

Unleashing the potential of regenerative leadership: A practice approach

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We must work on nature's terms, on the fish's terms, on the people's terms, on the local community's terms. If we can make that happen, I think we can look everyone in the eye with a clear conscience." Land-salm founder, Andres.

Since the Brundtland-commission highlighted the sustainable responsibility of businesses and organizations in the late 80s' (Brundtland, 1987) the role and responsibility of businesses in society has been discussed. The corporate social responsibility of businesses has covered everything from sponsoring local football teams, donations to the Red Cross, and environmental "reduction" (Robertson & Barling, 2015). The last 10 years there has been a stronger focus on integrating CSR/sustainability as part of core business, exemplified with the growing focus on sustainable business models (Bocken et al., 2014), sustainable collaboration design (Baldassarre et al., 2020) and regenerative organizations (Hahn & Tampe, 2021; Muñoz & Branzei, 2021). The literature on sustainability has shifted from sustainable processes and projects, towards sustainable and regenerative organizations, and more system-oriented perspectives. This article investigates the role businesses can take in leading the green transition – and the role of regenerative leadership in that.

Regenerative leadership has been introduced to guide leaders in transitioning their organizations to restore the degenerative consequences of our economic system – with planetary boundaries (Richardson et al., 2023; Steffen et al., 2015) being crossed and low increases in social welfare (UN, 2023). Though regenerative leadership is a promising concept and framing, we argue that the concept has a weak conceptual and theoretical basis, and in need of an empirical rooting. Our contribution is in exploring regenerative leadership-practices through a comparative case study of two Nordic companies. Five emerging practices are highlighted: *Advocating for the impacted*, *Ecological re-attuning*, *Driving radical goal alignment*, *Facilitating a systemic approach through authentic relationships* and *Cultivating communities*. These are a starting point for building a new practice-oriented process model for regenerative leadership, which future versions of this paper will delve into.

Introduction & theoretical positioning

Calls for more radical actions are directed to public and private organizations, taking the forms of strong sustainability (Haskell et al., 2021; Upward & Jones, 2016), net-positive organizations (Polman & Winston, 2022), Doughnut Economies (Raworth, 2017; Sahan et al., 2022) and lately, regenerative organizations (Buckton et al., 2023; Hahn & Tampe, 2021; Konietzko et al., 2023). Following this trend is a growing literature on leadership for sustainable organizations, taking the forms of eco-centric leadership/management (Biswas et al., 2022; Hernández & Muñoz, 2022), sustainable leadership (Maguate et al., 2024; Metcalf

& Benn, 2013), responsible management (Kempster & Jackson, 2021; Muff et al., 2020), environmental leadership (Robertson & Carleton, 2018; Su et al., 2020) and regenerative leadership (Hardman, 2009, 2013; Hutchins & Storm, 2019). Generally, these perspectives focus on how organizations transition from a mindset of reducing social and environmental harm, to give back by a positive social and environmental impact (Hahn & Tampe, 2021; Polman & Winston, 2022).

The focus for this article is on the research on regenerativity and concept of regenerative leadership. Research on regenerativity has its strongest empirical foundation in regenerative agriculture and the built-environment (Buckton et al., 2023). The last decade it has gained traction beyond these fields, exemplified with research on strategies for regenerative businesses (Hahn & Tampe, 2021), regenerative business-models (Drupsteen & Wakkee, 2024; Konietzko et al., 2023), regenerative business-practices (Caldera et al., 2022), regenerative design (Du Plessis & Brandon, 2015), and regenerative leadership (Hardman, 2009, 2013; Hutchins & Storm, 2019). Both Konietzko et al (2023) and Drupsteen & Wakkee (2024) set out on a mission to explore if and potentially how regenerative principles – including regenerative business models are distinct from traditional sustainability and circularity. Both these papers shows distinctions between these concepts, and argues for the value of regenerativity as a useful concept. For Konietzko et al (2023, p. 375), the distinction is clear in the essence of their definition in that regenerative business models are “Capturing value through multi-capital accounting, (aiming) for a net positive impact across all stakeholder levels.”

Regenerative leadership

The research on regenerative leadership is predominantly conceptual in nature. The concept was coined by Hardman (2009) and Storm & Hutchins (2019), and is a reorientation of leadership to increasing the health and well-being of people and socio-ecological systems. The contribution of Hardman derives from his qualitative dissertation, developing a regenerative leadership-theory. The dissertation takes a competency approach to leadership (Carroll et al., 2008), focusing on individual and collective behaviours and mindsets.

In contrast, Storm & Hutchins (2019) developed a regenerative leadership DNA, a dynamic model that presents three DNA-components; living system design, living systems culture, and living systems being. It builds on the principles of “logic of life” and research on biomimicry and circular economy (living systems design), diversity and self-organizing organizations (living systems culture), and presence in nature and ancient philosophy (living systems being). The principles are illustrated by case-stories from secondary data or their own work-experiences. The book is a contribution to the field that has gained traction also in academic circles (with 89 citations on google scholar), and has played a central role in popularizing the concept. Still, from our perspective it is problematic how it has been the foundation for regenerative leadership in academia.

