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## Living Systems Leadership Comfort in Complexity

Webinar on 15th May 2019 – Learning Review

- **Three areas of confidence**
- **Three capabilities**
- **Five qualities of thought and action**
- **One step at a time with a direction in mind**

This learning review is the output of the 4SD Webinar on **Living Systems Leadership – Comfort in Complexity**. The purpose of the webinar was to explore the characteristics and skills needed by living systems leaders in large, complex and politically contested situations, as discussed in the blog published by John Atkinson and David Nabarro on [heartofheart.org](http://heartofheart.org) on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2019.

The learning review presents (in their own words) the participants own thoughts, experiences and reflections on working with systems using the living systems approach, and as such provides an insight into how working in this way can be valuable, and what it really feels like.

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# Three areas of confidence

## Politics

Being confident when working with those who seek to accumulate and then use power

- I have chosen to do things on my own because I wanted to be outside of the usual political games that comes as being part of a big organisation, but it makes me feel a little bit isolated.
- It can be difficult to separate activity in the corporate world, to distinguish between genuine efforts and corporate public relations stunts.

There is conflict and contest over who has access to power in every single thing that I've ever done. Sometimes it's more overt, and sometimes we may want to press it a bit.

It's very important when we say you have to be confident in politics that it's being confident also about surfacing conflict.

## Adversity

Resilience in the face of adversity

- If you fail to acknowledge difference, the conflict, the tension, at some point it will bite you.
- In political contested issues there is a lack of trust. It's about recognising there will be issues and recognising my own personal distrust. This is my own personal challenge.
- I've a realisation that you do have to let go when you're doing systems work. Confidence in others is highly relevant to what we're trying to do.

I'm aware that the (place) I work with is heavily dependent on flying around the world. I decided initially just to focus on our institution and so I made a presentation to show that 60% of our work consumption went on flights, and presented a travel form where people had to justify travel and show they had tried to seek different means. There was a fantastic pushback. People saying this is a part of our work, planes are flying anyway, use less paper, what about offsetting? But it was out of that that a small group was set up and we're going to push these policies forward.

## Uncertainty

Being comfortable with and managing uncertainty

- A lot of this work has been about patience. Asking myself; 'how much patience do I need? What and when will it be time to act?'

My work has been stalling for a long-time.

I've been applying the living systems approach between two big organisations, two big bureaucracies, with many many different opinions. But I'm seeing it work. It does take a lot of patience though.

The challenge I have is that of connecting many different players and many different perspectives, dealing with political complexity, the technical complexity, the diversity of players, the scale of action and the very short period of time. There are the best and the worst of identities at play.

# Three capabilities

## Scoping

Creating a sense of meaningful direction

- I've been figuring out how to navigate the conversations and gauge at every level how the ideas have been received.
- I spend a lot of time making sure that the people who have the most influence in that system understand what I'm doing.

I'm working in (an area) that is described as 'failing to perform as it should'. They wanted me to create a vision, but when it started, in effect what I've been doing is gradually changing my brief, to one that says; 'how can I help you design experiments and architecture that are deliberately set to test what we might really do that would change aspiration'. Rewriting the scope of the work allows more innovation and learning from the different opportunities that arise.

I've found the living systems approach very helpful with conflict. Sometimes we gloss over conflict, but there are ways in the systems approach that really help you hold your ground, move people to your space and influence people.

## Evolving

Constant adaptation

- I'm coming to a point where I have to decide which way to go. If you move too early you get a bomb, if you move too late, you miss an opportunity.

People who know me, see me on one hand a slightly laissez faire attitude- letting evolve, but know on the other hand that I, actually with subterfuge, am trying to influence how the evolution takes place.

How far do you push and nudge? You're almost watching processes emerge from the system itself. That's sometimes frustrating. You have to keep rewriting your narrative because you keep learning. And you have to constantly give back the story, so that everyone else sees more clarity.

## Stropping

Pursuing strategy through opportunity

- There have been some really exciting opportunities that I didn't expect. I'm building on these unexpectedly.
- It's because we all see opportunities differently that we have to be prepared to spend a lot of time looking at the options and having dialogue about what really does represent a good opportunity.

I've been doing this with x. There's a never ending source of opportunities as a result of having a strategic approach, but you never know where the opportunities are going to arise. You have to be prepared to be surprised. You have to be prepared for the fact it will happen at its own pace.

# Five qualities of thought and action

## 1 Hold competing perspectives simultaneously

- If you're under pressure to move quickly it can get really hard to give yourself enough time to work through the obscurity phase until you get insight.
- There's very rarely a clear path once you've done your system's viewing.
- What are the gaps and challenges? And how do we put together a set of proposals that takes stock of what needs to happen and what is grounded in the reality of the political environment?

