



SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

***A Call to Lead: How to Find, Follow and
Sustain a Calling***

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*When you are inspired by some great purpose,
some energising project
all of your thoughts break their bonds.
Your mind transcends limitations.
Your consciousness expands in every direction
and you find yourself in a new, great and wonderful world.
Dormant forces, faculties and talents come alive
and you discover yourself to be a greater person by far
than you ever dreamed yourself to be.*

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1. Background

A Call to Lead: How to Find, Follow and Sustain a Calling researched the concept of “a calling” and extended its relevance to career development and leadership.

The complete work includes an extensive review of “callings” in historical, theological, sociological, leadership and psychological literature; interviews with 21 leaders to explore their understanding of “a calling” and its application to leadership; themes obtained from 30 of the author’s client case histories; and autobiographical/biographical accounts of a further 20 leaders.

Specific goals of the research were:

- (a) To develop a “Callings Process” which could be used to guide and benefit those persons seeking to find and live their calling.
- (b) To examine the relationship between organisational leadership and vocational calling.
- (c) To specifically investigate how leaders define, find and sustain their calling.

The 21 leaders were selected based on the following:

- Regard their work as fulfilling a sense of purpose or calling
- In a position of leadership and influence
- Respected and successful in their field
- Led corporate, government, not for profit or voluntary organisations
- Thought to be representative of a sampling of gender, race, religious beliefs, age and occupations

2. The Language of Calling

Historically, the term “calling” was used by religious traditions to describe a vocational commitment to religious life. Today, the definition and association of “calling” has broadened to apply to secular occupations or pursuits and describes the importance of and commitment to a particular life and/or work path.



The research found the term “calling” used interchangeably with the following words or phrases:

- My Purpose,
- Life’s Purpose
- “What I’m here for”
- Life’s Work
- My Dream
- Chosen Path
- Raison d’etre
- Mission
- Vision
- Vocation

Examples of unique personal leadership callings include:

- My calling is to empower struggling young women, that they have to power to change their future.
- My calling is to enable others to achieve the best they possibly can.
- My calling is to help and enable disadvantaged people to have access to justice and the wealth of the community.
- My calling is to create the environment for others to be great.

- My calling is to influence and to change things for the betterment of others and in a life-giving way for me.
- My personal calling is about growing into my identity in a way that is distinct.
- My calling is to use my legal background and passion for the environment to revolutionise water conversation infrastructure.
- My calling is to create and cultivate communities of interest in the arts and sport.
- My calling is live like a Sherpa, carrying the load for others with joy, ease and accomplishment.
- My calling is to live consciously with clarity and peace.

3. Key Characteristics of a Calling

Indicative characteristics of a calling are:

- (a) ***It’s Unique*** - no two definitions or interpretations are identical.
- (b) ***Depth and Emotion*** - articulating the calling invokes authentic and heartfelt emotion in the called person.
- (c) ***More than a Passion*** - living a calling requires more than a desire and passion. The calling generally fits the



person's talents, skills, disposition and "the needs of the world."

- (d) **Early Years** - a calling may be identified in childhood and/or teenage years.
- (e) **More than One** - it is possible to have more than one calling. Some expressed a general calling to serve God and/or humanity or "how" they live in the world as well as a specific calling to "be" a certain role, cause or use of talents. The researcher defined the presence of an inner and an outer calling for many interviewees.
- (f) **Evolution** - a calling may change and/or evolve over time.
- (g) **Life-long Road** - irrespective of an individual's day-to-day application of their calling, the definition, recognition, application and refinement of it may be a life-long pursuit.
- (h) **Effortless** - when a person is living their calling, ordinary tasks and routine elements are transformed from day to day drudgery. People expressed a sense of "life-giving" energy, of being "in the zone", working under conditions as if "time is standing still."

- (i) **The Cost of the Choice** - those who choose to follow a calling accept that personal sacrifices and compromises may be required.