Most of the recent literature on regenerativity & regenerative leadership in the field (Buckton et al., 2023; Konietzko et al., 2023), builds on the foundations of Hardman (2009, 2013) and Storm & Hutchins (2019). First, the work of Storm & Hutchins (2019) is highly conceptual, and inconsistently combines principles and practices from several strands of literature. It does not build on empirical work on regenerative leadership. Second, the work of Hardman (2009, 2013) is based on a dissertation with 24 interviews, and there are no follow-up studies from him or others aiming to improve the leadership-theory. Third, Hardman (2009, 2013) builds on a competency approach to leadership, while Storm & Hutchins (2019) mainly presents a holistic systems-model to leadership. This takes us away from what regenerative leadership looks like and how it takes form in organizations.

Regenerative leadership can be a valuable contribution to academia and practice, but it needs to restart on a strong empirical grounding. By answering to Hahn & Tampe's (2021) call for more research applying qualitative and process-based methods to explore regenerative businesses, this paper takes a practice-based approach (Nicolini, 2012; Raelin, 2020). There are several theories of social practice (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2017) and it has taken different forms through knowledge-as-practice (Orlikowski, 2002), strategy-as-practice (Whittington, 2017) and leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2020). Common for these are that it gives the researcher a lens to explore interactions between micro and macro-processes and the interactions between them (Raelin, 2020).

Cases & Methods

With this comparative case-analysis we aim to answer how leadership-practices are enacted, and how they contribute to regenerative transitions. The two Nordic case-organizations are situated in the hard-to-abate food-industry, and represent two different contexts for their regenerative journey. First, a tea and coffee-producer, Farm-Cof, with long direct-trade traditions with farmers. They have scaled their sustainability ambitions the last decade, aiming to transform both themselves and their global value-chains by placing environmental and social sustainability at the core. Second, Land-Salm, a land-based fish-farming business aiming to transform the industry by the interplay of disruptive technology and nature-based solutions. Land-Salm is in the scale-up phase, and with massive investments behind them they are scaling their productions and their ambition to be the world's most sustainable fish-farmer.

The first round of data-collection is based on semi-structured interviews with 16 employees and leaders. This includes three follow-up interviews to provide more data on the preliminary findings. A second round of data-collection will be conducted autumn 2024, depending on feedback from BAM and the like. In this first submission, we highlight five emerging regenerative leadership-practices that illustrate some of the richness and potential in the material.

Number and roles	Company	Sex
9 interviews on 6 persons employeeed in the company, 3 at c-suite level, 3 at other leadership-levels/operations. 2 external partners, representing communication and marine-consulting	Land-Salm	2 women, 8 men
7 interviews with 6 persons employeeed at the company. Two at C-suite level, 4 at other leadership-levels/operations	Farm-Cof	3 women, 3 men
One external expert on Biomimicry	External experts	Man

All interviews except one were conducted digitally through Zoom. The interviews were transcribed, and analyzed by both authors through approaches to narrative thematic analysis (Maitlis, 2012) and live coding (Locke, Feldman & Golden-Biddle, 2015), looking for commonalities, contrasts and puzzles across the interviews.

Findings

Through the preliminary data-collection there are many rich practices in the organizations relevant for developing regenerative organizations. In this article, the lens is in investigating the regenerative leadership-practices in play in these organizations, and which effect the practices has on strengthening Land-Salm and Farm-Cof's regenerative journeys. Throughout this findings-section, the five most notable leadership-practices are presented. One key practice is illustrated for each organization, however in future versions a more in-depth analysis will take place for each one and for what the practices together entails.

See table with the practices on the following pages.

Practice	Description	Key effects	Examples/ Illustrative quotes/
Advocating for the impacted	Entails the practice of bringing the attention back to the impacted, being a constant reminder about how decisions affect beneficiaries. It takes the form of actions where one dares to advocate for the impacted in situations of high importance, in addition to narrating from experiences with beneficiaries.	This practice has two central effects. First, it is brought alive through decision-making processes in the organization – large and small. Here, it has a guardian effect. Second, it has a meaning-making effect in that it removes the potential blindness to ones beneficiaries, and exemplifies their intrinsic value.	Land-Salm (LS): Ann – The fearless veterinarian that has worked her way to the c-suite team for her unique competence and hearth. Roger, the founder that disrupts the industry with fish and eco-system health as his calling. Farm-Cof (FC): The CEO that walks the extra mile in relationships with coffee-farmers, including financial investments and paying premium to farms without financial gains in return. Highlighting climate and equality concerns in their storytelling both internally and externally.
Ecological re-attuning	Leadership-practices directly and indirectly facilitate connection and re-connection to the natural world. Through these acts they facilitate for pro-environmental inquiries and reflection for teams and individuals. Takes the form of leaders facilitating meetings in nature or close to the powerful artifacts that the fish and the coffee tree represents. Includes storytelling to connect the companies purpose to the eco-system.	This practice has three central effects. Through day-to-day interactions with the symbolic artifacts as the fish and the coffee-tree, it plays the role as sparking an emotional connection to the work, and the strong interplay the companies have with nature. Second, for the leaders and employees with a regenerative agenda, it plays a significant symbolic role in their reason for being at the company. Third – it has a role when investors or partners are at company visits – as a conversation starter or as a materialized symbol/artifact of their sustainability work.	LS: The CEO that highlights the pool with fish as a central meeting point for internal meetings, always starting with “how is the fish?”. Walking by the pool alone for a strong emotional experience. The engagement the C-suite team has for the wild-salmon in the area and the natural eco-system they are a part of. FC: A coffee-tree in the factory, that plays the role as a reminder of the farmers, the farms and the local seasons. Using nature active in their business events. Travels abroad to visit farmers to see and feel things first-hand.
Driving Radical goal alignment	Leadership practices are actively managing the potential paradoxes between sustainability and profit by securing radical alignment between them. To do that, leaders place social and environmental sustainability as <i>the</i> defining goal for their	This practice has two central effects. First, by materializing their regenerative agendas in their visions and missions, both partners, investors and customers commit to their journey, being aware of the companies powerful ambitions implying world-class	LS: The mission of the company – “building the worlds most fish-friendly and sustainable salmon farming facility of its kind” – which is also the key story for investors, partners and employees.

