

A TESTING GROUND FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Why we should become a
leadership laboratory

Brad Jackson

▶ New Zealand is uniquely placed to
lead the world in new business practice

LENGTH : 14 min (3544 words)

NEW ZEALAND has the potential to become a global ‘testing ground’ for the new leadership practices, models and processes that the world desperately needs in order to effectively respond to the natural and man-made challenges that we increasingly face.



THE PAST two years have been the most challenging time for New Zealanders since the Second World War.

In common with other nations, we have attempted to navigate through the uncertainty and anxiety imposed by the Global Financial Crisis, and more recently by the Eurozone debt crisis. If that were not challenging enough, the nation continues to be rocked by the aftershocks of a devastating natural disaster, as unexpected as it was severe. The leadership challenges that the Canterbury earthquakes have posed—from coping with the initial catastrophe to re-building New Zealand's second city, Christchurch—are alone sufficient to preoccupy the entire nation for the next decade. But we do not have that luxury. The lethal accident at the Pike River mine in November 2010 galvanised the nation, then plunged it into despair. The event sorely tested national- and local-government leaders already stretched by the Christchurch earthquake, as well as the mining industry, the police and the international search-and-rescue community.

On a more positive note, at the other end of the country a new municipal entity was brought to life after many false starts. With the unitary governance structure of the 'Supercity' finally in place, it is a now-or-never moment for Auckland to finally live up to the potential that has been widely touted since its inception in 1840.

Finally, for three glorious months at the end of 2011 we welcomed and hosted the world (at least, the rugby-mad portion of it) to celebrate a great sporting event in our "Stadium of Four Million". This posed significant leadership challenges that the New Zealand Rugby Union, event organiser Rugby New Zealand 2011 and a myriad of government, business and not-for-profit organisations can attest to. It was with

equal parts pleasure and relief for the country that we were able to win both on and off the pitch.

These are just four of the major leadership challenges that this country has faced recently. We might add others, including the Rena environmental disaster and the vine-killing PSA kiwifruit disease, along with the perennial and seemingly intractable problems of global warming, child poverty, the cost of housing and youth unemployment.

As for how well we responded to these challenges, who would fail to be impressed by the resolve, courage and ingenuity demonstrated by so many of our compatriots in this troubling year? However, in my role as critic, I will argue that, with respect to the state and conduct of leadership in New Zealand, the glass is most definitely half-full. This article follows on from 'Why Leadership Matters', by Lester Levy (with whom I co-direct the New Zealand Leadership Institute), published in the previous issue of the *Business Review*. Lester showed that while leadership continues to be a priority not only here but throughout the world, it remains an elusive concept to fully comprehend, let alone practise with confidence and consistency. As he noted, much is said about the importance of leadership and how it should be practised but it is all too rarely acted upon.

I would like to make the case that, partly because of the types of leadership challenges that it has recently had to face, this country could become a global 'testing ground' for the new leadership that the world so desperately needs.

The definition of a 'testing ground' is "a region resembling a laboratory

inasmuch as it offers opportunities for observation and practice and experimentation". My contention, based on twelve years' experience in New Zealand, is that it can provide a singularly valuable laboratory in which to observe and practise leadership and to experiment with new leadership models and philosophies.

The allusion to a 'test' can be interpreted either as a challenge to be taken on from time to time (for example, a cricket test) or as a conscious attempt to experiment. I have already indicated that, as a nation, we have had more than our share of tests of late, to which we have responded relatively well. However, there is still much to learn from these various events. The Royal Commission inquiries into both the Christchurch earthquake and the Pike River mining disaster will hopefully prove instructive in this regard, particularly if a broad 'leadership lens' is applied to their analyses. A number of scholars are also deeply engaged in sifting and analysing these events, which certainly make for first-rate leadership and management case studies.