4. Characteristics of a Calling to Leadership:

In addition to the findings summarised in 3. *Key Characteristics of a Calling*, the following points specifically relate to leadership:

- (a) **A Call to Lead** - leadership can be a calling. Whether they followed a religious or spiritual practice or not, 76% of leaders believe that they have a specific and distinctive calling to lead. 43% of leaders believe that authentic leadership has to be a calling.
- (b) **What and Why** - the calling may be to leadership in general and/or specific to a cause or conviction. Generally, leaders describe living their calling in terms of "what" (actions) and "why" (values and meanings) as opposed to "how" parameters (i.e. role or functions).

80% of leaders express their "calling" as a sense of action and speak of actions such as "making a difference" and "serving others". Commonly expressed themes include a desire to act via love and service to others, living authentically, a persistent instinctive drive



to “do” and achieve something for the greater good, and a need to make a positive contribution.

Examples of calling definitions are listed in *2. The Language of Calling*.

- (c) ***It's Personal*** - when presented with the concept and definition of a calling, leaders recognise, identify with and acknowledge the importance of their unique, personal calling, even if they have never thought about it in those terms before.
- (d) ***Keeping it Quiet*** - most leaders do not talk about their calling because: they believed that it may not be “commercially savvy”; they had not felt confident to openly discuss their deep motivators; no one has asked them or felt it was too private a topic.
- (e) ***The Dark Side*** - there can be a “shadow-side” to a calling. Specific findings are presented in *6. Shadow of a Calling*.
- (f) ***Calling to Conscience*** - 40% of leaders regard their calling and conscience as interdependent. A calling is “a compass,” “a guidepost,” or the “organising principle” on which ethical decision-making and discernment are based.
- (g) ***Only Positive*** - rarely do discussions include references to: a desire to reduce work hours or achieve a better

work/life balance; self pity about the perceived demands placed upon them; de-energizing affects of workplace politics and bureaucracy; working just for financial security; self doubt around their calling; doing what they do to “fill in time” prior to retirement.

- (h) ***My Vision*** - leaders stress the importance of being able to identify, articulate and live their own vision, which for many is the basis for authentically and convincingly communicating their organisation’s vision and strategy.

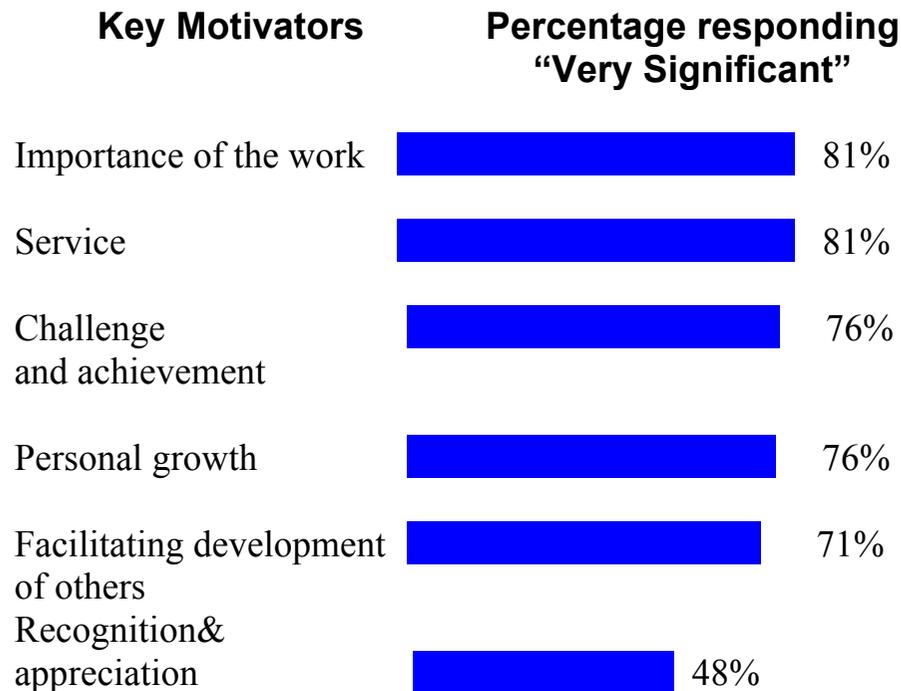
5. Core Motivators and Values of a Calling:

Leaders describe their calling as driven by a desire for meaning, purpose and achievement, generally not by money or career advancement. Unwaveringly, leaders state living their values with authenticity is essential to feeling energised and motivated.

