

The Ecology Loop

How Responses Become Patterns, Expectations,
and Organizational Reality

A companion white paper within Leadership Communication Ecology

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This paper extends Leadership Communication Ecology by specifying the recursive mechanism through which responses become relational patterns and relational patterns become conditions for future communication.

Abstract

Leadership communication is often examined through individual messages, conversations, decisions, or interpersonal behaviors. Leadership Communication Ecology takes a broader view by proposing that communication does more than transmit meaning within organizations. Repeated interactions create relational conditions that influence what people become willing to say, attempt, question, disclose, challenge, and contribute.

This paper introduces the Ecology Loop, a conceptual mechanism for explaining how individual communication responses can accumulate into durable relational and organizational patterns. The loop is represented as Response → Meaning → Adaptation → Pattern → Expectation → Next Interaction. A communicative response produces more than an immediate reaction. Participants interpret its meaning, adapt subsequent behavior, and gradually form expectations about what future interactions are likely to permit, reward, discourage, or constrain. Those expectations influence later communication, which elicits additional responses and continues the recursive process.

The Ecology Loop helps explain how leaders may unintentionally reinforce the very behaviors they later experience as problematic, including silence, dependence, defensiveness, excessive agreement, risk avoidance, and reluctance to surface unfavorable information. It also helps explain why meaningful leadership change requires more than insight or intention. Established communication ecologies contain relational memory, and new behavior must be repeated consistently enough to alter what people have learned to expect.

By describing the recursive process through which responses become relational patterns and relational patterns become conditions for future communication, the Ecology Loop extends Leadership Communication Ecology and provides a mechanism for understanding both the persistence and transformation of organizational communication patterns.

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Response → Meaning → Adaptation → Pattern → Expectation → Next Interaction

The next interaction does not begin from zero. It carries the accumulated influence of what participants have already learned to expect.

From Ecology to Mechanism

White Paper I establishes the foundational claim that recurring communication and response become ecological conditions: they shape communicative agency, knowledge movement, learning, and organizational possibility. White Paper III begins one level closer to the interaction. Its question is not whether those conditions accumulate, but how.

The key idea is relational memory. Participants carry prior responses into later encounters as interpretations, adaptations, and expectations. The Ecology Loop makes that accumulated process visible and shows how the next interaction begins inside a history rather than from zero.

Introducing the Ecology Loop

The Ecology Loop represents the recursive process through which individual responses can become increasingly durable communication patterns: Response → Meaning → Adaptation → Pattern → Expectation → Next Interaction.

These stages are analytically distinct, but in practice they overlap and may unfold rapidly. A single interaction rarely creates an organizational ecology by itself. Repeated interactions, however, can stabilize into recognizable patterns that influence how people interpret and participate in subsequent communication. The model is not intended to suggest a rigid linear sequence. Rather, it makes visible a recursive process in which earlier interactions shape later expectations, and later interactions either reinforce or modify what has already been learned.

STAGE	WHAT IT MEANS
Response	A verbal, nonverbal, behavioral, or absent response provides information about both the immediate issue and the conditions surrounding participation.
Meaning	Participants interpret what the response communicates about safety, status, trust, authority, competence, belonging, and the value of contribution.
Adaptation	People adjust what they say, withhold, attempt, escalate, question, or risk based on what the interaction appears to have taught them.
Pattern	Repeated adaptations become recognizable tendencies in how people communicate and respond to one another.
Expectation	Patterns become predictions about what is likely to happen, shaping participation before the next exchange even begins.
Next Interaction	Those expectations influence the next interaction, which elicits another response and continues the recursive loop.

Response

The loop begins with a response. A response may be verbal, nonverbal, behavioral, or absent. It may include a leader's answer to a question, reaction to disagreement, handling of a mistake, response to unfavorable information, acknowledgment of an idea, allocation of attention, or decision not to engage.

Responses matter because they communicate more than information about the immediate issue. They can also convey meaning about the relationship and about the conditions surrounding participation. When an employee raises a concern, for example, the employee is not simply transmitting information. The leader's response also provides evidence about whether raising concerns is welcome, whether disagreement threatens the relationship, whether the employee's judgment is respected, and whether similar concerns should be raised in the future. The ecological significance of a response therefore lies partly in what it makes more or less likely to happen next.

Meaning

Participants interpret responses and assign meaning to them. They make judgments about what the response appears to communicate regarding status, safety, trust, competence, belonging, expectations, authority, and the value of participation.