For the remainder of the discussion I want to focus on the second meaning of 'test': to consciously experiment with new models of leadership. I will argue that we need not only to be more conscious and deliberate in finding new ways to respond to issues, but also more proactive in selecting the issues that we take on and the means by which we address them. It is always tempting to resort to tried-and-trusted approaches, especially if they have been relatively successful in the past. It takes a far-sighted group of leaders to tackle seemingly intractable problems in the spirit of discovery.

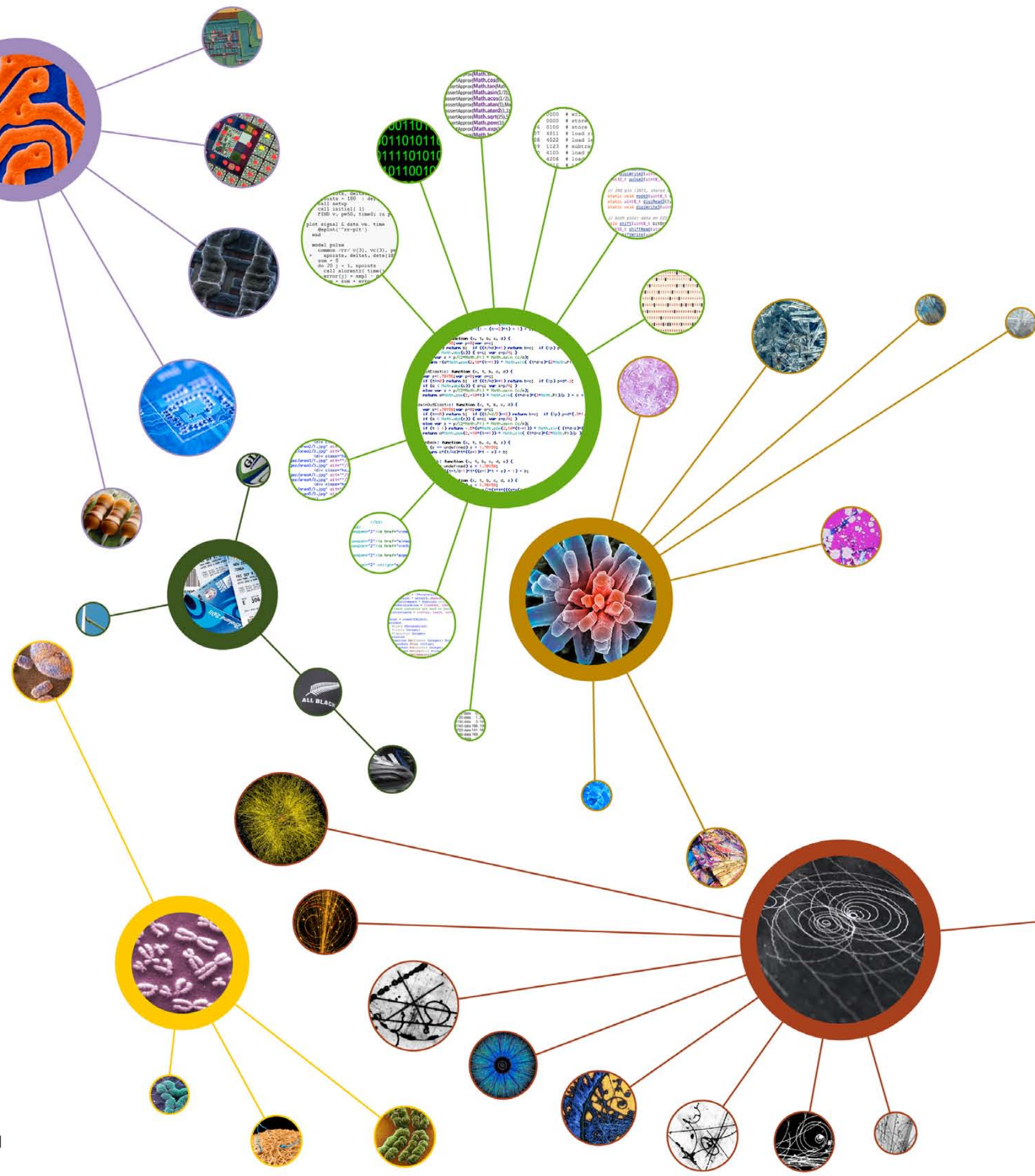
New Zealand can provide a singularly valuable laboratory in which to observe and practise leadership and to experiment with new leadership models and philosophies.

