

Resilient rivers require resilient leaders

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Key points

- Technical expertise alone is insufficient for addressing the complexity and uncertainty present in contemporary river and stream management.
- Values alignment supports ethical decision-making, stewardship and long-term ecological thinking in contested water environments.
- Emotional intelligence strengthens collaboration, conflict management and adaptive leadership across diverse stakeholder groups.
- Personal resilience supports practitioner wellbeing, learning and sustained contribution during periods of uncertainty and change.
- Developing self-leadership capabilities strengthens both individual effectiveness and the collective adaptive capacity of the water sector.

Abstract

Professionals and leaders in river and stream management operate in an environment of constant change. As catchments evolve under pressures such as climate variability and urbanisation, practitioners are required not only to adapt technically, but personally.

Rising rates of burnout across the water sector suggest that the pace and complexity of change are taking an emotional toll. Technical expertise alone is no longer sufficient. The capacity for self-leadership—consciously guiding one’s thinking, behaviour and impact—has become essential to truly “live and evolve with change.”

This paper explores three core elements of self-leadership critical to contemporary stream management practice: values, emotional intelligence and personal resilience.

Values act as an internal compass. In complex and often contested environments, clarity of personal and professional values strengthens ethical decision-making, supports long-term stewardship and helps align ecological outcomes with community aspirations. Values-driven practitioners are better equipped to navigate trade-offs while remaining anchored to the purpose of sustaining living rivers.

Emotional intelligence underpins effective collaboration. River management is inherently relational, requiring engagement across disciplines, sectors and communities. The ability to recognise and regulate emotions, demonstrate empathy and respond constructively to conflict builds trust and enables more adaptive, inclusive solutions.

Personal resilience enables sustained contribution amid uncertainty and setback. Funding constraints, political shifts and ecological disturbances are ongoing realities. Cultivating resilience supports wellbeing, learning and innovation over time.

Strengthening these capacities enhances individual effectiveness and builds the collective capability of the sector to steward resilient river systems in an era defined by change.

Keywords

Self leadership, Personal resilience, emotional intelligence, burnout prevention, values alignment, purpose driven, stream management.

Introduction

Catchments across Australia and beyond are undergoing profound transformation driven by climate variability, population growth, land-use change and urbanisation (Finlayson et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2012). As this rapid, artificial evolution occurs, practitioners are required not only to adapt technically, but personally. In this context, managing rivers is not simply a technical challenge — it is a deeply human one.

The 12th Australian Stream Management Conference theme of 'Living and Evolving with Change' acknowledges a maturing sector, one that has moved beyond early engineering-centred approaches towards more integrated, adaptive and ecologically-grounded practice (Rutherford et al., 1999; Palmer et al., 2014). Yet as the science and practice evolve, so too must the people who carry them forward.

Evidence from the broader water sector suggests that practitioners are feeling the strain. Burnout, compassion fatigue and disengagement are rising challenges in environmental professions, driven by the accumulating weight of difficult decisions, resource constraints, contested values and ecological loss (Albrecht et al., 2007; Coulthard, 2012). These trends highlight a critical gap: while the technical dimensions of adaptive management have received significant attention, the psychological and leadership dimensions of practice have been comparatively neglected.

This paper argues that self-leadership — the deliberate practice of guiding one's own thinking, behaviour and impact — is not a 'soft' adjunct to professional competence but a foundational capability for effective, sustained river stewardship. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature spanning environmental management, psychology and leadership studies, the paper examines three core elements: (1) values-based practice, (2) emotional intelligence, and (3) personal resilience. It proposes that cultivating these capacities at an individual level enhances decision-making, collaboration, and sustained contribution within the sector, thereby strengthens the collective adaptive capacity of the stream management sector and supports the broader goal of living and evolving with change.

