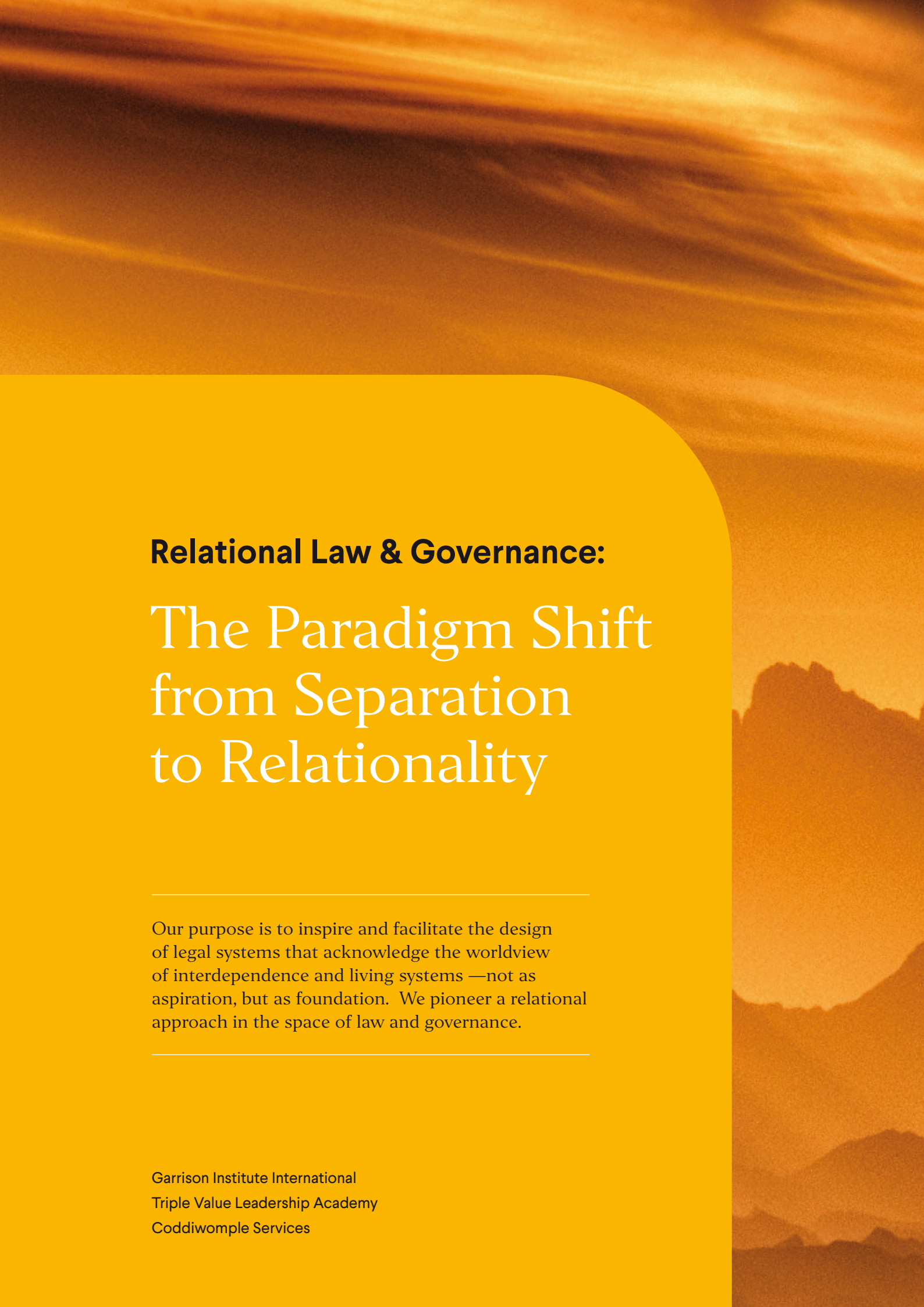




Relational Law & Governance:

The Paradigm Shift from Separation to Relationality

Our purpose is to inspire and facilitate the design of legal systems that acknowledge the worldview of interdependence and living systems —not as aspiration, but as foundation. We pioneer a relational approach in the space of law and governance.