Over 50% of the leaders identify values of service, contribution, achievement, authenticity, commitment and integrity. Other important values are: courage, trust, hope, love, gratitude, happiness, humility, growth, learning, building community, creativity, legacy and success.



When asked to identify what motivates them the following 6 motivators were the most frequently mentioned:



6. Shadow of a Calling

Based upon their own experiences, observations of other leaders and/or knowledge of world history, leaders reflect that living a calling can be fraught with danger. That is, the drive and passion of the calling may justify behaviours that

are dysfunctional and unsustainable. Behaviours include tendencies toward obsession, narcissism, self-absorption, self-righteousness, control and arrogance.

Responses frequently express a sense of thoughtful self-examination regarding the moral responsibilities inherent in a calling. Taking personal responsibility for continual self-assessment and seeking feedback about their performance, blindspots, derailers, behaviour and motivations was essential.

Leaders express the following “shadow” experiences of their own callings:

- *Competing Priorities* – an inability to manage availability and priorities.
- *Tensions* – commitment to the calling may be used to justify priorities at the expense of self-care and availability to spouses, family, friends and community.
- *Not walking the talk* – uncomfortable feeling of actions being out of alignment with their values.
- *I’m Tired* – driven by a sense of indispensability and “not enough hours in the day” to do what they feel compelled to do.
- *Addicted to Power* - once attained, power can be difficult to let go of. The fear of losing power and the



resultant “relevance insignificance” can be debilitating.

- *A need to “save the world”* – can be so absorbed in living their passion that loses perspective and hope.
- *Polarised Thinking* – risk becoming inflexible and ignore the lessons of the past.
- *Ego and Hubris* – need for constant approval and recognition or believing that they are more talented and committed than those around them.
- *Boundaries* – fuelled by passion and charisma, the leader may develop emotional over-dependencies amongst followers eg. risk of “guru” status.
- *Projection* - risk of imposing their transformational journey onto others (including entire organisations).
- *Zealot versus Leader* - appearing over zealous and behaving more like a “zealot” than a leader.
- *Avoidance* – using the distractions of the calling to overlook weaknesses in themselves.
- *Appear too intense* – others may experience enthusiasm and passion of the leader as intimidating or too intense.
- *Filters and Blind-Spots* - the capacity to filter perception to support their vision. Significant impacts include: failure to confront, inability to receive and process negative feedback.
- *Get it Right* – identifying that it is possible to be “off track” and follow a false calling.

- *Can’t Do It* – not being able to pursue the calling due to economic or market realities, skill/talent gaps or psycho-sociological factors. Such circumstances may trigger fears, despair and frustration until expectations are adjusted and adapted to the current reality.
- *Wounds* – when a leader has not adequately resolved and healed the often painful experiences that may have inspired the calling, they can become vulnerable to conscious or unconscious emotional triggers and reactions.
- *In the clouds* – practical aspects of daily living are dismissed in favour of loftier priorities.

7. Finding a Calling

Generally, identifying and living a calling appeared to follow a common pathway as illustrated in Diagram 1: The Call to Action Timeline.

Finding a calling featured the following experiences:

- (a) *Step by Step* - 48% said that they followed a gradual journey towards their calling. Their journey required persistence and courage. Setbacks, false routes, long periods of searching, disappointments, reassessments and difficult decision making periods were common. The journeys ranged from 5 to 40 years, starting with



the first stirrings of awareness to consciously “live their calling.”

- (b) **Then and There** - 52% remembered when they recognised their calling. Many recalled a peak experience, a transformative moment or a profound shift in awareness and consciousness. Such experiences appeared to be deeply held in their psyche and memory, and when recalled, reinforced their commitment. Since knowing their calling, their resolve had not wavered, although some talked of periods where they had lost perspective or had been “side-tracked” or distracted.
- (c) **Start Early** - by their 19th birthday, 38% of the total group had discovered their calling. Many others report that, after reflecting back on their lives, the hints of their calling had been present in their youth even if the manifestation of it lay dormant for a long while.
- (d) **Life Helps** - 80% state that their response to life event(s) and transitional life stages were the dominant factors that influenced the identification of their calling. 40% found that their calling was directly related to traumatic childhood experiences, and that these experiences provided a compelling catalyst that fuelled their desire to help others deal with and overcome similar challenges.

