



# EARTH SHAKERS

The Art and Craft of the Global Change Agent | Dean Williams

# Earth shakers figuratively shake the ground on which we work and live.

They stir people to action to address tough problems. They mobilize people to fix what is flawed or broken. They generate movements to tackle complex issues. They transform teams, organizations, communities, and nations. They help us to think differently about the world, and to take actions to make it a better place.

The earth shaker is a global change agent. They may operate at the local level or on the international stage but they appreciate how global forces and dynamics affect local forces and dynamics, and vice-versa. Given the interdependent nature of complex problems, they know they must cross borders and boundaries to get anything significant accomplished, as problems cannot be resolved in isolation.

We need earth shakers because globalization presents a whole new set of challenges for which traditional forms of leadership cannot resolve. Globalization generates forces and dynamics that produce unintended and unexpected consequences—surprises—some that are delightful and some that are threatening and outright scary.

Former UK prime minister Gordon Brown stated that, “globalization has generated opposite gravitational poles of production and consumption, and today the world arrangements look unbalanced and unsustainable.” He added that while there are benefits to globalization “they cannot be secured without a willingness to address, the underlying economic, democratic, social and political weaknesses of globalization.” In other words, the problems generated by globalization are complex, interdependent, and systemic in nature and cannot be resolved by thinking parochially or acting tribally.

The earth shaker shakes people out of their complacency, apathy or comfort to address threats and dangers and also to take advantage of opportunities that suddenly arise and just as quickly disappear. Oftentimes, given global forces, the earth is already shaking, generating anxiety, uncertainty, and fear, and the change agent’s task is to help people make sense of what is happening and to take appropriate steps to responsibly address the challenge.

# Earth shaking is a form of real leadership

The earth shaker exercises what I call real leadership. Real leadership is the process of getting people to face reality and attend to a problem that they do not want to face, hesitate to face, or simply do not realize is a vital concern that demands their attention.

Real leadership is different from big man leadership, which is the prevailing notion of leadership. Big man leadership is fundamentally tribal in nature and is about expressing leadership through prominence (“look to me”), dominance (“listen to me”) and what I call, tribalizing (“follow me, and I will advance your interests”). The big man leader, intentionally or unintentionally, is inclined to put the spotlight on themselves to orient the group, while the earth shaker in exercising real leadership puts the spotlight on the situation of irresolution. The earth shaker’s task is to be an attention manager in order to promote problem engagement, learning and change.

The opposite of real leadership is counterfeit leadership. Counterfeit leadership is the use of power or authority (prominence, dominance, and tribalizing) to get people to avoid reality or to look for quick fixes and simple solutions. While real leadership gets people facing tough problems and working on the tasks that will generate change, counterfeit leadership gets people focused on false tasks that produce no sustainable value for a community, organization, or nation. Real leadership helps people make critical changes in their values, habits, and priorities

in order to respond to new realities, while counterfeit leadership protects people from change or has them changing the wrong set of values or practices, thus impeding progress.

Counterfeit leadership is not necessarily done by bad people who intentionally deceive people. It may be provided by good people who act out of ignorance, arrogance, or incompetence. It is often done by people who get stuck in their factional web and group loyalties, and seek to advance their own group's interests at the expense of others, no different from one tribe competing against another tribe for valuable resources or dominance and control. Counterfeit leadership also occurs when leaders get "seduced" by their group into giving easy answers or pursuing activities that give an immediate pay-off at the expense of doing the hard work of producing long-term progress.

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## The Earth Shaker Intervenes to Promote Interdependent Problem Solving and Adaptive Work

Many of our problems today are complex and interdependent, and we avoid them or play politics with them at our own peril. These problems are what my colleagues and I call *adaptive problems*. Given the interconnected nature of adaptive problems, organizations, communities, and nations must make adjustments in values, priorities, and perspectives if progress is to unfold. Sometimes adaptations can be made through a slow and steady process of incremental change in small parts of the system, and other times, given how weak or broken the system is, or the degree of urgency, it might require a major burst of energy, a full-frontal assault, and the massive mobilization of people and resources to generate a total transformation. No matter what is required, someone must shake the earth and ignite a process for getting attention, building partnerships, facilitating problem solving, and help people to begin doing the adaptive work.

