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LEAD Insights

Theme

New organizational forms

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New organizational forms

Dear reader

Welcome to LEAD Insights – a shared learning platform for leaders and organizations across the world.

Every other month, we share insights, experiences, and perspectives on how people and organizations can evolve and succeed amid complex and fast-changing environments. By bridging research and real-world practice, we explore what truly works, in diverse contexts and under real leadership pressures.

As a Danish consulting firm with a global outlook, our work is grounded in Nordic values of trust, collaboration, and pragmatism. Yet our engagements span many cultural and organizational settings; from local institutions to multilateral organizations such as the United Nations. Through this work, we have learned that effective leadership takes many forms shaped by context, culture, and purpose.
The theme of this first edition is new ways of organizing. The pace of change in today's world raises an important question for many leaders: Can we continue to organize ourselves as we always have?

Much of the current thinking on modern organization design calls for dismantling hierarchy and granting full autonomy to staff. While this enthusiasm for freedom and empowerment is understandable, experience shows that lasting progress depends on balance. Especially in large and complex organizations, such as those within the UN system, hierarchy and structure are not obstacles to innovation; they are essential for accountability, legitimacy, and coherence.

The challenge is therefore not to replace structure with freedom, but to align the two intelligently, finding the right balance between empowerment and direction, between innovation and responsibility, between flexibility and stability.

In LEAD Insights, we explore exactly this dynamic. We examine how organizations around the world are experimenting with flatter structures, building trust-based collaboration, and leading effectively across geography, culture, and hybrid work models. We also share practical experiences from our clients and partners, who generously contribute their lessons and reflections.

We hope this edition inspires new thinking and dialogue about how leadership can create both clarity and freedom; enabling people and organizations to thrive in complexity.

Enjoy reading LEAD Insights.

Anne-Birgitte Albrectsen Director at LEAD

What characterizes new organizational forms?

There is a lot of hype about new organizational forms, with terms like Agile, TEAL, Sociocracy, and similar concepts. In this article, we provide an overview of some of the most popular and widespread organizational forms, explaining their key characteristics and how they differ from one another.

By
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Over the past decades, new and less hierarchical organizational forms, such as Agile, TEAL, and Sociocracy, have emerged in both private and public organizations. These can be seen as a shift away from traditional organizational designs rooted in a mechanical, functionalist, hierarchical, and bureaucratic understanding, where control, management, functional silos, top-down decisions, and unequal power between leaders and employees have been foundational. The newer forms share a focus on people, systems thinking, distributed responsibility, and collaboration. The aim is to unlock human potential to enhance well-being and improve performance.

On the opposite side, we summarize key characteristics of three widely discussed forms.

1

Agile organizations

Agile organizations share a foundation in the Agile Manifesto, which emphasizes people and interactions, responsiveness to change, and close collaboration with customers/users over rigid plans, contract management, and excessive documentation. In practice, teams work iteratively and incrementally, using structured development processes to deliver faster improvements. Leadership and decision-making are embedded in self-organizing teams with shared responsibility for progress and constructive collaboration.

2

TEAL organizations

TEAL principles, popularized by Frederic Laloux, replace formal hierarchy with self-organization, decentralized responsibility, and shared leadership. TEAL emphasizes holistic thinking (bringing one's whole self to work) and an evolutionary purpose; adapting continuously to create positive impact for people, society, and the planet.

3

Sociocratic organizations

Sociocracy's fundamental principle is circular governance. Self-organizing teams ("circles") collaborate and make decisions together. Circles interact and distribute responsibility, decisions, and direction through involvement, consent, and transparency. Continuous feedback and learning enable both people and the organization to evolve.

Four common traits

Organization comes in many forms and expressions

In Denmark, Agile is primarily seen in private companies, especially in IT. TEAL is often applied in elder care and services, using self-organizing teams and holistic practices to bring services and purpose closer to customers, citizens, and patients. Sociocracy can be seen, for example, at the Job, Activity, and Competency Center in Gentofte Municipality (JAC), where employees and leaders achieve consensus and make shared decisions about strategy, wages, hiring, and finances.