- (e) **Mixed Bag** - movement towards a calling appears to be influenced by a kaleidoscope of social, economic, educational, serendipitous, religious and personality factors.
- (f) **No Accidents** - phenomena such as synchronicity and happenstance were reported by 50% of participants. This group reported that seemingly unrelated incidents, experiences, choices and events blended to form an awareness and understanding of their calling.
- (g) **Just Easy** - as they moved towards an authentic life, the “path” (networks, information, options) toward their calling “effortlessly opened up”.
- (h) **Excuses** - the most commonly reported obstacles to living a calling included: financial security; personal inertia or laziness; not wanting to be different; opinions of significant others; self doubt; fear of taking responsibility; fear of lost identity; drive for perfection; pride and risk aversion.
- (i) **The More You Suffer** - 54% highlight an essential time (even if they did not consciously choose it) of healing and personal growth that preceded a “move towards a calling.” In these instances, a period of emotional and spiritual suffering was noted. The suffering was a “gift of grace,” and a profoundly motivating catalyst for the change or “tipping point” to living a calling.



- (j) **Wise Old Heads** - finding a calling may be influenced by the feedback, encouragement and recognition of significant others such as teachers, coaches, role models and mentors.

8. Recommendations on How to Find a Calling

Leaders were asked, “What advice would you give to someone who wants to find and live their calling?”

Ten key themes emerge from their responses:

- Make a decision to commit to finding your calling
- You may already know your calling but fail to recognise it because of distractions, fear or low self awareness
- Know yourself (eg. roots of your motivation) and develop emotional intelligence and inner confidence
- Know your talents, weaknesses, skills, gifts and interests
- Know your core values, disposition, passions and convictions
- Make a committed effort to let go of the past by: healing old emotional wounds; forgiveness of self and others; reconciliation; self acceptance

- Take time to reflect (eg journaling, time in nature, sabbatical). Take notice of your physiological and psychological state. Avoid “paralysis by analysis”. Listen to your heart and intuition as well your mind.
- Research options and identify needs in the world that resonate with your inclinations
- Seek advice and support
- Persevere and never give up!

9. Who or What is Calling?

There is a distinctive physiological, emotional and/or spiritual response to identifying and knowing a calling.

The origins and experiences of “calling” can come from internal and external sources:

- (a) “hear”, “feel” and “see” a calling (eg whilst watching a movie or listening to a song)
- (b) from a higher source (God) or the soul, personal will, grace, intuition, raised consciousness, an unrelenting “pull”
- (c) pre-disposition/pre-determination/compulsion by an outside force to “act”



So what burning questions remain unanswered?

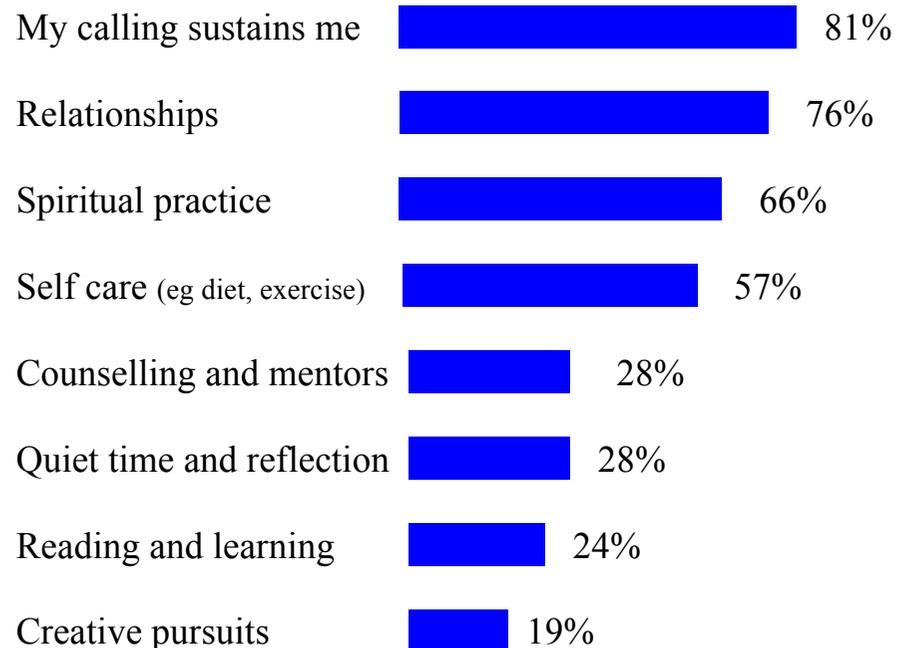
- Called by whom and by what?
- Where does the calling originate?
- How do personality, life experiences and memory influence a calling's origin? and
- When received how can a calling be authenticated?

