



Titles, Trees, and the Quiet Work of Institutions: An Ecological Reflection on Rank, Service, and the Human Need for Substance

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Abstract

Modern institutions often celebrate titles, ranks, honours, and ceremonial recognition as markers of success. While such symbols may serve administrative and cultural functions, they may also generate emotional distance, hierarchy anxiety, and misplaced attention when detached from meaningful service. This reflective commentary examines the tension between symbolic elevation and practical contribution through ecological metaphors, institutional theory, and systems thinking. Drawing from ecology, organizational studies, and governance scholarship, this paper argues that healthy institutions resemble functioning ecosystems where unseen processes such as nutrient cycling, mutualism, resilience, justice, and balance matter more than decorative display. Trees are sustained not by their tallest leaves but by roots, fungi, soil microbes, and water flow. Likewise, organizations endure through trust, fairness, competence, care, and adaptive governance rather than titles alone. This commentary reflects on the emotional experience of observing status amplification within formal systems while ordinary workers continue the quiet labour that sustains the whole. It proposes that genuine leadership is measured less by nomenclature and more by whether people feel supported, heard, and enabled to grow. In this sense, the deepest authority is not proclaimed but experienced.

Keywords: Leadership; Hierarchy; Ecology; Institutions; Symbolism; Governance

Introduction

There are moments in institutional life that seem small on the surface yet reveal larger truths beneath. A formal announcement, a ceremonial adjustment, a change in how one must address another person, or the multiplication of honorific language can provoke reflection beyond administration itself. Such moments ask a deeper question: What gives a person influence, dignity, or legitimacy within a community?

Human societies have long used symbols to organize status. Titles can recognize achievement, define responsibility, or facilitate protocol. In moderation, these functions are understandable. Yet, when symbolic rank grows louder than everyday service, some observers experience discomfort. They sense that attention is shifting from roots to branches, from substance to display, from stewardship to theatre.

Ecology offers a powerful lens for understanding this tension. In nature, visibility does not always equal importance. The tallest tree depends on invisible fungal networks, decomposers recycling nutrients, pollinators transferring life, and watersheds that quietly sustain the system [1]. What appears grand above ground may be entirely dependent on processes below ground.

Recent scholarship also views institutions themselves as ecological systems that occupy physical, symbolic, temporal, and social spaces, where proximity to centres of power often determines access to resources and influence [2]. This insight helps explain why symbolic adjustments inside organizations can evoke strong emotional responses. They are rarely only about words. They are about space, distance, belonging, and power.

This commentary reflects on titles, authority, and emotional distance through ecological understanding. It is written not from hostility toward recognition, but from concern that institutions may sometimes overvalue symbols while undervaluing the people and processes that keep them alive.

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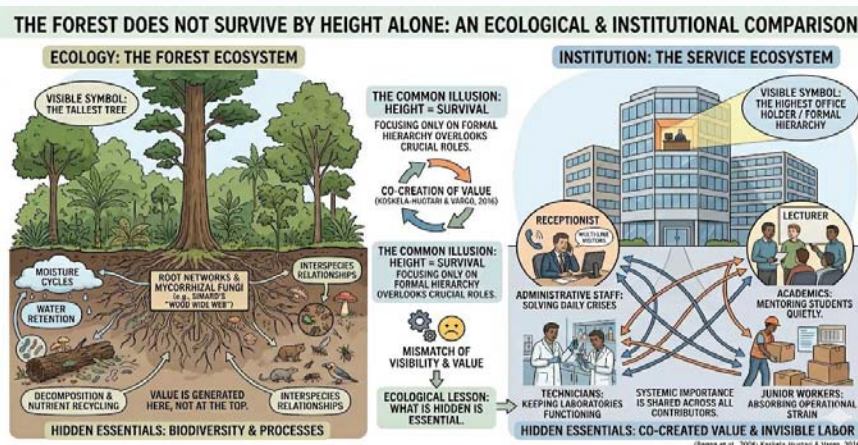


Figure 1: The Ecological and Institutional Ecosystems: A Comparative Analysis of Height versus Systemic Essentials.

Note: This diagram is generated using Google Gemini.

The Forest Does Not Survive by Height Alone

Figure 1 illustrates the structural similarities between a forest ecosystem and a service ecosystem (a university). In the forest (left), the focus is often on the tallest tree as the most visible and symbolic element, yet ecologists demonstrate that true sustainability depends on complex "hidden essentials" like biodiversity, root networks, soil fertility, decomposition, and moisture cycles [3]. These underground processes are analogous to the "invisible labour" that sustains an institution.

