



Living Systems Leadership

Seeing Into Systems

John Atkinson, David Nabarro

First published at heartoftheheart.org on April 26, 2019

In recent weeks we have focused on some of the characteristics of leaders who are able to bring very different people together so that they change the behaviour of interacting systems and do so in ways that are coherent and make a difference. We find that successful systems leaders reflect five key qualities of thought and action:

- **They can see and explain whole systems as well as their components.**
- **They can engage with systems from multiple perspectives at the same time.**
- **They can appreciate the relationships between systems and their environment.**
- **They can feel the pace and rhythm of systems and assess their readiness for change.**
- **They meet people where they are, rather than where they would like them to be.**

As systems leaders apply these five characteristics they need to be skilled at seeing inside systems and appreciating them. They know that getting into systems will be a voyage of constant discovery and joy, at the same time it is tinged with the frustration of sensing that they can never have the full view of the whole system.

A constant sense of uncertainty accompanies systems leaders. Even at the peak of their careers they are driven by a constant curiosity about how things function as they do.

For all of us, our first work with new systems can seem daunting. Our existing networks and knowledge may be helpful but insufficient in this new domain. We must work out what to do, who we can trust and to what extent, how things get done, who knows whom. All this takes time, and this can add pressure when we are being held or feel accountable for a swift result. We know we need to establish the right relationships with people we may know slightly or are even yet to meet.

We have observed four stages that we inevitably seem to experience as we see into a new system. Although we are describing them sequentially, in reality they may merge, overlap and loop as we feel into them.

1 Obscurity

At first, we just cannot distinguish the wood from the trees. We meet people, have mostly great (but sometimes difficult) conversations, yet have little ability to process these beyond their face value. We may hardly know the people we are talking to. We don't understand the history, experience and wisdom that lead them to their point of view. We hear their words, pay attention to their emphasis, their body language and search for the nuance, but we have little sense of where these come from. We are assembling information, yet we have few frames for processing it.

Time may not be on our side. Everyone is asking things of us; what do we want them to be doing, what are the milestones, will we be supporting their point of view? In the same way that we are trying to make sense of them and what they bring, they are doing the same to us. They know we are asked to establish a vision, develop a programme or outline a project plan. How will our venture support or disturb their lives as they are currently being run?

The way out of obscurity is to resist being coerced into rushing. It is to take time to listen, to cross-reference and to make relationships, not to immediately formulate the 100-day plan. You will usually find that you can negotiate at least some of the time you need to do this. Most people will afford you that time.

Some will try to take advantage of what they see as your early naivety. They will point you at the people they think matter. We have found that those who point you at people who disagree with them are special. They understand that the system is beset with trade-offs and compromise, but there are patterns which make sense to some and are abhorrent to others. Differences in perspective are valuable when the purpose is to make something that is new and altogether better.

Those who take time to help you appreciate the differences may see you as someone who can not only tease out the alternative points of view but also, most likely, build bridges.

Those who point you only at people who already agree with them tend to be single-minded. Consciously or unconsciously they may be trying to capture your activity to serve their interests.

You may find that this period of working within obscurity is draining. Your senses are on overload as you try to tune into everything you are seeing. You lack the heuristics that optimize your attention as you immerse in a new environment. Your brain is functioning at top speed as you try to make sense of everything that is unfolding around you. It can be exciting and stimulating but staying in obscurity over a long period may leave you exhausted and you yearn to be able to shape a meaningful appreciation of the landscape.

2 Vision

In due course the obscurity will clear, sometimes quite suddenly. As the range and depth of our new relationships grows, and new connections are made, we start to create a picture of how the system works. It is as if the mist is slowly lifting to reveal the image of the green valley below. Indistinct details become sharper and connect to the wider scene.

We listen to the stories of the system and how they describe its history. We appreciate some of the ways in which different actors relate to each other, and why. We try to sketch out the system though our picture is forever evolving.

We start to feel we can discern a pattern. The different activities and comments begin to make sense. Instead of a range of disconnected actors and actions we feel a rhythm and flow. We can explain what is happening and consider what we need to do. We can identify places where we might intervene. This is the stage at which, most often, systems leaders begin to formulate their plans.

