Overview

KEY WORDS:

Systems Thinking

If we are able to see our responsibility for delivering the services for the public from a wider system perspective, then we can also see the ‘bigger prize’ that could result from working collaboratively and across organisational boundaries. Here the word “system” refers to a human system that is organised around a particular purpose - such as the quality of life for older people in a community. It is not used in the sense of a fixed structure such as a Hospital or Information Technology system.

“System” in this sense can be defined as a perceived whole whose essential properties arise from the relationships between its parts. The concept of “systems thinking” was brought to prominence by Peter Senge in his book, The Fifth Discipline. 19

“The Fifth Discipline”

The cornerstone of any learning organisation is the “fifth discipline” - systems thinking. This is the ability to see the bigger picture, to look at the inter-relationships of a system as opposed to simple cause-effect chains. It is about studying the continuous processes rather than taking single snapshots of a process. According to this philosophy, the essential properties of a system are not determined by the sum of its parts - but by the process of interactions between those parts.

“THE LAWS OF THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE”20

1. Today’s problems come from yesterday’s solutions. Solutions shift problems from one part of a system to another.

2. The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back. “Compensating feedback”: well-intentioned interventions which eventually make matters worse.

3. Behaviour grows better before it grows worse. The short-term benefits of compensating feedback are seen before the long-term dis-benefits.

4. The easy way out usually leads back in. Familiar solutions which are easy to implement usually do not solve the problem.

5. The cure can be worse than the disease. Not only can familiar solutions be ineffective; sometimes they are addictive and dangerous.

6. Faster is slower. The optimal rate of growth is much slower than the fastest growth possible.

7. Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space. The area of a system which is generating the problems is usually distant to the area showing the symptoms.

8. Small changes can produce big results - but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious. Problems can be solved by making small changes to an apparently unrelated part of the system.


21. This “Hamburger Model” was developed by Nuala White and Malcolm Young in the 1980s.

WAYS OF WORKING AND RELATIONSHIPS

When we take a wider systems view, we see the bigger purpose - and the task takes on a new dimension. It becomes apparent that both relationships and the processes and ways of working together need to be different. A simplified model21 (see Figures 3 & 4) illustrates how processes (ways of working) and relationships can help or hinder the achievement of tasks.

Figure 3: A model of the processes and relationships in relation to tasks.

For example, the successful achievement of tasks depends on effective communication processes and the appropriate involvement of people in decision-taking processes. In the model, process problems - such as poor communication or inadequate involvement - are shown as spikes that have interfered with the achievement of the task at certain points along the task time line. At other times, communication and involvement have worked well to support task achievement. Similarly, trust and co-operation enable the task to get done. But, at times when relationships are not good enough, task achievement is inhibited by interpersonal problems.

Developing the model further (see Figure 4) helps us identify the factors that need attention in any group, organisation or wider system of integrated organisations. Also see the following example in practice.

Figure 4: A model of processes and relationships in relation to tasks

TASKS:

- A shared sense of purpose – what are the meaningful outcomes we are trying to achieve together and what are the shared values this connects with
- Tests of change / experiments to discover what is possible

PROCESSES:

- Ways for people to communicate, engage and make decisions

RELATIONSHIPS:

- Identity – our sense of belonging
- Loyalty – who we regard as trustworthy allies.
- Team or organisation boundaries can influence who we see as “us” and who we see as “them”.
- Culture is important in providing a set of expectations or norms about how we deal with status, conflict, openness and other important factors in how we work together.
- Leadership – the extent to which leadership is shared, the predominant style of leaders and the extent to which people choose to follow those in leadership roles.
AN EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE

The Health Centre Manager might think about improving appointments within the Health Centre, perhaps by introducing more flexible appointment times. That would be regarded as a problem-solving activity intended to improve ways of working within the Health Centre. Exploring the opportunity to do that could be expected and would involve only the other people who work in the Health Centre. See Figure 5.

It is unlikely that a hierarchical solution to integrating appointments could be found – the situation is too complex. Rather change is more likely to result from small-scale experiments to try to make progress.

Ron Heifetz describes the exploration of what could be done differently as “moving between the dance floor and the balcony”. As well as standing back from the immediate demands of our job to look at the wider system (“getting on the balcony”), it is also important to get first-hand experience of what is happening on the ground (“dance floor”) across different parts of the system.