The changing context of stream management practice

Contemporary stream management operates within a landscape of compounding change. Climate projections for Australia indicate increased frequency and intensity of flood and drought cycles, altered thermal regimes and accelerating changes to riparian vegetation (Hughes, 2003; Milly et al., 2008). At the same time, rapid urbanisation is transforming catchment hydrology, increasing impervious surfaces, concentrating pollutant loads and fragmenting ecological connectivity (Walsh et al., 2012; Burns et al., 2012).

These biophysical pressures occur alongside shifting governance landscapes. Practitioners must navigate an increasingly complex web of regulatory frameworks, community expectations, funding cycles and interagency partnerships (Huitema et al., 2009) that lack clear direction. River management decisions are rarely purely technical; they involve trade-offs between competing values — ecological integrity, recreational amenity, agricultural productivity and cultural significance — that must be negotiated across diverse stakeholder groups (Cosens et al., 2017).

The emergence of concepts such as 'living rivers,' ecosystem services and nature-based solutions reflects an evolution in how practitioners and communities conceptualise healthy waterways (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Naiman et al., 2008). This conceptual evolution demands practitioners who can work across disciplines, engage authentically with communities and sustain their commitment through cycles of ecological setback and institutional uncertainty.

Alongside these environmental and institutional changes, advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are beginning to reshape professional practice across the environmental sector. AI has the potential to reduce the administrative burden associated with data processing, reporting and routine analysis, allowing practitioners to devote more attention to complex problem solving, stakeholder engagement and strategic thinking. At the same time, AI is unlikely to replace the human capacities required for effective river management—ethical judgement, systems thinking, collaboration, creativity and the

ability to navigate uncertainty. Rather, it reinforces the need for practitioners who can lead themselves well, continually learn and adapt, and use emerging technologies thoughtfully in service of resilient social-ecological systems.

In this environment, technical knowledge remains essential but insufficient. As environmental challenges, governance complexity and emerging technologies continue to reshape professional practice, the capabilities that distinguish effective practitioners are increasingly human rather than technical. A growing body of literature on adaptive management and social-ecological systems highlights the importance of trust, collaboration, learning and reflexivity as determinants of management effectiveness (Folke et al., 2005; Plummer & Armitage, 2007). These capacities are not incidental to self-leadership; they are its practical application.

Self-leadership: a framework for practitioner development

Self-leadership was conceptualised by Manz (1986) as the practice of influencing oneself to achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform. Whereas traditional leadership focuses on influencing others, self-leadership centres on the internal processes — cognitive, emotional and behavioural — that shape how individuals respond to challenges and opportunities (Neck & Houghton, 2006).

In professional contexts characterised by ambiguity, complexity and competing demands, self-leadership provides a framework for sustained, purposeful action (Prussia et al., 1998). For stream management practitioners, these conditions are the norm rather than the exception. The capacity to lead oneself — to remain grounded, responsive and effective — is therefore not a luxury but a fundamental, professional requirement.

Three dimensions of self-leadership are particularly relevant to stream management practice: values clarity, emotional intelligence and personal resilience. These are not independent attributes but interconnected capacities that reinforce and sustain one another. A practitioner anchored in clear values is better equipped to regulate their emotional responses; emotional intelligence supports resilience by enabling adaptive coping and constructive sense-making; and resilience, in turn, supports the sustained enactment of values even under pressure.

Values: The internal compass

Values are the principles and beliefs that guide behaviour, ethical decision-making and purpose-driven action in complex environments (Rokeach, 1973). In environmental professions, values serve a dual function: they motivate commitment to ecological outcomes, and they provide a basis for navigating the ethical complexities inherent in natural resource management (Brown, 1984; Minter & Manning, 1999).

Stream management frequently involves contested terrain. Decisions about environmental flows, riparian revegetation, in-stream works and land management interfaces engage competing interests and values held by landholders, regulators, indigenous communities and the broader public (Cosens et al., 2017). Practitioners who lack clarity about their own values are vulnerable to decision fatigue, ethical drift and loss of purpose in these environments.

