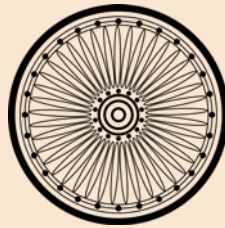


# Conscious Cultural Evolution



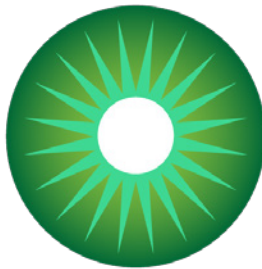
A PROSOCIAL APPROACH TO  
COLLECTIVE ACTION

Robert Styles, PhD  
Paul Atkins, PhD

# **Conscious Cultural Evolution**

*A Prosocial Approach to Collective Action*

Robert Styles  
&  
Paul Atkins



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# Forword

*by Andrea Monsanto*

Like many in our time, I often reflect on what it takes to propel humanity in the right direction, given our immense challenges. Such a question, of course, has no simple answer. However, I am deeply convinced that our world's state mirrors its inhabitant's inner lives. With this conviction, I have dedicated my professional life to teaching contemplative practices and social-emotional skills, including compassion, to foster inner peace for others and myself. Though I consider this inner journey transformative and essential, I felt something was missing in my work. The prosocial methodology outlined in this book has revealed the missing link!

By helping to create the external conditions that support prosocial behavior, groups can unlock their potential to become powerful agents of change by learning to collaborate effectively in the process. I have witnessed how giving all team members a voice brings forth a collective intelligence that transforms the ordinary into something extraordinary.

Embracing the principles in this book, I have experienced people at their best, working together to contribute to causes bigger than their individual and, often, selfish interests. That was the case with “Inspire: Compassion in Action”, a high-impact project in which I trained gifted college students to teach basic social-emotional and collaboration skills to the lowest-income community of Nuevo León, Mexico. By leveraging the collective intelligence of the whole team, we created a rich and diverse educational intervention that enriched both the community that was receiving the knowledge and the students that delivered the program. From gifted college students to humble families, I have seen how the tools offered can adapt to different contexts. The only prerequisite is a genuine desire to collaborate with others. On a personal level, embodying the practices has allowed me to work harmoniously with even the most challenging individuals, including some family members and colleagues.

In a world where hope often fades, the work described in this book serves as a beacon of light, rekindling the human spirit. It reminds us of the profound strength we discover when people come together, united by a shared purpose. This strength, rooted in collaboration and mutual understanding, has the potential to transform lives and communities. My hope is that the prosocial methodology will enable us to tap into our inherent unity to address the most pressing challenges of our time. From climate change to social inequality, our collective efforts, guided by this framework, hold the promise of meaningful and lasting change.

Whether you aim to change the world, become a more effective leader, or strengthen your interpersonal relationships, this book provides an indispensable guide. Its insights and practical tools will support you on your journey toward building stronger relationships and contributing to a better future for all.

Andrea Monsanto, M.S.  
International Well-being Consultant

# Forward

**by Marcelo Ferreira de Castilho**

I am deeply honored by the invitation to translate the book *Conscious Cultural Evolution*, by Robert Styles and Paul Atkins, from English to Portuguese. This is not just a book about ideas or theories; it is a living bridge between academic depth and everyday experience, a journey that invites us to walk the path of self-knowledge to strengthen collective action. There could be no proposal more aligned with the needs of our times, where solutions to the most complex challenges can only emerge from the human capacity to genuinely connect with one another.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of working directly with Robert and Paul on complex cultural evolution projects in Latin America through CollabSoul, in strategic partnership with ProSocial World. There, I learned the true essence of transformative conversations: those are the ones that allow us to reach new levels of consciousness for the collective benefit. Robert and Paul have the extraordinary ability to bring forth topics and practices – that could easily remain confined to academic circles – and make them accessible to everyone in an informal, deep, and affectionate way. This is a rare and valuable achievement.

*Conscious Cultural Evolution* is a book that does not limit itself to teaching models or techniques. Instead, it offers a prosocial approach to catalyze collective action and foster processes of conscious cultural evolution. The Conscious Cultural Evolution Program (CCE) described in the book is an incredibly rich and participatory framework that provides cycles of action and learning designed to guide groups and communities in cultivating resilience, adaptation, and the power of collaboration.

