



## Flat Army

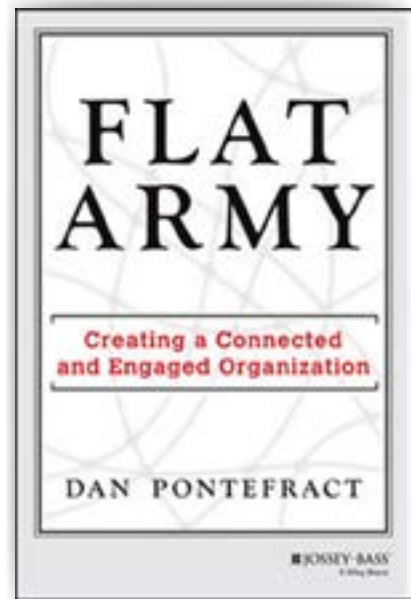
### *Creating a Connected and Engaged Organization*

Dan Pontefract

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## KEY CONCEPTS

- Employees are generally disengaged from the work they do and the organizations for which they do it. Work disengagement springs from the traditional hierarchical style of management that views workers as the “brawn” to managements “brains.”
- The historical roots of employee disengagement stem from the British charter companies of the 16th century, the European armies of the 18th century, and the Scientific Management ideas that shaped American companies in the late 19th century.
- “Connected leaders” break down traditional hierarchy in favor of a flat organizational structure. They treat employees as complete human beings and connections are encouraged across all levels and work areas.
- The connected leader trusts their employees, involves and empowers them, empathizes with them, and helps them develop their careers. A key aspect of all of these traits is consistent and open communications with all team members.
- The traits of the connected leader begin as behaviors that they must practice and exercise daily until they are habit. Eventually, the connected leader moves beyond merely practicing these attributes to truly living them.
- Participative leadership requires continual, authentic, and reciprocal interactions with team members and the leader’s wider internal and external network. Education is a key component of the Participative Leader Framework and must be practiced consciously and formally.
- The “Action Model” for the collaborative, or connected-participative, leader begins with connecting to all stakeholders and weighing their input. Next, the model calls for the leader to communicate a plan of action to all stakeholders, and then become immersed in executing that plan. The leader confirms with stakeholders that they are satisfied with the result and then congratulates all involved by focusing on the behaviors they brought to the project to make it successful.

- To truly benefit from the Flat Army philosophy, one must embrace Web 2.0 technologies for conversation, education, and network presence.

## INTRODUCTION

Studies show that the majority of workers to be disengaged from their work and their organizations. To truly engage employees, Dan Pontefract believes companies need to adopt a “Flat Army Philosophy.” In his book **Flat Army**, the author argues that leaders need to surrender command and control in favor of a more open and inclusive style of leadership. When they seek out authentic connections with their teams and come to understand work as an important but not existential endeavor, these leaders become truly connected and therefore profoundly effective. Such connected leaders make ample use of social media and other technologies to deepen connections across their organizations. The result is a self-generating, perpetually learning, dynamically balanced enterprise that is a pleasure both to lead and to work for.

### THE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT FOUNDATION

Open, collaborative leadership assembles engaged employees into an effective armada, or army, moving toward a common goal. Engaged workers—people who actually want to be working at their job—are the building blocks of this “flat army.” Studies show that most employees are disengaged from work, so an organization with engaged employees enjoys a competitive advantage.

Engagement is increasingly important today as millennials and subsequent digitally-native generations accustomed to social networking technologies join the labor force, but it still remains a fuzzy concept. Some experts even question its impact on job performance. Pontefract sides with those experts who consider engagement the cornerstone of high-performing organizations. He defines employee engagement as a state of reciprocal trust between worker and leader. This kind of engagement can reduce staff turnover significantly and ensure that workers go the extra mile for customers. Disengagement is not merely passive; it can actively threaten an organization when employees voice feelings of detachment to customers and the media.