Garrison Institute International
Triple Value Leadership Academy
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Introduction

Today's world is defined by unprecedented volatility and interconnected crises: climate and biodiversity breakdown, technological disruption reshaping entire industries, mounting inequality, and epochal geopolitical shifts driven by resource competition.

There is growing recognition that these challenges are fueled by the very architecture of our economic system, with the financial sector at its heart, and with the legal system as its backbone. The architecture is designed around individual actors, whether persons or firms, for maximizing private gain by systematically externalizing social and ecological costs.

After decades of deregulation, the price of corporate freedom has become undeniable in the cascading crises now unfolding. Regulatory efforts have surged in response, yet they struggle to keep pace. Insurance is retreating from escalating ecological risks. Technology races ahead of governance. Courts and legislatures worldwide grapple with artificial intelligence, data privacy, and digital platforms—addressing algorithmic accountability, personal data protection, liability for AI-generated harm, and content moderation.

The speed of technological and social change has outpaced legislative processes, pushing courts into uncharted territory: digital property rights, cryptocurrency regulation, whether AI systems can hold legal personhood or rights. These aren't mere puzzles—they represent fundamental shifts in how we conceptualize personhood, property, and accountability, revealing again that our legal frameworks trail the realities they must govern.

Meanwhile, the international architecture meant to enable global collaboration is fracturing. In his recent address at Davos, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney observed that we are witnessing a ruptured rules-based international order, with great powers now operating from unilateral strength rather than law.¹ Paul Polman added: "It is not a failure of knowledge. We know what needs to be done. It is not a failure of resources. Global capital has never been more abundant. It is a failure of collaboration and collective action."²

¹ Speech made at World Economic Forum, January 2026, Davos,

² LinkedIn quote at the occasion of World Economic Forum, January 26, 2026, Davos,



We stand at a dangerous threshold where we risk sliding from a rule-based order into power-based disorder. While the old structures are dissolving, new ones have not yet emerged. The threat is real.

Yet the choice remains ours. The Chinese word for crisis—危機 (*wēijī*)—contains both danger (危) and crucial turning point (機). The trembling instability of this meta-crisis is forcing us to see with new eyes, to question what we took for granted, and to reimagine what is possible. As Carney and Polman argue, the path forward lies not in resignation but in building coalitions among those committed to shared purpose—creating what Carney calls “a dense web of connections” capable of acting without permission from failing centers of power. This is the work before us: not to preserve what is breaking, but to build systems aligned with the relational reality we can no longer afford to deny.

A Third Way

The separation of humans from nature that Western frameworks encode—linguistically, legally, technologically—is the root cause of the environmental destruction and today’s failure of leadership. For centuries, Western legal systems have operated as if the world were made of discrete, bounded units—separate persons holding separate property, with clean lines between self and other, human and nature, present and future. Western legal systems have been built on twin pillars: *private property* and *legal personhood*. These foundational concepts have structured who counts, what can be owned, and where boundaries fall. Yet their architecture has too often operationalized extraction—nature as property, harm as “externality,” time horizons too short to protect the conditions that make well-functioning markets, governments, and communities possible. The fiction of separation encoded in our laws has truly become a dangerous liability. And so today our western legal system faces metamorphosis as insights from complexity science, quantum physics, and ecology suggest that the world is far more interconnected.

As Jonathan Rose, co-founder and chairman of the Garrison Institute, writes, “Every entity, whether a quark, a microbe, a household, a business, or a country, is part of a relational field, a vast array of interconnections that support, challenge, and influence the entity”³ And, vice versa: the relational field is influenced by each individual entity.

3 Rose, J. F. P. (2025). *Meta economics: Generating moral economies*. *International Review of Applied Economics*, 39(2–3), 175–180. [Meta economics: generating moral economies](#)



Ecological pressures and cultural evolution suggest that a civilizational transition is underway.⁴ The question is not whether transformation will occur, but whether it will be conscious and generative, or reactive and disorderly. Framed in this way, the direction appears self-evident. Yet the transition requires overcoming centuries of Western ontological assumptions that separate humans from nature⁵, entrenched economic interests invested in control and extraction, and psychological resistance to acknowledging the limits – and often the illusion – of human mastery.⁶

And, importantly, the conceptual foundations for this shift already exist. A legal field that is assigning rights to nature has emerged and is growing.⁷ Governance theory increasingly emphasizes systems thinking, adaptive institutions, and regenerative economics.⁸ Market signals – from ESG capital flows to stakeholder governance reforms – further indicate growing recognition that long-term viability depends upon ecological integration rather than extraction.

