



Holding Space

The high art of leadership

Dr Nick Udall



‘Holding space is a high art.’

Dr Nick Udall



Holding Space: the high art of leadership

by Dr Nick Udall, CEO nowhere

Leaders are experiencing a quantum shift in context, where both problems and opportunities are becoming more complex, blurred, hyper-dependent, digital and diverse.

Our world is changing at an unprecedented rate. In every aspect of our lives we are witnessing events that were unimaginable just a short while ago. The volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA world) that we are currently experiencing only looks set to continue, if not increase.

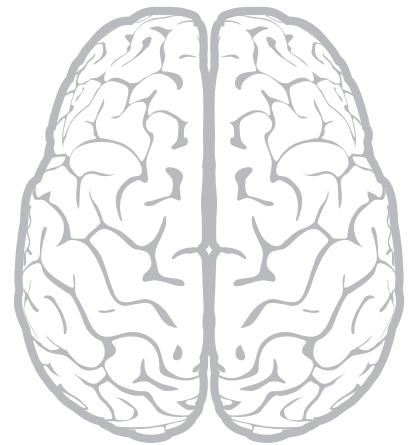
Meanwhile, technology is transforming our lives at exponential rates, saturating us with information, changing the way we think and interact, and shifting our expectations of one another and of the world around us.

Leaders are therefore experiencing a quantum shift in context, where both problems and opportunities are becoming more complex, blurred, hyper-dependent, digital and diverse.

This shift in context means it is no longer possible for an individual (be it in a team, an organisation, or a government) to hold all the information, to spot the warning signs, or to find the most elegant solution.

Holding court with our big brains (and big egos) in this new world is simply not enough at so many levels. And neither, by the way, is the belief that all we need

to do is work harder and longer. Simply doing more of the same – better, faster, cheaper – in a world that is changing at pace, is not going to end well.



Instead, the increased interconnect-edness of things means that we have to work across 'tribes', talk across boundaries, and learn to lead at creative intersection with people who think differently to us. This is the only way we will be able to re-design our world, and move forward in more purposeful, equitable, sustainable and innovative ways.

We can no longer simply believe in and overly rely on superstar leaders, who

We can no longer simply believe in and overly rely on superstar leaders, who burn brightly then burn out fast.

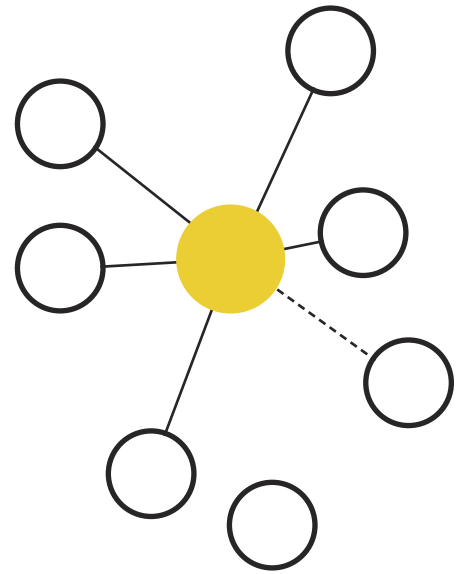
burn brightly then burn out fast. Instead we need leaders who have the quiet humility to 'create and hold spaces' where diverse groups and communities can come together, become greater than the sum of their parts, and consciously and wisely shape, and make, the unmade future.

Taking up space

All leaders affect space, whether they know it or not. Through their position, intellect, presence and behaviour, they determine the quantity and quality of space that we have to be creative and to do amazing things.

The danger, especially but not only in corporate life, is a bias towards an individualised approach to high-performance. This mind-set encourages leaders to 'take up' space, and to become the centre where everything else revolves around them.

If we are lucky it's their strengths (vision, breadth and depth of capability and speed of thought) that takes up the space. If we are unlucky it's their ego, the loudness of their voice, or their inadequacies that take up the space.



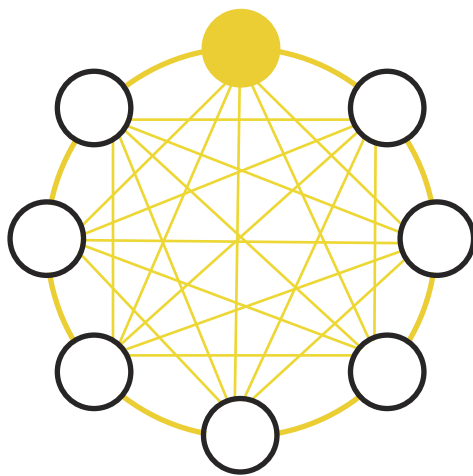
In both cases, 'taking up' gets in the way of teams or organisations moving into states of optimal performance and peak experience, and thereby limits their capacity to create, shape and innovate at speed and at scale.