10. Sustaining a Calling- Keeping it Going

The literature review highlighted the challenges of personal sustainability. The leaders were asked to share how they sustain themselves. All feel that it is a need they constantly address.

Resoundingly, the most important sustainability actions are living their calling, meaningful relationships, spiritual practice and self-care. The following table lists the most frequently mentioned actions (and % of participants)

Sustainability Actions



Many leaders passionately express the impact of their calling on their quality of life and well-being:

- I'm realising my dream
- I'm meant to be doing it
- I have a sense of purpose
- This is what I feel I was born to do
- I am now working for a greater goal
- I am committed



- My calling is life-giving
- I love my work
- I have more energy than ever
- I am so much happier in my personal life-I have minimised how much my frustrations were impacting upon my health and my family.
- I now live a life of purpose and contentment with few regrets.

11. Saying “No” to a Calling

Saying “no” to a calling may result in adverse physical and psychological effects such as tiredness and prolonged periods of unhappiness, irritability and anger. Non-alignment (in terms of core values) to work and /or not using natural talents and abilities can lead to thoughts and feelings such as: -

- I feel that I am wasting my life.
- I’m stuck, I need to find a new direction
- Feelings of loneliness and disconnection
- Repetitive thoughts, such as: What next? What am I meant to be doing? There must be more to life than this! I want to work for a cause, not just a living. Life feels futile.

- Yearning for authenticity
- Is this a mid-life crisis?
- I feel really lost and confused
- I feel I’m at a cross-roads
- I feel as though I am living my second best life
- I don’t think I am using my talents

12. The Callings Program

Based upon the research, a practical step-by-step process has been created. It can be used in a logical as well as reflective manner. There is an identifiable sequence of questioning to understand, define and articulate a calling. The process is presented by the acronym of C.H.O.I.C.E. That is: Contemplation/Clarity, Healing/Health, Options, Information/Inspiration, Clarity/Commitment and Enactment.

The Callings Program encourages individuals from all walks of life to discover and define what their calling is and be supported on the path to living it. In cases where a calling is actually being lived, the capacity to develop it can be explored.



The content of *The Callings Program* is as follows:

Contemplation and Clarity:

Meditation, Creativity and Prayer

Who am I? What is my purpose? What is my goal?

Life Mapping and Recording Life Stories

Keeping a Journal-Recording Insights

Using the “Calling Cards”

Healing and Health:

Building Physical and Emotional Strength

Understand and Learn How to Shift Personal Resistance and Self Limiting Beliefs

Understanding our Psychological Wounds and How to Heal Them

Options:

Identifying and Evaluating Options

Setting Goals and Action Plans

Analysing Options

Information and Inspiration:

Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses

Talents, Skills and Interests Identification

Analysis of Knowledge and Experience

Identifying Values and Motivators

Testing Motivators

Clarity and Commitment:

Writing a Callings Statement

Create a Callings Name

Making Discerning Choices and Decisions

Dealing with Obstacles and Challenges

Creating a Commitment Ritual

Enactment:

How to invoke the True Nature of your Calling

Taking Action to Sustain Energy and Commitment

13. Implications of the Research:

- (a) *Developing Leaders* The concept, terminology and resonance of “a calling” extends beyond religious and spiritual constructs. Therefore, secular leadership development programs and literature should consider including content that specifically addresses “callings”.
- (b) *Onwards and Upwards* There can be a strong correlation between the personal calling of a leader and the description of the vision, mission and values of the organisations they lead. By being able to understand and articulate their calling, leaders can experience a personal congruence that advances their capacity to lead and communicate with authenticity.
- (c) *Finding the “Right” People* The recruitment selection process can be enhanced by a developed and tested



series of questions about Calling and Life Purpose, in particular, where selection extends beyond technical and managerial abilities, to emotional competencies, intrinsic motivators and qualities of character.

- (d) ***World of Work - job, career or calling?*** Employment trends indicate that it will be common to have 10-20 different job descriptions and 3-7 career changes in an average working life of 40 years. This trend signals the potentially conflicting desire for sustained, meaningful work amidst constant change.

The Callings Program provides a path for handling and managing the important processes of self-awareness, information gathering and decision-making. A calling isn't about a specific role and *The Callings Program* assists individuals in applying their calling to different contexts, roles and industries.

Additionally, global employment growth is occurring in the not for profit, volunteer and lay religious sectors. These sectors attract personnel who are motivated to serve others, to grow, be challenged and to participate in work that is meaningful to society. *The Callings Program* could be applied as a tool to inspire and encourage individuals to pursue careers in these growing and critical sectors.

- (e) ***Cross-Roads*** “Rites of passage” exist throughout male and female lifetimes. *The Callings Program* can assist to soften the often painful transition periods that accompany these “rites of passage” change points. The reflective elements of the program can assist in interpersonal, occupational, spiritual and age-related transitions.

- (f) ***Calling it a Day*** Living a calling may provide an unwavering sense of purpose that has the potential of circumventing the potentially demotivating influences of retirement. The calling may not change, just the “vehicle” for expressing may adapt. *The Callings Program* can be used to assist retirees in the transition period from work to retirement by guiding them to find meaningful ways to give back to their communities whilst fulfilling a sense of purpose in their own lives.

- (g) ***Our Youth our Future*** The study reinforces that youth yearn for purpose, meaning and a have depth of introspection that should not be under-estimated. *The Callings Program* encourages youth to find an educational and career path that suits their talents and disposition. The Program features specific exercises that provide a vehicle for young people to reflect on, discover and ACT upon their calling. This could replace more traditional approaches of choosing a career direction perceived to be fostered by school results, family and societal expectations.



The Callings Program offers a process for self-reflection and an avenue for developing resilience and perseverance, all worthwhile tools for assisting a young person along a sustainable life path.

Teachers and mentors significantly impact the way in which young people learn to recognise and value their own natural talents and abilities. Encouragement from significant adults in conjunction with self-reflection provides a space in which a young person's calling can be cultivated and grown.

