




# Leadership training, design thinking and the ethics of care: Comments on Cornel du Toit

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This review article juxtaposes the principles of 'design thinking' and more specifically of human-centred, caring design thinking, with the kind of leadership (between idol and role model), which can achieve the goals of designing products and services that also serve the highest ethical standards for human thriving. The article takes its inspiration from the work of Cornel du Toit, in particular three key ideas from his vast oeuvre. These ideas were, firstly, Du Toit's careful analysis of what technology-with-a-human-face means, secondly his writings about human consciousness as open, emergent and dynamic, and finally, the key role that relationality can play in leadership training for a more hopeful future.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** In this article, these three ideas are reflected on and linked to suggestions for role-model leadership training as part of design thinking education at the tertiary level.

**Keywords:** Cornel du Toit; design thinking; ethics of care; human thriving; leadership; relationality; role-models; technology.

## Introduction

### Background

Universities are turning to the principles of 'design thinking' to add value to graduate skills to foster innovative problem-solving abilities and participatory leadership competencies. Design thinking courses are presented in tandem with leadership and entrepreneurship courses. Brown (2009) defines design thinking as generating holistic, empathic understandings of problems that appreciate that emotions, needs and motivations drive behaviour. Burnett (2016) at the Stanford University's Centre for Professional Development suggests that design thinking involves at least three tenets. Firstly, design thinking starts with discovery, through needs assessment, stakeholder analysis, empathy creation and value clarification. Secondly, designing a product, service or technology follows through creative ideation, experimenting with prototypes and designing for sustainability. Thirdly, the output is delivered through testing, communication, implementation and effective feedback loops so that the cycle can start anew.

Designing any intervention or product is a situated, local act that involves multiple, diverse actors. More importantly, each step in the design cycle requires creative, empathetic leadership. Whitbeck's (1996) notion of 'ethics as design' asks that we consider products and tools (such as learning objectives, curricula, lesson plans, assessments, leadership development, products and services) as having innate ethical and moral implications relating to access, social justice, health and well-being. This innate value-imbuement revealing of 'things' also permeates Du Toit's (2003:180, 2016:1) scholarship concerning speculative realism and the panpsychic (meaning that everything has a mind) appreciation of life forces as flowing through all levels of human interactions and actions. From this, we can deduce that ethical design is the material form of doing ethics (Frauenberger, Rauhala & Fitzpatrick 2016; Verbeek 2011). Ethical design researchers point out that contemporary, high-tech design is explorative, situated and responsive, while much of the ethics that should guide such ventures are still anticipatory and stagnant (Frauenberger et al. 2016).

### Objective

The question that arises is how we leverage design elements to enable entrepreneurial, role-model leadership thinking for future graduates so that they are enabled to tackle complex real-world

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problems in a caring way? In this regard, Du Toit (2003, 2005, 2019) suggests that all technology must be subjected to careful reflection on context, empathy, action and power relations, and leads to the first lesson from this scholar's work, namely the possibility of technology-with-a-human-face.

## Discussion

### Technology-with-a-human face and leadership considerations

'Caring design' intersects relational and responsive dimensions in design thinking by avoiding disembodied, ahistorical design thinking and top-down leadership. Leadership is a nebulous concept and becomes increasingly difficult to define in a fast-changing landscape. Mango (2018) tells us that there are no less than 66 theories of leadership and that this overcrowded subfield suffers from neophiliac tendencies. Brey (2017) suggests that we often judge leadership in design only *post hoc* when witnessing the negative externalities of the innovation, for example when it leads to ecological harm, deeper interpersonal alienation, the commodification of issues, crude accumulation, or the subservience of people in a consumer culture. To look at the leadership demands for ethical, caring design, we then need to analyse what caring design for well-being and the highest socio-environmental good would entail, and this is where Du Toit's (2003) technology-with-a-human face is most illuminating.

Du Toit (2003:173–175) posits that technology is imbued with values, but that such values are mutable, generational, contextual, multiple and complex. He aptly surmises that the relentless march of technology renders us 'comfortably secure' and 'in control of our destiny' (Du Toit 2002:175, 2005:830) while simultaneously warning that the responsible scholar should interrogate such illusionary security for all its externalities, including endless cycles of extraction and commercialisation that may render 'a person herself...part of this standing reserve (objectification), as a resource esteemed only for her potential contribution to the technological process' (Du Toit 2003:176).

Crane (2022) suggests that we should link human thriving in such a technological flux to eudaimonic leadership, guided by the ideal of living well and acting well. Eudaimonic leadership would then need to balance four elements. Firstly, it requires a learning mindset and organisational culture that asks *how* and *what* we learn from each other and from others outside our group. Secondly, it demands a value clarification by articulating an end goal that is explicitly linked to what we *need to become* to enable human thriving. Thirdly, it expects the ability to set deliverables for people's potential fulfilment by reflecting on what we *strive towards*. Fourthly, it requires ensuring authenticity through continuous ethos building. These four requirements can be juxtaposed with Du Toit's (2003:177) dire warning that technology cannot reflect on its own relentless size, speed and violences, but that reflections by humans as creators and/or creatures of technology can allow us a deceleration, or pause, to

rethink the ethos undergirding the technology. This leads to the next point, namely that personhood and consciousness transcend technology.