On the right side of Figure 1, the university service ecosystem mirrors this dynamic. While the central administration is the visible symbol of formal hierarchy, the "hidden essentials" that allow for value co-creation are the daily interactions of receptionists, lecturers, technicians, and junior workers. Service ecosystem theory posits that value is not created by a single, prominent actor (like a university president or CEO), but through a wide and complex network of interactions among many diverse contributors embedded within institutional structures [4]. Therefore, all of these hidden roles hold equal systemic importance for the survival and functioning of the organization.

In many forests, the tallest tree captures attention. It dominates the skyline, receives photographs, and becomes the visible symbol of the landscape. Yet ecologists know that height alone does not sustain the forest. Survival depends on biodiversity, soil fertility, root networks, decomposition, moisture cycles, and interspecies relationships [3].

An institution can fall into the same illusion. It may focus heavily on formal hierarchy while overlooking administrative staff who solve daily crises, academics who mentor students quietly, technicians who keep laboratories functioning, and junior workers who absorb operational strain. These are the soil organisms of the institutional ecosystem. They are rarely celebrated, yet collapse would be swift without them.

The emotional frustration many people feel in hierarchical settings often comes from this mismatch between visibility and value. Public symbols may be amplified while silent labour remains unnoticed. Ecology teaches that what is hidden is often what is essential.

Studies on service ecosystems similarly argue that value is co-created not by one visible actor but through interactions among

many contributors embedded within institutional structures [4]. In that sense, the receptionist, clerk, lecturer, cleaner, lab assistant, and support officer may all carry as much systemic importance as the most publicly visible office holder.

Plumage, Display, and the Cost of Over-Signalling

Figure 2 illustrates the evolutionary trade-offs of signalling, where biological ornaments like bright feathers or elaborate calls - used to signal fitness and establish territory - demand significant energy that is diverted from other survival needs [5]. In a biological context, a bird with vibrant plumage but weak flight illustrates the "fragility of over-signalling," where the display remains impressive but the underlying capability is compromised.

The right side of Figure 2 applies this metaphor to institutional settings, where grand offices, excessive protocols, and symbolic hierarchy function as status displays. When these symbols become detached from actual contribution, they can "pollute" the organizational environment by eroding morale and discouraging the upward feedback necessary for sound decision-making. As noted in higher education research, excessive performance rituals can weaken authentic learning relationships and contaminate the trust essential for a resilient system [6]. Ultimately, the diagram suggests that an institution rich in symbols but poor in listening remains as vulnerable as the over-ornamented bird.

In biology, many species display ornaments such as bright feathers, enlarged antlers, or elaborate calls. Such traits may signal fitness, attract mates, or establish territory [5]. Yet signalling carries cost. Energy spent on display is energy not spent elsewhere.

Human institutions also signal. Grand offices, formal titles, excessive protocol, layers of deference, and symbolic distance can all function as status displays. Some signalling is inevitable. The problem emerges when signalling becomes detached from contribution.

If members of an organization feel that image receives more investment than welfare, morale can erode. If symbolic hierarchy discourages honest upward feedback, decision quality may decline. If people obey rank rather than reason, learning slows. A bird with bright plumage but weak flight is still vulnerable. Likewise, an institution rich in symbols but poor in listening remains fragile.

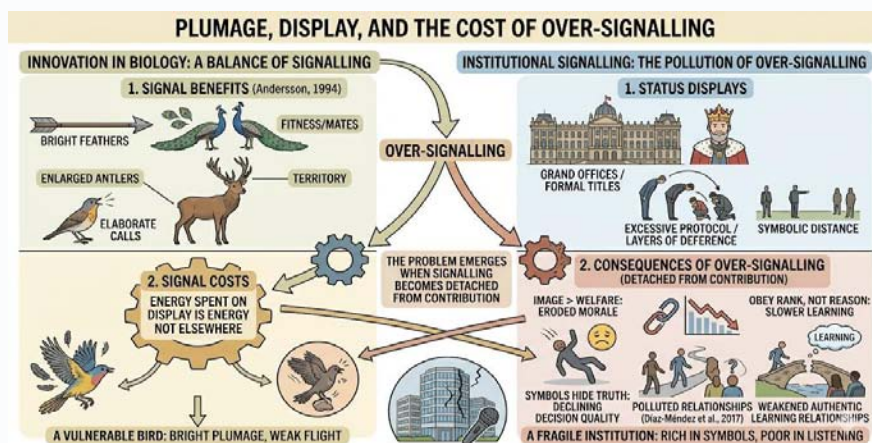


Figure 2: Plumage, Display, and the Cost of Over-Signalling: Biological and Institutional Vulnerabilities.