In practice, many organizations take a pragmatic approach, adopting "the best of both worlds" and retaining elements of traditional leadership while experimenting with new approaches in selected areas. Despite their diversity, new organizational forms share four common traits:

1

A lesser or non-existent formal hierarchy

A flatter hierarchy may remove layers or distribute leadership roles. The goal is to reduce reporting lines and power asymmetries, creating more autonomy for individuals or teams. Direction-setting becomes a collaborative endeavor, supported by clear mandates.

2

Decentralized decisions

Decision rights shift downward and across the organization to where expertise resides. For example, a caregiver is often best placed to assess whether a client needs care, a conversation, or a walk - without requiring a KPI or a manager's approval.

3

Self-organizing teams

Cross-functional, self-organizing teams decide what to work on, how to do it, and who should do what. This team-centric focus aims to drive flexibility, efficiency, and innovation - from product development to public service delivery.

4

Flat but clearly defined structures

Self-management requires explicit structure. Successful flat organizations formalize collaboration, roles, responsibilities, decision-making, and escalation paths. Clarity about mandates enables autonomy without chaos.

Differences and similarities among organizational forms

Based on these common traits, we use "new organizational forms" as an umbrella term for organizational and leadership logics that strive for flatter hierarchies, decentralized decision making and responsibility, greater self-leadership and self-organization, as well as a clear structure and formalized procedures for collaboration and processes.

We illustrate the differences and similarities among these organizational forms as follows:

	Traditional	Agile	TEAL	Sociocratic
Fundamental logic	Analysis, prediction, control, stability; value for shareholders	Circular and iterative; customer/ user focus and speed over documentation/ control; innovation	Organic and purpose-driven; meaningful impact on people and planet	Inclusive and democratic; meaning through involvement, consent, and consensus
Governance model	Centralized decision-making at the top	Centralized vision/strategy; decentralized execution in self-organizing, multi-disciplinary teams	Dismantled formal hierarchy; decentralized decisions; self-leadership	Dismantled formal hierarchy; democratized decision processes via involvement, consent, and consensus
Perspective on leadership	Command-and-control; leader sets direction and drives results	Servant leadership; leader supports, coaches, removes obstacles, and facilitates team success	Self-leadership and self-organizing teams replace hierarchical leadership	Leadership is co-produced in democratic communities
Perspective on employees	Resource motivated by rewards/ punishments	Creative agent motivated by meaning, mastery, participation	Purpose-driven agent motivated by expressing the whole self and connection	Democracy-driven agent motivated by participation and community

New organizational form arise from new expectations

Why are more organizations moving in this direction? Intensifying competition, digitalization, and complexity have propelled Agile models. Sustainability, ESG, and triple bottom line considerations are attracting people to TEAL's holistic focus on business, well-being, and societal impact.

There's also a humanistic push for workplaces that accommodate life as a whole (e.g., flexible hours, four-day weeks). Rising rates of stress and burnout require organizational responses.

These trends increase the demands on how we organize. New forms can help by liberating individual potential and enabling organizations to bring out people's best.

From Denmark to Brussels, Switzerland, West Africa, East Asia to you

We have transitioned from a Danish consultancy into an international consultancy. We have entered collaborative partnerships with major global organizations such as UNICEF, IOM (International Organization for Migration) and WFP (World Food Programme) as well as expanding our consultancy support to international, multicultural and English-language clients in Denmark.

Therefore, we are now launching a new English-language website that explains in greater detail how we support our partners both in Denmark as well as internationally.

We firmly believe, with all humility, that our cross-functional and evidence-based approach to leadership holds worldwide potential. Again and again, we observe that when we engage with people through trust, curiosity and a distinctly humanistic mindset, collaboration is strengthened, and change becomes lasting.

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Getting started with flattening the hierarchy

Organization is no longer synonymous with hierarchy. New organizational forms are becoming increasingly popular. Before you get dazzled by enthusiastic messages from well-crafted international management books, there are several considerations regarding purpose, culture, and implementation to address if you want to effectively flatten the hierarchy.

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Organizations have relied on hierarchy for so long that it can feel like a natural law; yet it is possible to organize in flatter, more self-managing ways, with compelling reasons to do so. This article highlights what to consider when distributing leadership among more people.

The "So ein Ding" trap

Start by asking: Why organize differently? Is there a real need or are we being swayed by trends? Avoid adopting a model because it looks compelling on slides or in a best-selling book. Instead, clarify how a flatter form would better advance your purpose, strategy, and goals than your current structure.