In a relational and entangled worldview—especially given today’s global turmoil and systemic challenges—both leadership and law have promising roles to play in creating benefit for entire systems. Leadership geared towards a whole systems approach requires both awareness and compassion. The cultivation of awareness, or mindfulness, enables individuals to perceive the interdependent nature of life more clearly. Compassion on the other hand is the ethical response to recognizing interdependence in Buddhist philosophy that translates as positive action. Law can support more wholesome systems when legal structures are designed with systemic awareness and a focus on mutually beneficial relationships and sustainable ecological systems.

As mentioned, we can already see law shifting from enforcement through universal institutions like the UN and WTO toward plurilateral agreements and shared standards among willing partners. This shift represents a coalition deliberately choosing the power of relationship as a foundation for free, sustainable, and just societies—rather than participating in or falling prey to power coercion by so-called great powers.

A relational approach to law uncovers the substrate beneath legal formalism, asking: What paradigm of reality does our law encode? The networked, relational reality reveals a different truth than the prevailing paradigms currently encoded in our western legal system: we exist in webs of mutual dependence, where every action ripples outward and every boundary is provisional. A relational view of the law invites us to design legal

4 Fritjof Capra & Pier Luigi Luisi(2014). *The Systems View of Life* Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass*

5 Carolyn Merchant (1980). *The Death of Nature*

6 Donella Meadows (2008). *Thinking in Systems*

7 Christopher Stone (1972). *Should Trees Have Standing?*

8 Gilbert, J., Macpherson, E., Jones, E., & Dehm, J. (2023). Rights of Nature in international law scholarship.



systems that acknowledge this worldview of interdependence—not as aspiration, but as foundation.

Indigenous and Wisdom traditions

A relational, living systems approach to leadership and law is compelling not because it's novel but because it's true and a recognition of a reality that Indigenous peoples have always known and that Western frameworks have long denied but can no longer afford to ignore:

We are embedded in living systems animated by forces we participate in but don't control.

This understanding echoes across wisdom traditions worldwide. Ubuntu philosophy in Southern Africa holds that “a person is a person through other persons”—*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*—recognizing that individual identity and flourishing are inseparable from community and relationship⁹. The Buddhist concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) teaches that all phenomena arise interdependently, with no independent, permanent self—a radical relationality at the heart of existence itself.¹⁰

In Taoism, the Tao Te Ching speaks of the sage who “acts without doing” (*wu wei*), aligning with natural patterns rather than imposing isolated will. Indigenous Australian traditions understand Country not as property but as kin—a living network of reciprocal relationships between people, land, ancestors, and future generations. And the Māori concept of *whakapapa* maps genealogy as connection to all living and non-living things, dissolving the boundary between human and ecological community.

Furthermore, academic work in systems thinking and relational ontology frames Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Wisdom traditions as *relational ontologies*, not merely cultural or ethical standpoints but *theoretical positions with implications for science and governance*.¹¹

9 Gram-Hanssen, I., Schafenacker, N. & Bentz, J. (2022) Decolonizing transformations through ‘right relations’. *Sustain Sci* 17, 673–685. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-021-00960-9>

10 Nāgārjuna, in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), Chapter 24.

11 Romm, N.R.A. (2024) An Indigenous Relational Approach to Systemic Thinking and Being: Focus on Participatory Onto-Epistemology. *Syst Pract Action Res* 37, 811–842. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-024-09672-4>



Even within Western thought, dissident voices have long pointed toward this truth. The Stoics understood nature as an interconnected logos. Medieval mystics like Hildegard of Bingen spoke of *viriditas*—the greening power that flows through all creation.¹²

Contemporary systems thinkers have demonstrated scientifically what these traditions knew intuitively: life is relational all the way down. Gregory Bateson conceptualized mind as ‘a network of interactions relating the individual with his society and his species and with the universe at large.’¹³ Fritjof Capra similarly argues that living systems must be understood as ‘a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent.’¹⁴