But there is a risk. That risk is that we have become captured by an image we have created of the system and stopped exploring the reality. The patterns we have seen and the stories we have heard are those that everyone tells us. We see where they have come from and find them internally consistent. They seem sensible. At the same time, we know that inside the system, what we see is defined by its norms, values and history. These act as a filter for new information, determine what we take on board (and what we don't), what we should attend to and what we leave aside.

If we let ourselves be captured in this way, we are not very useful. We simply conform to the existing patterns of activity and add little. Even if we bring fresh language or ideas the system makes sense of them through its existing view of the world. It tries to turn anything new that it encounters back into more of itself. The elements which do not fit are rejected. This is the nature of life. 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.

3 Insight

Systems leaders who move beyond the comfort of an image tend to be those who recognise the value of differences. Where voices differ, they are telling us about both those who are speaking and about the system. If we just pay attention to the image of the existing system we are likely to dismiss these outliers, perhaps too readily. We need to hold competing perspectives in mind at the same time to see what might emerge in the space between them.

We can test multiple perspectives on a system through undertaking precise actions and examining what happens. How do people respond when unfamiliar elements are introduced into a system? How do they react when we try things that others claim to have tried before? It is when we encounter unexpected responses and reactions that we gain a closer insight into how the system really works. We should be careful not to dismiss those whose views are outside the norm as difficult or ill-informed. One approach is to ask, "What might they be telling us if we could only hear the message"?

We also need to move beyond our own system. We should speak with others who are not involved. Their image of the system matters. What are they seeing that our key informants are ignoring? We need to be ready to test our views with selected people beyond those who are normally consulted. We should keep a sharp eye for difference. Often it is in the detail that the important distinctions emerge.

Before we have insight, we are limited to helping the system do what it already does – but better. When we have insight, we are at a point where we can add real value. From here on we can sense how transformation might occur.

4 Opportunity

Now the value we add becomes explicit. Other people may see us as weaving magic, but all we are really doing is paying attention to the important differences and from them creating opportunities for action. Each connection gives us an opportunity to deepen our learning. We are developing hypotheses, letting them evolve, testing and adapting them, improving them as we go.

As we do this, the potential for action starts to open up. By freeing ourselves from the existing narrative of the system we start to frame an aspiration that will help all concerned to make new sense of their environment. As we do this, we start to appreciate the collective potential for the system to change. We are seeing possibilities that we might not have seen before: opportunities that differ from our own view. To take advantage of this opportunity we must let go of fear. We have the discipline needed to avoid trying to control and instead focus on the aspiration. This allows us and our colleagues to make a new sense of the system and commit to it with both our energy and altruism.

This for us is where the biggest opportunity lies. Find the art of connecting to the heart of the system. Connect to peoples' desire for creating something altogether more meaningful. Trigger a shift in the way they view the world so that it for them will never look the same again. From then on there is momentum for transformation.

So, to recap:

The first step is to move from seeing obscurity to having a vision.

Then, as we open our eyes more, we see beyond the image.

We gain insights through making connections, welcoming divergence and testing hypotheses.

We start to see inside systems and to find promising opportunities for change.

Learning to be good at seeing systems and appreciating them is a vital element of our work as systems leaders. We get better at it one step at a time, and do not always get it right. But we know that the ability to see into multiple systems creates opportunities for leading change that is substantial and significant. It is an indispensable skill-set as we work on complex issues and harness the energy for massive transformation. For those who are committed systems leaders nothing has greater meaning.

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.

David Nabarro

David is the strategic director for 4SD and previously worked for several years in senior roles within the UN system. These included coordinating the international response to the West Africa Ebola outbreak 2014-15, the UN's response to volatile food prices and the Movement for Scaling-Up Nutrition. In October 2018 he was joint winner of the World Food Prize.

www.4sd.info
contact@4sd.info



John Atkinson

John is a founding director at PKP. He has designed, instigated and led whole systems change approaches at the global, national and local level for Governments and Cities as well as for multi-national corporations.

www.phillipskay.com
info@phillipskay.com