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The earth shaker is fundamentally an attention manager. They get attention and orchestrate problem engagement by intervening to *punctuate the equilibrium* of a group, which is a term from evolutionary biology that suggests that unless there is a disruption in the environment adaptation will not be stimulated. Big man leaders generally seek to maintain order, while earth shakers generate disorder—not chaos, but sufficient disequilibrium to shake people out of their complacency, cultural habits, and immediate concerns, and start wrestling with the problem. The earth shaker punctuates the equilibrium by making both provocative and evocative interventions.

The provocative intervention seeks to irritate or disturb people. It is an agitation. It seeks to disrupt that part of a person's thinking that is stubborn, stuck, dogmatic, or resistant. Its aim is to incite deep questioning and reflection that ultimately generates positive action. An evocative intervention, in contrast, appeals to higher values and seeks to engage that part of the person's thinking that is not trapped but willing, curious, imaginative, and can see potential. While the provocative intervention stirs, disturbs, and bothers people, the evocative intervention is educational, aspirational, inspirational, and invitational. It moves people. It evokes the goodness in people to do the right thing. The earth shaker should use both forms of intervention creatively and strategically to mobilize people to action.

# The Earth Shaker Helps People Transcend the Negative Aspects of the Tribal Impulse

What adds to the difficulty in addressing interdependent and urgent problems is that by nature, humans think parochially and act tribally. Although we live in a globalized world and we have made extraordinary scientific and technological advances, we remain fundamentally tribal in our instincts; and this tribal instinct leads to the persistence of fractures within and between groups.

Tribalism leads to parochialism. Parochialism is about focusing on a small section of a problem without consideration for the larger system in which the problem is imbedded. Diverse tribal memberships can help in broadening our horizons in that the individual is exposed to different perspectives—but that is not always the case. Online tribes, for example, might connect the individual to thousands of other individuals from around the globe—but these individuals reinforce a particular view of the problem and perpetuate parochialism, tribal tendencies, and the fractures between groups.

The tribal impulse is manifest in the creation, perpetuation, and protection of group boundaries, be they religious, cultural, professional, geographic, economic, class, and ethnic boundaries, to name but a few. Every group has a boundary, and boundary keepers to protect and reinforce the boundaries. Boundaries are designed to keep the “right” people in and the “wrong” people out.

Boundaries, however, serve an important purpose—to sustain the life of a group. Nature has boundaries and all organisms have boundaries. Without a boundary, or if the boundary is too permeable, the group or organism is weakened, could die, or might simply disappear. The same can be said if the boundary is too thick or serves to constrain problem solving and impede creativity.

While there are many positive benefits to the tribal impulse and group boundaries, the leadership challenge for the earth shaker is to help people see and transcend the negative aspects such as parochialism, complacency, and the unwillingness to engage with others in shared problem solving. In companies, for example, when managers hide behind their boundaries, silos emerge and the organization can become bureaucratic and political, leading to turf battles and competition for scarce resources, culminating in a mediocre organization that produces poor products or services.

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# The Earth Shaker Works at the Boundaries

The earth shaker operates at the boundaries. Big man leaders operate within their boundaries, reinforce their boundaries, and protect their boundaries, but the earth shaker is not constrained by boundaries but crosses boundaries to mobilize diverse factions to tackle interdependent challenges.

**Crossing boundaries:** When data is scattered and multiple factions in a system own pieces of the problem, the change agent must personally cross boundaries and help others to cross boundaries to promote a systemic learning process that brings resolution to the problem.

Boundary crossing work is critical work for a company that must get people to transcend silos and work together for a core business strategy. And it is much needed work in the realm of religious institutions—getting diverse faiths to come together to share lessons and join hands to address some of the wider community's toughest social problems. Boundary crossing is important for governments that must create collaborative partnerships with the private sector to address challenges pertaining to education, job creation, health care, and environmental protection. It is also important in politics. We are all tired of seeing politicians protect their turf and fight wasteful battles at the expense of crossing boundaries and partnering to produce policies that add value to the collective.