Why New Zealand should become a leadership testing ground

WHEN I FIRST arrived in New Zealand twelve years ago I was told by many as a point of pride that this country was frequently selected by transnational corporations as a test market in which to try out new products and services—especially in the information technology and telecommunications sectors. The optimists asserted that this was because of the country’s penchant for innovation and its technological sophistication. The skeptics suggested that, in large measure, it was because we were so far from the rest of the world that if the tests resulted in failure, damage would be minimal.

Whatever the truth, it strikes me that there is no reason why we could not apply the same logic to softer human technologies such as leadership and team processes. Those who have worked in high-performance environments will appreciate how ‘hard’ the softer people issues can be to address and resolve. The world places great value on this kind of knowledge. There is no reason why New Zealand could not begin to export its leadership know-how the way it does with primary products and aspires to do with hard technologies.

We have several advantages. Our bicultural heritage, underpinned by the Treaty of Waitangi, has already provided a testing ground for the operation and reconciliation of very different governance and leadership practices. Perhaps we should have learned more from this unique nation-building experiment.



Our Maori scholars have established a leadership position in indigenous development that could provide a great base for indigenous leadership research.

The relatively small size of the country’s population, coupled with the relatively fewer degrees of separation (everyone seems to know everyone), gives us the potential to work swiftly, more informally and with more agility than larger nations. Given this, it is perhaps ironic that we still tend to mimic the complex bureaucratic structures of larger Western countries. Because of the way we have navigated the shifting sands of international relations—and because we are not a military threat—we have managed to preserve an ‘honest-broker’ role that would be helpful in promoting and operating a leadership laboratory. Our geographical position in the Pacific provides us with a unique vantage point to observe the pressure that a new generation is exerting on deeply entrenched autocratic leadership practices in much of Asia—most notably in China.

If we can make the case for New Zealand as a testing ground for new leadership and governance processes, what are the kinds of things that we should begin actively testing through

research and development efforts? In what follows, I have singled out five areas that we might profitably begin working on. These are high-yield issues that are attracting considerable interest from some of the more progressive leadership thinkers in the world—many of whom have visited us in the past three years. Because they are all related, there are likely to be considerable synergies in pursuing a multi-pronged agenda.

Five leadership tests

Create leadership practices fit for the age of complexity

WE NEED to recognise that we are operating in an environment of continuing complexity that demands new forms of leadership and governance in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. The past few years have certainly been an exceptionally challenging time in New Zealand, but it may be wise to assume that this is the context within which we will be working and living from now on. Things are not going to get back to 'normal'. Not that conditions ever were particularly easy—a deeper reading of history reveals that effective leaders have always intuitively understood that they were operating in complex environments.

We also need to recognise that we are not the only country in this situation. One promising way forward is the notion of 'complexity leadership' being refined by Mary Uhl-Bien, a leadership scholar from the University of Lincoln-Nebraska. Mary's work was inspired by the pioneering research of Margaret Wheatley who noted that change does not result from preconceived, top-down strategic plans but from local actions that occur simultaneously and link together to produce powerful emergent phenomena. The Arab Spring is a compelling example of this type of leadership process.

In her theory of complexity leadership, Uhl-Bien distinguishes between 'administrative leadership' (top-down) and 'adaptive leadership' (bottom-up) processes, and highlights how in many organisations these processes frequently fail to connect. 'Enabling leadership' is what is required to connect these two leadership processes. This is very hard to identify, let alone promote, and yet it is the crux of effective leadership.