One of the high arts of leadership is therefore the capacity to hold spaces in which people surprise themselves with what they create together.

Holding space

The challenge for leaders in a VUCA world is to step out of the middle, and from being at the centre, to instead create spaces that feel held, purposeful and charged with energy, so people are called forward (evoked) to do things they never thought they could do.

These spaces allow new possibilities to arise and latent potential to be released. And, this is before a thought is thought, or a word is spoken.

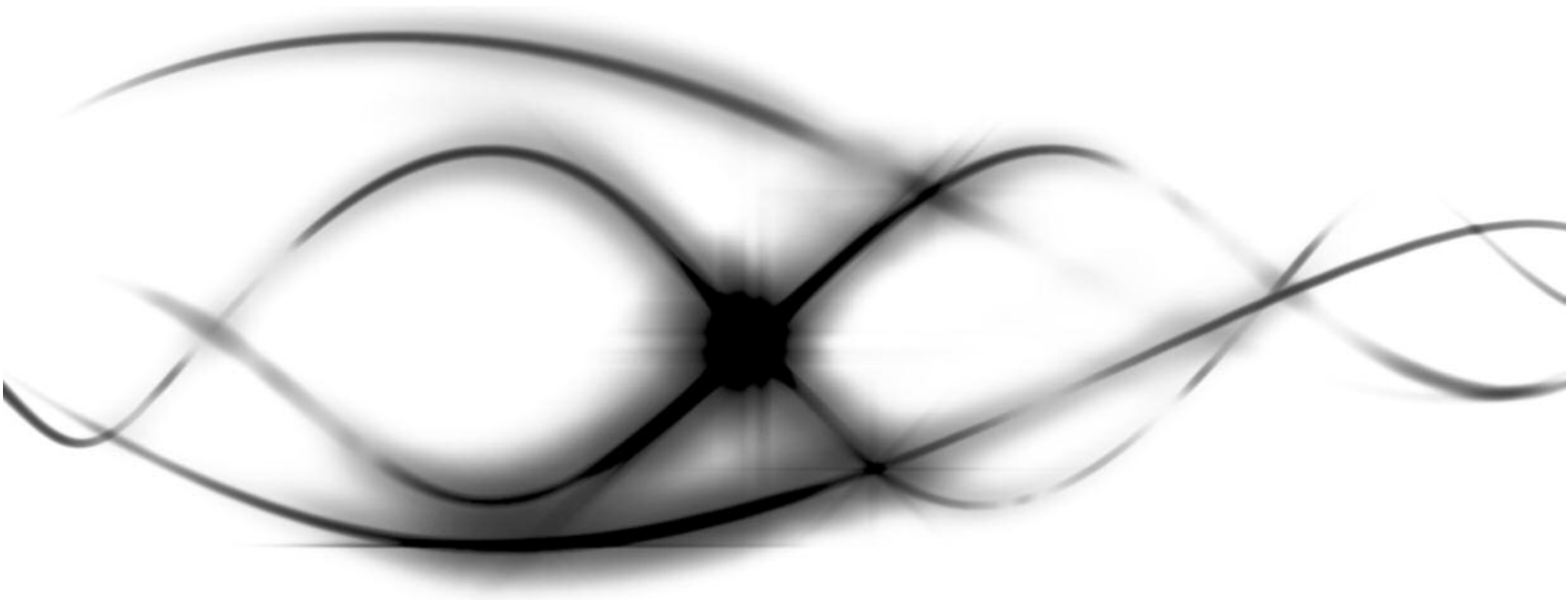


These spaces need to be strong enough to hold the uncertainty and emotion that come with disrupting the status quo – and safe enough to speak the truth. They must create the need and the desire to step into the unknown, as well as the stillness needed to catch the fragile and fleeting glimpses of ‘the new’ that inform and fuel new patterns of thought and action.

One of the high arts of leadership is therefore the capacity to hold spaces in which people surprise themselves with what they create together.

Surprise is a transformational emotion. When we do something we never thought we could do, we transcend our sense of self, our core belief systems are re-patterned and we expand our capacity to ride the highs and lows of the creative process.

