



Living Systems Leadership

Feeling Systems

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More than magic

At its best, systems leadership seems to exhibit an almost magical sense of the possible. Where people are locked in apparently intractable complexity, systems leadership seems to open up a new way through the mess.

Systems leadership does not work by reducing things to the lowest common denominator, to the point at which everyone can agree. Instead it seems to help us find something new, something bigger, something imaginative that holds an attraction to people and is rapidly amplified.

To see this as some sort of magic is to miss what makes it work. As systems leaders, we all have the potential to sense into a system, but we often wonder how best to let it happen.

Deftness of touch

If we are engrossed in managing our organizations, navigating their power structures and processes, we may not be able to focus sufficiently on developing our capacity for systems leadership.

Yes, there is an art to systems leadership, but all great artists are also technically proficient. They hone their movements and thus their ability to translate insight into action over many years.

Systems leadership is no different. It pays attention to areas where we can learn to operate effectively outside of the formal authority of the organization. It enables us to build our capacity to act, increasing our deftness of touch.

Getting the feel of the system

There is no set procedure for getting the feel of a system and starting to sense it. There is no linear thread that you can follow as you assimilate the intent of others and process it analytically into the one best answer. All human systems are living systems; when we engage with them, we recognize how generative they are. Ideas and capacities grow, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, sometimes predictably, often not.

As we move towards the heart of the web of knowledge in any system we are increasingly conscious of its power. If we attempt to retain that power for ourselves we decrease the capacity of the system to act. If we enable others in the system to access and use this power we develop a collective feel of the system and we all start to sense just how much might be achieved. In this way we find that our value arises from our capacity to promote collective action rather than application of personal power.

The art of connecting

Systems leaders are skilled in enabling a group of people, perhaps coming from widely different viewpoints or organisational intent, to sense what might be possible between them.

At the heart of this is the art of connecting so people are able to realise just how much they might achieve together.

Sometimes this is described as networking, but we have not used that term here. We find that it can have quite mundane meanings that fail to capture the intent and emotional quality of what we mean.

Making time to connect

Over the years, we have noticed just how much of our time is spent connecting people and connecting with people. This is not always done for a particular purpose. It may just be we feel some sense that it might be valuable. And not valuable simply for us. We may not get any obvious value from it at all.

Often we just feel that two people we know might have an interesting conversation and we connect them with no expectation of any return and may never know the outcome.

We may not be guided by a goal or specific objective in how we connect people. At the same time, it is not a random process. We have some sense, often quite intuitive, that the connection might somehow be valuable.

Perhaps this is why we make a point of spending time with people when it might appear to make no sense to do so. We spend time responding to students writing dissertations, meeting people from other sectors whose work is only tangentially connected to our own. We listen to people who have retired from the fray, hurt by the negative emotions that human systems can sometimes hold quite powerfully and vent on those who dare to name their issues.

We consistently find that it is the quality of connection that matters most. So our connecting carries a gentle curiosity. We try to meet people where they are. This helps us understand what they are seeing in any human system that we are missing. And perhaps our unique vantage point allows us to see what is not visible to them.

Relentless optimism, deep pragmatism

We are always striving for sustainable and just development for all people and our planet.

We start from a belief that people are inherently good. If their actions confuse, confound or confront us we feel it is worth understanding why a good person might behave this way. Guided by a strong personal sense of what is appropriate, we try to be generous, genuinely and respectfully caring about the other person as an individual.

We are guided by a relentless optimism. We believe that there is something better that can emerge if only we can help it, and it needn't be about us. If we can offer something that allows people to move from where they are to somewhere better, our time will have been spent well.

This is balanced by a deep pragmatism. A pragmatism that wants to keep things moving, growing, unfolding. Always we hold a direction in mind, not a goal that we must complete, but nonetheless, something that offers a purposeful sense of movement.

Sensing through connecting

When these beliefs guide our connections, we find we begin to sense the potential of any system to move to a more coherent place. A place where its activity aligns more closely with its stated intention. Where the troubling inconsistencies and painful contradictions start to resolve.

Our actions are guided by our intuition about where to focus, whom to connect and the quality that is needed in that connection. Intuition in this form is not speaking to us directly about what we should do. Instead, when we feel uneasy we want to know why, not carry on regardless. When we are filled with joy and enthusiasm we sense this as it arises and find we can infect others.

An act of care and love

Over the years we have learned that systems leadership means paying attention to connections in selfless way. We have found a joy in constantly connecting, a joy in our curiosity about other's experiences. In our different ways, we were both brought up to believe we had a responsibility to leave the world a better place for our time here. We would wish that to be part of every interaction we have. Given selflessly, connecting is an act of care and love.

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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