

The Wisdom of Natural Intelligence: In Conversation with Leen Gorissen

By Wayne Visser

This is a summary of a conversation from my podcast Thriving: The Breakthrough Movement. You can listen to the full episode [here](#).

When I spoke with Leen Gorissen, I was immediately reminded of how much we still have to learn from nature. A trained biologist, Leen shifted from a decade in sustainability research to founding the Centre for Natural Intelligence. Why? “What we were doing there was not having enough impact on the ground,” she told me. “The focus was still too much on the technological fix idea; on the world view that the world is a machine, instead of a living system.”

Natural Intelligence—NI—is her response.

“Natural intelligence is the art and science of surviving and thriving on a planet that is continuously changing, and on a planet with limited resources.”

Her mission is to help organisations, businesses, and governments embrace living systems thinking—because, as she sees it, “once we can better understand how living systems operate, we will become much better equipped to see where the intervention points are.”

One of the major paradigm shifts she advocates is away from reductionist, linear thinking. “Actually, it’s nonlinearity that rules in nature,” she said. “Everything is interconnected and interdependent and nested.” She explained the concept of nestedness using the human body: “A lung cell is nested inside the lung tissue, which is nested inside the lungs, which is nested inside your respiratory system, which is nested inside your body.” And so it goes with organisations: businesses are nested in communities, in landscapes, in the biosphere.

This nested perspective challenges the mechanistic mindset that sees business as separate from nature. “We think that humans are separate from nature; nature is what exists outside of us. But we can shift from being the problem to being the solution, if we learn how we can add value to our community, to our landscape, and to the biosphere that we are part of.”

Leen brought nature vividly into the conversation through examples. “If we look at termites... their buildings actually help the land to adjust to climate change,” storing nutrients, moisture and seeds. Or whales, who act as “stewards of the marine circular economy.” By supporting plankton growth, whales indirectly sequester carbon. “If we can create the conditions so that whales return to the pre-whaling numbers... they can help us draw down billions of tons of carbon each year.”

We explored how these principles are being applied in practice. One of her favourite companies is Interface, which now makes carpets that sequester carbon. “They started off with biomimicry... and now they have shifted with their new vision towards creating positive impacts, which is much more aligned to the process of regeneration.”

She also highlighted the founder of Visa, Dee Hock, who pioneered a “chaordic” model—blending chaos and order—by allowing decentralised self-organisation among banks to develop the system. “He created the conditions bottom up... Just give them the space to come up with a system.”

This capacity for emergence is central to how Leen sees nature—and innovation.

“Innovation is always driven from the bottom up and not top down.”

Most companies, she noted, still operate in a top-down fashion, but those that adopt holacracy or similar models see “a lot more new ideas and new products, but also more efficient ones.”

She shared one particularly compelling example of her work: a collective of five social entrepreneurs in Flanders, Belgium. “What I introduced was shifting from a view of sustainability... to regeneration, which is about creating positive impacts.” When they applied this thinking internally, they asked their staff, “What do you need?” The result? Shorter work hours and greater productivity. “Productivity actually goes up, because the people can regenerate more in their own time, and their vitality goes up.”

It echoed something I’ve always observed in nature: cycles of rest and renewal. Leen elaborated on another key insight: “Nature has a lot of built-in redundancy or slack in the system.” By contrast, our economic systems “have zero slack, just-in-time delivery, very tight supply chains, and we’re starting to pay the price for that.” She believes businesses need more “diversity, decentralisation and redundancy” if they want to be resilient.

And what of leadership? Leen was candid: “Most leadership programs are still focusing from the old mechanistic worldview... very little about who a manager or leader has to become, which for me, is the basic shift that is needed.” She sees the real opportunity in “creating enabling conditions,” letting go of control and trusting emergence.

“Every person can be a leader ... It’s trying to find that essence, and trying to shift from being part of the problem to being part of the solution.”

Her own garden has become both laboratory and teacher. When she and her partner moved in, “the garden was very much a dead zone.” Applying principles of permaculture, biomimicry, and systems thinking, she watched the space come alive. “Even though I’m a biologist... it still blew my mind how quickly change happens when you start collaborating with nature.” And yes, she’s had to overcome her own resistance to “chaos” in the garden: “It took me two years to get used to the fact that my garden was chaotic.”

We ended with the topic of hope, which runs as a thread throughout *Thriving*. Leen’s response moved me deeply. “From my garden project, I also see how fast restoration

and regeneration can go... This year, for the first time in more than 100 years, a wolf was actually seen in our garden.” That, she said, gives her hope.

And there’s another reason to stay inspired. “What I can see is an under stream of pioneers that are really radically transforming the logic of value creation... I hope the tipping point will come soon, that the under stream can take over from the ones that just don’t want to change.”

I love that image: not a mainstream, but an *under stream*. Quietly, persistently, it’s carving a new path. And if Leen’s vision of regeneration and natural intelligence continues to ripple outward, that under stream may soon become a powerful current for change.

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