

Communication Ecology Stewardship

How Communication Ecologies Are Sustained,
Stressed, Repaired, and Renewed

A companion white paper to Leadership Communication Ecology

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A scholar-practitioner framework for leadership, conflict, power, and organizational renewal

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Once I began thinking of organizations as living communication ecologies, a second question became impossible to ignore: What happens after an ecology has formed?

Organizations inherit communication patterns. They inherit ways of asking questions, responding to disagreement, explaining decisions, using authority, and handling mistakes. Some of these patterns support learning and trust. Others make caution, silence, defensiveness, or overcontrol feel necessary. Even when leaders change, the ecology can continue teaching people how communication works here.

Communication Ecology Stewardship is a practical extension of Leadership Communication Ecology. The first white paper explains how recurring communication-response patterns become the environment through which organizational life emerges. This paper asks what people do with that environment once it exists. How is it sustained? What happens when conflict or change places it under pressure? How can damaging patterns be interrupted? And how do better responses become durable enough to create a different future?

CENTRAL CLAIM

Every organization inherits a communication ecology, and through daily participation leaves one behind.

From Emergence to Stewardship

White Paper I establishes the foundational premise that recurring communication-response patterns accumulate into expectations that shape participation, learning, and organizational possibility. Communication Ecology Stewardship begins from the consequence of that accumulation: ecologies are inherited.

Once formed, those expectations do not disappear when a new value is announced or a new leader arrives. They persist in meeting habits, decision practices, stories, silences, protected assumptions, and remembered consequences. The ecology can outlast individual leaders and initiatives, teaching newcomers how communication works before formal orientation does. This paper therefore shifts the question from how an ecology emerges to how it is carried, tested, cared for, and changed over time.

Stewardship means caring for those inherited communication conditions. It is not an additional leadership competency or a polished communication style. A person can speak clearly while reinforcing deference, listen politely while ensuring that nothing heard can influence a decision, or invite candor while making disagreement costly. Stewardship asks a different question: What pattern is this response helping the organization learn?

The model in one view

STRESS	VISIBILITY	STEWARDSHIP	REPAIR	RENEWAL
Pressure tests established patterns.	Hidden rules, risks, and power become easier to see.	People intentionally care for the conditions of participation.	A harmful pattern is interrupted by a different response.	Repeated repair becomes a new expectation.

The sequence is not a rigid five-step program. Organizations may move backward and forward, repair one part of the ecology while leaving another unchanged, or experience different ecologies across teams and levels. The model is a way to see how communication conditions are tested and changed over time.

Stress Reveals What Routine Can Conceal

Communication ecologies are often easiest to overlook when work is predictable. Familiar routines allow people to coordinate without examining the assumptions beneath them. Conflict, rapid growth, leadership transition, failure, public criticism, reorganization, scarcity, and uncertainty change that. They place existing expectations under pressure and reveal whether the organization can still think, speak, and learn when the stakes rise.

A constructive ecology often becomes more deliberate under stress. People slow down enough to clarify assumptions, invite missing information, and keep disagreement connected to the work. A constrained ecology often becomes narrower. Leaders explain before listening, people protect position, difficult knowledge becomes personalized, and urgency is used to close questions the organization does not yet know how to hold.

Conflict is not only a disruption. It is also information.

A disagreement about deadlines may expose workload, decision rights, or control. A complaint about communication style may reveal concerns about dignity, belonging, or unequal authority. A debate about standards may show whether uncertainty can be admitted without loss of credibility. The visible issue matters, but it may also be the surface through which the larger ecology becomes visible.

This is why rapid resolution can be misleading. A conflict can disappear from discussion while the conditions that produced it remain intact. Silence may mean closure, but it may also mean that people have learned the cost of continuing. The question under stress is not simply whether people can speak. It is whether communication can still matter.

PRACTITIONER QUESTION

Can unwelcome information enter collective understanding and influence what happens next?

The Ecology Is Coauthored, but Not Equally

Everyone participates in the communication ecology. Colleagues reinforce or interrupt patterns through the ways they listen, explain, challenge, credit ideas, remain silent, or respond when someone is vulnerable. Yet shared participation does not mean equal influence.

Titles, decision rights, institutional credibility, access to information, tenure, and economic security shape whose responses carry organizational force. A leader can establish a boundary through one public interruption that a colleague may be unable to repair through months of private encouragement. An employee may remain silent because speaking is risky; a senior leader's silence may leave everyone else to decide whether the issue matters.

