



Living Systems Leadership

Comfort in Complexity

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Leadership through large, complex and politically contested issues challenges our perception as to what is for the best, how best to achieve it and how to find connection with all those who need to be involved. It can be very tough on people. We find that as systems leaders focus on complex global challenges they cannot just rely on neat and ordered, linear approaches to problem-solving. They need different characteristics that are not always taught in the seminar room.

The essence of systems leadership goes beyond acquiring basic competence. It involves being able to feel what might be possible, how quickly and with whom. It means living with the pain, discord and conflict that are inherent in getting divergent groups to work effectively together. Systems leaders must be confident that they can preserve their ability to lead in difficult situations. It means helping people find the way along a path that is rarely clear and often needs creating. It calls for unique qualities of thought and action.

Three areas of confidence

Politics

Whenever complex problems are being addressed decisions are made about who gets what. The stakes are high and different options can seem equally unpalatable. Who will win and who might lose out; who will do what and when; who will pay and how? The real source of power is not always obvious. Systems leaders must be confident when working with those who seek to accumulate and then use power. They must be comfortable operating within this deeply political realm. It sometimes seems that politics are undermining efforts to get vital tasks done. An ability to work with the politics of living systems is an essential but sometimes frustrating aspect of a systems leader's journey.

Adversity

Systems leaders encourage connections between living systems in ways that make better collective sense of what is going on. Making connections among people who are suffering pain and hurt may be far from pleasant. It can be personally challenging and some people may become hostile. The systems leader is the personification of a new and unwanted direction and is likely to be on the receiving end of frustrations and anger. The leader has to be resilient in the face of adversity and avoid taking personal responsibility for all the difficulties systems face. If you want too much for yourself in any outcome you will invariably fail. If you are prepared to sink without trace in the final outcome, almost perversely you become more influential.

Uncertainty

Systems leaders must be comfortable with, and manage, uncertainty at all times. It is a given that there is uncertainty in the environment. If the future direction was clear and agreed you would have no work to do. Uncertainty can challenge both the systems leader's existing sense of coherence as well as her or his ability to maintain it. Systems leaders sense there is progress when better ways to get things done are starting to emerge. New patterns arise but things are not always better for everyone. Collapse and emergence walk hand-in-hand.

Three capabilities

Scoping

Systems leaders maintain a sense of meaningful direction that appeals to many. The direction and destination do not need to be described precisely nor entirely. They do need to draw on different elements that reflect the interests of the various groups of stakeholders. Let people see how what they want can be achieved if they are prepared to join the work. Small groups can rapidly grow in size and momentum by making sure that there is a real sense of purpose whilst the means for getting there is necessarily vague. This is a form of constructive ambiguity, a valuable attribute in systems leadership.



Evolving

Systems leaders appreciate that to better tackle complex issues, detailed plans and outcome measures should only be allowed to become apparent as the work progresses. Being comfortable with this kind of progressive evolution is at the heart of systems leadership. Real transformation is an evolutionary process involving constant adaptation. You don't project manage evolution.

Stopping

Systems leaders pursue **strategy** through **opportunity**; **stopping**. The strategy finds its place and pace through the opportunities that appear in the journey of change. They will prefer to work with whole systems, getting all the system in the room. In practice this may come later rather than earlier in the process. Things may begin with a small group sensing something that disturbs the status quo and coalescing around the disturbance. Slowly others who think like them are drawn into their conversations. If things are to shift significantly, it's also necessary to ensure that all the right groups are engaged, especially those with much to lose. They often have quieter voices and less capacity than the groups already at the table.

Five qualities of thought and action

1 Hold competing perspectives simultaneously

1 Living systems can look different to all of us depending on where we sit. People can hold competing and contradictory views that are all true. In the systems leadership role we need to be able to hold these multiple competing perspectives simultaneously and stop striving for an objective truth. It isn't there to be found.

2 See the whole system differently to its separate parts

2 A living system has characteristics that are a function of that system as a whole and not found in any of its parts. We don't arrive at a truth as to how the system works by studying its separate elements. So we shouldn't do it. Focus instead on how the elements relate and what happens when they act together.

3 Feel into the pace, rhythm and readiness

3 A living system will move at a pace driven by its internal relationships and its relationship with its environment, regardless of external timescales or plans. Systems leaders need to become adept at feeling into the pace of change that can be handled, the rhythm that underpins that pace and whether they are ready or not ready to move. If it's not ready, we don't try to move it. When it is ready to move fast, we don't slow it down.

4 See the system in relationship to its environment

4 Living human systems evolve in symbiosis with their environment. An internal focus on the workings of the system tells us only a part of the story. It is at the points where the system and its environment are in closest contact that the new occurs. We must go and take a look there and reflect on what we're seeing.

5 Meet people right where they really are

5 The way people show up is the way they show up. We can't force them into holding our point of view. We can't make them move faster than they are prepared to go. So we see them, hear them and engage with them right where they really are, not from where we feel they should be. Then we can work with the potential that exists, however great or small.

One step at a time with the direction in mind

Systems leadership is both art and science

It is the artist and scientist in each of us that determines how we respond to what we uncover. How we bring our best to any situation requires evolving our capacity to access our compassion, intuition and integrity.



We hold the key to being good at being ourselves

As each situation unfolds we interpret what we find through our own experiences and emotions. Being honest about our real motives, as well as our reactions to what is happening around us, helps us feel our way into the next step. That, for us, is the beating heart of this art.

We take each situation one step at a time with the direction in mind

We are always enhancing the quality of our thoughts and actions. We become confident with politics, uncertainty and adversity. We scope, evolve and stop, together, remaining aware of the directions in which our steps are leading.



The Authors

In our work together we have explored what systems leadership means, what working with living systems really looks like and how that plays out for real when you have a central role within loosely-organized human systems that are trying to address complex issues.

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