- What is the patient’s experience?
- What do families and carers see as helping or hindering?
- How could the receptionists’ experiences contribute to the new thinking?

Figure 5: Health Centre Appointments Booking Process

On the other hand, the Health Centre Manager might think about the wider system and the added “Public Value” to be achieved by having an integrated system for appointments and by involving a wider range of people who can help improve health. Exploring this wider opportunity would not be regarded as part of the Manager’s role. Rather it would be a personal initiative - requiring “lateral leadership” - to engage with people outwith the Manager’s normal sphere of influence. See Figure 6.

Figure 6: Health Improvement Appointments Booking Process

MOVING BETWEEN THE “BALCONY” AND THE “DANCEFLOOR”

When a leader “gets on the balcony” to look at the bigger picture, it could be as simple as giving more consideration to the inter-dependence between their own team and another team. Thinking about both teams together from this wider perspective, it might be that more effective use of public money could result from a different skills mix or outcomes could be improved by joined up decision-making. Achieving such changes through cross-team co-operation depends on re-thinking who is the “we” - and letting go of our defensive inclinations to protect “our budget”.

The same analysis applies at any level of inter-dependent activity: team, department, directorate, organisation, partnership. At any level, leaders can choose to reach out and find ways to create more “Public Value” by using “Operating Capacity” more effectively - acknowledging that their budget belongs to the public and that their staff are primarily accountable to the public.

Of course, sometimes a realignment is imposed through re-structuring - when teams, departments or organisations are merged. Those in authority make these changes to facilitate cultural integration and joined up processes for managing the work. However, whatever the origins of the re-configuration, there will always be cross-boundary inter-dependencies. And there is always a need for lateral leadership from people who take the wider view and seek to create cross-boundary co-operation.

Also see Further Resources relating to Systems Thinking & Systems Leadership.

What do “Systems Leaders” do?

Systems leaders encourage “collective leadership” – in that way, they enable the people who are experiencing an “adaptive” or “wicked” challenge to make progress. According to his model of so-called “adaptive leadership”, Ronald Heifetz would say: they “give the work back to the people”23. Systems leaders are able to have a perspective from the wider system. They recognise that it is necessary to distribute leadership responsibilities to bring about change in a complex inter-dependent environment.

They create the conditions in which leadership initiatives can flourish. They change the mind-set from competition to co-operation. They foster dialogue, i.e. open-minded exploration of different points of view which can result in new thinking and new possibilities to make progress.

The Case for “Collective Leadership” in Health Services

The importance of developing “collective leadership” in the NHS is espoused by Professor Michael West and his colleagues in the Kings Fund.

“Collective leadership means everyone taking responsibility for the success of the organisation as a whole – not just for their own jobs or work area. This contrasts with traditional approaches... to leadership, which have focused on developing individual capability while neglecting the need for developing collective capability or embedding the development of leaders within the context of the organisation they are working in.

Collective leadership cultures in the Health Service are characterised by all staff focusing on continual learning and, through this, on the improvement of patient care. It requires high levels of dialogue, debate and discussion to achieve shared understanding about quality problems and solutions.

Leaders need to ensure that all staff adopt leadership roles in their work and take individual and collective responsibility for delivering safe, effective, high-quality and compassionate care for patients and service users.

Achieving this requires careful planning, persistent commitment and a constant focus on nurturing leadership and culture.

The King’s Fund, 2012

Referencing another publication from the King’s Fund, Kim Turnbull-James similarly emphasises the importance of leadership at all levels of the system in health care:

“Leadership must be exercised across shifts, 24/7, and reach every individual; good practice can be destroyed by one person who fails to see themselves as able to exercise leadership, as required to promote organisational change or who leaves something undone or unsaid because someone else is supposed to be in charge.

The NHS needs people to think of themselves as leaders not because they are personally exceptional, senior or inspirational to others, but because they can see what needs doing and can work with others to do it.”

Kim Turnbull-James, 2011

HOW TO BE A SYSTEMS LEADER

Accountability for outcomes is important

Improving an outcome for a particular client group or a community is rarely within the sole capacity of one person or one team. Achieving outcomes is usually the consequence of a blend of inputs from a diverse range of people.

Systems leaders hold people to account for outcomes for which they do not have overall direct control. In this way they encourage co-operative activity. Rather than trying to simplify things by chunking up responsibilities, the people involved are expected to share responsibility. The complexity of inter-dependencies - between individuals and teams – is embraced. The key organising principle becomes: Who do I need to work with… so that together we can explore the possibilities and make improvements?