	business success, securing win-win dynamics between sustainable success and profits. Instead of primarily appearing as storytelling of their purpose, it is operationalized as a <i>fanatic</i> focus on quality, which is at the root of business success.	products. This leads to less tensions in their strategic decision making processes – the ambition is materialized. Second, towards the employees, the visions and missions are kept alive regularly, however, the purpose is operationalized by a unique focus on quality – towards fish-health or coffee-quality. This makes it easy for employees and leaders to have specific KPI's and day to day processes to track progress.	The radical investment in technology, external expertise, and processes to measure their sustainability efforts and results. FC: The mission of the company; “Opening the door towards the worlds best coffee”. Quality is key for the company, winning international awards, but for them quality builds on sustainability – Direct trade, a premium that gives local farmers a livelihood and environmental sustainability
Facilitating a systemic approach through authentic relationships /	A practice that embraces the complexity of regenerativity – in that a product never is sustainable, rather a positive contribution to a potentially regenerative value-chain. To do that they develop long-term partnerships both upstream and down-stream, and contribute to and sustain knowledge, quality, and equity as key principles.	This strong conviction that everything is interlinked, gives three key effects. First, central is finding the partners key, and secure long-term, synergetic partnerships with them. These are sometimes integrated in their governance structures as owners or in other key roles. Second, to be world class, a hunger for, and sharing of, knowledge in the value-chain and at industry levels is vital. Third, it has an effect on the day-to-day operations in that employees are encouraged to seek learning and actively engage with the value-chain.	LS: Cooperation with traditional fish-farmers and traditional value-chain actors, also as owners and in the board. Knowledge sharing in regional networks. Active R&D-strategy, including central roles in international R&D-projects. FC: Direct trade as a facilitator for lasting partnerships, lasting connections and building eco-systems between the different farmers. Mainly has B2B customers and involve them through barista courses, week-long trips to the farmers and through storytelling.
Cultivating communities	A practice that focuses on the local - building a community internal in the company and towards the community as beneficiary. Internally, it takes the form of shared experiences that build pride, and a combination of artifacts and narratives. Towards their community it takes the form of using resources to secure ripple-effects to the communities they are a part of – the municipality in the example of LS and the communities of the farmers for FC.	The practice has three key effects. First, it builds a pride and a thriving culture in both companies. Second, it secures good cooperation and positive synergies with the communities, where both organizations are regarded as community-builders. Third, it has a feedback-effect to the employees in that they see a materializing of the impact the company has. These impacts contributes to social and environmental issues in their communities employees can relate to.	LS: A vocalized sense of pride and engagement to be part of this disruptive scale-up. They use the Kon-Tiki expedition as symbolic reference for the journey LS is on. Most employees are recruited regionally, and they have strong engagement for local eco-systems and building flourishing communities. FC: Strong internal pride on their direct-trade approach, and in how they deliver world-class quality coffee. A strong focus on storytelling – with the farmers and their communities as the focal point. Contributes with more “traditional” CSR-projects.

Advocating for the impacted

The fish is my key priority. It is so ingrained in my thinking. Constantly... I bring it up all the time – in every management-meeting or project-meeting. Its automatic for me. How will this (decision) influence the fish and the fjords? (...) I am fearless, and have countless years of experience in the industry. I say it like it is. That's what I do. I have nothing to lose.
Ann, Director of fish health in Land-Salm.

Advocating for the impacted entails the practice of bringing the attention back to the impacted, being a constant reminder about how decisions affect beneficiaries. It takes the form of actions where one dares to advocate for the impacted in situations of high importance, in addition to narrating from experiences with beneficiaries.

This practice has two central effects. First, it is brought alive through decision-making processes in the organization – large and small. Here, it has a guardian effect. Second, it has a meaning-making effect in that it removes the potential blindness to ones beneficiaries, and exemplifies their intrinsic value. Individuals in the two case-organizations advocate for different beneficiaries; being the local community and the salmon for Land-Salm, or the farmers and how Farm-Cof's direct-trade model impact them.

Fearlessly advocating for the fish.

Ann strongly identifies as a veterinarian, and has close to thirty years working in the industry. She is regarded as one of the countries most experienced fish experts, and quit her job as head of a department in a consultancy to start in Land-Salm. She has been in Land-Salm the last four years, now in a C-suite role, but has followed the technology-development as an external consultant the last decade. Throughout the interview, Ann highlights the importance of being at one with nature in how they do business:

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For Ann, the focus is the fish and the local eco-systems. For her, advocating for the impacted is not a practice of storytelling and visions, but rather an interplay of facts and constant reminders in day-to-day interactions. It keeps sustainability alive and reinforce pathways to regenerativity. But this is not a leadership-practice that Ann is the only representing – though she is the only one that can do it with an unquestionable credibility. The head of organizational development, Jenny, talks about how she also centres in on fish-health in her work.