For the reasons outlined in the previous section, New Zealand would be an ideal place to gain a better understanding, through direct observation and active experimentation, of how these enabling leadership processes function: Who is responsible for them? How and why do they make them happen? What do we do to encourage and promote them in the community, the organisation, the city and the nation?

Foster a willingness to tackle 'wicked' problems

THANKS in part to media hyperbole, leadership has come to be seen as the all-encompassing source of, and solution to, most of the world's problems—to the point where the term has become somewhat meaningless. Keith Grint, of the University of Warwick, has developed a helpful framework to distinguish between the functions of leadership, management and command processes.

To gain clarity about what leadership is and what it is for and, ultimately, to make it useful again, he distinguishes between 'critical' problems (those that are self-evident, crisis-driven and urgent) that need to be tackled by a 'command' process to provide fast and ready answers; 'tame' problems (those that are complicated but ultimately resolvable through unilinear logic) that should be tackled by a 'management' process which leads to better organisation; and 'wicked' problems (complex problems with no right or wrong answers) that are to be tackled by 'leadership'. Leadership is distinguished by its preoccupation with asking questions, not by providing short and snappy answers with heroic decisiveness, as is commonly believed.

By way of illustration, we could look at the Canterbury earthquakes. In the period immediately following each major

shock, 'command' was the most appropriate response to the crisis, as was generally recognised. Once the search and rescue mission was completed, it was important to move into 'management' mode to become methodical and equitable in addressing who should receive support, when and how much—a tame problem. Now, as we move into the long and arduous re-building phase, according to Grint's framework we should be entering the 'leadership' realm. The \$2 billion draft plan for the Christchurch CBD purportedly drew on over 100,000 public submissions. Have the leaders been asking the right questions in order to forge a sustainable and productive future for the country's second-largest city?

The problem with leadership problems is that followers quite naturally want instant answers and solutions. Every problem tends to be viewed by them as either a critical or a tame one. But leaders need to resist the temptation to stick to the familiar and simpler command or management modes. It takes a courageous, yet enlightened leader to ask the bold and frequently unpopular questions that need to be asked. To find a way through this conundrum, we will all need to revisit our assumptions about how leadership is created—which takes us to the next leadership test.

Seek to develop leadership not just leaders

IN A WORLD full of confusing and conflicting leadership definitions, Ken Parry and I, in our book *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership*, humbly added our own, defining leadership as "an interactive process between leaders and followers within a distinctive context to pursue mutually important goals". This definition emphasises

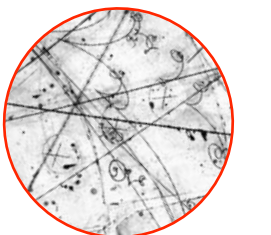
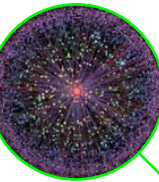
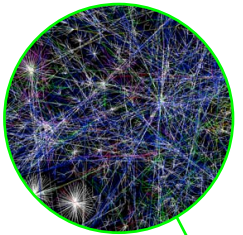
leadership as an interactive process that is constantly being created through communication. It also privileges the relationship between leaders and followers and emphasises the central role of purpose and context. In *The Leadership Challenge*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner go further, arguing that "leadership is a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow". We generally worry about the former when perhaps we should become more aware and concerned about the latter.