### Personhood and consciousness as irreducible to our technology

Du Toit (2003:180–181) describes an Afrocentric ontology as possessing a deep understanding that health, healing and the avoidance of extreme alienation hinge on respecting a process of social and interpersonal restoration and communal interdependence. From this, we can deduce that empathetic leadership for 'caring design' aligns closely with the notion of a leader as a role model with the kind of leadership agility that is adaptive and leaning towards servant leadership by offering learning-by-doing examples and opportunities. Role-model leadership of this cadre is further away from the notion of a leader-as-idol that is chiefly based on admiration because of unrealistic expectations about the idol's virtues, skills, extraordinary abilities, or opportunities to single-handedly save the organisation, community or society (Ellinger 2013; Meyer & Meijer 2018).

A key element in role-model, empathetic leadership is guidance during a crisis. When people, groups or an organisation face a crisis or calamity, the resultant stress, anxiety and pressure to act can lead to reactive, short-term goal setting and unethical decision-making to contain any risks and maximise gains (Crane 2022). The way in which the leader frames the crisis is therefore critically important. Positive framing of the crisis demands that the role-model leader presents the challenge as an opportunity to gain experience and for much-needed change, thereby empowering others to become architects of purpose (Carton 2018). Here, Du Toit (2019) helpfully pauses to suggest that we are not the victims of technological change, or biological machines waiting to be outperformed by artificial intelligence (AI). Instead, the crux of the issue lies in the changes in epochs of thinking that have rendered a situation where (Du Toit 2005):

[W]e have become used to finding certainty and truth in abstract subjectivity and we find it difficult to reconcile the emotional and corporeal dimensions of being human with the rational dimension. (p. 838)

Ladkin (2017) suggests that the plasticity demands of role-model leadership imply that context and circumstance would require just-in-time, situated judgements and fit-for-purpose leadership that goes beyond knee-jerk reactions. Relying solely on reactive leadership can create a situation where we have too many leaders and not enough leadership, leading to stagnation or all talk and no action. Bertrand Russell (1996) reminds us that we can learn to live with uncertainty without becoming paralysed by it. Du Toit (2019, 2005) suggests that we should ask what kind of world we want to create with our technology, which leads seamlessly to the next point on ethos-building.

## Relationality as constant value clarification and ethos-building

Another key feature in role-model, empathetic leadership is to ensure value clarification as to what human well-being and thriving entail. In this regard, Du Toit (2019:7–9) acknowledges that we constantly create illusionary self-images, struggling to fully grasp our subconsciousness, as we battle with the flawed recall-cum-immediacy of memory that guides our decision-making in an ineffable unfolding that orients us to an uncertain future. At the same time, he suggests that a solution is on hand in our capacity for dialogue to embrace the emergent quality of value clarification. Du Toit (2005) explains:

The integrity of the human person is a perpetual challenge which refers to the way we assume values in order to make sense out of our lives. This inevitably gives our lives narrative form, enabling us to orient ourselves to the good (the values we hold): narrative, culturally and historically rooted, unified by tradition and community, a *sine qua non* of both identity and moral spiritual life. (p. 844)

Drawing on all these ideas, leadership of this role-model variety for caring design would then stress the leader's own mindset of growth, meaningful engagements, sharing, cultivating optimism, nurturing relationships and practising kindness (Crane 2022; Ruitenberg & Desmet 2012). Following eudaimonism, it would entail value clarification of well-being and thriving as the outcomes of three steps. Firstly, purposefully seeking opportunities to gain experience, develop and grow by creating and fostering a learning environment. Secondly, removing any obstacles in the way of empowerment. Thirdly, foregrounding the social significance of the design's contribution to society that goes beyond mutual benefit to get to altruism and to reach a transfer of ownership of the service or product (Ellinger 2013; Turban & Yan 2016).

Our experience of the contemporary world inundates us with examples of leaders that may be so deeply embedded in a particular network, at the expense of being marginal to other networks, that the ethos becomes utterly self-serving and morally corrupt. Trade-offs in social capital-building to keep cronies happy can engender mutual destruction packs when an unethical leader brokers deals that turn a blind eye to the transgressions of supporters in return for their continued patronage. Leadership built on such shaky grounds must increasingly use repressive ways to distribute the scarce socio-economic advantages available to sycophantic followers and disburse these sparingly only when the obedient followers allow themselves to be stripped of their own basic rights to critique the leadership or hold them to account. Active ethos-building responds to Bentley's (2013) comment regarding Du Toit's exposition of truth claims as allowing for deep understanding to grow out of 'respectfully engaging with a diverse world'. Ethos-building is therefore an embodied, intrinsic act that must grow and change with each new challenge and subject itself humbly to the principle of 'Quis custodiet ipsos custodes'. Moreover, ethos-building

must be evaluated, because Du Toit (2014:6–9) says that we interact through our emotions with the world to unlock our potential for intellectual courage, generosity, wonderment and excitement.