Choosing a path

- If you aim to be more agile, faster, and efficient, consider Agile organizing.
- If you seek a more humanistic organization where inclusion, responsibility, and autonomy drive well-being and collaboration, explore humanocracy.
- If purpose and sustainability are central, consider TEAL or regenerative leadership.

Every form has trade-offs. Begin by articulating why a flatter approach fits your needs.

Context and culture cloud the picture
Exemplars like Buurtzorg, Morning Star, Valve, and Patagonia are inspiring, but context matters. Buurtzorg is a private company, hard to compare with municipal home care shaped by bureaucracy, NPM logics, and political constraints. Pragmatism is required to adapt lessons to public-sector realities, including UN entities with complex mandates. Transforming a legacy hierarchy into a fluid organism of self-managing teams is challenging. Don't underestimate your context and culture.

Implementation: Big Bang or ripples in the water?
Let's look at the advantages and disadvantages of three distinct methods for implementing a flatter organizational structure.

1. The spark approach
Pilot a flatter, more self-managing design in a team or department. Start small, e.g., introduce self-organizing teams or purpose-driven work streams. Advantages: low risk, bottom-up energy, and learning. Risk: isolation from the surrounding hierarchy can extinguish the spark without leadership support.

2. The ripples-in-the-water approach
Implement a new form in a defined area, redesign roles and workflows, and provide time, resources, and support. Learn and adapt as you go, then consider how to integrate with other parts. Advantage: strategically initiated by leadership, creating momentum and scale. Risks: friction at interfaces; polarization between "new" and "old" ways; "us vs. them" dynamics.

3. 'Big bang' implementation
Roll out a new form across most of the organization (e.g., Oticon's "spaghetti" model; Nuuday's enterprise Agile). Advantage: a genuine fresh start that can reset structures, culture, and behavior. Risks: costly, heavy, and risky; structure-first changes may become an empty shell if roles, collaboration, and accountability aren't clear; the new design may not fit the purpose.

Checklist

Before you flatten the hierarchy, go though this checklist:

- Problem framing: What specific problem or outcome are we solving for (speed, quality, inclusion, innovation, sustainability)?
- Mandates: What decisions will shift where and what are escalation paths?
- Interfaces: How will the new form connect with legacy units, processes, and governance?
- Metrics: What few measures signal progress (delivery, well-being, learning)?
- Culture: What legacy practices do we keep/change (e.g., performance rituals, meeting norms)?
- Capacity: What training, coaching, and role clarity will we provide to teams and leaders?

How do we maintain a sense of community when half of our employees are working from home?

Some organizations now require employees to return to the office, fearing that remote work undermines collaboration and cohesion. That framing, freedom versus community, creates a false choice. The challenge is to deliver both.

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A growing question for leaders is how to foster trust and social support when many colleagues work remotely several days a week. Attractive workplaces offer both flexible work arrangements and strong collegial communities. The tension is real and must be navigated with reflection, action, and adjustment.

Strengthen spontaneous and informal dialogue

Because less physical presence reduces serendipitous interactions, leaders should deliberately create space for informal connection and knowledge sharing.

Practical steps include:

- Reserve time in meetings for informal dialogue and peer updates.
- Use brief digital check-ins on remote days so everyone is "present," even when apart.
- Cluster on-site days to maximize spontaneous collaboration.
- Reinforce onboarding with structured touchpoints (e.g., at 2, 6, and 12 weeks).
- Create networking and professional communities of practice.
- Pair colleagues via mentor or buddy programs to strengthen bonds across grades and duty stations.

Balance individual and collective needs
Flexible work can erode social support for those who need it most. Leaders should create psychologically safe forums to discuss preferences and needs and co-design inclusive, engaging practices. It must be equally acceptable to value in-person contact and informal sparring as it is to prize autonomy and flexibility. There is no single right answer; context and culture matter.

Prompt set: team norms for hybrid work

- What do you need from the team to do your best remote work this month?
- What would make on-site time most valuable?
- When do we meet in person versus virtually—and how do we handle exceptions?
- How do we protect deep-focus time across time zones?