In this broad journey of possibilities, I see in Paul and Robert's work a combination of life wisdom, academic depth, and generosity in sharing their knowledge. They remind us that the success of a group depends essentially on promoting collective well-being, while curbing the excessive individualism that often compromises the whole. It is indeed an evolutionary structure—but also an invitation to the constant practice of observing and transforming the world, responding to the ever-changing needs of those around us.

Throughout this book, the authors propose that the first cycle of evolution begins with self-awareness and personal responsiveness. Then, this process expands to the entire group, building a shared sense of purpose that is flexible and context-sensitive. It is an approach that aims to connect communities to the society in which they are embedded, promoting practices that respect the capabilities of all involved and seek to improve the quality of interactions at all levels of the system.

I had the joy of witnessing firsthand the power of these conversations that, gently and profoundly, allow us to move together towards systemic changes. This is a catalyst work for transformation that embodies and translates everything I have experienced in these complex, multi-level change projects, and I believe it will be a fundamental reference for many who seek a path of self-discovery that strengthens collective action.

I invite you, the reader, to savor this unique creation, made possible only because it is deeply immersed in love and compassion for others. Here is an invitation to create spaces of conversation that enable, in a simple and accessible manner, the flourishing of conscious cultural evolution. After all, advancing together toward transformation is what can truly leave a lasting impact in a world that works for everyone.

Marcelo Ferreira de Castilho, PhD  
CollabSoul Cofounder  
Curitiba, Brazil



## **Part One: Networking Our Wisdom**

# **A Prosocial Approach to Collective Action**

## **A Call to Collaborative Action**

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the scale of the changes humanity is being called to make to address the daunting challenges of our time? At times, both of us have felt so overwhelmed that we have doubted our capacity to contribute to the regeneration and healing required. But over the years, we have also learned to return again and again to the extraordinary capacities of humanity to cooperate with and care for each other and the planet under the right conditions. This book aims to explore what those conditions are.

About thirty years ago, our paths converged, and as kindred spirits, we embarked on a profound journey of discovery together. With humility, we now share insights gained about the strength of community and our collective ability to consciously evolve a world that works for all. We warmly invite you and your community to join us on this path.

## **Transcendence & Wisdom**

Central is an appreciation of what adaptation means for humanity, particularly given our unique ability for symbolic behaviour.

Just like all species, we evolve genetically and epigenetically, but this happens slowly over generations. We also evolve behaviourally, learning quickly from experiences. As a species, we also evolve symbolically. Our ability to tell stories enables us to help one another. We can stop someone burning their hand just by telling them the fire is hot. Through language, we create symbolic representations of our past and possible futures, and the tapestry of civilisation and culture is born—all that tradition, science, and art have to offer. Yet, this linguistic ability is double-edged; we can imagine fires that aren't there and react as though they are.

To catalyse processes of conscious cultural evolution, we will be inviting you to step outside the worlds of words you inhabit, the stories you are telling yourself about what is and what isn't and question their coherence. Transcending the internal and sociocultural “world of words” we have constructed shifts our collective presence profoundly. This shift begins within you. By embracing it, you can connect with the “real you” and the “real them” as a vast, open consciousness within which awareness arises. For our purposes, this is at the heart of the *prosocial approach to collective action*!

Developing this quality of presence together is the radical shift that catalyses the power of many. When we experience each other as fully aware, pulsating living presences rather than amateur theatre performers, we transcend the verbal traps that keep us separate or unchanged. It is the most

stable and safe place we know and is the best vantage point for viewing and questioning the coherence of the world of words that we construct and the topography of experience those words attempt to describe. At such times, a different order of transformation and adaptation occurs that is beyond just a reaction. For perhaps the first time, we can answer, with integrity, “*What is important right now and in the long run?*”

## **Conscious Cultural Evolution**

What does this mean in practical terms, though? In doing evolutionary work with groups and organisations, we have learned to help them develop a transcendent quality of presence, see well into the future, and, in doing so, orient their attention toward what is valued here and now in relation to that future. We engage in cycles of participatory action learning/research to vary, select and replicate the most functional behaviours. All the while, we celebrate our successes and profile who we are becoming. This *prosocial approach to catalysing collective action* allows a group, or clusters of groups, to answer the following key questions:

1. How can we cultivate a healthy and values-consistent future orientation, the foresight to take us in the right direction? How can we learn to see things differently?
2. How can we create the symbolic niches—strategies and norms—that will guide our behaviour toward achieving valued outcomes?
3. How can we reweave our socio-cultural fabric to nurture life? How can we maintain self-awareness and self-regulation throughout the journey? How do we each become flexible enough to continue selecting for what is most important now and in the long run?