And today, modern physics reinforces ancient insights about relationality at a fundamental level: quantum mechanics reveals that entangled quantum systems cannot be understood as collections of independently existing parts. When two or more particles become entangled, the *state of the whole system* is described by a single quantum state that cannot be factorized into separate states for each particle. As a result, measurements on one part of an entangled system are strongly correlated with measurements on another, even when the particles are widely separated in space. These correlations reflect the deep non-separability inherent in quantum theory—not a signal or influence traveling faster than light, but a manifestation of how the system is fundamentally interconnected.¹⁵

What physicists initially found paradoxical, wisdom traditions have long understood: reality is not composed of isolated, autonomous entities but of interdependent processes and relations. What makes the recognition hereof today different is not the insight itself but the mounting cost of ignoring it. Climate breakdown, biodiversity collapse, and social fragmentation are the predictable outcomes of legal and economic systems designed around an illusion of separation. The question is no longer whether relational reality is true—it is whether our institutions will align with that truth before the consequences become irreversible.

¹² Hildegard von Bingen. *Scivias* (Know the Ways) (completed 1151),

¹³ Gregory Bateson (1972), *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.

¹⁴ Fritjof Capra (1996), *The Web of Life*.

¹⁵ BESIII Collaboration. Test of local realism via entangled system. *Nat Commun* 16, 4948 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-025-59498-4>



Relational Law & Governance

Relational Law & Governance (RLG) introduces a new legal, governance and leadership paradigm modeled on living system principles—symbiosis, adaptive resilience, regenerativity and distributed intelligence. Instead of optimizing for short-term gains, the aim becomes long-term whole systems health.

A regenerative legal perspective starts with a simple premise: the integrity of living systems is a legal interest—sometimes even a legal subject. This fundamentally reimagines the twin pillars of Western law: legal personhood and private property. Instead of attributing rights and responsibilities primarily on the basis of the above two pillars, regenerative law allows rights and responsibilities to flow from roles within interconnected systems.

The legal question shifts from “What do we own and control?” to “What relationships does this system sustain, and how do we enhance these relationships for the overall health of the whole—whether ecological, socio-economic, or technical?”

Legal experiments worldwide are addressing practical questions such as: How do we give standing, voice, and remedies to the living systems our economies and societies depend on? How do we expand the circle of personhood beyond the human and reimagine property not as domination but as relationship?

Regenerative legal systems go further than environmental compliance. They redesign governance defaults: fiduciary duties that internalize system health, corporate and financial rules privileging long-term resilience over short-term optimization, and public-law doctrines treating ecological thresholds as boundary conditions instead of optional policy. They recognize that in a networked world, there are no true externalities—only delayed consequences that eventually return home.

Components of a possible RLG doctrine could include:

- *Interdependence-Based Rights* — Legal standing flows from demonstrated contribution to system health, not merely ownership claims
- *Duty of Care to Systems* — Obligations extend to maintaining entire networks—ecological, social, and technological—not just preventing individual harm
- *System Guardians* — Representatives ensure both natural and technological systems operate within ecological boundaries, providing practical enforcement mechanism
- *Regenerative Standards* — Legal requirement for net-positive impact transforms compliance from cost center to innovation driver



- *From Rules to Principles* – from overly bureaucratic fragmented compliance to principle based compliance, encoding accountability on measurable system health

As recognition of life's interconnectedness is growing across disciplines, developments in the area of law have begun reflecting these insights too.

The Rights of Nature movement now extends beyond courtrooms into corporate governance itself. Giving nature explicit representation in decision-making—through board seats for ecological interests, mandatory environmental consideration in fiduciary duties, or formal stakeholder representation for ecosystems—challenges the legal fiction that directors owe duties only to shareholders.¹⁶ This framework recognizes corporations as embedded within ecosystems rather than separate from them. There are many other initiatives that demonstrate how accountability governance mechanisms can make ecological relationships legally binding.¹⁷

Steward ownership separates economic rights from governance rights, ensuring companies are owned in trust for their long-term purpose rather than by shareholders seeking maximum return. This legal structure reframes ownership as temporary custodianship with embedded responsibilities. Because the company cannot be sold, steward ownership creates intergenerational continuity and shifts the fundamental question from “what can I extract?” to “what can I sustain and regenerate?”