Less hierarchy and more community
New organizational forms challenge traditional, hierarchical logics. They emphasize flatter structures, self-leadership, and distributed responsibility; supported by strong team-based communities. Research shows these approaches can raise satisfaction, engagement, and well-being. The aim is not either/or, but a both/and: more connectedness and collaboration alongside individual flexibility.

Building connections when times are tough

A perfect storm of complexity has hit the UN. Yet in a global institution whose purpose depends on collaboration across borders, building connections remains vital. Shared direction, alignment, and commitment are key - but so is staying human in the midst of it all. One simple yet powerful way to do that is through the leadership 'walk-and-talk.

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When times are tough, uncertainty intensifies. At the United Nations (UN), this truth resonates deeply. Political instability, regional conflicts, shrinking budgets, and ongoing organizational transformation have created a perfect storm of complexity. For a global institution whose very purpose depends on collaboration across borders, the challenges of this moment are both external and internal.

In a hybrid and virtual work environment, UN employees operate across a web of boundaries - geographical, temporal, organizational, stakeholder, and hierarchical. These boundaries, while enabling global reach and inclusion, can also amplify ambiguity, fragment coordination, and erode commitment. In times of crisis, hybrid and distributed organizations such as the UN are particularly vulnerable unless leadership succeeds in reinforcing direction, alignment, and commitment across every level of the system.

Hybrid work at the UN - a double-edged reality

As the UN navigate the complexities of a global workforce, the distributed hybrid work presents both opportunities and challenges. A distributed hybrid workforce, as defined by researcher Rikke Lindekilde refers to a flexible organizational model that integrates co-located and remote collaboration, enabling

teams to operate across time zones, geographies, and cultures. Hybrid work bridges geographical divides and enables global cooperation, but it also tests shared understanding, cohesion, and leadership clarity (Lindekilde, 2022).

Within the UN, this reality is vividly present. Employees in Amman, Bogota, Geneva, Jakarta, New York, Nouakchott and many hundreds of other locations must coordinate seamlessly across time zones and technological platforms. The demands of global collaboration often mean irregular hours, fragmented communication, and the constant pressure to be "always on." While distributed hybrid work thus allows for flexibility and collaboration spanning globally, it also introduces pressures that can affect efficiency and employee well-being.

The challenge of global collaboration

The UN operates in a uniquely diverse environment where professionals from various cultural backgrounds work toward shared globally agreed goals. Hybrid work existed at the UN long before the COVID-19 pandemic, but remote collaboration from home and with stakeholders has since intensified as many other workplaces went more hybrid (Davis, 2021).

While this transformation has enhanced flexibility, collaboration and access to a wider talent pool, it also comes with side effects. Studies have shown that the normalization of remote work can blur the boundaries between professional and personal life (Schieman & Badaly, 2021).

Within the UN context, where urgency is often the norm, employees may feel compelled to stay connected at all times, increasing the risk of burnout and reduced job satisfaction (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). These dynamics reveal that the success of hybrid work in the UN does not hinge on technology – nor even wellbeing councilors – alone; it depends on leadership that spans boundaries with clarity, empathy, and intention.

The UN adopted its first UN System Workplace Mental Health, and its Well-Being Strategy was approved in 2018. This created a solid foundation for addressing burnout risks. In advance of the next strategy it was, however, also acknowledged that further action was needed, particularly related to prevention, leadership and stigma reduction. In this landscape, traditional management approaches are no longer enough. Leaders must learn to span boundaries, not only geographically but emotionally and organizationally, to sustain unity and drive.

Leadership across boundaries - direction, alignment and commitment

So, what kind of leadership can help address the challenges that come with great volatility and hybrid

work? In volatile times, leadership within hybrid organizations becomes both a stabilizing force and a compass. Effective leaders must span boundaries to create shared direction, ensure *alignment*, and foster *commitment* (Tannenbaum et al., 2012).

- *Direction* provides clarity of purpose – ensuring that every employee understands the mission and their role within it.
- *Alignment* ensures that decisions, structures, and communication channels work cohesively across geographical and organizational divides.
- *Commitment* nurtures the emotional and motivational connection that sustains engagement, even under pressure.

Boundary-spanning leadership is therefore not just about managing distance. It's about connecting across differences to build unity and resilience.