We will be unpacking these questions in two parts.

### **Part One: Networking Our Wisdom**

In Part One of the book, we will explore the evolutionary and behavioural principles that have inspired us and form the foundation of our approach. We delve deeply into the personal transformation central to this work, followed by an examination of the profound impact such a radical shift can have at the socio-cultural level.

### **Part Two: Orchestrating Conscious Cultural Evolution**

In Part Two of the book, we present *The Conscious Cultural Evolution (CCE) Program*—a set of participatory action/learning cycles designed to help you guide conscious cultural evolution within your community. These

## 1. A Prosocial Approach to Collective Action

methods have been carefully developed and refined through research over the past thirty years.

So, let's get going!

# **How Evolution Science Can Help Us Collaborate to Make Our World a Better Place**

Orchestrating evolutionary change requires an appreciation that, in principle, we evolve and develop along three interconnected dimensions—biological, nonverbal behavioural, and verbal behavioural/symbolic/cultural—each at a different level. Because these evolutionary principles are fundamental, in this chapter, we will take a deeper dive into how we can discriminate between these streams and understand how they interrelate and mutually influence each other.

For most people, evolution is understood as a biological process—the process of change in the heritable characteristics of biological populations over successive generations. Characteristics that are the expression of genes passed on from parent to offspring during reproduction. But this ‘gene-centric’ perspective fails to embrace the full spectrum of what underscores and drives evolution, particularly for humans.<sup>14, 81</sup> A fuller appreciation has significant implications for the future of us as a species as well as our planet as a whole.

We are evolving along three interacting vectors:

1. Biological: Including genetic, epigenetic, molecular, cellular, organic, anatomical, and physiological aspects.
2. Nonverbal behavioural: Integrating operant and respondent conditioning with behavioural modelling and imprinting.
3. Verbal behavioural/symbolic/cultural: Covering relational responding, symbolic inheritance, and distinctions in verbal communication and cultural practices.

Further, these interacting streams are operating simultaneously at multiple levels of complexity—within and between individuals, between individuals within groups, and between groups within multi-group populations. Grasping this dynamic provides a profound insight into the nature of some of humanity’s unique characteristics and, in particular, our capacity for extraordinarily high levels of cooperation and altruism. This nuanced understanding paves the way for us to build a more prosocial and sustainable world.

## **The Traditional View**

Post the Renaissance and the emergence of the ‘new method of modern science’, philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries sought to explain natural history in terms of physical laws suggesting that life on earth was not

merely the product of divine cosmic order or the existence of fixed categories. Rather, species could be defined by the features that perpetuated themselves generation after generation. The question these scholars asked was, how? Their inquiry saw the emergence of the scientific theory of evolution by natural selection, originally conceived independently by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace in the mid-19th century, but set out in detail in Darwin's book.<sup>17</sup>

In making their case for evolution by natural selection, Darwin and his contemporaries pointed out, for example, that more offspring are often produced than can possibly survive, and that these surviving offspring tend to look distinctly like their parents. This led to three fundamental assumptions about living organisms. Traits vary among individuals with respect to their morphology, physiology and behaviour (variation); different traits confer different levels of fitness, rates of survival and reproduction (selection); and, that traits can be passed from one generation to the next (replication). These scholars observed that over successive generations, the members of any given population are more likely to be succeeded by those offspring whose traits have enabled them to survive and reproduce in their respective environments. In this way, favoured traits accrue across generations and over time lead to diversification and ultimately, speciation. For Darwin, evolution was a "struggle for existence" between individuals, and only the traits of the winners made it to the next generation.

This perspective on heredity was widely accepted at the time of Darwin's writing. However it was not clear how this process worked until Gregor Mendel, a scientist and Augustinian friar, did some experiments showing that some invisible "factors" (later identified as genes) were at play in fashioning the heritable features of peas. The profound significance of Mendel's work was not recognised until the turn of the 20th century, more than three decades later. And by the 1930s, Darwinian theory and Mendelian genetics had combined into what came to be called the Modern Synthesis.<sup>35</sup> From that point on, for most people, genetics became synonymous with the concept of evolution. But while genetic inheritance is an integral part of evolution, it's now believed there are three distinct evolutionary inheritance streams.<sup>37</sup>

### **Three Streams of Inheritance**

#### **1. Biological Evolution**

Following the pioneering work of Darwin, Mendel and their contemporaries, the first and best-known inheritance stream is indeed the biological—a stream of genetic and epigenetic processes that shape the heritable biological characteristics of populations transmitted over successive

generations. This is the process by which those mutations and changes in DNA (variation) that support survival and reproduction (selection) are passed from parent to offspring during reproduction (replication).