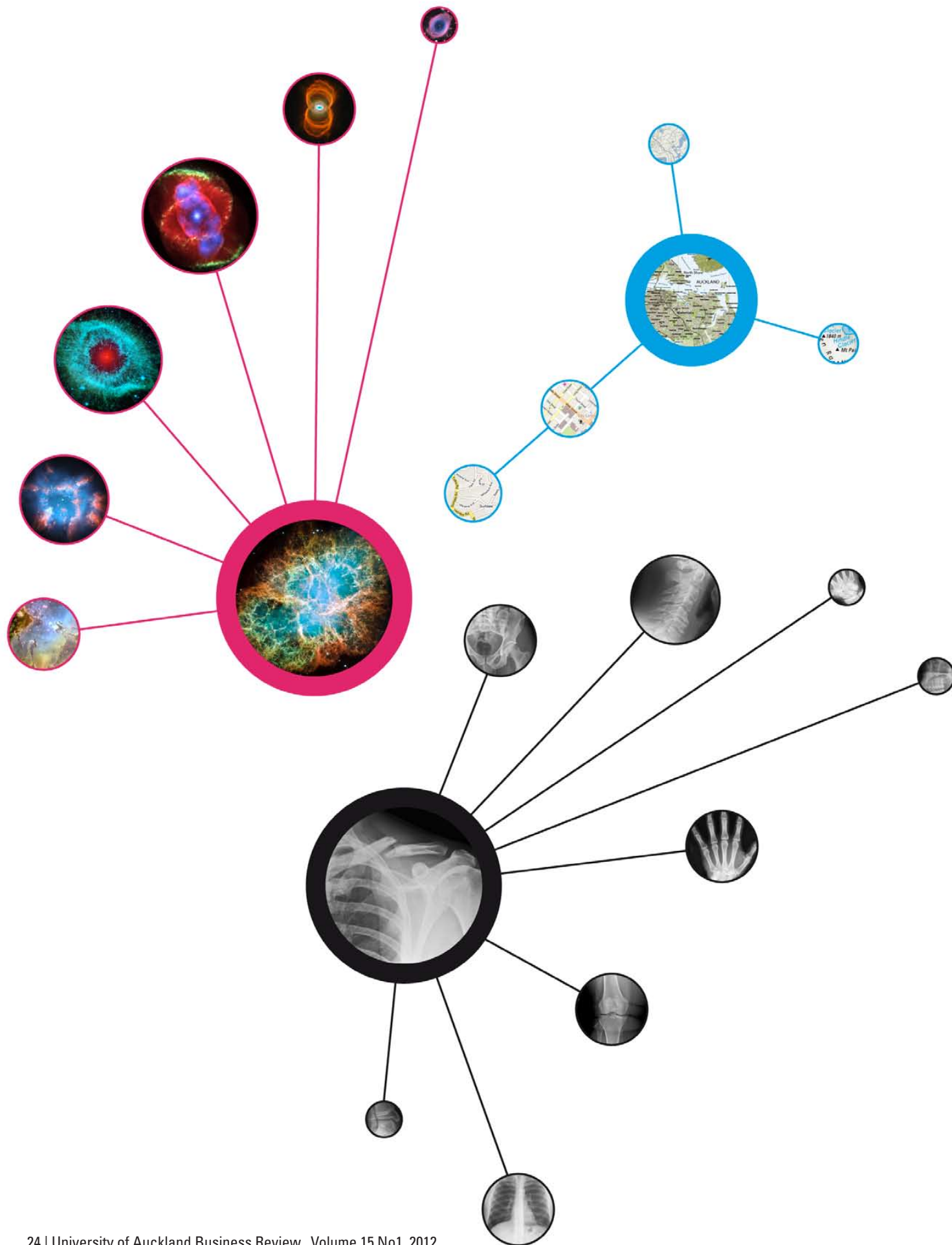
In common with other individualistic Western countries, New Zealand has taken a narrow, leader-centric focus with its leadership development. The country has virtually ignored the role of the follower in creating good leadership. Indeed we are quite reluctant to acknowledge—and feel generally uncomfortable with—the notion of being a 'follower'. This is unfortunate, as it is only when we start to actively promote smart followership that we will begin to put the 'ship' back into leadership.

Our leadership development strategy needs to become more widely encompassing and considerably less elitist. It needs to kick in much earlier in a person's life – not just as they are about to assume senior leadership roles. And it needs to focus on developing collective capacity as much as individual capacity.