## WHY ARE THERE NOT MORE FLAT ARMIES ALREADY?

The pervasive disengagement in modern corporations flows from the top-down approach that remains stubbornly common in today’s organizations. This disengagement remains even with evidence that leaders succeed when they cultivate and coordinate workers rather than try to command and control them. The command-and-control model has deep historical roots in government and industry.

One clear source is the British monarchy that chartered the world’s first corporations in the 17th century. Royal charters such as the East India Company were monopolies that made fortunes for their investors by keeping far-flung global enterprise on a short leash. By the 19th century, European nations used the riches from such overseas adventures to fight European wars using armies that were the very model of hierarchy. Industrialization came next along with the attendant rise of scientific management; a school of thought in which workers are mere unthinking cogs in a highly structured machine. Throughout the 20th century, corporations continued to operate by these models.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about the author and subject:

[www.danpontefract.com](http://www.danpontefract.com)

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## DEFINING A CONNECTED LEADER

The connected leader does not hold court in their corner office. They park themselves in the center of activity, demonstrating openness to anyone who has an idea to share. If the top leader is openly engaged with others to execute a coordinated and harmonious outcome, leaders at every level will follow suit and openness will become part of an organization's culture. Leaders cannot demand collaboration from those below them while they themselves remain aloof.

The connected leader and the Connected Leader Attributes (CLAs) are the first of a three-part Flat Army Philosophy. Part two, the Participative Leader Framework (PLF) emphasizes the actions leaders must take in terms of two target audiences. The Collaborative Leadership Action Model (CLAM), part three, is a three-step process of results-driven collaboration.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dan Pontefract** is the Head of Learning & Collaboration at TELUS ([www.telus.com](http://www.telus.com)). He is responsible for the overarching leadership development, learning and collaboration strategy for the company. He has driven a philosophical and cultural shift in the way TELUS views and experiences learning. Called "Learning 2.0", it's a social, informal and formal learning and collaboration model for all 40,000+ team members, bringing TELUS to the forefront of learning leadership. Dan also championed the introduction of the TELUS Leadership Philosophy (TLP), an open and collaborative-based leadership framework for all TELUS team members, alongside a litany of social collaboration technologies.

When he's not cycling, he's goofing around with Denise, Claire, Cole and Cate. You can reach him at [www.danpontefract.com](http://www.danpontefract.com).

The fifteen CLAs begin with five "becoming" attributes, default leadership behaviors to set the right tone:

- Trusting
- Involving
- Empathizing
- Developing
- Communicating

*We need to move together as an organization. Leadership doesn't come from one, it comes from all. That is why the word "flat" comes in front of army. Flat denotes togetherness.*

These are like the roots of a giant sequoia which must be in place before the tree can ever be expected to stretch skyward.

"Being" attributes are those functional attributes that allow the leader to work in a collaborative team that still operates efficiently. These are:

- Analyzing
- Deciding
- Delivering
- Cooperating
- Clowning

Third are the "beyond" attributes that enable transformation into a magnanimous and all-seeing leader. Moving beyond a connected leader takes:

- Coaching
- Measuring
- Adapting
- Exploring
- Bettering

Pontefract imagines the PLF as an enormous traffic circle. In the traffic circle are both collective and individual goals brought with strategy and compassion by workers (drivers) who must both learn from and contribute to the whole.

The CLAM presents a default mode for leaders to interact with employees, teams, partners, and customers. It aligns heterarchy, which is the opposite of

hierarchy, with the vertical power structures sometimes necessary to confront discreet challenges.

These three elements, the CLA, PLF, and CLAM add together to create the Flat Army Philosophy. Each is considered in turn.

### THE FIVE “BECOMING” ATTRIBUTES

Becoming a connected leader begins with the *trusting* attribute. A leader learns to trust by listening to the viewpoints of others while being transparent in their own views and actions. Actions speak louder than words, and too much talk and inconsistency of message can paralyze an organization. Also, mistakes happen, so the leader should encourage them as learning opportunities.