Individual organisms live and die, and species evolve biologically as their members adapt to their local environments. How does this happen? Every cell in our body, skin, liver, blood etc., contains precisely the same DNA sequence, yet each cell grows and evolves to have a different structure and function. This is because different cells use, or express, different elements of our genetic makeup, i.e., different DNA, depending on which are turned on and off due to epigenetic modification.

In a sense, DNA is like an instruction manual detailing how to build a body, and epigenetics is the process of highlighting which instructions, or bits of the DNA (genes) are activated or deactivated at various times and in response to different circumstances. For example, one particular epigenetic process called methylation occurs when molecules called methyls attach themselves to a DNA sequence, thereby deactivating it. Methylation happens in response to an organism's experience, such as starvation or trauma, which can lead to changes in cell structure and function. From an evolutionary perspective, such epigenetic modifications can be heritable. Epigenetics suggests that our childhood diets or those of our grandparents might still be affecting us epigenetically today.

In this way, evolution along the biological dimension occurs when evolutionary processes such as natural selection, including sexual selection and genetic drift bring about variations, resulting in certain characteristics becoming more common or rare within a population. This process has given rise to biodiversity at every level of biological organisation, including the levels of species, individual organisms and molecules. Thus, genetic evolution and epigenetic modifications constitute a distinct biological hereditary system.

## **2. Nonverbal Behavioural Evolution**

The second stream is nonverbal behavioural—mainly learning by trial and error, otherwise known as operant learning, but also including respondent conditioning and forms of behavioural modelling and imprinting.

The psychologist B.F. Skinner was one of the first to observe that natural selection occurred along different inheritance streams, which he identified as genetic, behavioural and social. Most of Skinner's work centred on the behavioural traits learned by organisms as they operated on their environment and experienced what did and didn't work, a process he called "selection by consequences" or "operant learning."<sup>70</sup> Operant learning, he argued, involves behavioural variants being selected, or reinforced by the consequences they produce and hence becoming more or less likely to occur again in the future,

i.e., the heredity of learning. Just as individual organisms live or die and the species evolve biologically, individual behaviours are selected or deselected, and the operant evolves. Operant learning enables an organism to adapt to its local environment more quickly than genetic or epigenetic evolution, clearly conferring survival advantages that result in the behaviour being selected as a heritable trait.

Operant learning also puts organisms into regular contact with specific aspects of the environment to which they may then become more adapted. For example, the reinforcing effectiveness of crustaceans ensures that flamingos regularly hunt for food in river mud and that regular contact, in turn, allows the beaks of flamingos to evolve based on the natural selection of beak variations that make hunting crustaceans more successful. Because of such processes, contingency learning has been proposed as the single most important factor contributing to the 'Cambrian Explosion', the proliferation of species seen 540 million years ago, when contingency learning first appeared.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to operant conditioning, other forms of non-verbal socially mediated learning include respondent conditioning, behavioural modelling and imprinting. It has been shown that these types of interaction between members of the same species and their environment consequently shape the behaviour of future generations.<sup>37</sup> For example, the cumulative evolutionary effects of the food we eat. The eating habits of a mother will shape the future food preferences of an unborn while in utero. It is also evident that some coincidental forms of imitation and non-imitative social behaviours without a direct learning history have an evolutionary impact. For example, the filial misimprinting that occurs when newly born goslings instinctively follow the first animal they see after hatching rather than their natural mother.

In this way, behaviour regulated by nonverbal social and contingency-based learning has long been argued by behaviour analysts to be an evolutionary process within the individual's lifetime. But it is clear now that these processes continue to a degree across lifetimes due to cultural practices, social learning processes, niche selection and construction, food preferences and food handling, choice of pathways for migration, predation and defence, and all aspects of mating, parenting, and social interactions with other animals within the group. These nonverbal behavioural processes in turn have an impact on epigenetics and the biology of progeny due to interactions between these evolutionary dimensions.<sup>26, 37</sup> As such, nonverbal direct and socially mediated behavioural learning is an important vector of transmission within any group and is a key ingredient of cultural evolution. These facts point to the key role that behaviour and learning play in the evolution of all species.