Note: This diagram is generated using Google Gemini.

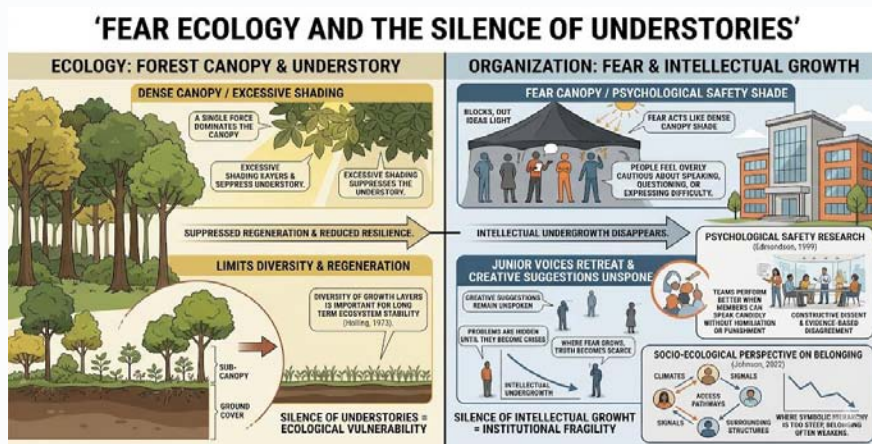


Figure 3: Fear Ecology and the Silence of Understories: A Comparative Ecosystem Analysis of Shading and Silence.

Note: This diagram is generated using Google Gemini.

Research in higher education service environments has shown that organizational systems can become polluted not only materially but relationally, where formal procedures and performance rituals weaken authentic learning relationships [6]. The metaphor is apt: excessive symbolic emissions may contaminate trust.

Fear Ecology and the Silence of Understories

Figure 3 visualizes the structural and dynamic parallels between a forest ecosystem facing a loss of diversity due to canopy dominance (left) and an organization experiencing the erosion of intellectual growth due to a culture of fear (right). In the forest model, derived from ecological theory, a single dominant force in the canopy casts excessive shade, which directly suppresses the vital growth layers of the understory and sub-canopy. This lack of growth layer diversity reduces regeneration and ecosystem resilience, leading to long-term instability [7]. This process creates a direct analogue to how organizational conditions can suppress human potential and critical operational processes.

The organizational model depicts fear functioning like a dense canopy, creating a "psychological safety shade" that suppresses intellectual growth, open dialogue, and constructive dissent (Figure 3). When teams fear speaking, questioning, or expressing difficulty,

critical information and creative suggestions remain hidden, leading to a state where organizational problems are only revealed once they escalate into crises. The diagram reinforces that team performance is highly dependent on psychological safety – a shared belief that the team environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking [8]. Additionally, from a socio-ecological perspective, inclusion and belonging within an institution are non-linear products of surrounding structural signals, climates, and access pathways; a symbolic hierarchy that is too steep will weaken these connections, leading to systemic fragility [9].

Some forests lose diversity when a single force dominates the canopy. Excessive shading suppresses the understory, limiting regeneration and reducing resilience. Diversity of growth layers is important for long term ecosystem stability [7].

In organizations, fear can act like dense canopy shade. When people feel overly cautious about speaking, questioning, or expressing difficulty, intellectual undergrowth disappears. Junior voices retreat. Creative suggestions remain unspoken. Problems are hidden until they become crises.