Power also appears in ordinary interaction: who controls the pace, who interrupts, whose interpretation becomes the official one, who is expected to remain calm, and whose candor is treated as disloyalty. A leader may believe that close supervision demonstrates care while employees experience the same pattern as mistrust. Intention matters, but authority amplifies impact.

Stewardship therefore begins by refusing the fiction that everyone enters a conversation from the same position. A trustworthy process may require preparation for a less powerful participant, separation of evaluation from dialogue, explicit acknowledgment of unequal stakes, slower pacing, neutral facilitation, or clarity about how contributions will influence the decision.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLE

Because communicative risk is unequal, greater power carries greater responsibility for the conditions under which others participate.

Four Responsibilities of Stewardship

Communication Ecology Stewardship is the ongoing cultivation, protection, repair, and renewal of the conditions through which people interpret, learn, disagree, coordinate, and act together. These responsibilities overlap, but each directs attention to a different part of the work.

RESPONSIBILITY	WHAT IT MEANS
Cultivate	Establish communication patterns worth inheriting: questions that legitimize learning, attention that brings overlooked knowledge into view, and visible

RESPONSIBILITY	WHAT IT MEANS
	connections between contribution and action.
Protect	Preserve dignity, agency, and fair boundaries when pressure increases. Protection does not remove all discomfort; it keeps discomfort from becoming humiliation, retaliation, domination, or premature closure.
Repair	Interrupt patterns that have damaged trust or narrowed participation through acknowledgment, accountability, altered behavior, and credible follow-through.
Renew	Allow repaired responses to recur until people begin expecting a different consequence when they question, disagree, admit uncertainty, or name harm.

Leaders hold disproportionate responsibility because their responses are more visible and more consequential, but stewardship is not limited to formal authority. Colleagues steward the ecology when they refuse ridicule, credit an idea accurately, protect unfinished thought, or preserve another person's dignity during disagreement. Coaches, facilitators, human resource professionals, and organizational development practitioners can also create temporary structures in which a group practices responses its current ecology does not yet support.

Repair Begins with the Next Response

Repair becomes necessary when repeated communication has taught caution, defensiveness, futility, or mistrust. A declaration of openness cannot reverse those lessons by itself. People who have learned that candor carries a cost need repeated evidence that the conditions around speaking have changed. The next response matters because it becomes the first piece of that evidence.

Ecological repair is not one technique. It is a family of practices that interrupt automatic patterns, make hidden dynamics discussable, reconnect intention with impact, and create a different experience of consequence.

Name what is happening in the interaction

Metatalk allows people to step back from the immediate content and name the conversation itself: its tone, pace, defensiveness, avoidance, imbalance, or repeated script. A statement such as, "I notice we are defending positions rather than trying to understand what matters," creates a pause between pattern and repetition. That pause restores choice.

Use response as information

Good intention does not complete a communicative act. The response of others provides information about what a behavior produced. The intention-response loop asks people to clarify the outcome they intended, examine the behavior they chose, notice the response it invited, and modify the next turn when intention and impact do not align.

Return conclusions to observations

People often move rapidly from incomplete data to interpretation, judgment, and certainty. Repair becomes more possible when participants return to what they actually observed, make their interpretation visible, and invite another account. “When I did not hear back, I interpreted the silence as dismissal. What happened?” is more workable than treating the interpretation as fact.

Make repair credible

Acknowledgment matters, but repair also requires accountability and changed behavior. Trust is not restored because a leader declares the issue resolved. It becomes credible when the next commitment is kept, the next difficult contribution receives a different response, and follow-through remains visible over time. Sometimes the most important response is simply to remain present long enough for another person’s pain or experience to be received without correction or minimization.

REPAIR PRINCIPLE

Change begins with the next response and becomes real when that response becomes a pattern.

Renewal Is a New History of Response

Repair addresses a damaged interaction or recurring pattern. Renewal is the longer temporal achievement of stewardship: repaired responses remain credible long enough, and under enough pressure, that people begin to trust a different future. Renewal is not a return to an earlier, ideal ecology. Organizations cannot erase the history that made repair necessary; they can build a different history beside it.

Renewal becomes visible when old predictions lose some of their certainty. A difficult question no longer reliably predicts defensiveness. An admitted mistake no longer reliably predicts blame. A concern receives follow-through rather than disappearing after polite acknowledgment. White Paper III, The Ecology Loop, develops the interactional mechanism through which expectations change; the concern here is temporal and ecological: whether a repaired pattern becomes durable enough to survive the conditions most likely to reactivate the old one.