### **3. Verbal Behavioural/Symbolic/Cultural Evolution**

Verbal behavioural/symbolic evolution, a combination of relational responding and symbolic inheritance, is the third stream and pertains particularly to human cultural evolution. Human language, the use of symbols to represent events and to alter the function of those events, arguably constitutes an inheritance system in its own right. For example, with different languages, current processes of selection in the forms of retelling and retweeting, and replication in the forms of books and data storage represent a stream of continuous symbolic inheritance.

It is understood that human cultural evolution really took off approximately 70 thousand years ago with the emergence of symbolic systems and generative language, i.e., language without a direct learning history.<sup>27, 36</sup> From an evolutionary perspective, symbolic behaviour was likely initially selected by its ability to extend human cooperation due to the mutual entailment of symbols, i.e. symbol=object relations learned through social perspective-taking. As our ability to derive relations among events increased, we became sensitive to the internal coherence of networks of symbols and their relations with external events. In this way, our capacity for relational responding was established via our use of language, consequently providing a tool for human problem-solving, planning and design. Over time these symbolic systems allowed for the accumulation and rapid transmission of ever more complex knowledge that in turn opened up new opportunities, and the rest, as they say, is history.

### **Multi-level Selection and Cooperation**

As well as taking place within and across three inheritance streams, evolutionary processes also occur at different levels of biological organisation, from cells to individual organisms to groups of organisms to multi-group populations where heritable units vary and are selectively retained.<sup>31,81,84</sup> This is known as Multi-level Selection (MLS) and refers to the fact that selection can operate simultaneously at the level of individual units such as cells, individual organisms and specific actions, as well as collections of such units such as multicellular organisms, groups and behavioural repertoires.

Cancer may be viewed as the unregulated behaviour of individual cells that undermines the integrity of an organ (the group) and ultimately the survival of the whole organism (the system). Similarly, the behaviours of individuals such as selfishness, free-riding, secretiveness, disloyalty, disrespect, laziness, addiction, law-breaking and profiteering can strongly undermine civility and social cohesion within groups and the broader societal context.

For our purposes, we are interested in exploring the implications of MLS when it promotes success at the level of the whole and restrains excessive time

and attention being given to sub-repertoires at the cost of the whole. Given a particular environmental context, the interests of an individual may be best served by means of cooperation in a group, which can be successfully selected subject to individual selfishness being suppressed. Major evolutionary transitions tend to consist of precisely such sets of conditions. Examples are provided in the literature by the development of eukaryotic cells, multicellular organisms, and eusocial species.

For each of us and the groups we belong to, this means recognising those behaviours that benefit the individual but don't benefit the group and engaging in processes that promote cooperative and prosocial behaviours above self-interest—in effect, improving how we function as groups in relation to our external environments and matters of concern.

### **Applying Evolutionary Principles**

While occurring independently, the three evolutionary inheritance streams also interact with each other creating an extraordinarily complex process that enables humans to adapt swiftly to extremely diverse ecological niches.<sup>57,83</sup> Our use of symbols, in particular, can readily impact cultural practices, social learning, niche selection, niche construction, and consequently epigenetics. As we individually and collectively take perspective on, discriminate, and describe our environment, we begin acting in relation to it.

Importantly, for our purposes, knowing an organism's behaviour can change in response to its context, new possibilities abound. For humans, this is a matter of evolving our verbal context, i.e., creating cultural inheritance systems that evolve prosociality through shared value systems, selection, socialisation, and reward systems—all designed to make it difficult to benefit oneself selfishly at the expense of others. This is the principle of intentional evolution being applied, as we seek to re-author ourselves through the conversations we will be having with you throughout this book. Our guiding principle is that the environments within which we cultivate and adopt these prosocial norms must be sustainably advantageous for the generations to come.

### **Group Norms and Morality**

Prosociality refers to a constellation of behaviours, values, and attitudes that involves people cooperating and striving together for the well-being of others, sacrificing for others, and fostering self-development.<sup>6,83</sup> At the cultural level, prosocial communities tend to internalise the higher-order and universal virtues of justice, social responsibility, and modes of moral reasoning aimed at realising greater public and social good. These behaviours are regulated by our discourse with others and shaped by our ontological

and ethical worldviews that reflect agreements on what is and what ought to be. These are the behaviours that have shaped and evolved us as a cognitive, highly social species.