We talk more about fish health than we talk about profit...the theory is that if we have good fish health, then you also will have good profit. (...) And I'm proud that we can be very confident that we are world class on this.

This practice has roots in the founding-story of the company. When asked about the roots for the fanatic focus on fish health and the local eco-systems, most people point to Roger. The founder has worked on the idea and technology for Land-Salm since the early 2000's. He is now in his late sixties and reflects on the roots for his sustainability engagement.

When you start as a fisherman and sit and reflect outside in your boat, you get a close relationship with sustainability and the fish you catch. So it really started at the very

beginning... I started as a 13-year-old fisherman with my own boat. (...) I see it's been quite a while (...) So it's in a way where I've got it in with a teaspoon.
(...) It's really connected to both my education (two masters in fishery) and my background as a fisherman, quite simply, that I'm concerned with sustainability. In that context, it is primarily a passion for taking care of our fish and our sea.

He saw the growth of the fishing industry during the 70s, 80s and 90s, each one with different sustainability challenges; overfishing of cod, bottom-trawling and a disruptive growth in sea-based salmon farming in some Norwegian regions, challenging local eco-systems. Looking back, Roger has always tried to challenge the industry to take bigger steps on sustainability.

That sustainability perspective has really been a driving force. (...) And it was primarily the fish that was the starting point (for his engagement). The driving force behind innovation is to make a change, to make a difference. Making a quantum leap. A real difference.

His goal is to build the world's most sustainable fish-farming facility. When we confront the CEO with what it takes to be that he proudly answers: "We are".

Placing farmers first: Paying a premium on the premium

Farm-Cof has an old, origin story of embracing direct-farming. For them, certifications as Fairtrade and the like is not enough. Through direct farming they can themselves evaluate and take part in developing the farms and communities of farms, as well as hand-pick the best coffee in the world. What surprised us in our work with the organization was how direct this "direct-farming" was. It includes travelling to meet farmers up to several times a year, regular chats and whatsapp messages, and creating synergies between coffee-farmers from different regions, e.g. in sharing advices on how to deal with the soil in extreme weather. Last year, they met over 200 of the Kenyan farmers they worked with. They brought some of their key customers (e.g. restaurants) with them on the trip.

All the farmers were invited to come and meet us. 200 of them actually showed up. And then we got our customers to serve them their coffee as well. That we had brought back from Norway, and then roasted it and then brought it back and prepared it for them, which was really great. *Ben, CEO.*

There are other stories that strengthen the employees' connection to the farmers and the farm-communities. Like Rita that traveled to Miguel's farm in Chile. She was fascinated with the central role this farm took in the community, and how Miguel was central in renovating natural rivers and springs. This was first and foremost to secure water for his farm, but with strong synergies for the local community. She reflects on how these trips are key for her other-taking perspective, learning about the everyday life of the farmers:

So when we sit (with them) in the evening...and you get this low key, good, friendly vibe...you are able to talk to them about how's actually life. And if they struggle with the farm, or the workers?... That conversation, it gives us a lot of information on how things really are."

This proximity to the farmers is enacted upon in FC's small and large decisions. Especially prominent are the stories about how FC pays a "premium on the premium" to secure sustainable practices at the farms and to secure long-term partnerships.

We have this farmer that has been delivering coffee to us, many, many years, usually he delivered like 80 bags of coffee. One bag is 60 kilos and that was the majority of his, of his

harvest. And then one year. Due to climate, the climate issues, I think he had frost and when you have frost the, the flowers on the coffee trees they die. And that means that you will have a smaller harvest because the berries themselves come from the flowers (...) He only managed to produce 30 bags and if we were to pay only for those 30 bags, he would go bankrupt and he would have to stop (producing) coffee. So, we paid for 80 bags of coffee, even though we only got 30 just to help him...

For Ben, one of his ambitions as relatively newly appointed CEO of Farm-Cof is to make sustainability more infused in the organization. He builds on a proud heritage in the company, but brings throughout the interviews with us up situations where they advocate for the farmers, and put them first. When telling about the story of the Ethiopian farmer, Tesfaye that had to flee his farm because of the civil war, not being able to visit it. Sharing frustration with Kenyan farmers where the government try to regulate the small, premium farms out of business. Or when he vividly tells of how the premium they pay, secures farmers that dare to develop their farms and experiment.

Might sound like charity, but it's not. (...) Because now we have access to that coffee and he does not forget that (...) and if we were to only pay for the 30 bags then he would have to stop. And, and for us to have access to really high quality coffees is super important. Which means we can forgo... Umm, like a short term profit.

These stories are examples of where the leadership-practice of *advocating for the impacted* takes place. There are references to this type of practice all around in both organizations, varying from day-to-day interactions to fundamental discussions in the board-room. For Land-salm, especially the fish, the local ecosystem and the local community is advocated for throughout the organization. In Farm-Cof it is especially prominent in relationship to the farmers and the communities they represent.