The new pattern must survive pressure

Many organizations can listen when the issue is minor. The test comes when listening may change a decision, expose a leadership failure, delay action, or redistribute authority. New responses become trustworthy when they remain available at the moments old patterns once returned.

This is why stewardship cannot be reduced to an isolated workshop, listening session, or facilitated dialogue. Training can provide language. Coaching can strengthen awareness. A skilled facilitator can create a temporary protected space. Yet the ecology changes only when ordinary meetings, decisions, explanations, and responses begin teaching the same lesson without external support.

RENEWAL PRINCIPLE

Renewal becomes credible when repaired responses persist long enough, including under pressure, to become a new organizational history.

The Ecology Also Teaches People How to Care for It

The deepest recursive insight of stewardship is that an ecology does more than shape immediate communication. It teaches people how the ecology itself will be treated. People learn how to receive bad news by watching how bad news has been received. They learn how to use power by experiencing how authority has been exercised. They learn whether repair is a normal responsibility or an admission of weakness.

A constructive ecology develops a greater capacity to care for its own conditions. Curiosity invites more complete information. Accountability makes repair thinkable. Fair attention makes participation more credible. Colleagues intervene when ridicule or blame threatens the conversation because they have learned that the quality of interaction is part of the work.

A constrained ecology can teach the opposite. Participants learn to protect themselves through silence, impression management, overcontrol, procedural language, selective disclosure, or rapid closure. Those responses may be individually rational in the inherited environment even while they collectively weaken the organization's capacity to learn and coordinate.

This helps explain why leadership transitions and culture initiatives often produce less change than expected. New leaders enter an ecology that already contains practical rules for attention, authority, conflict, and participation. Unless those rules become visible and are repeatedly interrupted, the ecology may socialize the leader more quickly than the leader reshapes the ecology.

CENTRAL RECURSIVE INSIGHT

Communication ecologies shape the stewardship practices that will later reinforce or interrupt the ecology itself.

What Stewardship Changes in Practice

Leadership development

Leadership development should examine what happens to participation when authority is activated, especially under disagreement, uncertainty, failure, and time pressure. Leaders need to understand the

risks others bear when speaking to them, the conditions their authority makes more or less available, and their responsibility when ordinary responses narrow participation. Stewardship development therefore asks not only whether a leader communicates skillfully, but whether the communicative conditions needed for learning, dignity, and consequential participation remain available when the stakes rise.

Conflict engagement

Conflict should be approached as information about the ecology, not forced into one standard procedure. Conversation may be appropriate when meaning needs clarification; negotiation when interests compete; mediation when trust has deteriorated; and structured or independently facilitated processes when power, identity, or safety shapes what can be said. The purpose is not merely to end the visible disagreement, but to understand and change the pattern it reveals.

Culture and organizational change

Culture change often begins with values, competencies, or desired behaviors. Stewardship begins with anticipated consequence. What do people expect will happen if they question, admit uncertainty, challenge authority, identify harm, or offer an unfinished idea? Culture changes when the recurring responses to those acts change.

Organizational development interventions also enter an ecology with a memory. People may have learned that surveys disappear, listening sessions produce no visible action, or leadership language changes faster than leadership behavior. A sound intervention is not enough. Credibility depends on the response patterns surrounding it.

Diagnosis

A practitioner diagnosing the ecology should look for patterns rather than isolated attitudes. What happens after concerns are raised? How do ideas move across boundaries? Who receives follow-up? How are decisions explained? Does disagreement change collective understanding? How does power alter the cost of participation? These questions bring the lived ecology into view.

What Stewardship Does Not Mean

Stewardship is a normative framework: it argues that communication conditions deserve intentional care. It should not, however, be interpreted as a claim that more communication is always better, hierarchy should disappear, or every conflict should be opened to unrestricted participation.

- **Decision rights still matter.** Expertise, confidentiality, authority, and clear accountability remain necessary. Stewardship asks that boundaries and decisions be sufficiently clear, fair, and explainable.
- **Silence is not always harmful.** Silence may reflect reflection, privacy, care, strategic restraint, or the need for additional safety. The question is whether silence is freely chosen and reversible, or produced by futility, fear, exclusion, or retaliation.
- **Safety and justice may need to precede dialogue.** When harassment, retaliation, trauma, legal exposure, or ongoing harm is present, direct conversation may be inappropriate without

safeguards, independent review, or structural intervention. Dialogue must not become an obligation imposed on the less powerful.