Promote inter-group, place-based leadership

IN ADDITION to being overly preoccupied with the development of individual leaders, most of our current leadership development has focused on improving the quality of leadership within existing teams, departments or organisations—what Todd Pittinsky, from the Center for Public Lead-





ership at Harvard University, describes as “intra-group leadership”. Pittinsky argues that the next phase of leadership development should make inter-group leadership the top priority. Inter-group leadership addresses the leadership of disparate, frequently competitive and occasionally hostile groups and organisations in order to create long-term sustainable change.

New Zealand has an unhealthy penchant for spawning new organisations charged with creating new programmes every time a fresh problem emerges. We are not taking the time to assess the possibility of reinvigorating or closing down existing organisations. Collaboration and partnerships are often talked about, but rarely practiced, in a full and sustainable way. The net result is that many well-intentioned efforts to tackle large, globally-induced problems are dissipated through fragmentation and an inability and unwillingness to build scale, due to competing positions and interests. We often fail to capitalise on our small population size, seeking instead to gain legitimacy by being organised in a similar manner to Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom.

We can readily observe the power of inter-group leadership in action when we see how well New Zealanders can collectively respond to natural or human-induced disasters. We need to see more of that capacity being developed and deployed to tackle the longer term, less dramatic—but equally urgent—economic and social problems.

One potentially powerful way to foster inter-group leadership is to focus leadership development initiatives on place rather than organisation. Place can provide far greater unifying force for leadership than a single organisation or industry. Four years ago the New Zealand Leadership Institute engaged in an unusual programme aimed at devel-

oping the collective leadership capacity in the North Island’s economically-challenged Kaipara region. Sponsored by the Northland Corporation, the programme brought together 20 emergent leaders from the business, iwi, government and community sectors over an eighteen-month period to tackle some of the region’s most pressing problems. This group continues to work together to promote effective leadership by organising special learning events and informally working on community issues.

Celebrate leadership not just leaders

IN A COUNTRY supposedly afflicted by the ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’ we do not appear too shy to celebrate and reward success, if the number and frequency of award dinners is anything to go by. While, as a leadership scholar, I would be the last person to argue that we should not celebrate success, I do think we need to question what exactly these awards are achieving and promoting in the long term. Indeed it may a good time to rationalise the number of awards and ceremonies in this country. That being said, I would be quite willing to promote an award that recognises and celebrates leadership that is genuinely distributed and enabling, and which succeeds in bringing disparate groups together rather than preserving the existing well-intentioned, but highly fragmented, status quo.

Along these lines, it was gratifying to see Sam Johnson, the widely-acknowledged leader of the 10,000-strong University of Canterbury Student Volunteer Army, given a special award by the Sir Peter Blake Trust. I believe that this movement presents a graphic example of the power of distributed and enabling leadership, assisted to positive effect by social media.

We often fail to capitalise on our small population size.

We have the opportunity to become an international centre for leadership development.

New Zealand: a key destination for 'leadership tourism'?

HOW WILL we know we have been successful in becoming a testing ground for leadership? One powerful indicator might be the number of people who begin to visit these shores, either physically or virtually, specifically to observe and understand the leadership practices we have developed to effect sustainable change. By way of initial focus, we might consider the following contexts within which to concentrate our efforts, given our track record in entrepreneurial business, health, indigenous, sport and youth leadership.

Building on New Zealand's emerging capacity to host global sporting events, we could create leadership events in which to observe, practice and experiment with leadership. For years many of the world's leaders—including many from New Zealand—have made leadership-development pilgrimages to the hallowed halls of Harvard, Yale or Stanford. There is no reason why New Zealand could not find a place on future leadership-development itineraries.

Much has been made of the importance of promoting ecotourism to attract a new and environmentally-conscious type of visitor. What about spawning a new field of 'leadership tourism'? Most talk regarding innovation in New Zealand hinges on inventing and selling 'hard' technologies in the biotechnology, information technology, telecommunications or healthcare sectors. What about the export potential for inventing and

selling 'soft' human technologies that can lead to development of more effective and responsive leadership?