Research on environmental professionals suggests that values-driven practitioners exhibit greater job satisfaction, ethical consistency and long-term commitment to their organisations and the communities they serve (Bright et al., 2006). Values alignment between personal and organisational goals enhances coherence and motivation, reducing conflict and burnout, and increasing engagement (Kernaghan, 2017, Leiter & Maslach, 2004). For stream management, this translates to practitioners who can advocate for ecological outcomes with integrity, maintain respectful relationships across value differences and contribute to the stewardship of living rivers over the long term.

Moreover, values influence how practitioners prioritise actions under resource constraints or political pressure. When values such as equity and transparency are central, decisions tend to be more

inclusive and just, fostering trust among stakeholders. This trust is crucial for collaborative governance and effective implementation of management plans. Values also shape organisational culture, which can either enable or hinder innovation and responsiveness to change.

Practically, cultivating values clarity involves deliberate reflection — through supervision, peer dialogue, coaching, mentoring and professional development — on what matters most and why. Organisations can support this process by articulating shared professional values and creating space for ethical deliberation within teams (Brown & Mitchell, 2010).

Emotional Intelligence: The Relational Foundation

Emotional intelligence (EI) — the capacity to perceive, understand, manage and use emotions effectively — was formalised by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and popularised by Goleman (1995). Across a range of professional domains, EI has been consistently associated with effective leadership, collaborative performance and constructive conflict resolution (Côté et al., 2010; Joseph & Newman, 2010).

Effective river management is inherently relational, requiring collaboration across disciplinary, sectoral, and community boundaries. Practitioners engage daily with diverse stakeholders — landholders, engineers, ecologists, local government officers, community groups and indigenous land managers — each bringing different frames, priorities and emotional investments to the conversation. The capacity to listen empathically, manage one's own reactions and respond to conflict constructively is not peripheral to this work; it is central to it.

Research in natural resource management and collaborative governance highlights emotional competence as a key predictor of stakeholder engagement outcomes (Reed, 2008; Raadgever et al., 2008). Practitioners with higher EI are better positioned to build the trust necessary for durable collaborative arrangements, navigate power dynamics sensitively and facilitate adaptive responses to disagreement (Boyatzis et al., 2000).

In practical terms, emotional intelligence enables river managers to navigate the often sensitive and conflicting interests of stakeholders, from Indigenous communities to industry representatives. For instance, recognising emotional undercurrents during consultations can prevent misunderstandings and build rapport, leading to more sustainable and accepted outcomes. EI also supports leadership in times of crisis, where maintaining composure and clear communication are vital.

In the context of ecological grief — the distress experienced in response to environmental loss and degradation — EI also plays a protective role (Albrecht et al., 2007). Practitioners who can acknowledge and process their emotional responses to ecosystem decline are better equipped to sustain their motivation and avoid the numbing disengagement that can accompany chronic exposure to environmental bad news.

Developing EI requires intentional practice: reflective journaling, peer supervision, coaching, mindfulness training and feedback-rich professional cultures all contribute to this development (Brackett et al., 2011).

Personal resilience: Sustaining the long game

Personal resilience—the capacity to sustain wellbeing, learning, and innovation amid uncertainty and setback—is increasingly recognised as vital for river management professionals facing ongoing ecological disturbances and sectoral challenges (Southwick et al., 2014). Resilience therefore is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing, dynamic capacity that must be actively cultivated.

The challenges facing practitioners are structural and chronic. Funding for river restoration is cyclical and often inadequate (Lave et al., 2010). Political priorities shift, threatening long-term projects. Ecological disturbances — floods, droughts, invasive species — can undo years of restoration effort. Regulatory complexity and misaligned timing can slow implementation. In this environment,

practitioners who lack resilience are at risk of disengagement, cynicism and burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

Research on resilience in environmental professions points to several key contributors: social support networks, a sense of meaning and purpose in one's work, cognitive flexibility (the capacity to reframe setbacks as learning opportunities) and access to recovery resources including adequate rest, recreation and peer connection (Robertson et al., 2015; van der Linden, 2015). Organisations play a significant role in enabling or constraining individual resilience through their cultures, access to support networks (such as coaching and mentoring), workload structures and approaches to psychological safety.