In a hybrid organization like the UN, direction and alignment provide clarity on goals and processes, but it is commitment (the emotional and motivational engagement of employees) that ensures these goals are realized. Commitment thrives when individuals feel connected to each other and to the mission, even when separated by geography, time zones, or organizational silos. Building cohesion, therefore, is not just a "nice-to-have" – it is a strategic lever for sustaining engagement, performance, and resilience in challenging times.

Regular team engagement initiatives, such as virtual town halls, collaborative workshops, and occasional in-person gatherings, help reinforce a shared sense of purpose and collective identity. Mentorship and peer support programs pair experienced staff with newcomers, promoting belonging, knowledge transfer, and alignment across career stages. These initiatives strengthen both commitment and operational coherence, helping the UN translate strategy into action across dispersed teams.

Yet structured programmes alone are not sufficient. Genuine connection grows through conversation; through the everyday human interactions that remind people why they joined this work and why it matters.

Walk-and-talk as a leadership and culture-building tool

When times are tough, the psychological instinct to retreat into silos is natural. To focus on the urgent and forgetting the important. To cut what seems to be 'fluffy' or hard to see the impact of, like mentorships or structured conversation. Yet the UN's success depends on reaching across boundaries, opening spaces for dialogue and connections – also internally.

As a leader, being open and available for short conversations has been proven to be one of the most effective ways to overcome barriers and boundaries. Too simplistic? Actually it's not. Research tells us that one of the most effective ways to foster connection is the Walk-and-Talk: a 15–20-minute conversation (in person or virtual) between colleagues from different units, different countries or experience levels. This exercise nurtures both cohesion and commitment, bridging divides through shared stories. And it helps increase your daily step count.

These walk-and-talks are guided by four simple but powerful questions:

1. What brought you to your profession or this organization?
2. What do you enjoy most about your work?
3. What have you learned from working with colleagues who are newer or more experienced than you?
4. How do you like to spend your time when you're not working?

The first question reawakens purpose and passion, while the third explicitly fosters learning and connection between experienced staff and newcomers.

These authentic exchanges remind us that in the UN's hybrid environment, human connection is the strongest bridge across every boundary, sustaining resilience, commitment, and purpose.

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Potentials and pitfalls of new organizational forms

When hierarchies are flattened, they can enhance well-being and help create workplaces that attract talent. But they can also create uncertainty about where power lies and who decides what. This article explores both sides.

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Flatter, self-managing structures hold real promise for well-being, sustainability, and talent attraction. Yet no form is perfect. Understand the opportunities and pitfalls before you commit.

Potentials

Influence and autonomy
Self-organized teams prioritize work that creates value for customers or citizens and decide who does what and how. Influence grows when people have a say in both decisions and execution.

Social support and shared responsibility
Teams become the central unit; departments and formal boundaries recede. Responsibility is shared, with teams deciding distribution of tasks and contribution norms - strengthening support and connectedness.

Meaning and clear purpose
Purpose becomes the guiding principle. Employees continuously renegotiate goals and methods to align with values and mission - boosting intrinsic motivation and adaptation.

Learning and development
Learning rhythms (retrospectives, peer feedback, reflection sessions) are embedded in daily work, supporting competence, recognition, and growth.

Pitfalls

Leadership power may become ambiguous
Flattening can dilute structural power and blur mandates. While formal hierarchies clearly assign authority and accountability, distributed leadership can leave people asking, “Who decides?”

Responsibility can become boundless
With freedom comes responsibility. Without guardrails, work can become boundaryless, with unclear success criteria and escalating workload. People differ in willingness and capacity to shoulder responsibility; design for variety and support.

Culture and structure may clash
New logics can collide with deeply ingrained hierarchical habits. Many organizations run hybrid models (traditional and new) side-by-side, creating tensions e.g., centralized vs. decentralized decisions; autonomy vs. common direction. Structure shapes culture: define structures and collaboration processes clearly, then build behaviors to inhabit them.

Guardrails for healthier flat organizations

- Decision rights: Publish mandates and escalation paths (RACI-by-theme works well).
- Cadence and WIP limits: Set prioritization rhythms and work-in-progress limits to avoid overload.
- Minimum viable structure: Clarify roles, rituals, metrics, and interfaces.
- Interface design: Manage interactions between “new” and “legacy” units deliberately.
- Culture shaping: State “what we keep / what we change” for legacy practices.
- Learning loops: Build reflection and adaptation into the operating rhythm.

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