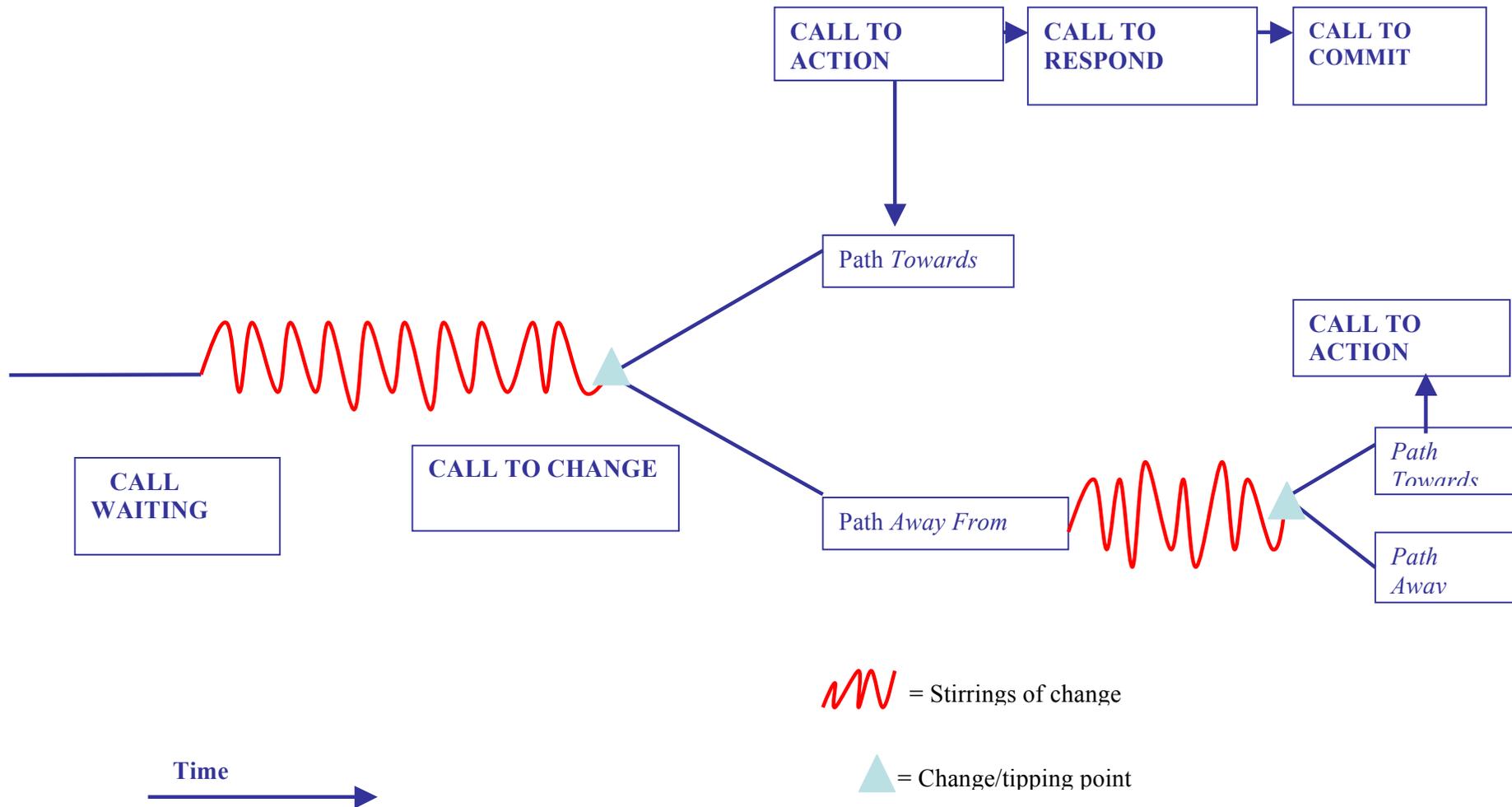
(h) ***Australia – The Lucky Country*** By most global indicators of peace and wellness, Australia is a “lucky country”. Standards of living, security, work opportunities, climate and environment – we appear to have it all. If *The Callings Program*, its accompanying research, and the work of others in similar fields can

become endemic in our educational, social, religious and political fabric, then perhaps Australia could play a more influential role in addressing urgent global issues such as poverty, sustainability and environmental degradation.

* *The statistics (including sample sizes, selection criteria and detailed responses of research participants) can be obtained from the full text of the research paper.*



Diagram 1: CALL TO ACTION TIMELINE





FOR A LEADER

May the gift of leadership awaken in you as a call to action,

Keep you mindful of the providence that calls you to serve.

As high over the mountains the eagle spreads its wings,

May your perspective be larger than the view from the foothills.

When the way is flat and dull in times of grey endurance,

May your imagination continue to evoke horizons.

When thirst burns in times of drought, may you be blessed to find the wells.

May you have the wisdom to read time clearly

And know when the seed of change will flourish.

In your heart may there be a sanctuary, for the stillness where clarity is born.

May your work be infused with passion and creativity

And have the wisdom to balance compassion and challenge.

May your soul find the graciousness, to rise above the fester of small mediocrities.

May your power never become a shell, wherein your heart would silently atrophy.

May you welcome your own vulnerability, as the ground where healing and truth join

May integrity of heart be your first ideal, the source that will guide and bless your work.

JOHN O'DONOHUE