For those who insist on a business case for this strategy, it is very difficult to define let alone quantify the scale of the leadership industry—that is, all those who engage in developing, educating and researching leadership. One estimate has placed it at well over \$100 billion in revenues, globally. In addition to being a lot larger than most people imagine, it is also one of the few industries that is continuing to grow, as people and institutions seek solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems.

When I first arrived in New Zealand in 1999, there was relatively little in place for fostering leadership. It has been exciting, therefore, to witness the growth of an impressive leadership development infrastructure throughout the country in the past decade. The New Zealand Leadership Institute, Leadership New Zealand and the Leadership Development Centre, together with an elaborate web of leadership development consultancies and community-based programmes, have done a great deal to develop New Zealand's collective leadership capacity.

In view of this infrastructure and our special context, we have the opportunity to become an international centre for leadership development. Leadership practitioners, scholars, developers and educators can visit New Zealand to observe and participate in innovative leadership processes.

The key will be in forging a durable two-way connection between the research undertaken, the practices introduced into leadership development programmes and other sectoral and organisational initiatives.

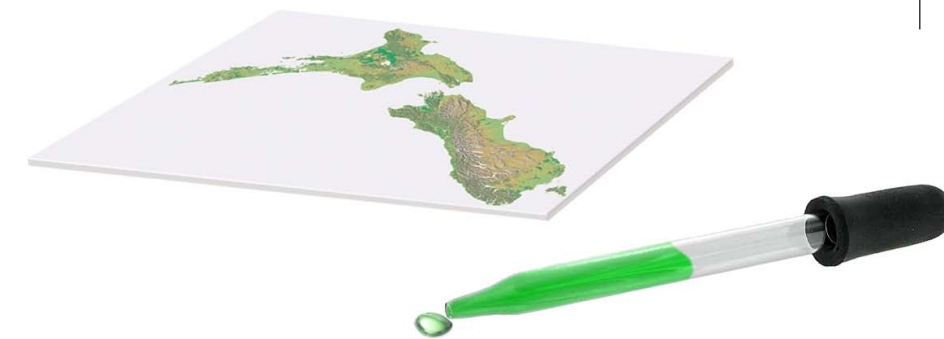
This is something that the New Zealand Leadership Institute has been committed to since its inception. Inspired by the interest in our work shown by leadership scholars in other countries we have been actively working with the International Leadership Association (ILA) to launch a regional network across Oceania that can serve as a model for Asia, Africa and Latin America—parts of the world that are

just beginning to invest in leadership research and development. We will be hosting an ILA Oceania regional conference in Auckland in April 2013.

I invite you to contact me if you are keen to learn more about this idea or would like to work with us. We will need to engage in inter-group leadership of our own with individuals and organisations who are willing to pursue leadership research and development in the spirit of open inquiry and active experimentation, but with the determination to find new and viable ways forward. The stakes are too high for us not to begin this important work. ■



Brad Jackson is the Fletcher Building Education Trust Chair in Leadership and Co-director of the New Zealand Leadership Institute at The University of Auckland Business School. Professor Jackson has published seven books, including the *Sage Handbook of Leadership* and, with Ken Parry, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership*. He is Vice-Chair of the International Leadership Association, and a Research Fellow of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management. b.jackson@auckland.ac.nz



KEY TAKE-OUTS

- **New Zealand is an ideal testing ground for new leadership practices and processes due to its small size and indigenous leadership expertise, its 'honest broker' status and its growing leadership infrastructure.**
- **Prime areas for experimentation are: complexity leadership, leadership development, inter-group and place—based leadership.**
- **New Zealand has the potential to attract both physical and virtual visitors to not only observe but also engage with us in experimentation with novel and sustainable leadership practices.**