Ecological re-attuning

It is a very easy question to start with: "How is the fish?". So it always feels natural, because we are all relying on very good fish welfare. Steven, CEO of Land-Salm

The leadership-practice of Ecological re-attuning directly and indirectly facilitate connection and re-connection to the natural world. Through these acts they facilitate for pro-environmental inquiries and reflection for teams and individuals. The practices vary from how they call attention to the nature and life in the production facilities, or to connect the employees to local (Land-Salm) and global (Farm-Cof) ecosystems through storytelling, personal experiences and embracing nature in their social-trips.

This practice has three central effects. Through day-to-day interactions with the symbolic artifacts as the fish and the coffee-tree, it plays the role as sparking an emotional connection to the work, and the strong interplay the companies have with nature. Second, for the leaders and employees with a regenerative agenda, it plays a significant symbolic role in their reason for being at the company. Third – it has a role when investors or partners are at company visits – as a conversation starter or as a materialized artifact of their regenerative work.

In Land-Salm, this leadership practice centers around reminding them about the impact of their disruptive fish-farming technology - with low to no degeneration of the local

eco-systems, healthier wild-salmon rivers, and the important role they take in their local community. The engagement is locally focused, and locally activated.

In Farm-Cof, their direct trade-model and the strong connections to individual farmers and their communities are spotlighted, facilitating for conversations raising nature, climate and social issues. The leaders in Farm-Cof bring these topics to life through bringing stories, videos, and feedback from the farmers to the head-office, and through field-trips to visit the farmers. Farm-Cof's global impact is materialized and brought alive locally.

The coffee-tree that gives life to the symphony of nature's cycles

When asked about what relationship Ben, the CEO at FC, has to nature, he tells about the coffee-tree in their production facilities. An employee brought it back from a trip to a supplier 30 years back. What was then a small bush is now a large tree, making its way to the top of the factory-roof.

And it's really old, so it's been here for many, many years. It produces like eight berries or so a year. So, so it's not a lot at all... But still, it's nice to have it there and to remind us, uh, what we're doing."

Rachel which works in marketing, elaborates on how she personally relates to the tree.

A coffee tree is a really good reminder of how everything is, how it's so important for us to take care of that. We are like 45 people in the house and we walk past the tree every day, and everyone is taking care of it in their own way... it is a really good reminder that this is what we do. And when you think about our farmers, that has like thousands of trees or 50 trees, we have so much respect and I think it's a good thing we are very aware of that.

In our interviews, this was the most powerful example in FC on how they re-connected to the nature and to the farming-communities. For some, the coffee-tree is mainly regarded as a good conversation starter, while for other – as Lene iterates – it plays an important role in their the re-attunement of employees to nature and their bigger purpose. Rachel continues telling about the increased connection when the coffee-beans enters the production facilities in Norway after their journey around the world.

Because the farmers, they do a lot of work on the coffee bags, so it's so nice and if you see it, it makes you feel like you have a really connection to the place where the coffee beans are from. So, we use the coffee bags and hang them up and are really proud of them.

The intrinsic value of 200.000 fish:

Steven, the leader at Land-Salm is not the typical scale-up CEO. Where most of the other land-based fish farmers have an outspoken CEO mainly working with the financial markets to secure large funding for risky projects, Land-Salm has chosen differently. Only the CFO has a strong financial background, everyone is from the region, and most of them have a background from the fishery industry. Steven graduated as an aquaculture graduate 15 years ago, and was excited with the opportunity as taking the role of CEO, after spending some years in the board. His goal is to contribute to a better future for fish-farming, which today has challenges with degenerating ecosystems and an average fish-mortality of 15-20 %. "And when 20% of the salmon die, maybe 50% have wounds and cuts".

Last year, Land-Salm had 2.5% salmon death in their facilities, which is world-class survivability results. He reflects on his daily ritual of passing by the fish:

So, when we... it becomes a bit like that, when you come to work, and then you have 200,000 fish in front of you in a pool, and you see that the behavior of the fish is natural, you see that it

thrives, you see that it feels good... that impression.. That feeling you have then, the good conscience it gives... because I have stood on some poolsides where it has been bad. (...) We see it everyday (how the salmon is thriving). Oh my God, we see how well this works (...) We now have a way of doing it (fish-farming), which actually solves so many of the challenges that we have. That's quite a strong, emotional moment... that I've had quite a few of during the year.

Stories of this was told throughout the organization. For some it represented the fish-health itself and the intrinsic value of the fish. For others, it played just as strong symbolic role, as a symbol on them taking part in saving the wild-salmon in the area through this project. Steven says that bringing employees, partners and investors to the fish-pool is a regular practice – it is their meeting-point:

When you're working close to this, you get, say, an emotional relationship with the work instead of just looking into a computer or a screen. This is our meeting point. We all gather around this (fish-pool) and talk about it. It is a very easy question to start with: 'How is the fish?' So it always feels natural, because we are all relying on very good fish welfare.

Driving radical goal alignment

Every activity we do is to reach this target. I don't need to convince people about the importance of this, or ask them to do an extra effort (on sustainability). It is the main target. (...) We talk more about fish-health than profit.

Jenny, in Land-Salm about the goal to become the world's most sustainable fish-farming company.

Quotes like this is highly present in both Land-Salm & Farm-Cof. Central to both companies is that the leadership practices are actively managing the potential paradoxes between sustainability and profit by securing radical alignment between them. To do that, leaders place social and environmental sustainability as *the* defining goal for their business success, securing win-win dynamics between sustainable success and profits. Instead of primarily appearing as storytelling of their purpose, it is operationalized as a *fanatic* focus on quality, which is at the root of their business success.