This meaning is not controlled entirely by the person who responds. A leader may intend one message while others reasonably experience another. A manager who asks repeated questions may intend to demonstrate interest while an employee experiences scrutiny. A leader who quickly solves a problem may intend to provide support while employees experience a lack of confidence in their ability to handle the situation themselves.

Leadership Communication Ecology therefore distinguishes between communicative intention and experienced meaning. Intention remains relevant because it helps explain the leader's purpose and assumptions. Experienced meaning is equally consequential because it influences how others understand the interaction and how they subsequently respond. The ecology is shaped not by intention alone, but by the interaction among what participants intend, what others experience, and what repeated patterns eventually teach.

Adaptation

Once participants assign meaning to an interaction, they begin to adapt. An employee who experiences curiosity after raising a difficult concern may become more willing to surface problems early. An employee who experiences anger after disagreeing may become more cautious. A team whose leader repeatedly takes over difficult decisions may begin escalating decisions more quickly, while a group whose contributions receive genuine consideration may become increasingly willing to participate.

Adaptation is not necessarily deliberate or fully conscious. People continually adjust communication in response to experience, often without explicitly deciding to do so. They learn when to speak, when to wait, how much detail to provide, what tone to use, when to seek permission, how much uncertainty to reveal, and whether raising a problem is worth the interpersonal or professional risk. This is one reason seemingly small leadership responses can become consequential. The immediate interaction may end, but participants carry information from that exchange into future encounters.

Pattern

As similar adaptations occur repeatedly, they begin forming recognizable patterns. An employee who hesitates once may gradually become quieter. A team that occasionally seeks the leader's approval may become increasingly dependent on it. A group that repeatedly experiences constructive responses to disagreement may develop a more candid form of dialogue.

At this stage, leadership behavior and employee behavior become increasingly difficult to understand as independent phenomena. The leader's response influences employee adaptation, while employee adaptation changes what the leader subsequently encounters. The leader then responds to that changed behavior, creating the possibility that the emerging pattern will reinforce itself.

For example, a leader who repeatedly intervenes when employees struggle may gradually encounter a team that seeks more direction. The leader may then interpret that dependence as evidence that continued intervention is necessary, further strengthening the original pattern. The ecology is therefore recursive rather than merely reactive.

Expectation

Repeated patterns eventually become expectations. People no longer enter each interaction as though it were entirely new. Instead, they begin anticipating what is likely to happen based on accumulated experience.

An employee may expect that difficult feedback will produce defensiveness. A team may expect that the leader will eventually take over a decision. A manager may expect employees to remain quiet unless directly invited to speak. Another group may expect that mistakes can be discussed honestly without humiliation.

Expectations are especially important because they begin influencing communication before the next response occurs. People enter conversations already anticipating likely reactions and possible consequences. Those expectations influence whether they speak, what they disclose, how strongly they advocate, how much risk they tolerate, and how much of their judgment they bring into the interaction. Once expectations become established, the ecology begins shaping behavior prospectively rather than only retrospectively.

Next Interaction

Expectations influence what participants bring into the next interaction. People decide what to say, what to withhold, whether to take initiative, when to ask for help, how much uncertainty to reveal, and whether disagreement is worth the risk. The leader then encounters that behavior and responds to it, continuing the loop.

The next interaction is therefore not independent of the previous one. It contains the accumulated influence of earlier responses, interpretations, adaptations, patterns, and expectations. Each interaction enters an ecology that already carries meaning from what came before. This recursive quality is central to Leadership Communication Ecology because it explains how communication patterns can become durable even when no participant explicitly intends to create them.

How Leaders Help Produce the Behavior They Encounter

The Ecology Loop offers a useful explanation for a common leadership paradox: leaders may unintentionally reinforce the very behaviors they wish employees would change.

Consider a leader who wants employees to demonstrate greater autonomy. When employees encounter difficulty, however, the leader quickly provides solutions or takes control of the decision. Employees learn that escalation is efficient and that the leader is likely to intervene. Over time, they begin bringing decisions upward earlier. The leader then encounters increasingly dependent behavior and concludes that employees lack initiative. In response, the leader becomes even more involved.

A reinforcing autonomy loop might therefore move from leader intervention, to employee interpretation that deference is expected, to increased escalation, to a pattern of dependence, to a leader expectation that employees require direction, and finally to more intervention. Neither side may consciously intend to create dependence; the pattern emerges through recurring interaction.