Psychological safety research consistently shows that teams perform better when members can speak candidly without

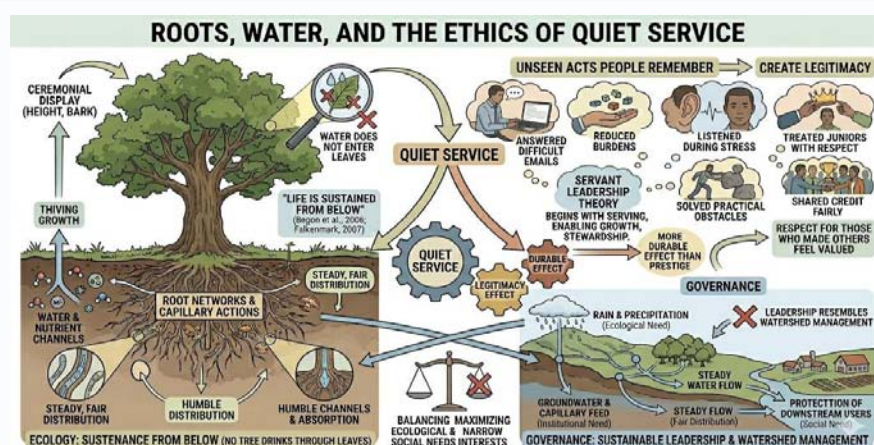


Figure 4: Roots, Water, and the Ethics of Quiet Service: A Diagrammatic Comparison of Ecological Sustenance, Social Governance, and Institutional Servant Leadership.

Note: This diagram is generated using Google Gemini.

humiliation or punishment [8]. Universities and knowledge institutions particularly depend on constructive dissent, evidence-based disagreement, and open dialogue.

Where fear grows, truth becomes scarce. A socio-ecological perspective on belonging in institutions further shows that inclusion is not produced merely by individual motivation but by surrounding structures, climates, signals, and access pathways [10]. Where symbolic hierarchy is too steep, belonging often weakens.

Roots, Water, and the Ethics of Quiet Service

This multi-faceted Figure 4 illustrates the foundational concept that just as a tree's survival depends not on its ceremonial leaves or visible height but on subterranean root networks that absorb water through "humble channels" [3, 11], sustainable leadership in institutions is similarly powered from below. On the right, the diagram translates the ecological metaphor into specific human actions of "Quiet Service," such as listening during stress, reducing other's burdens, and protecting juniors - acts that often occur beyond official titles and ceremonial language yet establish the organization's durable legitimacy. The complex system of interlocking gears visually demonstrates how these acts create a self-reinforcing relationship between organizational health, legitimacy, and a durable institutional effect that is more potent and enduring than formal prestige alone. This is further reinforced by a flow detailing that respect flows to those who make others feel valued.

Connecting these domains, the bottom portion in Figure 4 links the concept to the theory of "Servant Leadership," which asserts that effective leadership begins with a mindset of serving others and enabling their growth, rather than an accumulation of personal power [12]. A flow diagram on the left visually compares the biological nutrient pathways of an oak tree's capillary actions with a parallel socio-ecological framework of leadership acting as "Watershed Management." In this model, effective governance requires balancing maximizing individual interests with broader ecological and social needs to protect downstream users, and it emphasizes that leadership is a service that stewards institutions for steady distribution rather than concentrating power at the top. The overall diagram serves as a holistic summary of how seemingly small, consistent acts of humble service, hidden nutrient channels, and balanced governance create true systemic resilience and sustainable authority.

No tree drinks through its leaves. Water enters through roots. Nutrients arrive through humble channels. In ecological systems, life is sustained from below.

The same is true in human communities. People remember who answered difficult emails, who reduced burdens, who listened when stress was high, who treated juniors with respect, who solved practical obstacles, and who shared credit fairly. These acts may not appear in ceremonial language, but they create legitimacy.

Servant leadership theory similarly emphasizes that leadership begins with serving others, enabling growth, and stewarding institutions responsibly [12]. Such leadership may appear less glamorous than formal prestige, yet its effects are deeper and more durable.

The most respected figures are often not those who demanded reverence, but those who made others feel valued. Governance scholars have likewise argued that sustainable systems depend on balancing ecological and social needs rather than maximizing narrow authority interests [11]. Leadership, then, should resemble watershed management: fair distribution, steady flow, and protection of downstream users.

A Personal Reflection on Emotional Dissonance

There is a particular feeling when one sees symbolic expansion while carrying practical burdens. It is not merely envy, nor simple disagreement. It is dissonance. One asks inwardly: if energy were redirected toward fairness, responsiveness, or reducing unnecessary strain, would the community not benefit more?

This feeling resembles observing a polluted river whose surface remains decorated while oxygen below declines. The water may still reflect sunlight beautifully, yet fish sense another reality.