For any learning culture to operate, leaders would need to be open to critical feedback, also because any theory of moral reasoning (or put differently, the answers to the question as to what is ethical or the highest moral good) must remain fallible and open to revision. In Du Toit's (2016:9) lexicon, such openness helps 'convert possibles into actuals' in a participatory, panpsychic interaction between mind and matter, human and non-human, people, technology and thought. Shanker and Sayeed (2012) refer to this as transformational leadership that empowers others to innovate without fear. They opine that the basis is empathetic understanding, modelling, coaching, mentoring, rethinking old ways and openness to feedback.

Being open to feedback to empower others means acknowledging the notion that responsible judgement depends on dialogue (Arendt 1971). Du Toit's (2016) work on consciousness, emotion and technology demonstrates how the slow, difficult processes to interpret, communicate and translate inner, interpersonal and technological selves demand transformational, deliberate, reflective practice. Truly transformational role-model leaders value freedom, justice and human dignity to turn followers into leaders (Ciulla 2012:526). They demonstrate these ideals normatively through their actions, communication styles, decision-making and reinforcement (Brown, Treviño & Harrison 2005:120). The role-model leader would need to demonstrate ethical decision-making in both private and public spheres.

## Training for leadership in an ethics of care

The preceding thoughts bring us to a contemplation of what this implies for an ethics of caring design and how we can train for leadership of such processes. The leadership dimension is crucial, because Ciulla (2012) says that in leadership, ethics get magnified. In the early 1980s already, Gilligan (1982:19) alerted leadership researchers to the fact that the moral problems stem from conflicting responsibilities instead of from competing rights, and that this requires a deep consideration of context, story, responsibilities and relationships. Since then, further development of the ethics of care scholarship covers key tenets such as relationality, compassion, responsiveness and connection. Du Toit (2016), while also championing the potentiality of relationality to foster such skills, wrestles with the fluid, plasmatic (meaning formative) nature of our techno-human reality, bringing his work close to the New Materialism of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad that is based on an open understanding of 'being' as implicated in the dynamic complexity of the power-knowledge nexus. Du Toit (2005, 2016) seems to have foreshadowed the moment where we realise that our understanding of what it means to be human is intrinsically linked to the technology of our times.

What does this imply for an ethics of care? MacGregor Burns (2004) suggests that three types of ethics of care present themselves in leadership. Firstly, *ethical virtues* suggest that the role-model leader should be seen to act ethically. If, for example, the leader demands observance of office presence, yet constantly allows himself to disobey, then the dissonance between what is proclaimed and what is expected results in role-model leadership failure. The issue of ethical virtues for the leader, however, brings up the difficulty as to whether the modern workplace hires for perceived character and train for skills or *vice versa* – hire for skills and attempt ethical leadership later. This is a deeper dilemma than what we can imagine, especially if the forces of change suggest that leadership is known for its ability to achieve results, not for its efforts to remain ethical. Secondly, *ethical values* demand that the role-model leader must understand the contextual rules of ethical conduct. Thirdly, *moral values* imply that the role-model leader should champion a communal sense of justice and equity. Ciulla (2003:xv) explains that ‘leadership is not a person or a position. It is a complex moral relationship between people based on trust, obligation, commitment, and a shared vision of the good’. Du Toit (2019:10) echoes this idea when he declares that our self-transcending abilities make ‘us more than any well-programmed machine’.

## Implications and recommendations

Du Toit (2014:9) offers a solution for the stated leadership for caring design needs in his descriptions of relational, authentic togetherness, suggesting that a return to a deep appreciation of wonderment and mystique can restore and preserve life-affirming ways of knowing, so that we are not ‘doomed to carry on dancing without joy, to laugh without delight, to worship without faith’. To develop caring design leadership skills, students should be allowed to practise specific participatory methods. Examples of such approaches include empathy mapping, brainstorming for radical collaboration, communication for change, Ubuntu and Buen Vivir learning and Badura’s guided mastery (Association for Talent Development 2020; Dladla 2017; Gray 2017; Lambdin 2022; Lewington 2022). A cutting-edge philosophical mind like Du Toit would probably have added to this mix further knowledge-creation adventures into diffractive (meaning complexity and entanglement) methods and rhizomatic analysis (meaning profoundly interconnected networks). Although we are denied such a conversation with him, the message from his work remains a call to all scholars to challenge worn assumptions and to allow for alongside learning as we embrace new technologies and the demand for design thinking.

## Conclusion

Role-model leadership is needed for caring design thinking that successfully manages social relationships, technology and processes to achieve meaningful, flourishing, sustainable human and ecological futures. This article builds on the

ideas that punctuated some of Du Toit’s scholarship about technology, being, emotion and the need for participatory approaches. The potential constructive collaboration between role-model leadership research and ethical design training is substantial. In bringing ethical design perspectives to bear on leadership, this paper attempts to draw attention to the importance of human connections that undergird some of Du Toit’s work.

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G.E.d.P. is the sole author of this research article.

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