The question is, how do we orchestrate the evolutionary processes that will lead to better group functioning and the fostering of prosocial behaviours and norms that benefit the group as a whole rather than individual members? This is the intentional evolution we want to catalyse with you. The processes and methods described throughout the remainder of this book have been designed to actively shape behaviours and cultural practices and promote group-oriented values and actions. Our aim is to equip you with what you need to ably coach and guide groups to adopt norms that foster cooperation and support the common good, ultimately enhancing their ability to adapt and thrive in their environment.

# The Conversation

From one perspective, becoming more prosocial involves changing our way of viewing the world. We see the world and social systems as complex adaptive systems unfolding over time. Our challenge is to create contexts that increase the likelihood of prosocial behaviour and decrease the likelihood of antisocial behaviour. In other words, we seek consciously to evolve a world that works for all. By ‘evolve’, we mean the Darwinian processes of variation, selection and replication in context but applied to individual and collective behaviours. In the previous chapter, we described this evolutionary perspective on cultural evolution. In this chapter, we give an overview of the methods we use to evolve prosociality.

Evolving prosociality is not merely a theory or a viewpoint, it’s a way to transform the world. As an evolutionary framework, it’s a method for observing the world and constantly modifying it in response to our experiences and the ever-changing needs of those we work with. One of our goals in developing this approach is to create a framework broad enough to incorporate other approaches and methods to complement the core set we will be introducing throughout this book. We have accomplished this by specifying the key processes required for effective long-term change rather than emphasising specific techniques to enhance those processes. While we do provide guidance on particular techniques we also want to allow for the use of many other techniques that can effectively achieve the same objectives.

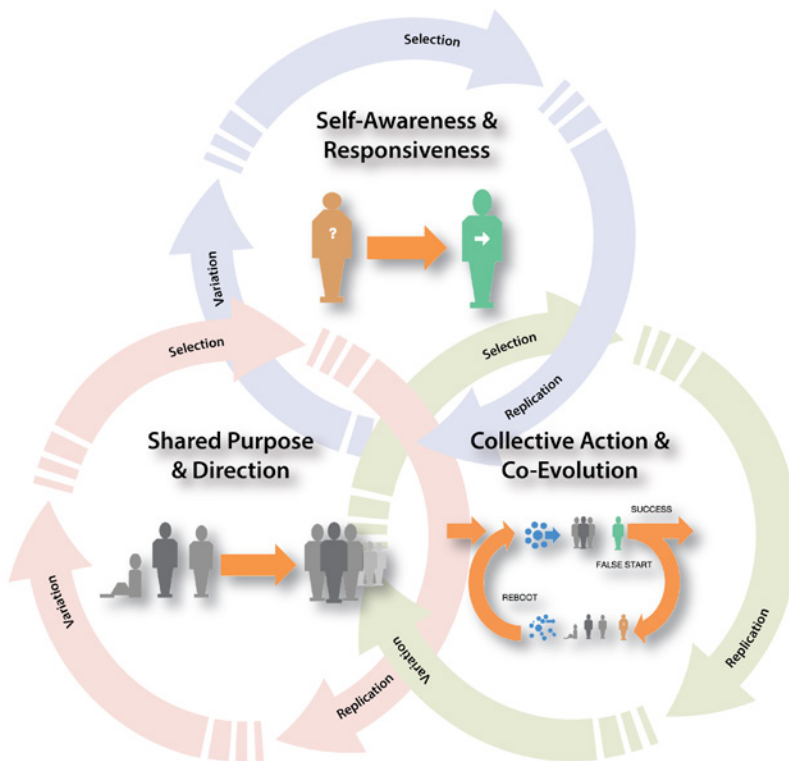
## What is a Process?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a process as a series of actions taken to achieve a particular result. In a business, a process might be a series of steps taken to create or market a product. In the psychological world of humans, a process can be intentional or unintentional. Grieving, reflecting on one’s own identity and what matters most about life and work, problem-solving how to get a new job and move ahead in life—these are all psychological processes that a person might engage in at critical junctions in their life. What unites all these responses is that they are behaviours in response to a context that produces a particular outcome. For the purposes of the rest of this discussion, ***we define a process as a series of actions, taken in a particular context, to achieve a desired result.***

When we specify a process, we can focus on either the form (the specific actions that are engaged in) or the function (the desired result). From the perspective of pragmatic action in groups, **it is more helpful to focus on function rather than form.** There might be many specific techniques to

achieve a sense of shared vision in a group, but the desired result is always the same—a shared view of a highly desirable future.