- **Repair cannot be declared by one side.** Apology and listening may begin change, but renewal requires altered behavior, credible follow-through, and time. Accountability, separation, policy change, or formal remedy may sometimes be necessary before relational repair is possible.

Questions for Scholar-Practitioners

The framework is intended to help leaders and practitioners see patterns that ordinary organizational routines can hide. The following questions can be used in leadership reflection, team diagnosis, coaching, conflict preparation, or organizational development work.

- What do people expect will happen after they raise a concern, admit uncertainty, or disagree?
- Which responses have taught people that participation is consequential—or merely ceremonial?
- Where does power change the risk, pace, or meaning of the conversation?
- What does conflict reveal about the organization that routine conditions conceal?
- Which inherited patterns are people reproducing without intending to?
- What response would begin repair now, and what would have to recur for that repair to become credible?
- Which communication conditions must remain available when pressure is highest?
- What will the next generation of organizational members learn from the ecology being created today?

Conclusion

Leadership Communication Ecology explains how organizations become through recurring communication. Communication Ecology Stewardship extends that theory across time. It explains how communication conditions are tested by stress, made visible through conflict, cared for through stewardship, interrupted through repair, and changed through repeated evidence of another possible response.

The goal is not to eliminate disagreement or create permanently comfortable communication. It is to preserve the conditions under which truth, uncertainty, knowledge, dignity, and repair remain available when they are most difficult to hold. Those conditions are coauthored, but they are not equally shaped. People with greater authority carry greater responsibility for the consequences their responses create.

An ecology can become durable without becoming permanent. Patterns once associated with silence or futility can be interrupted when accountability, consequential participation, and fair process remain credible over time. Renewal is slow because stewardship must survive the very conditions that previously narrowed the ecology.

Stewardship begins when people recognize that the question is not whether they are shaping the ecology. The question is what others will learn to expect within the world their responses create.

STATUS OF THE FRAMEWORK

Communication Ecology Stewardship is presented as a conceptual extension of Leadership Communication Ecology. It draws on established research and practitioner experience, but its constructs and relationships remain open to empirical testing and refinement.

SCHOLARLY GROUNDING

Reference Notes

1. Communication constitutes organization. Constitutive approaches argue that organizations are accomplished and sustained through communication. Stewardship extends this premise by focusing on how recurring responses maintain or change communicative conditions over time. See Cooren et al. (2011), McPhee and Zaug (2009), and Putnam and Nicotera (2009).

2. Sensemaking under disruption. Sensemaking scholarship explains how people create plausible understanding during ambiguity and change. Ecological stress makes the organization's usual ways of interpreting and coordinating more visible. See Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) and Maitlis and Christianson (2014).

3. Routines and socialization. Research on routines shows how repeated practice can create both stability and change, while organizational socialization explains how newcomers learn existing ways of participating. See Feldman and Pentland (2003) and Van Maanen and Schein (1979).

4. Voice, silence, and psychological safety. Voice and psychological-safety research shows that people make socially informed judgments about the risks of speaking. Stewardship extends the analysis from whether people speak to what their speaking repeatedly produces. See Edmondson (1999), Morrison and Milliken (2000), Morrison (2014), and Detert and Edmondson (2011).

5. Resilience and crisis. Resilience and crisis research examines how organizations adapt and maintain functioning under adversity. Communication Ecology Stewardship focuses on the recurring responses through which communicative capacity is preserved or narrowed under that pressure. See Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) and Bundy et al. (2017).

6. Reflective practice and organizational defenses. Reflective-practice traditions emphasize examining action while acting, while organizational learning scholarship identifies defensive patterns that prevent inquiry. Metatalk and the intention-response loop are treated here as communication-specific practices that support reflection and repair. See Schön (1983), Argyris (1990), and West (2000).

7. Trust and repair. Trust research suggests that repair depends on how a violation is understood and on whether responses are credible over time. Stewardship treats trust as an accumulated history of communication rather than a declaration or one-time intervention. See Dirks and Ferrin (2002) and Kim et al. (2004).

8. Temporal persistence and change. Structuration theory describes how action produces structures that later enable and constrain action. Stewardship draws on that recursive premise to examine an explicitly temporal question: how inherited communication conditions persist, become visible under stress, and are intentionally repaired or renewed. See Giddens (1984).

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