For example, in 2022 the founder of Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard, transferred ownership of the company to a purpose trust and a nonprofit entity in order to permanently embed environmental protection into its legal structure. As Chouinard explained, “Instead of going public, you could say we’re going purpose”¹⁸ Under this structure, the Patagonia Purpose Trust holds voting control to safeguard mission integrity, while profits not reinvested in the business are distributed to the Holdfast Collective to support environmental causes.¹⁹ Similarly, Robert Bosch GmbH is majority owned by the Robert Bosch Stiftung, a charitable foundation that reinvests dividends into philanthropic purposes while preserving the company’s long-term independence.²⁰ This governance model separates economic benefit from voting control, ensuring continuity of purpose beyond short-term shareholder interests. Such examples illustrate how corporate property can be structured not as an instrument of unrestricted extraction,

¹⁶ <https://www.garn.org/>

¹⁷ Sedilekova, Z., Ramos, J., Graham, M., Luyt, L. (2025). Corporate Governance for Nature. In: Brears, R.C., Lindley, J. (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Policy and Law. Palgrave Studies in Sustainable Futures. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55387-5_17

¹⁸ Chouinard, Y. (2022, September 14). *Earth is now our only shareholder*. Patagonia. Yvon Chouinard Donates Patagonia to Fight Climate Crisis

¹⁹ American Bar Association. (2023). *Patagonia, Purpose Trusts, and Stewardship Trusts*. Probate & Property, 37(1).

²⁰ Robert Bosch Stiftung. (n.d.). *Ownership structure of the Bosch Group*. Home | Robert Bosch Stiftung



but as a fiduciary mechanism oriented toward long-term stewardship and societal value.

Elinor Ostrom, Nobel prize for Economics laureate, defined a self-organized commons governance model based on eight design principles.²¹ This model shows how communities can collaborate and regenerate ecological systems, buildings, or public resources on the basis of care, reciprocity, participation, and contribution.

Contract law scholars have long recognized that legal agreements are embedded in wider social relationships and cannot be understood purely as discrete transactional promises. Relational contract theory— developed most notably by legal scholars such as Ian R. Macneil ²² — emphasizes the role of ongoing trust, shared norms, and mutual adaptability in long-term contractual relationships. This offers a conceptual foundation for newer practices like Conscious Contracting that aim to bring a relational understanding into the DNA of legal practice—the contract itself. Each consciously crafted contract thereby becomes a small but tangible demonstration that our legal instruments can align with the relational reality of life itself.

While the above developments are growing steadily in the realm of environmental and climate challenges, courts and legislatures currently grapple with artificial intelligence, data privacy, and digital platforms—addressing algorithmic accountability, personal data protection, liability for AI-generated harm, and content moderation. Beyond technical-legal questions lie deeper concerns: ethical risks, displacement of jobs and creativity, environmental costs of computing infrastructure, and power asymmetries in AI governance.

Together—from climate litigation to corporate governance reform, rights of nature to AI governance—these developments show existing legal systems trailing the realities they must govern and struggling to adapt to technological, societal, and ecological transformations that don't fit established categories. Relational paradigms recognizing life's interconnectedness are however emerging and inviting us to *(re)design legal systems that acknowledge this interdependence—not as aspiration, but as foundation*. The question is whether public institutions and business organizations will resist this evolution until forced by regulation or whether they will lead the transition with clarity and capture the enormous value available to those who *pioneer a relational approach in the space of law and governance?*

21 Ostrom E. (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press

22 Macneil, Ian R. (1985). *Relational Contract: What We Do and Do Not Know*. *Wisconsin Law Review*, 483–526.



Leadership

The legal frameworks emerging around the relational paradigm, reflect a deeper shift in how societies understand responsibility, interdependence, and the common good. Lawrence Kohlberg's work on moral development is useful here: organisations that treat these frameworks as tick-box exercises stay stuck at the level of rule-following.²³ The real invitation is to move beyond compliance into genuinely internalised values — leading not because the law requires it, but because you've come to see interdependence as the only rational basis for action. Kegan and Lahey describe a parallel journey in adult development: from being shaped by external expectations, toward being guided by your own principles, toward holding genuine systemic perspective.²⁴

RLG supports leaders in making that journey. Three qualities are central to leading in this way.