*We should all strive for a culture of borderless collegiality, and it is an aim of this book to show you how it can be done. It will leave a much more promising legacy than what our ancestors have passed down to us.*

*Involving* others helps one become a connected leader as well. A leader should encourage even reticent team members to provide input. The leader should go further still by breaking down any barriers to inclusion from all parties.

*Empathizing* begins with an open office door and truly listening for feedback to ensure that others see the leader’s vision. A leader empathizes when they admit their own mistakes and troubles, giving employees the freedom to do the same. Employees are more than ID numbers, and work will always be there tomorrow if time is needed today to respond to pressing personal or familial concerns.

*Developing* is the attribute of helping all employees develop in their careers—ultimately to move on to bigger and better things even if those better things are outside the organization.

The fifth becoming attribute, *communicating*, means being both clear and concise in all of one’s verbal and written communications. One must communicate the same message in multiple ways and be sure to listen for feedback.

### THE FIVE “BEING” ATTRIBUTES

To be a connected leader one must *analyze* data holis-

tically. Again, the leader must be open, aware of multiple possible answers and of those elements of the problem that quantitative analysis cannot capture. Analysis leads to *deciding*, the second connected-leader attribute. A holistic look at the data should be matched by an inclusive approach to all decisions. Ultimately, however, the leader may have to make the call without consensus.

To *deliver* the results arising from decisions, a leader should use SMART objectives that ensure clarity. These will keep track of time frames and budgets, ensure accountability, and identify underperformers.

*Cooperating* as a connected leader means treating your team as just that—a group working together toward a common goal. The competition is other firms, not one’s own.

Lastly, *clowning* will improve cooperation, team functioning, and outcomes. Being overly serious or working till midnight reduces effectiveness. Connected leaders make time for games and are willing to laugh at their own expense.

### THE FIVE “BEYOND” ATTRIBUTES

The leader who moves beyond being connected starts with *coaching*. They coach staff through a broad spectrum of methods and nurture them in an honest relationship rather than simply as part of an employment contract. Coaching happens at all times, in every interaction, so one must have a system for recording these interactions and reviewing them regularly.

Similarly, *measuring* takes the connected leader beyond analyzing. This kind of leader creates SMART goals that are quantitative and qualitative, while remaining mindful of possible constraints and the humanity of their workers.

*Exploring* is another attribute of someone who has moved beyond being a connected leader. It means relating to people from different parts of the firm as well as outside of it. Reciprocity demands that a beyond leader explore others outside their comfort zone and allow those other people to explore the leader’s own space as well. In the same way, one who has moved beyond connected leadership is *adapting*. They embrace uncertainty and the inevitability of change.



Finally, one who has become a connected leader by *developing* moves beyond by *bettering*. This means openly encouraging team members to see other career opportunities and chances for growth. The connected leader may conduct performance reviews; the bettering leader reviews performance continually and interactively.

### A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

The Participative Leader Framework (PLF) calls for everyone within the organization to learn to “say it forward.” The author draws on the concept of *paying it forward*, the requirement in a loan that the recipient later do the same thing for another needy soul, again with the stipulation that the loaning continue. The idea is to leverage the initial capital, or in this framework, the shared knowledge, so that it will have the widest possible impact. The second part of the framework is *guanxi*, a Chinese word for a wide network, one that extends beyond the typical idea of a professional network. A participative leader taps *guanxis* regularly and encourages their team members to do the same. Third is *autopoiesis*, the concept of self-generation. In the PLF an organization becomes self-maintaining and perpetuating. Its collaborative nature allows it to be self-regulating and therefore more efficient and consistent.

The fourth PLF concept draws on the idea of *neighbor networks*. Although even a decade ago it might have been useful to have one’s own secondary and tertiary connections within a network, today the advent of LinkedIn, Facebook, and other cyber-networking tools make these connections less valuable. Instead, the PLF calls for finding individuals who the author describes as “direct-contact juggernauts,” people with the right primary connections to reach the objective at hand.

