants to take on the idea and move forward. Participants accepted the premises of each of the developmental stages as “safe enough to try” and became open to learning about the universal patterns of living systems as relevant to the economics of a healthy humanity and economic system change. The stage was set.

Session three focused on examples of guidance from the knowledge and approach. It introduced the LSF, noting the three levels of the framework, as described above. The session invited learning some of what the universal patterns, that afford flourishing in all living world systems, are guiding us to know and do. This session revealed the difficulty participants have with shifting from ingrained mechanistic systems understanding to living systems understanding, with many new terms and an impatience to be given tangible examples that they could take and apply for themselves. On this occasion, only the fifth implication of five was discussed in an effort to be tangible. Yielding to this request disrupted the progressive building of knowledge and meant that this had to be addressed again in session four.

The last session, session four, focused on the implications of, and acting from, the knowledge and approach. It built familiarity with the implications of the universal patterns of living systems in application to bringing about regenerative economics. It offered a very quick overview of five (of the many) implications and posed two action-oriented questions to seed a group conversation. The disruption in the progressive building of knowledge in the previous session was rectified to some degree, yet tending to a wide variation of content and practical understanding in a group of this size was challenging, and not all participants’ learning needs were able to be addressed. An opportunity exists to further refine the examples used to convey these ideas in such sessions.

The seminar series was overall well received, with participants taking on some of the new ideas. The conversational format, where participants could ask questions and make comments, and the facilitator could tie them directly to the LSF and bring it to life, was a strength. This case confirmed the high level of intimacy (as such in one-on-one advising and coaching) and the long duration of supported practical application required by those aspiring to change human systems, such as economics or education, towards those that support system health. Living systems knowledge and approaches offer much to this work.

Future Considerations: Changing Business Education

The living systems approach to changing business school education is likewise very different from most current efforts; it applies the LSF and seamlessly integrates the four foci of the seminar series case. A skilled facilitator builds a relationship and works with initially one aspiring and open person in a relevant role in a business school. The different living systems knowledge and approach is introduced into that person's context such that it supports increased consciousness of themselves, their context (the part of the business school ecosystem they operate in), and the fundamentals of their system, both human and living. This context shift enables new actions to be taken by that person, in the coupling between the person's abilities and their context (combining to be a person's capabilities), which then, in turn, allows for internal changes in the person and/or their external context in a recursive manner.

This changing context allows for others in the shared context to also take new actions, including forming a group inside the business school with effective internal organization and capability to take more substantive external change actions than persons can take by themselves. When this process is informed by the universal patterns that support flourishing in all living systems, it starts a virtuous change cycle where the persons, their context, and their next nested level of context are all changing together in the direction of health.

Systems change of the type that moves society towards health shows up in the purpose and organization of the business school, the research conducted, its curriculum, and its extra-curricular activities, and spreads outwards from the business school into business school education, education, economics, and society. This "practice of change" approach, based on the LSF, encapsulates and transcends patterns such as the Multilevel Selection (Wilson, 1997), dual inheritance theory (Richerson & Boyd, 1978), and autopoiesis (Varela et al., 1974). It scales as evolution. In this way, the approach is in contrast to "theories of change," models, frameworks, and approaches that are informed by studying humans and human systems alone, whether they be from psychology, sociology, or organizational development, for example, that act and scale mechanistically.

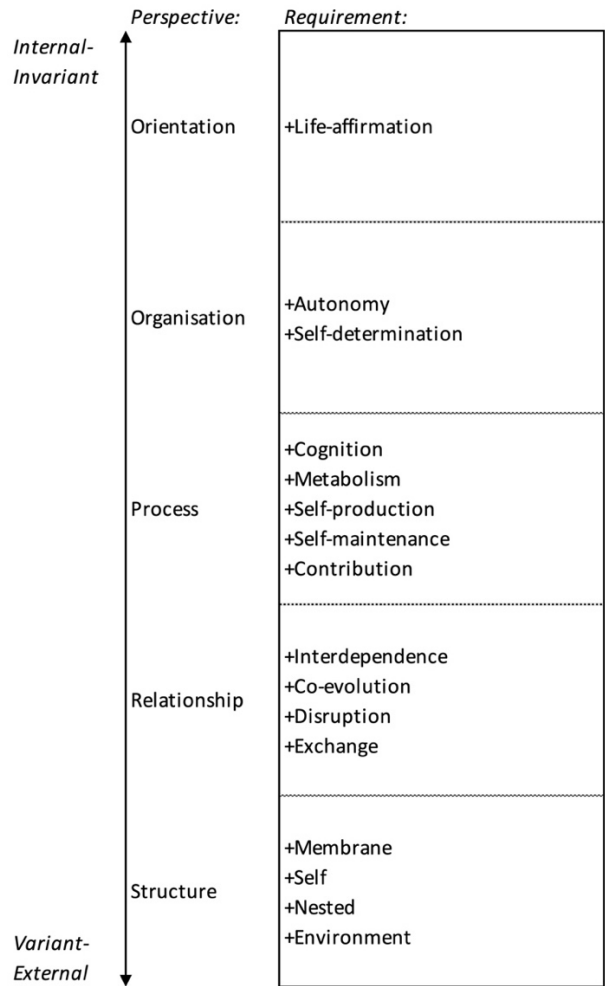
This article has introduced and demonstrated the value of the Living Systems Framework to changing business school education, education writ large, and human systems in general. This nascent systems change approach is in the early phases of gaining commercial viability. Like so many activities that work to improve the holistic health of human systems, they need to create both the demand and the supply for the offering; the market is not currently incentivizing it. This

work is being done, and there is uptake of the approach with people and organizations that are ready for a developmental systems approach to deep change over the long term. There is an opportunity for funders to ramp up these efforts.

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The universal patterns that support flourishing in living systems



In plain language:

For a living thing to be healthy and grow, it needs to pursue life, control itself, undertake critical activities, be meaningfully connected, and be physically present. Here's a breakdown of these needs:

Why It Exists (Purpose):

Staying Alive: Every living thing wants to stay alive, grow, and thrive in its surroundings.

How It Works (Rules and Control):

Self-Control: A living thing takes its own actions and controls itself from within.

Unique Setup: Each living thing has its own way of operating that helps it thrive and adapt.

What It Does (Activities):

Sensing: It can notice things around it, process them, and take action.

Using Energy: It takes in energy and materials to to keep functioning and grow.

Making More: It can grow and create new parts of itself.

Fixing Itself: It can fix problems and stay balanced even when conditions change.

Playing a Role: It has a specific function or role in its environment, contributing to the overall ecosystem.

Connections (Interactions):

Dependence: It relies on other living things and its environment, and they rely on it also.

Growing Together: It evolves and adapts alongside other living things and the environment.

Handling Changes: It deals with changes in its environment and keeps adapting to be healthy.

Sharing: It exchanges energy and materials with its environment to support its survival and function.

Physical Form (Body and Structure):

Boundary: It has a membrane that separates its inside from the outside, allowing it to manage what comes in and out.

Whole Thing: It is a complete, separate being that uses energy to stay organized, alive, and active.

Part of a System: It has parts within its whole and is also part of larger systems that all work together.

Outside World: Everything outside the living thing gives it variety and connections it needs to stay alive.

Figure 1: Living Systems Framework developed during PhD research by identifying and structuring the common patterns in primary research on living systems principles across multiple disciplines.