The question is, how do we orchestrate a conversation that effectively shapes, moulds and sustains the normative environments and practices that will lead civilisation to flourish? For our purposes, this will involve facilitating three broad processes. The first focused on developing self-awareness and responsiveness, the second on deepening shared purpose and direction at multiple levels within polycentric systems, and the third on enhancing the group's capacity for collective action and co-evolution within relevant spheres of influence. Overall, the whole ongoing and integrated process looks like this.



### Cultivating Self-Awareness and Responsiveness

The first process is focused on evolving personal awareness and responsiveness. This is foundational to everything that follows. We will pick this topic up in the chapters: *Being Present, Your Essential Self, Attending to What is Most Important* and again in *Cycle 2 (of the Conscious Cultural Evolution Program): Self-Development*. Here you will learn how to exercise psychological flexibility, an approach to life that will expand the range of beneficial actions available to you and your people at any given moment,

even when under pressure. This will help you to live in a more authentic manner and in accordance with your personal values. As a consequence of these reflections and related activities, you will significantly enhance your capacity for self-determined, intentional and positive change within your life, relationships and work with others. The focus here is on cultivating behaviours that promote personal growth, as well as the growth of others around us.

What is being selected for are the behaviours (inner & outer) that will move you more towards a life of thriving. The desired outcome is for you, with your people, to take a broader perspective on your experience such that you can respond consciously rather than reactively to your environment.

#### **Developing a Sense of Shared Purpose and Direction**

The second process is at the level of the whole group and aims to build a flexible, context-sensitive, deeply held sense of shared purpose based on values and needs. We will set the scene for this conversation in the chapters: *If We Are to Survive This Century*, *Collaborative Societies*, *Reclaiming the Commons* and pick it up again in the *Conscious Cultural Evolution Program Cycles: Onboarding and Strategic Agenda Setting*. This will be an active inquiry into and consideration of what a preferred and probable future could look like within your family, community, organisation, and society, considering the disciplines and practices you are engaged in. During these discussions, you'll gain insights from your peers and reflect on the perspectives of the individuals and groups shaping this future. You'll consider the key factors that could create a healthy, harmonious, and prosperous world. The outcome of these discussions will give you a clearer understanding of the trends and drivers influencing people's behaviours and the impact of collective efforts towards your goals. This will help you identify and evaluate opportunities and innovations that could spark widespread, lasting change across generations.

In evolutionary terms, this is about constructing a new symbolic niche for the collective that can then act as an attractor for collaborative activity. What is being selected for here are robust descriptions of a healthy future world, of shared value and vision that reflects the head and the heart of everyone in the group. The desired outcome of this process is a deeply held sense of shared vision, values, and purpose, i.e. alignment between everyone in the group.

#### **Engaging in Collective Action and Co-evolution**

The third and final process is at the level of the group embedded in a broad system. In this part of our conversation, you will be introduced to a set of principles for effectively coordinating behaviour based on the prize-winning work of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom and generalised by Atkins,

et al.<sup>5</sup> These principles have been shown to help groups enhance trust, sharing and collaboration over decades, centuries and even millennia.

You will consider the best ways to guide and support your group or organisation in implementing these principles to foster more effective, trusting, and collaborative relationships. Additionally, you'll explore how your community or organisation can better connect and interact with the broader society of which it is a part. With this framework in mind, taking into consideration the capabilities of all involved, you will collaborate to design and test best practices across all levels of the system. These strategies will be introduced in the chapters: *Collaborative Societies and Reclaiming the Commons* and further detailed in the *Conscious Cultural Evolution Program Cycles: Prosocial Governance, Action Learning, and Scaling-up Local Level Successes*. Central to this process is the call for innovation, encouraging the integration of our diverse cultural and disciplinary backgrounds in prosocial ways as we address the pressing challenges of our era.

What is being selected for here are well-coordinated normative practices and learning through action. The desired outcome of this process is a genuinely co-developed and implemented plan for action that is tracked, evaluated and evolved over time. In this way, emergent best practices can be selected and replicated in the service of valued long-term outcomes.