Taken together, these four elements create a new way for the leader to envision the organization. With this new vision, the leader can begin to demonstrate CARE: continuous, authentic, reciprocal, and educating behaviors. To be continuous means to have the right rhythm of action. A leader cannot put off coaching, for example, simply because a deadline is at hand.

Authenticity must infuse every aspect of the leader’s persona so that they exist as a whole person for others. Reciprocity means being responsive to everyone, and educating means being committed to teaching. This last behavior must be intentional and formal.

### COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

The PLF leads to the CLAM—the Collaborative Leader Action Model. According to the model, every project starts not with action but with *connecting* to all of the potential stakeholders. Those stakeholders are brought into the brainstorming sessions, the *consider* step at which the project begins to take shape. As the project proceeds, the leader must *communicate* progress and problems to all stakeholders. The *create* phase of the model is the actual implementation stage where outcomes are essential. Leaders must immerse themselves in the project but use SMART goals to avoid micro-managing the team. Next, the leader *confirms* the output with all of the stakeholders by debriefing them formally alongside the team. Finally, there is time to *congratulate*. Before the party, however, the leader should be sure to congratulate behaviors as well as outcomes. In other words, this is an opportunity for positive and constructive feedback to the entire team, feedback that focuses on how the best elements of their work might be replicated in the future.

*To become a connected leader, someone operating in the harmonious zone, there are five attributes in particular that leaders might want to start shouting in unison: build trust, involvement and empathy, and develop and communicate. These attributes are the foundation of our Flat Army concept.*

### PERPETUAL, PERVASIVE LEARNING

The Flat Army Philosophy holds that learning has moved from a discreet activity that happens only in classrooms and at conferences to a pervasive activity that occurs formally, informally, and socially.

Formal, classroom-type learning continues to make up a third of the learning within the Flat Army. Of course it happens more and more online through eLearning techniques rather than in traditional classrooms. Informal learning, which involves opportunistic guidance, inspiration, and the transmittal of

expertise and skill, is another third of the learning.

*The Collaborative Leader Action Model is an action process for leaders and employees alike to become more collaborative in their projects, actions and decisions. It is nonhierarchical and can act as an interaction manifesto between members of all walks of the organization and applies to any type of opportunity.*

Social learning, a new category, makes up the final third of the pervasive learning pie. Pontefract defines social learning as an exchange of ideas, knowledge, and information over the internet. This learning is distinct from the formal online education and training described above. It provides understanding through personal and professional networks using tools such as wikis, micro-blogging, and discussion boards.

### THE WEB 2.0 TOOLS OF THE FLAT ARMY LEADER

Pontefract believes strongly in the power of social learning, which he divides into *converse*, *contents*, and *context*. There are several useful conversations in the social learning space. Micro-blogging, commonly equated with Twitter but including internal organization platforms such as Yammer and Sharetronix, enables the formation of a human-centered corporate culture. Instant messaging serves a similar purpose, but includes the idea of presence. By leaving their IM clients open at all times with flags that let teammates know if they are available for a chat, the kind of collaboration usually associated with close proximity can happen across great distances. Participative leaders of a Flat Army also use comments and discussions to make communications—and hence corporate cultures—more personal. When a leader enters comments, they demonstrate that they have read and engaged the material.

In addition to conversation tools, Social Learning includes tools to generate content such as wikis, video sharing, and blogs. Wikis are made in the Flat Army mold because anyone can view and edit them. Rather than top-down messaging, they provide a collaborative way to generate and store collective knowledge. Although generally associated with Wikipedia, an internal or project-specific wiki can be a useful Flat Army tool. Video sharing and blogs also fit into the content category. Blogging especially requires a con-

sistent, authentic commitment to pervasive learning. One blog post does not a Flat Army leader make.