Scale this up and we can re-tune the frequency at which cultures vibrate – unleashing cultures of innovation across the organisation and even across eco-systems of organisations.



Holding space is therefore a high art. Scale it up and you can re-tune the frequency at which your culture vibrates.

Evocative leadership

Holding space, at its essence, is a subtle skill. It is not taught to us at school (which is a real shame for our kids) or at business school. Most of us are therefore unconscious of how we affect space – both at work and in life in general.

Alongside thinking and talking, holding space completes the triumvirate of skills that make the difference between good leaders and great leaders – what we call evocative leadership.

Thinking Talking Affecting Space

Evocative leaders love life. They see problems as opportunities. When they hear no, they think yes. It is never about them, but it's about the bigger endeavour they are passionate about, and the difference it will make.

This is a special kind of leadership, as it doesn't rely on hierarchical position, or command and control. And it isn't about the 'hero' leader who must win at any cost – often at the expense of others.

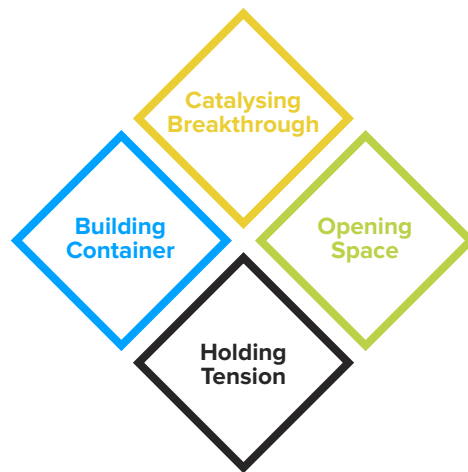
Instead it is about holding spaces where diverse groups of people can come together and become more than themselves, collectively hold a strategic pattern of possibility, work with emergence, iteration and rapid prototyping, and, when they need to, to move like a flock of birds, or a swarm of bees, around adaptive challenges.

Holding space is therefore not about 'my' brilliance as the leader, but about unlocking the brilliance of my team, and through my team, their teams, and so on. Moreover, it is a systemic issue, for how we 'hold' our teams, or not, ripples through at least the next five levels of the organisation – for good or for ill.

And just to be clear, holding space is not the abdication of leadership, rather it's a higher order of leadership.

Four capacities

Evocative leaders have developed four key capacities to help them hold space.



Activating these four capacities is the high art of holding space. Mastering them is a life-long endeavour.

First, they open spaces of new possibility that inspire others to step forward and be part of something larger.

Second, they build containers that are safe enough for the best possible version of people to turn up, so they can put difference into creative relationship.

Third, they hold tension, for as we step into the unknown it triggers an emotional response designed to collapse us back to what we already know. The challenge is to counter-intuitively lean into and stay with this tension, understanding that it is a necessary part of the creative process.

And fourth, they catalyse breakthrough, by learning to notice the subtle and energetic moments that move them and their people, allowing them and their teams to see new patterns in complexity and new order in chaos, and ultimately turn these insights into elegant actions and ways forward.

Activating these four capacities is the high art of holding space. Mastering them is a life-long endeavour.

This is the second of the hidden series of **nowhere** articles by Dr Nick Udall.

About nowhere

Since the mid nineties, **nowhere** has been working behind the scenes and at the highest levels, with multi-national companies all over the world, tuning the creative frequency at which their cultures operate.

Our 'practice' is born from a unique blend of insight traditions, creative and organisational disciplines and doctoral research, and has over twenty years of development and refinement with some of the biggest brands and inspiring leaders.

It enables us to work in creative partnership with our clients & partners to:

1. **design, catalyse and choreograph breakthroughs** – including breakthrough teams & meetings, strategies & innovations, cultures & journeys.
2. **transform the way they work** so they can breakthrough the cultural ceiling that many organisations all over the world are hitting up against ie. thinking that doing more of the same, but a little bit better, is good enough (it's not), or thinking you can work harder and longer hours (you can't). The challenge is to think, relate, learn and organise differently.

About Dr Nick Udall

Dr Nick Udall is a co-founder and the CEO of **nowhere**, and was a co-founder and the former Chair of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on New Models of Leadership.

Since the age of 23 Nick has been working with executive leaders of global corporations, choreographing transformation journeys, and designing and catalysing breakthrough strategies and innovations. He also gives evocative talks at different events around the world.