I'm working with a technically brilliant group of people who run local administration who have been utterly unable to deal with the challenges of a community that is feeling deep hurt and deep pain, and have unrealistic expectations about what anyone might be able to do about it.

I'm trying to see x as a living system. It's rich in terms of content and of diversity of personalities. We just have to see how we can make this diversity a strength. It also has major opportunities and major risk and threat.

## 2 See the whole system differently to its separate parts

- It's about really going for it. But when the existing system is not in line with its own rhetoric, how do you shift that?
- Simply giving tension or conflict a name can actually be helpful because it can then be referred to, and it doesn't have to be explained every time.

It's a long journey. We have a destination clear (sic). I'm trying to use living systems for a process that's aiming at nothing less than changing mindsets and changing systems at a speed and at a scale that has never been attempted or achieved in the history of humanity.

Not enough attention has been paid to the fact that this is an integrated agenda, spanning many different portfolios and governments. They haven't yet woken up to the implications that they need to change their own decision making, their own thinking patterns.

### 3 Feel into the pace and rhythm

- There's an assumption in this that sometimes we want to speed things up, and actually at times, particularly at times where we get into spirals of conflict, we want to slow things down. You can do that sometimes by not doing anything, when people expect you to do something.
- How do you help people get on the same page about what the opportunities are? By adding an extra beat to the rhythm.
- Getting the rhythm right, the moment when you mix the ingredients is fundamental.
- There's a little bit of a problem with the 5 capabilities, and that is that they have to take place at their own pace. You can't really rush it, but if you go too slowly those around you are going to say; 'this isn't good enough, we need more milestones, better indicators'.

As I build a narrative, I'm seeing a lot of positive signs that this is inevitable, however, we're not where I'd like us to be. It is moving at a pace slower than that which I'd like it be, and certainly where I'd set my milestones. But using living systems I accept that these milestones come at their own pace, and the readiness is not there yet.

I watch x as a systems leader, just feel the pace and rhythm and readiness, and take advantage of their skills at feeling it to be able to feed in an extra shift, or nuance to the rhythm, so that the rhythm changes so it becomes more amenable to some kind of system transformation effort to be introduced. It sounds a bit Machiavellian, but it's not.

### 4 See the system in relationship to its environment

- There's a story, an acceptance of how things are. But reality is hugely variable.
- It is making full use of the opportunities and adversities that are presenting.
- When you actually try to tell people 'here's some great data, and you have to do things differently', you find out how the system really works in what it now says.

**Yes**, go for the positive, amplify the things that work for what you're trying to do, don't spend your energy on the terrorists.

**And**, understand where the conflict is real and what that is telling you about how the system works and what matters in it.

I believe it's really important to hold on to and don't hide from the difference, the conflict and the tension. Don't pretend it isn't there, because it's telling you something very important about what matters in that system and what matters to that identity in that system.

## 5 Meet people right where they really are

- How do you stay open to other's views and diversity? You don't want to impose a direction of travel, but at the same time you do want people to move together.
- Meeting people where they are, I maybe have lost track of where I am.
- Meet people where they are, investing a lot of time in listening and figuring out what it is they want, what it is they offer.
- I'm always nervous about just going with the people who are overtly passionate. Often passion is hidden. It comes out in unusual ways. I'm increasingly interested in leaving time available so that those not overtly passionate at the beginning can still express it.

I've talked to a lot of people. I've listened, listened, listened, to what they are saying and also to what they are not saying. And one of the things that's quite hard when you come into this sort of work is that when you first talk to people in a new environment you don't notice what they are not saying because your antennae are not tuned in yet.

I'm looking at where is the passion is. What we work with is the passion of decision makers, it's the passion of the people who are in key places in the networks we're trying to influence. What I try and understand is what motivates people. These different sets of interests and passions become the colours we use to paint our canvas.

## One step at a time with a direction in mind

### Do we accept mediocrity in group work?

- It's a very perilous situation and the role of people like ourselves as systems leaders is actually to help those that are feeling a little bit lacking in ambition to raise their sights.

### What is the value of transparency?

- We do as much as we can, but we can't always be fully transparent, otherwise our own room for manoeuvre gets decreased and our utility as facilitators gets impaired.

### It's about:

- A willingness to elevate the agenda
- Relationships with others
- An ability to add in an extra beat to the rhythm
- A lot of dialogue
- The right meeting places where people can come together safely

### And remember

- Judgements are not something we can get right every time, this is all experimental and sometimes we get it wrong.