**Busting boundaries:** Sometimes, the work of the earth shaker is to help a group bust confining boundaries and breakup maladaptive, dysfunctional practices that impede progress. The group might be insular, parochial, refusing to face problematic realities, and hiding behind its boundaries. The boundaries might be too thick and suffocating or perpetuating a set of practices that produce negative consequences not only for the group but the wider system. Busting boundaries is needed to generate a cultural shift, promote adaptation, and open up the flow of information, resources, and energy.

In 2008 one of the biggest investment banks in the world, Lehman Brothers, collapsed because it failed to do the leadership work of busting boundaries and breaking up maladaptive behaviors related to cultural practices and strategic decisions that led to an overreliance on derivative products as the source of revenue generation for the company. There were flaws in the company's problem solving processes and the prevailing boundaries, and the boundary keepers, protected those flaws, either consciously or unconsciously. When no one is exercising leadership as an earth shaker to shake up the *cultural drift* and highlight flaws and possible dire consequences, a system could be in danger of collapse, as we witnessed in 2007 and 2008 with the global financial crisis.

**Transcending boundaries:** Sometimes the leadership work is to help people transcend boundaries—leave the safety of the known and move out into the great unknown. A boundary is a barrier, but it is also a frontier with tremendous opportunity potentially available. Transcending the boundary is like embarking on an adventure in the spirit of exploration and discovery. It is the promotion of creative problem solving and innovation.

Harnessing the power of diversity is an example of an adventure that requires leaving secure, predictable boundaries in order to make discoveries and promote creative problem solving. Diversity of backgrounds, cultures, professions, gender, religions, and philosophical orientations is an invaluable resource that, if managed wisely, can generate extraordinary boundary transcending innovations. The *d.school* (design school) at Stanford brings academics and students from multiple disciplines together to address novel social and business problems and is a testament to what can be accomplished when people transcend boundaries and engage in collaborative thinking and exploration.

**Connecting fractured groups:** At times, the earth shaker might need to intervene to build a relational bridge between divided or fractured groups—a bridge of trust, understanding, and support. The groups might be divided by war, conflict, or enmity, or the groups might simply be a mystery to one another by virtue of having different values and priorities. Bridge building work reconnects the boundaries of divided groups, gets people talking, and helps groups heal wounds and resolve conflicts.

The earth shaker's role is to be a frontier guide and help groups make sense of the other. That requires orchestrating *perspective taking* and *perspective giving* to help people appreciate the sacred values of the other, to discover what they share in common, to learn about competing narratives, and to help groups put the past in the past to move unencumbered into the future.

This is not easy work, but given the fractures in the world today, it is critical work that must be pursued delicately and intentionally. Nelson Mandela is a perfect example of a bridge builder who united the diverse political and cultural factions of South Africa. Who can forget, as captured in movie *Invictus*, when Mandela walked out into the playing field on the 1995 rugby world cup and made a symbolic but powerful gesture to white and black South Africans by embracing the white Springbok team, and even wearing their jersey, thereby highlighting the higher value that “we are all in this together.” The crowd went wild with approval.

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# The Earth Shaker Has a Global Mindset

Given the complexity of the problems we face today, the earth shaker needs to be a “global” change agent in terms of mindset and practice. They cannot simply represent their tribe or clan or advocate an agenda that leads to advantage for their group alone. Parochial tribal leadership where I fight you because you have insulted my group or because we want your territory is ineffective and wasteful.

The global mindset has three components: 1) the capacity to see the big picture and the systemic nature of a problem, 2) the capacity to understand the purpose and functions of culture as a bonding agent for making meaning, and 3) the personal capacity to transcend culture and the tribal orientation, and to cross boundaries when required.

**The capacity to see the big picture:** The capacity to see the big picture means the ability to see how issues and problems are connected and the dynamic global forces in the background of a local problem. We live in a global system, and that system presents tremendous opportunities, many dangers, and endless dilemmas. Globalization is breaking down many boundaries yet many old fractures persist and new fractures are being generated. The physicist Edward Lorenz coined the term the butterfly effect, and illustrated it by arguing that when a butterfly flaps its wings in Rio de Janeiro it can lead to a thunderstorm in Texas. This might not be

literally true, but the point is that globalization is a nonlinear system where small changes in one part can produce dramatic changes in other parts. With a global mindset, the change agent seeks to understand how problems are connected and the impact of certain phenomenon on local communities and between communities.

