



Living Systems Leadership

Navigating difference

John Atkinson, David Nabarro

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Illustration is a photograph of an original artwork by Norwegian Sami sculptor, painter and book illustrator Ingunn Eldbjørg Utsi.

Leadership requires the capacity to navigate difference. Good leaders help groups of people achieve greater impact through enabling them to make sense of their different perspectives. This is vital if those involved share an interest but do not have a clear agreement on how to move forward. They may disagree on what needs to be done. Even basic facts might be contested. Leadership helps them to navigate through their differences and find the best ways to move forward. The leader does not begin by insisting that differences must first be resolved.

Leading for greater impact

A capacity to work with human systems is essential when making sense of complex issues like disease outbreaks, changing weather or food shortages. Systems leaders help the groups working on these issues to expand their ambition and achieve greater impact, despite their different perspectives. They help articulate a story and direction that makes sense to all and encourage others to explore this direction through their own life lenses. Thus, they make room for others to advance in ways that are inspiring and meaningful.

Seeing difference as a strength

Systems leaders see different perspectives as assets and not as problems. They know that inevitably there are competing points of view on any issue that matters, and that those who hold them believe they are correct. Good systems leaders can hold different points of view lightly, without favor or prejudice, whether in open or private exchanges. If they can hold many different perspectives at the same time, and can model this behavior to others, they demonstrate what is needed to help divergent groups navigate difference.

Taking care re simplifying

Where there are multiple perspectives on what to do there are often calls for the leader to help. To clarify, simplify and offer concrete direction. Be careful if this leads to stark choices between competing options: seductive, simple, either-or choices. Often in the Western dialectic tradition, a dispute is answered through debate between opposite positions. However, simplification and debate often lead to the emergence of competing factions. Each has their backers, positions become entrenched, and winners (and losers) emerge. In the most volatile environments this can lead to deepening resentment and generations of conflict. Ballot victories are hollow if the issue festers as an unhealed wound. The divergence is exacerbated, and the leader's role becomes harder.

Seductively stark choices are unreal

It is a seductive but false notion that you can address divergence by breaking down complex issues into stark either-or choices. Real life is rarely straightforward. Complexity fares badly when simplified into two competing viewpoints because there are invariably many options and are seldom opposites. In setting up a choice between two options the leader must omit some perspectives, prioritize selected data over others, and so present an incomplete picture that misinforms and may even be seen as manipulative. The leader who handles divergence by taking sides may end up facing even more intractable challenges.

Holding divergence skillfully

A systems leader who holds divergence skillfully succeeds by expanding the frame for thought, pointing towards a collective 'better' (not necessarily the 'best'), and holding that direction lightly. The leader enables people to see how the collective better helps them fulfil their needs. Exploring this gives people the room they need to invest in a bigger and broader cause.

Holding differences as necessary paradoxes

Systems leaders who can hold competing perspectives over time, without taking sides, enable new relationships to form. They encourage the emergence of wonderful new ways of being and doing. They do not need bigger brains or more processing power to do this. But even in the face of the most complex and contested challenges they do need one basic skill. That is their ability to hold differences, lightly and long enough to live with them as necessary tensions. When they can do it for themselves, they can help others do it too.

Practical implications for the leader

- 1.** Hold multiple competing viewpoints together and treat them all as valid even when they appear to contradict.
- 2.** Avoid boiling difficult issues down to stark either-or choices in the name of keeping things simple.
- 3.** Avoid contributing to the deliberate spread of misinformation: you will not be trusted if this surface.
- 4.** Be aware there always will be unintended consequences in any approach – that they will occur again and again, evolving over time and space, often in unpredictable ways. Look out for them and build them into your strategy, adapting to new circumstance as you learn more about the space in which you are operating.

Handling one's own uncertainty

If leaders are to help others hold differences, they need to be able to hold differences for themselves. As they juggle with many points of view, they must also handle their own uncertainties. They have to accept that there may be no solution to the challenges they face. They need to be conscious of, and then park, their own biases. They learn to stop trying to find answers to unanswerable questions. And they do not need to propose solutions to be seen, noticed and affirmed.

Leading in living webs

Systems leadership is part of a living web of human activity. It is best described using ecological metaphors. Human systems are dynamic and generative, with inbuilt vitality. They are complex, diverse and symbiotic. They are living systems. Those who lead in them find that seemingly insignificant connections can profoundly influence outcomes and that novel phenomena emerge from new relationships. Leadership should be seen as tending to this living web, leaders are not mechanics tuning a large machine to make it more efficient.

A rich resource for the collective good

Unresolved differences within groups of people can paralyze them when they try to tackle complex challenges together. Paralyzing conflicts occur in many settings, including parliaments, governments, institutions, organizations, communities and even families. Systems leaders who can help groups to navigate their differences have much to offer. They enable new relationships to form where people can hold onto and make good use of their differences - as they may well contain what is needed to enable everyone to move forward together.

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 of 4SD Foundation who led the Food Systems Dialogues and the Nutrition Dialogues.

www.4SDfoundation.org
contact@4SD.org



John Atkinson

John is 4SD's mentor on systems leadership. He curates the systems leadership blog "heart of the art".

[https://www.heartoftheart.org/
john@heartoftheart.org](https://www.heartoftheart.org/john@heartoftheart.org)