This practice has two central effects. First, by materializing their regenerative agendas in their visions and missions, both partners, investors and customers commit to their journey, being aware of the companies powerful ambitions implying world-class products. This leads to less tensions in their strategic decision making processes – the ambition is materialized. Second, towards the employees, the visions and missions are kept alive regularly, however, the purpose is operationalized by a unique focus on quality – towards fish-health or coffee-quality. This makes it easy for employees and leaders to have specific KPI's and day to day processes to track progress.

To fuel the pro-social fire, both companies are communicating visions of excellence and regenerativity, aiming to be world-class in their field. Their ambitious visions fuel their regenerative journeys, and plays the role of aligning potentially conflicting goals in their organizational transformations. That makes placing sustainability first the natural thing to do.

In Land-Salm their most central driver is that to be an alternative to more cost-efficient sea-based fish-farming, they have to document excellence in both social and environmental sustainability. In a land-based fish-farming industry where most companies have failed, that is their key value-proposition. The mission of the company is "building the worlds most fish-friendly and sustainable salmon farming facility of its kind.

For Farm-Cof, at centre of their business model is providing some of the best coffee in the world. This is impossible without building long, direct relations with farmers across the globe, and by supporting the farmers in their adaptations to environmental challenges. There are numerous examples of Farm-Cof contributing with equipment, sharing of best practices and even a set, yearly price for a farmers coffee, independent of low production because of extreme weather. The mission of the company is “Opening the door towards the worlds best coffee”.

Quality equals sustainability

In Farm-Cof the CEO speaks about sustainability constantly. However, among most employees, it was quality that was key for them and for the companies success. Sustainability was a natural pre-requisite to support this quality. Like David, one of many employees that started his career as a barista – and now is in working on sales. He is proud of taking part in direct-trade, and reflects on its importance in achieving knowledge and control of the raw materials in addition to the effects it has on sustainability: “(we) pay more as well to the farmers and then again secure their livelihood and secure their survival as companies. Rather than just buying coffee”. However, reflecting on how Farm-Cof is different, he goes back to quality:

In general, we have a especially high quality on our coffee. That's our core business. High quality coffee, and we rank pretty high when it comes to being a speciality roster and we are worldwide known for this.

Even though Ben constantly talks about sustainability he embraces the focus on fanatic quality, and proudly tells about their one employee that was the Norwegian champion of Cup-tasting, and that entered the World Championship of Cup Tasting last year. When asked about his reflections about the connection between sustainability and quality, he explains in detail:

It actually goes hand in hand. Because we, we pay a quite a large premium to the farmers when we buy high quality coffee and when we pay quite a big premium, it actually enables them to do their own investments... Uh, to get renewable energy and to invest in in new production equipment or, or even hiring more people to trim and prune the trees. (...) So people, I wouldn't say confuse, sustainability with quality. But I would say that they infuse them more or less, and say, that's OK, this is this is high quality. That means that it's sustainable, or it's sustainable, which makes this high quality.

Becoming world-class: “We talk more about fish-health than profit”

Land-Salm is being a disruptive supplement to the industry, and has been on the forefront with disruptive technology, radical ambitions and aims to document that there are different ways to do fish-farming. And that land-based farming is a part of that. Throughout the interviews with employees and partners, two words create a symphony in the company. Fish-health and quality. Jenny, the leader of organizational development at Land-Salm puts these together. She speaks energetically about the goal to become the world's most sustainable fish-farming company of their kind.

Every activity we do (in the company) is to reach this target. I don't need to convince people about the importance of this, or ask them to do an extra effort (on sustainability). It is the main target. (...) We talk more about fish-health than profit.

Mary, that daily works with the fish as an operator, alludes to sustainability being an intrinsic part of the company:

Although we may not reflect so much on the concept of sustainability, or talk about it so much, it is, in a way, indirectly what we are talking about when we discuss production and improvements we can make there.”

The founder, Roger, elaborates.

Sustainability is primarily linked to the fish's welfare and fish health. (...) It is linked to fish welfare, fish health, to how we take care of the environment both internally and externally towards the sea. But not least biological water quality, i.e. that the water is good for the ... And then it is linked to the sustainability perspective linked to people. The social part of it. It was actually included in all the presentations already from day one, when we managed to excite investors to believe in this. That was what it was all about, selling it in and creating credibility. And above all, believe in yourself. If you don't believe in it yourself, then you just have to find something else to do.

Quotes on quality related to fish health etc:

We have brought in the expertise we really need. We have an incredibly strong legal team behind us, who also know aquaculture very well. And then we have brought in professional expertise from Consultant X... We have handpicked people on fish health and marine environments. Tom

He works in Consulting-X...they have a lot of sustainability and marine biologists there... He works approximately 80% for us, with precisely sustainability applications and focus on not affecting nature negatively at all levels...It is a practical example of us hiring a high level of expertise in the external environment.” Ann

It's not just sustainability like nice words and all... No, we do it... We will survey all environmental aspects, all issues that can lead to changes in the environment. We did that. We took a visual condition assessment which was expensive and large research..., we also get to use oceanographs to simulate how far it can go in the flu area.... We intend to continue with this to see if there is any change. We must know what we are doing . We must know the environmental impact. We should not just believe...It must be based on knowledge. We must be able to document that we do no harm. If our measurement results do not show that the fjord has more tolerance, then we cannot produce more either. That is the feedback we work on. I don't want to work for a company that doesn't pay attention to those things.” Ann

Facilitating a systemic approach through authentic relationships

Well, if that means that, for instance the the supplier in India, uh can increase their quality by learning some the some good practices from from from a from a grower in in Colombia that benefits them and it benefits us. That's why we're doing it. Ben.