## **ProSocial Projects**

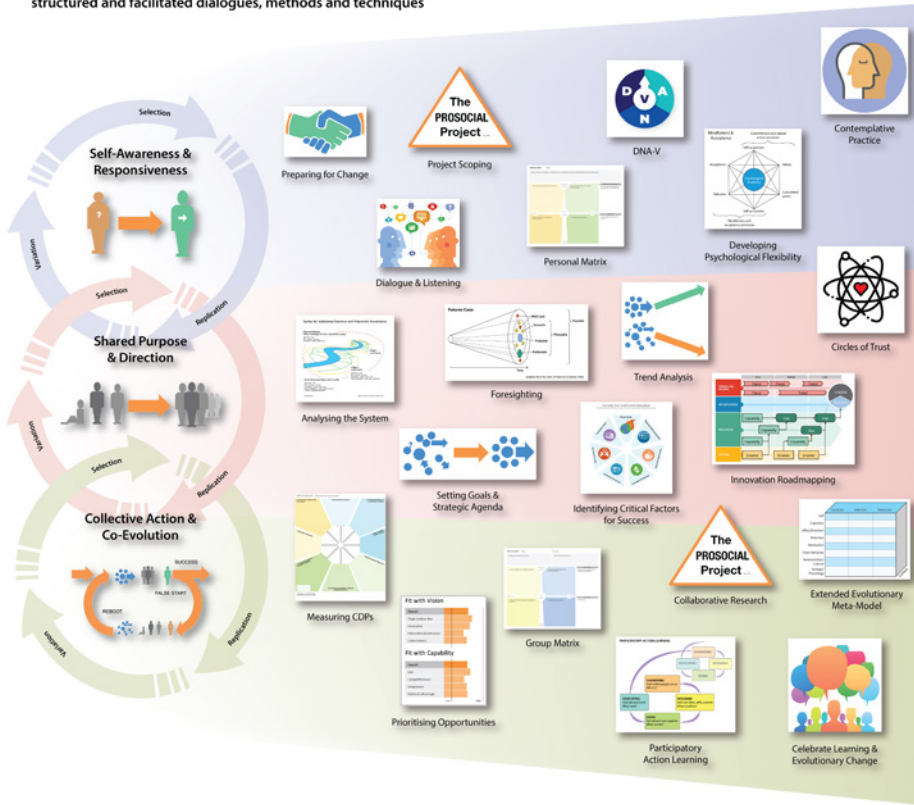
While the three interrelated processes outlined above are at the heart of a ProSocial Project, practically speaking, when implemented, this translates into a family of methods that help create alignment and focused action that integrates individual and collective interests. For an experienced facilitator, understanding these cycles in the relatively abstract terms we have provided is sometimes enough to inspire skilful action—a mix-and-match of approaches that suit the group in context.

However, many people require more detail regarding implementation specifics. Over the years, we have witnessed the successful application of ProSocial principles in various contexts. Each has been a unique response to the needs of those involved. Whether it be to enhance the quality of relations within and between groups and improve group collaboration or develop a multi-stakeholder strategic plan together. In each case, the suite of structured dialogues, methods and techniques employed by us and others doing this work has been a creative mix and match depending on what is being called for. It has never been a one-size-fits-all. An indicative suite of methods associated with each of the three processes is depicted in the figure below.



### 3. The Conversation

Three primary processes of conscious cultural evolution and an indicative suite of structured and facilitated dialogues, methods and techniques



### Our Aim

No doubt you will be wondering, what are the specifics? What skills are needed? What should we do in each stage? This is why we have written this book. Our aim is to introduce you to our best practices for facilitating these three processes in the context of strategic planning. These comprise a series of structured and facilitated dialogues designed for change agents to reflect, with their people, on what is important personally and professionally to them and how they can effectively shift towards what is valued in the long run.

As a change agent, you will cultivate the ability to exercise psychological flexibility and take choices for action toward things that fundamentally matter at each level in the system. You will learn to think strategically about changing future contexts and contribute professionally and influentially to establishing the collaborative and productive cultures capable of bringing about desired change. Importantly, these facilitated discussions and reflections will be complemented by fieldwork in order to reinforce and embed desired change within your life and the institutions you are a part of operationally—a



practice that you will be invited to engage in throughout our conversation. As far as possible, our aim in this book is to have these three conversations with you.

So, are you ready? Let's begin...



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