Many workers in institutions know this emotional ecology. They continue performing duties, writing reports, teaching classes, mentoring students, repairing systems, and holding standards. They do so quietly. Yet inwardly they wonder whether anyone notices the roots.

Such reflections are not acts of rebellion. Often, they are signs of conscience.

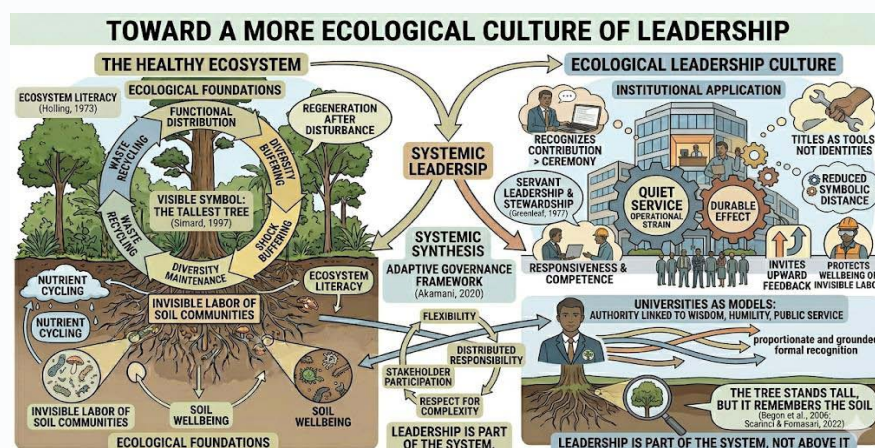


Figure 5: Toward a More Ecological Culture of Leadership: A Systemic Synthesis of Adaptive Governance.

Note: This diagram is generated using Google Gemini.

Institutions that ignore such signals risk losing the tacit energy of committed people. Ecological systems collapse not only through sudden disasters, but through slow erosion of unseen functions.

Toward a More Ecological Culture of Leadership

Figure 5 presents a holistic model for institutional reform, merging the principles of healthy biological ecosystems with modern leadership frameworks. On the left, the "Healthy Ecosystem" cycle emphasizes functional distribution, diversity maintenance, and the recycling of resources - all supported by the "invisible labour" of soil communities. This serves as the foundation for an "Ecological Leadership Culture" (right), where authority is not an isolated peak but is integrated into the system's operational health, emphasizing that leadership is a part of the system, not above it [13].

The synthesis of these ideas suggests that universities and knowledge institutions can thrive by treating formal titles as tools for service rather than static identities (Figure 5). By adopting an adaptive governance framework, organizations can foster flexibility, encourage stakeholder participation, and protect the wellbeing of those performing essential, yet often unnoticed, labour. Such a model ensures that recognition remains proportionate and grounded, linking authority to wisdom and public service [14]. Ultimately, this ecological approach recognizes that while a leader may stand tall, their endurance and legitimacy are entirely dependent on the health of the "soil" - the collective contributions of every member within the institutional ecosystem [3].

Healthy ecosystems distribute function. They recycle waste, maintain diversity, buffer shocks, and regenerate after disturbance. Institutions can learn from this. A healthier culture would recognize contribution more than ceremony, reduce unnecessary symbolic distance, reward responsiveness and competence, invite upward feedback without fear, protect the wellbeing of those doing invisible labour, and treat titles as tools rather than identities.

Adaptive governance frameworks emphasize flexibility, stakeholder participation, distributed responsibility, and respect for complexity in managing living systems [13]. These principles are equally relevant to organizations. Leadership should not merely stand above the system, but work within it. Universities in particular can serve as models of ecological literacy, where authority is linked

to wisdom, humility, and public service rather than symbolic inflation [14]. In this model, formal recognition can remain, but it is proportionate and grounded. The tree may stand tall, but it remembers the soil.

Conclusion

Titles may have their place. Protocol may have utility. Recognition may be deserved. Yet no honorific can substitute for justice, empathy, competence, or service. In ecological terms, flowers may attract the eye, but roots sustain life.

Institutions flourish when authority is matched by humility, when rank is balanced by responsibility, and when those at every level feel respected. The deepest prestige is not printed after a name. It is carried in the memory of those who were helped. A forest does not praise itself through labels. It simply gives shade, oxygen, and renewal. Human institutions might learn from that silence.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author's own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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