This is a leadership-practice that embraces the complexity of regenerativity – in that a product never is sustainable, rather a positive contribution to a potentially regenerative value-chain. To do that they develop long-term partnerships both upstream and down-stream, and contribute to and sustain knowledge, quality, and equity as key principles.

This strong conviction that everything is interlinked, gives three key effects.

First, central is finding the right partners key, and secure long-term, synergetic partnerships with them. These are sometimes integrated in their governance structures as owners or in other key roles. Second, to be world class, a hunger for, and sharing of, knowledge in the value-chain and at industry levels is vital. Third, it has an effect on the day-to-day operations in that employees are encouraged to seek learning and actively engage with the value-chain.

Creating an eco-system of suppliers and between suppliers

What we found peculiar with Farm-Cof was how the direct-ness in their direct-trade model is. Not only does it mean having the name of a peculiar farm – as highlighted previously it is about what's-app messages, sharing video-content. About Rita sharing a beer at the fireplace. Paying a premium to the premium. We regard these as ingredients that secure these long-time partnerships, and that they see as a foundation for delivering world-class quality through a regenerative value-chain.

During this round of interviews, we were lucky to be involved with both buyers, sellers and marketing-professionals in Farm-Cof. All of them had been abroad to visit farmers the last years – the buyers with a much higher intensity to their travels. Rachel highlights the rationale for this travel-intensity: “We make sure that the travel is not just for trying to find the best quality, but also trying to make the farmers have access to the best tools and technology and knowledge”.

David elaborates:

If there are farmers struggling with the drying beds or things like that, we are supporting them with the equipment as well. (...) We are also training them in how to make coffee, but we have a lot of learning by visiting many different farmers and they have different ways to do it. Some of them are very good at trying new ways.

This is in addition to the regular digital interactions with the farmers, and connecting them across.

The coming autumn there is a huge coffee- fair in the Nordics, and Farm-Cof have invited about 20 of their different suppliers to a two-day gathering in Oslo after the fair.

(We have) set off a lot of time for them to be able to talk to each other. (...) Of course I'll be there. And then Gary and Luisa will be there to talk about what Farm-Cof and what we think. But the most important part is to actually to, to connect the different suppliers with each other so that they can learn from each other and they are...

These are super interested people and they are really passionate about what they are doing, which is growing coffee and finding new ways of treating the coffee.. Or new ways of growing or increasing their efficiency or increasing their quality. (...) we'll do some sightseeing and some barbecuing and stuff like that. That's all but, but mainly it will be for them to create an arena where they can talk together.

When reflecting on the rationale for doing this, Ben, the CEO, underlines it is not because of charity. In addition to increasing the quality and sustainability of the beans these farmers supply, it distinguishes Farm-Cof from the other suppliers, so that in a situation of lack of raw materials or competition on the best beans, Farm-Cof are remembered.

These practices serve to engage the local communities in sustainable development while the company creates authentic long-term relationships with the farmers.

Embracing and developing traditional value-chains.

Jenny, describing the strong dependence and need for collaboration within the salmon industry in the region, emphasizes the partnership relations even with their competitors. Deeming themselves as a supplement in the industry, Land-Salm highlights the firms' dependence on community goodwill and integration with the locals, although introducing a disruptive technology to land-based farming. Developing authentic long-term relationships thus becomes a vital practice for the firm in pursuit of a regenerative organization with a net positive impact in the local community.

Because we actually live very well side by side with them, so the best we can do is to enjoy the infrastructure and what's around us, and get goodwill from them... salmon [industry] stands out very much considering that you're not competitors, you actually benefit from each other's good work. And then it's a bit important that we get along with those around us. So we are somewhat dependent on them.

Tom on use of R&D partners

We have had Nofima and the keel research project with us all the time to verify what we are doing. So we get some pure scientific results. The multidisciplinary team working on the regulatory matters... We call it a project that works with totality. Being able to look holistically at the entire project has been absolutely essential.

From reports:

Industry, innovation and infrastructure: Land Salm aims to create great values for the region of which we are a part. We shall contribute strongly to innovation and research and increase knowledge and expertise in a broad perspective. Research and development are a key part of Land-Salms innovative power and has the highest priority. As a local business, we want to contribute, collect, and share data that allows us to tackle future climate challenges. Our objective is to build the world's most sustainable fish farming facility, both out of consideration for the climate and the local environment.

Cultivating Communities

A practice that focuses on the local - building a community internal in the company and towards the community as beneficiary. Internally, it takes the form of shared experiences that build pride, and a combination of artifacts and narratives. Towards their community it takes the form of using resources to secure ripple-effects to the communities they are a part of – the municipality in the example of LS and the communities of the farmers for FC.