A similar process can occur around candor. An employee challenges an idea, the leader responds defensively, the employee interprets challenge as relationally costly, and future dissent becomes more cautious. As dissent decreases, the leader may interpret the silence as agreement, making future challenge even less likely.

The same mechanism can appear around mistakes. An employee acknowledges an error, the leader responds with disproportionate blame, and the employee learns that ownership carries risk. Defensive communication increases, the leader receives less candid information, scrutiny rises, and self-protective communication intensifies.

These examples illustrate why communication ecology cannot be understood solely through individual traits. Employee behavior remains influenced by personality, capability, judgment, motivation, and choice, but it also develops within patterns of interaction. A leader may experience frustration with employee behavior while simultaneously participating in conditions that have made that behavior increasingly adaptive. LCE therefore invites leaders to ask not only why people are behaving a certain way, but also what repeated interactions may have taught them to do.

The Ecology as an Informal Curriculum

White Paper I states a foundational LCE proposition: every response teaches something. The Ecology Loop specifies how that teaching travels forward. A response is interpreted, adaptation follows, repeated adaptations become patterned, and patterns become expectations. In this sense, everyday interaction operates as an informal curriculum.

Formal values and everyday patterns may reinforce one another, or they may diverge. When they diverge, repeated experience often becomes the more credible teacher because it supplies ongoing evidence about what candor, initiative, accountability, respect, and participation actually produce.

Why Established Patterns Are Difficult to Change

The Ecology Loop also provides an explanation for the persistence of leadership and organizational patterns. Traditional approaches to leadership development can sometimes imply that change begins primarily within the individual. A leader becomes aware of a blind spot, develops insight, chooses a different behavior, and practices it. Those steps are important, but they are incomplete because leadership behavior exists within an established relational system.

Consider a leader who has historically responded defensively to disagreement. After receiving feedback, the leader becomes determined to change and begins responding more thoughtfully. The leader's behavior may change before employees' expectations do. Employees still carry learning accumulated through previous interactions. They may remain cautious, avoid difficult topics, or test the new behavior incrementally.

Their hesitation can then frustrate the leader, particularly when the leader believes significant progress has already occurred. Without an ecological understanding, the leader may interpret this continued caution as evidence that employees themselves are resistant or unwilling to engage. If frustration causes the leader to return to the previous defensive response, the old expectation is reinforced.

Sustained change therefore requires something more demanding than intention. A leader must create enough new experiences for an established expectation to become less credible. This process takes time because relational learning is cumulative. One gracious response does not immediately erase years of defensiveness, one act of delegation does not undo a longstanding pattern of control, and a leader who has repeatedly punished unfavorable information cannot restore candor simply by announcing an open-door policy. The ecology requires repeated evidence before expectations begin to change.

How a Loop Changes

White Paper II develops repair and renewal as stewardship responsibilities. The Ecology Loop addresses a narrower question: what has to happen inside the recursive process for an established expectation to lose predictive power?

A loop changes when participants encounter a sufficiently consistent sequence of different responses and begin adapting differently. New experiences do not erase prior relational memory; they compete with it. Repetition matters because expectations change only when the old prediction becomes less reliable.

Repair matters mechanistically because it can interrupt an expected sequence. A leader who recognizes an interruption and says, "I interrupted you again. Please finish your thought," does more than correct a moment; the response introduces evidence that the old pattern is no longer inevitable. Over time, the strongest evidence of change is reciprocal: other people begin to participate differently because they expect something different.

Reading the Ecology

The Ecology Loop also suggests a different approach to leadership diagnosis. Leaders naturally pay attention to employee behavior, but LCE encourages them to examine changes and recurring patterns in that behavior as possible information about the surrounding communication environment.

When a previously candid employee becomes quiet, the question need not begin with “Why has this employee disengaged?” It may also include, “What has this environment taught the employee about speaking honestly?” When employees continually escalate decisions, the question need not stop at “Why will they not take ownership?” Leaders can also ask what tends to happen when employees make decisions independently. When problems consistently arrive late, leaders can examine what previous responses have taught employees about bringing forward incomplete, uncertain, or unfavorable information.

These questions do not assume that every employee behavior originates with leadership or with the communication ecology. Individuals retain agency, personality, judgment, responsibility, motivation, and differing levels of capability. An ecological perspective does not eliminate individual responsibility; it broadens the field of inquiry by examining the recurring interactions through which certain behaviors may become increasingly understandable, adaptive, or persistent.