The third element of Social Learning is context, which refers to networking. Internet tools such as personal profiles let others see the collaborative leader while the leader can use search tools to develop a network from the profiles of others in turn. Tagging and rating online content helps build the network as well. Finally, badges serve to highlight credentials in the same way formal degrees and accreditation do. They help create networks of expertise.

### LEADING THE FLAT ARMY IN ACTION

To illustrate the Flat Army philosophy in action, the author considers eight organizations that embody the Flat Army Philosophy or show how failing to embrace such a philosophy prevents them from achieving their best.

The National Health Service (NHS) is one of the UK's most cherished institutions, celebrated at the 2012 London Olympics. The NHS provides universal health care for English citizens, as do counterparts in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Yet of the 1.2 million employees, about half are in supporting or infrastructure support roles. As a result, perhaps, the NHS has a top-down management strategy. Its managers are rewarded for laying down challenging quantitative targets and then meeting them. Recent reports have found that staff is not engaged fully because of this command-and-control approach. These reports give hope that a "Flat Army NHS" may be in the works.

The example of media company CTVglobemedia, Inc., shows the value of pervasive learning. In 2007, CTV let one of its most experienced and well-connected music producers go. The firing itself suggests the company's leadership lacks openness. Also, without the benefit of pervasive learning, the fired producer carried his expert knowledge and extensive network out the door with him. Had up-and-coming producers been learning pervasively along the way, that knowledge would have become institutional knowledge as a matter of course.

Research In Motion, the Canadian maker of BlackBerry devices serves as another example the dangers of closed leadership. The company once dominated the market for smart phones, but it did so by engaging corporate customers who then provided the technology to their employees. RIM management failed to grasp the changes in the smart phone marketplace that opened the field to players marketing directly to employees. Its resulting troubles are well known.

In contrast, the Japanese conglomerate Hitachi demonstrates how a Flat Army succeeds. Hitachi recognizes that leadership is for all and enjoys leadership operating in the Participative Leader Framework, using the CLAM, and Pervasive Learning, and using the kind of collaborative information technologies championed by the author. Similarly, Zappos made the Flat Army Philosophy part of its corporate culture at its inception. The founders began with the premise that everything—brand, customer service, and employee engagement—all flow from the corporate culture. Not only has this understanding and the Flat Army Philosophy of Zappos made it wildly successful—revenues have climbed from \$1.6 million in 2000 to over \$2 billion today—but also it has put the company on Fortune’s list of the 100 best companies for which to work.

Finally, the author outlines bringing the Flat Army Philosophy to TELUS, a Canadian telecommunications provider. Here the emphasis is on collaborative technologies such as wikis, blogs, and even gaming to implement and sustain the Flat Army Philosophy. Another key has been creating a corporate culture that embraces “leadership for all.” A similar story plays out at Canada’s Scotiabank, where a sustained commitment to developing leaders throughout the far-flung corporation has helped it embrace the Flat Army Philosophy.

### FROM WORKER ENGAGEMENT TO A FLAT ARMY CULTURE

Creating a Flat Army begins with the problem of employee engagement but it ends with a thriving organizational culture. The Flat Army Philosophy measures a corporate culture by the extent to which it engages its employees. The manner in which the direct leader treats those workers defines the culture.

Building such a culture successfully can be a two or three-year process, and a connected leader can institute individual pieces in sequence. In every case, however, the process begins with a self assessment according to the fifteen CLAs. A similar assessment follows for the team using the CLAM. Finally, an organization-wide look at Pervasive Learning and the use of Collaboration Technologies gives a baseline from which to build these frameworks.



## FEATURES OF THE BOOK

**Estimated Reading Time: 7–8 hours, 314 pages**

**Flat Army** would be best read by leaders who want to improve performance by creating a more humane and engaging workplace. It provides a philosophy of management that can either inform the reader’s understanding of current practice or help guide them toward a new, non-hierarchical way of leading a team. The tone is conversational, replete with analogies and anecdotes to illustrate the author’s ideas. It is best read cover to cover.

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