**Understand cultural narratives:** The second aspect of the global mindset is the capacity to understand one's own cultural foundations, and to have a curiosity about the cultural foundations and narratives of other groups. Rather than relate to culture as a definitive and sacred form of organization that cannot and should not be changed, the global change agent relates to culture as a malleable system for meaning-making in groups that can be modified, reinterpreted, and elements even discarded. The earth shaker is not excessively respectful of culture but at the same time they are not disrespectful. If one is overly respectful then one will not seek to challenge or change particular cultural norms or values that might be maladaptive and producing negative consequences. If one is disrespectful, then one is in danger of trivializing important meaning making aspects of a group and being attacked or marginalized.

**The capacity to transcend one's cultural loyalties and perspectives:** The third aspect of the global mindset is the capacity to transcend culture, tribal loyalties, and group boundaries when needed. With a global mindset, the change agent is not trapped by their tribe or culture.

They can honor their tribe and culture and celebrate their heritage, but they are also strive to be citizens of the world. They are comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty, and diversity, and can operate in messy and difficult environments for sustained periods without having to retreat to the safety and security of their tribal boundary.

Few people really have a global mindset or the wisdom to transcend cultural constraints and lead on interdependent challenges, but one should not wait to become more global or wise before trying to lead. What is important is the passion for wisdom and curiosity to learn by exposing oneself to novel and challenging experiences that expand one's personal boundaries.

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# Anyone Can Be an Earth Shaker

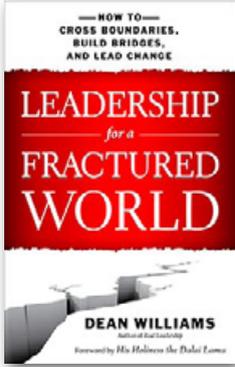
Anyone can be an earth shaker as everyone has some power, and they can use what power they have creatively and strategically to shake their immediate environment—their family, team, organization, or community—even if it is just a little shake—in order to produce a learning opportunity or highlight stupidity, hypocrisy, or the contradiction in values, and to get people to see a problem with fresh eyes and consider something they had not considered before. Of course, some people have more power than others, and nothing is more refreshing and encouraging than seeing powerful people use what platform they have to shake the earth positively for the benefit of others.

Steve Jobs was an earth shaker; he shook the earth in terms of how we relate to technology—contributing to the breaking down of boundaries around the world. You will often find in school systems inspiring earth shakers—superintendents, principals, and teachers—shaking the status quo and creating schools and learning experiences that generate a more global orientation for their students. More earth shaking leadership is needed in the religious domain. Pope Francis seems to be an earth shaker, intervening to reorient his flock, and the larger world, to focus more on compassion and connection and to let go of maladaptive practices and beliefs.

Someone who is an earth shaker with little formal authority but significant moral authority is Malala Yousafzai, who is a champion for the rights of girls to be educated. On 9 October 2012, thirteen year old Malala was shot in the head while returning from school by a member of the Taliban. The intent was to kill her, but amazingly she survived. Today she speaks around the world on behalf education, the empowerment of girls, and against violence of any kind. “The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambitions,” she said, “but nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born ... I am not against anyone, neither am I here to speak in terms of personal revenge against the Taliban or any other terrorist group. I’m here to speak up for the right of education for every child.”

Being an earth shaker—a global change agent—is courageous and essential work. It is also joyous work. Nothing is more gratifying than seeing the seeds of your efforts take hold and eventually produce fruit. Given the challenges we face today, we desperately need more women and men who can be earth shakers. **The expression of such leadership can make the difference between mediocrity and excellence, success and failure, between growth and collapse, and between war and peace.** 📌

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Dean Williams is a faculty member of the Harvard Kennedy School. He leads the World Leaders Project at the Harvard Center for Public Leadership, and chairs the Global Change Agent executive education program, and is also president of Global Leadership Advisory Services. He is the author of *Leadership for a Fractured World: How To Cross Boundaries, Build Bridges and Lead Change* (Berrett-Koehler, 2015); and *Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face Their Toughest Challenges* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005). Dean blogs about leadership at [www.globalleadership.net](http://www.globalleadership.net).

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