Collective resilience — the capacity of a team or organisation to absorb disturbance and adapt — is also shaped by the resilience of its individual members (Norris et al., 2008). Investments in practitioner resilience provide not only individual benefits, but organisational and sectoral ones. A more resilient workforce is better positioned to sustain the long-term, adaptive stewardship that living rivers require.

How to build self-leadership?

Building self-leadership means intentionally clarifying what matters to you, understanding and managing your own emotions and reactions, and developing the capacity to recover from setbacks—so you can lead effectively even amid the complex, often contentious dynamics of managing shared water resources.

Defining personal values – A simple exercise: list the five decisions you've made in your career that you felt most proud of, then ask "what value was I honoring?" each time (e.g., fairness to downstream communities, ecological integrity, transparency with stakeholders). This gives you a working set of core values to check decisions against—useful when balancing competing demands like irrigation, hydropower, and ecosystem needs.

Building emotional intelligence – Practice a brief "pause and name" habit before and after contentious stakeholder meetings (e.g., negotiations between upstream and downstream water users): note what emotion you're feeling (frustration, defensiveness, urgency) and what triggered it, before responding. Over time this builds self-awareness and helps you respond deliberately rather than reactively when tensions rise over allocation disputes.

Building personal resilience – After a setback, such as a stalled basin agreement or a failed negotiation, do a short structured debrief with yourself or a trusted colleague: what worked, what didn't, what's one thing you'll try differently next time. Treating setbacks as data rather than failure, especially in long, multi-year basin governance processes, helps sustain motivation and adaptability over time.

Implications for practice and sector development

The case for integrating self-leadership capacities into stream management practice has implications at multiple levels: individual, organisational and sectoral.

At the individual level, practitioners can take deliberate steps to cultivate values clarity, emotional intelligence and resilience. This includes engaging in reflective practice, seeking coaching and mentoring, accessing peer supervision, participating in professional development focused on leadership and wellbeing, and actively nurturing the relationships and recovery practices that sustain professional capacity.

At the organisational level, agencies and consultancies working in stream management have a responsibility to create the conditions in which self-leadership can flourish. This means fostering psychologically safe cultures where practitioners can speak honestly about challenges and uncertainties, providing access to coaching, mentoring and supervision, recognising and rewarding values-driven practice, and designing workloads that allow for recovery and reflection alongside delivery (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

At the sectoral level, professional bodies, universities and conference communities — including the River Basin Management Society — can embed these themes into their offerings. The recognition that effective stream management practice requires not only ecological and hydrological knowledge but also leadership, emotional competence and resilience, represents a maturation of the profession.

Conclusions

The theme of this conference — Living and Evolving with Change — captures something essential about the contemporary experience of stream management practice. Catchments are changing. Communities are changing. Governance frameworks are changing. And the practitioners who steward living rivers must change with them, not merely in their technical repertoires, but in the depth and quality of their self-leadership.

This paper has argued that values, emotional intelligence and personal resilience are not supplementary attributes for 'people-oriented' practitioners but foundational capacities for all who work in this complex, consequential field. Together, they constitute the inner structure of adaptive, ethical and sustained practice — the human dimension of river management that technical training alone cannot provide.

The stream management sector has made remarkable advances in the science and practice of ecological restoration, adaptive management and integrated catchment planning. The next frontier of professional development may lie closer to home: in the hearts and minds of the practitioners who show up, day after day, to do this vital work.

Strengthening self-leadership across the sector is an investment in the resilience not only of its people, but of the living rivers they serve.

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