This distinction is important because LCE should not become a theory in which leaders are presumed to cause every behavior they encounter. Rather, it proposes that leaders participate in relational systems and therefore have an obligation to examine how their own responses may be contributing to recurring patterns.

Leadership as Ecological Responsibility

White Paper II develops the ethical implications of unequal power in greater depth. For the Ecology Loop, the relevant point is narrower: authority changes the weight of a response. Because a leader’s reaction often carries greater relational and organizational consequence, it can accelerate the formation of meaning, adaptation, and expectation.

This does not mean leaders control the ecology. Communication ecologies are jointly produced, historically situated, and influenced by multiple participants, relationships, systems, structures, and external conditions. The Loop instead makes visible one reason leadership responses deserve disproportionate attention: they often become high-salience evidence about what participation will cost or permit.

Implications for Leadership Development

The Ecology Loop adds a recursive lens to familiar leadership practices. Listening, feedback, delegation, conflict management, accountability, coaching, and psychological safety are not only discrete skills; each response enters a history that may reinforce or alter what people have learned to expect.

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Development through this lens asks leaders to trace the loop: What did I do? What meaning may others reasonably have made? How did behavior adapt? What pattern now follows? What expectation is entering the next interaction? Which response could alter that sequence?

This shifts the developmental goal from mastering isolated conversational techniques toward developing greater capacity to recognize and influence communication conditions. The practical question is no longer simply, “What should I say?” It becomes, “What might this response teach, and what could it make more likely next?”

Conclusion: What Happens Next Is Being Created Now

Leadership communication is often evaluated in the moment: Was the message clear? Was the conversation handled well? Was the decision communicated effectively? The Ecology Loop adds another question: What does this interaction make more likely the next time?

Responses are interpreted, carried forward through adaptation, stabilized through repetition, and eventually converted into expectations that enter later interactions. Curiosity can make candor more likely; defensiveness can make silence more adaptive; repeated intervention can cultivate dependence; thoughtful accountability can support ownership. No single response determines an organizational future, but repeated responses participate in creating the conditions from which future communication emerges.

Organizations become, in part, what their communication repeatedly teaches people to expect. The Ecology Loop makes that recursive process more visible, clarifying how patterns become established, why they persist, and how different responses can begin creating different possibilities for what happens next.

Reference Notes

STATUS OF THE FRAMEWORK

The Ecology Loop is presented as an original conceptual mechanism within Leadership Communication Ecology. The notes below identify established literatures that inform and contextualize the model; they do not imply that the Ecology Loop has yet been empirically validated as a distinct mechanism.

1. Communication as constitutive of organization. Communication-as-constitutive scholarship argues that organizations are accomplished and sustained through communication. The Ecology Loop extends this premise by specifying a recurring response process through which communicative conditions can become durable. See Putnam and Nicotera (2009) and Cooren et al. (2011).
2. Recursion and structuration. Structuration theory describes how action produces structures that later enable and constrain action. The Ecology Loop offers a communication-centered account of this recursion through response, meaning, adaptation, pattern, expectation, and subsequent interaction. See Giddens (1984).
3. Sensemaking and experienced meaning. Sensemaking research explains how people construct plausible interpretations that orient subsequent action. The meaning stage of the Ecology Loop focuses on how participants interpret responses and carry those interpretations forward. See Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) and Maitlis and Christianson (2014).
4. Routines, adaptation, and persistence. Research on organizational routines shows how repeated practice can produce both stability and change. The adaptation and pattern stages of the Ecology Loop similarly emphasize how repeated participation can stabilize expectations while remaining open to modification. See Feldman and Pentland (2003).
5. Voice, silence, and psychological safety. Voice and psychological-safety research shows that people make socially informed judgments about the risks and likely consequences of speaking. The Ecology Loop extends this analysis by tracing how responses to voice can become expectations that influence future participation. See Edmondson (1999), Detert and Burris (2007), Detert and Edmondson (2011), and Morrison (2014).
6. Organizational learning and defensive patterns. Organizational learning scholarship identifies the importance of examining and correcting patterns of action as well as the defensive routines that can inhibit inquiry. The Ecology Loop treats repeated communication responses as one pathway through which learning or self-protection can become increasingly adaptive. See Argyris and Schön (1978) and Argyris (1990).

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