The first is understanding *the relational paradigm*. This means genuinely grasping that organisations, communities, and ecosystems are not collections of separate parts to be managed, but living systems of relationships in constant interaction. Systems and complexity thinking are essential tools here — helping leaders see feedback loops, emergent dynamics, and the ways that actions in one part of a system ripple unpredictably through others. But this goes beyond intellectual understanding. It requires a real shift in worldview: from seeing the world as made of things to seeing it as made of relationships. Leaders who make this shift stop asking “how do I fix this part?” and start asking “what does this system need in order to thrive?”

The second quality is *awareness* — not as a private mental skill, but as an embodied, relational practice. Living systems are always sensing, interpreting, and responding to their environment. Effective leaders develop this same capacity: perceiving patterns and signals, noticing interdependencies, and bringing genuine presence rather than detached analysis. This kind of awareness cannot be developed at a distance — it arises through deep engagement with people and with the living reality of the systems we inhabit. Leaders who cultivate it become more attuned to what purely analytical approaches so often miss.

23 Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The philosophy of moral development: Moral stages and the idea of justice* (Essays on Moral Development, Vol. 1). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

24 Kegan, R. and Lahey, L.L. (2009) *Immunity to Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.



The third quality is *compassion* — understood not as sentiment, but as the natural consequence of seeing clearly. When you truly perceive how deeply people, communities, and ecosystems are bound together, the suffering or flourishing of any part of that system becomes your concern. This reorients leadership motivation away from narrow competitive goals and instead orients it toward the flourishing of the whole. Compassion doesn't mean avoiding hard decisions — it means making them with genuine regard for their systemic consequences and with care for the human and living reality they affect.

These three qualities — relational understanding, awareness, and compassion — form the foundation of the *RLG Leadership Development Program*, built on the Compassionate Systems Leadership (CSL) approach. CSL creates the conditions for adaptability, creativity, and genuine collaboration, because fear and overwhelm tend to pull leaders back into rigidity and habit. The challenges we face require leaders to grow into the next-best version of themselves. RLG is designed to support exactly that.

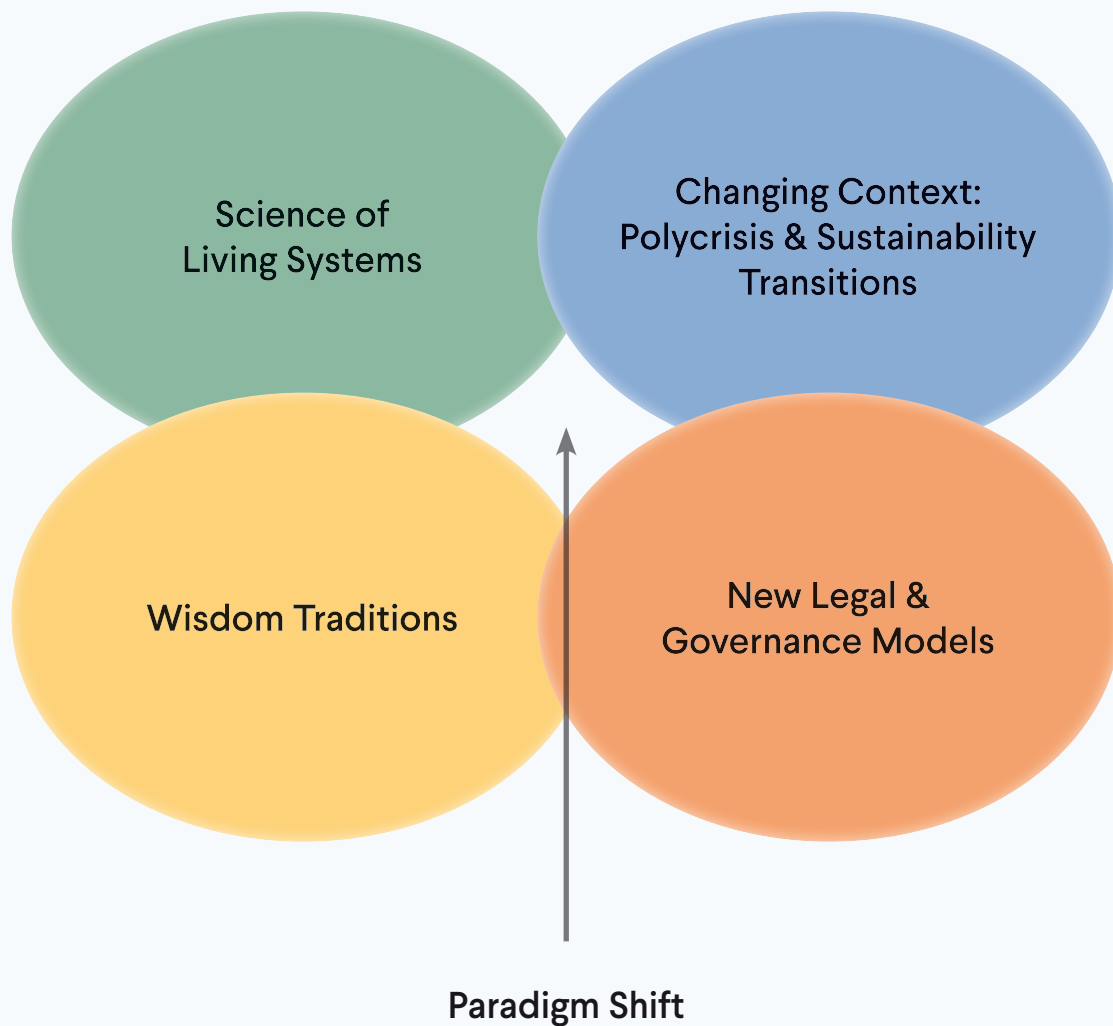
The higher levels of leadership and governance capacity – expressed as adaptability, creativity and innovation will enable the shift that the current systems crises call for. This is what we call Wise Leadership.