The practice has three key effects. First, it builds a pride and a thriving culture in both companies. Second, it secures good cooperation and positive synergies with the communities, where both organizations are regarded as community-builders. Third, it has a feedback-effect to the employees in that they see a materializing of the impact the company has. These impacts contributes to social and environmental issues in their communities employees can relate to.

In Land-Salm the key focus is a vocalized sense of pride and engagement to be part of this disruptive scale-up. They use the Kon-Tiki expedition as symbolic reference for the journey LS is on. Most employees are recruited regionally, and they have strong engagement for local eco-systems and building flourishing communities.

In Farm-Cof there is strong internal pride on their direct-trade approach, and in how they deliver world-class quality coffee. A strong focus on storytelling – with the farmers and their communities as the focal point. Contributes with more “traditional” CSR-projects building local communities in the poorest farming communities they participate in.

Farm-Cof

Spread the gospel of sustainability. I talk a lot. And I talk and cry. It's a matter of being consistent as well... The work that we're doing, what makes us proud, celebrate our victories, and share the insights that we get and just make people more aware. Ben

We actually have a meeting every Friday for everyone... Sometimes it's when we launch a new product or if there's a new coffee coming in, but always if someone has been out traveling, especially if they've been to a producing country. Ben

You can say [I applied because] some sustainability aspect as well because we are buying direct from the farmers, so we have control of everything... in the coffee industry, I'm working up against large companies, lawyer companies and consultants and they need to know that we are doing our best... that we follow the code of conduct as well, and we need to show them that we are doing things properly. David

Well, it builds a pride. It builds a pride on on on how we work, that we actually make a difference for people that we know in the other. On the other side of the world Ohm it's also it. It makes our business easier as well. Having strong relationships to to the actual suppliers as a strong relationship, so discussing topics like child labor and climate issues, there's a lot easier when you've already established. Uh, like a personal relationship as well. (...) It gives pride to actually work with a proper product. Uh. That has been. Yeah, it's it's been grown on the other side of the world and then transported here more or less unchanged. So it's one of the few products that has a really, really close connection to the people that are growing it, the the value chain is pretty simple and and I'm pretty transparent. Uh, that which means that even or the people working in our warehouse, the people working in production. Uh, the financial team? All of them are really, really interested in in, in what's going on in the in the supplying in the supplying countries and with our suppliers. So it's it's not just for show and it's not just to convince our consumers that this is this is this is a really fantastic coffee which is, which is of course it is. But but it's also. For them to know that what we do actually have an impact on people's lives, on the other side of the, I think it gives a sense of purpose. (Ben)

Land-Salm

We don't just build companies, we also build local communities. We are building a facility that must be built on nature's terms, but that we affect our surroundings... Then it's just that we are now driving close to 200 people who are in the construction phase here, and thundering by with large machines through small local communities here. And I have tried to be such a bridge builder between local communities and our facilities, which has been important. But also internally in the company, I feel that I have tried to... That we have to develop this on the fish's

terms. If we do not create an exciting workplace, we will struggle. So I think it's probably a bit right... I've been keen to spread enthusiasm and joy.

That ... And ... Yes, I think I have. Roger

Then we used the analogy... Do you know Kon-Tiki, that raft that Thor Heyerdahl took over the Atlantic? He had an idea that it was going to work, but he wasn't sure. And everyone was willing to step on board the raft, in the obvious uncertainty that this would not work, but with a strong belief that if we make it happen, then we can change history. So just to say in the interview situation that, 'are you willing to step on board Kon-Tiki? Tom

...it's about making sure that we don't just come here and dig big holes and destroy the nature, but also make sure that the local shops and the local everything get something out of it. And there is work for the local people and its local retail can sell a lot of goods to people working there and everything. Jenny

We don't want to be the ones who destroy something here. So there's a lot of projects that's going on now in the municipality which we are involved in. Steven

We must work on nature's terms, on the fish's terms, on the people's terms, on the local community's terms. If we manage to get that, I think we can look everyone in the eye with a clear conscience. Roger

When we recruit, it is an important criterion that the people we recruit can work in accordance with the vision and our vision ... If they don't have the passion for the animal or the environment, then maybe this is not the workplace for them. It must be leading in the decisions we make. Roger

Discussion

The five regenerative leadership-practices of *Advocating for the impacted*, *Ecological Re-attuning*, *Driving radical goal-alignment*, *Facilitating a systemic approach through authentic relationships* & *Cultivating Communities* represents the initial highlights of study. The project aims to explore leadership-practices that are key to regenerative transitions.

The contribution from this project is threefold. First, this is a practice-oriented contribution to the concept of regenerative leadership, representing a bottom-up approach. Second, this study contributes to the vast variants of literature on leadership for sustainable organizations, including eco-centric leadership/management (Biswas et al., 2022; Hernández & Muñoz, 2022), sustainable leadership (Metcalf & Benn, 2013), responsible management (Kempster & Jackson, 2021; Muff et al., 2020), and environmental leadership (Robertson & Carleton, 2018; Su et al., 2020). Finally, it contributes to the literature on micro and meso-processes in organizational sustainability transformations, a research tradition which has been criticised for being highly macro-oriented (Geels, 2011, 2019).

We are eager to get your feedback on this draft, and to discuss the following:

- Do you see other things in the data? Other analysis?
- Relevant theories?
- Need for a stronger comparative dimension?

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