New interdisciplinary field

RLG operates at the intersection of a number of fields, spanning academia, social activism and the legal profession. In essence, we are pioneering a new interdisciplinary field of inquiry, integrating law and governance, systems thinking and sustainability leadership and change. This can be visualized as follows.

Intersection Research Field





Conclusion

The choice before us is whether Western legal and governance systems will continue to treat nature, corporations, and technologies as objects to be controlled and owned – reinforcing extractive dynamics that intensify ecological destabilization – or whether we will redesign our institutions in alignment with the principles of living systems. Such principles are deeply encoded in Indigenous knowledge traditions and increasingly supported by contemporary complexity science.

A systemic shift is already in motion. The question is not whether change will happen, but whether it will be intentional and life-affirming, or chaotic and destructive.

The intellectual architecture for intentional transformation is in place. Legal breakthroughs like Rights of Nature jurisprudence and purpose-led ownership structures demonstrate that property and authority can be reframed as custodianship rather than control. Organizational theory increasingly prioritizes holistic thinking and regenerative principles. Financial flows—from impact investment to multi-stakeholder reforms—reveal mounting awareness that enduring prosperity requires ecological alignment rather than depletion.

The obstacle lies in dismantling centuries of Western worldviews that fragment humans from the living world, vested powers committed to dominance and resource capture, and deep-seated reluctance to accept the boundaries—and often the fiction—of human supremacy.

What remains scarce is not theory, nor emerging tools, nor economic signals. What remains scarce is leadership: visionary, aware and compassionate actors willing to relinquish extractive logic, embrace interdependence, and undertake the creative challenge of designing technologies, legal systems, and enterprises worthy of the living world. Such leadership would not merely mitigate harm but actively participate in a civilizational metamorphosis — from extraction toward symbiosis and regeneration.

Invitation

We hereby invite forward-thinking legal scholars, legal and governance practitioners and law students to join a pioneering Community of Practice dedicated to reimagining what law and governance can be.

This is a space for those who sense that the legal systems of tomorrow must look fundamentally different from those of today — and who want to be part of building them.

As a member of this community, you will engage with both the inner and outer dimensions of systems change: cultivating the qualities of Compassionate Systems Leadership while doing the hands-on work of exploring, applying, and advancing the principles, concepts, and frameworks of Relational Law and Governance (RLG).

Together, we explore and pioneer the legal and governance models in service of a more just, relational, and sustainable world.

Founders



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