When leadership involves such a collective endeavour, the way people see their accountability matters. People are more likely to engage in transformational leadership if they feel in some way accountable for outcomes - rather than just responsible for particular tasks or activities.

The challenge is that the work can become messier and more inter-connected. Rather than operating within neatly demarcated accountabilities within each separate part of a system, a systems leader will expect people to work collaboratively in several different teams and to be able to communicate effectively in different contexts. This may still feel like quite a challenge – culturally and personally – to an individual who is used to working within a more traditional, hierarchical environment (such as those found in parts of the NHS).

Being open-minded and open-hearted is important

In seeking ways of making improvements jointly, we may need to ‘re-frame’ the issues - to let go of our current assumptions about what is needed, what is ‘best’ and what is ‘right’. Being an effective advocate is an important skill in a professional role. However, for working effectively within a complex system (such as health and social care), it is critical to balance advocacy with open-mindedness to the legitimacy of others’ points of view.

We tend to hold onto our assumptions and beliefs as if they were truths - rather than the ways of thinking we have learned. We tend to seek to confirm our existing viewpoints - rather than dis-confirm them. Being deliberately open to changing your own mind is an uncommon ability – and one which it is essential to cultivate as a systems leader.

“Nothing undermines openness more surely than certainty. Once we feel as if we have ‘the answer’, all motivation to question our thinking disappears. But the discipline of systems thinking shows that there simply is ‘no right answer’ when dealing with complexity. For this reason, openness and systems thinking are closely linked.

But most people have grown up in an authoritarian environment. As children, their parents had the answers. As students, their


teachers had the answers. Naturally, when they enter organisations, they assume the boss must have the answers.

When people in an organisation come collectively to recognise that nobody has the answers, it liberates the organisation in a remarkable way. You realise that any answer you have is at best an approximation.”

Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

Systems leaders seek to create conversations in which all parties are open-minded to new thinking. They invite others to let go of some of their assumptions to help make joint progress with the problem. Seeking to understand, as well as accepting, others’ perspectives is seen to be as important as seeking to be understood and persuading other people. Being involved in such systemic change may mean that people have to accommodate proposals that may challenge their personal, professional and organisational principles – in the interests of the greater good.

Through building trust and an open-minded exploration of possibilities, systems leaders help people discover whether there are better ways of delivering services – for the people on the receiving end (users/staff/customers/communities/society). Small changes which deliver better outcomes can be applied on a bigger scale – and even rolled out as a new way of working across the whole system. This is how transformational change normally comes about – starting as a test of change then, if that works, seeking support and resources from those with hierarchical power for a wider scale project and ultimately full commitment to the new approach.

While such ‘experiments’ may fail in practice, there is always insight and learning to be gained from these good ideas. Systems leaders have a readiness to accept that there are no guarantees of success from tests of change. They are prepared to invest in learning from mistakes. Transformational change depends on this kind of risk taking. It involves trying things, even if we discover that they do not work.

NON-HIERARCHICAL THINKING IS IMPORTANT

There are good reasons for hierarchical organisational arrangements in the public services, not least for robust governance and efficiency. Working through a hierarchy helps ensure efficiency: through joined up planning processes; standardisation of policies and work practices; and, clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Communication channels and decision-making authority are clearly defined. There are clear career progression pathways and defined criteria and processes for getting promotion. For many individuals, working in a well-structured environment meets our psychological needs for order and control.

However, organisations that depend on invention, creativity and entrepreneurship are likely to be organised differently – perhaps with a flatter structure and a culture of trust and co-operation which enables the exploration of new ideas.

Systems leaders encourage “lateral leadership” alongside business-as-usual ways of working. In this way, they may seek to dismantle some of the organisational arrangements that undermine lateral leadership. They act to reduce the bureaucracy that risks stifling transformational change in order to make it easier for cross-boundary initiatives to be taken.

Given that “lateral leadership” is about acting in non-hierarchical ways, it challenges cultural expectations. Trial and error experimentation is about creativity, sometimes at the expense of efficiency. Time and energy spent outwith our department might not be valued and rewarded. Cross-boundary collaboration dilutes the authority of those with positional power.

In undertaking systems leadership across public services we need to strike the right balance between enough governance (clinical, financial, corporate) to ensure quality, safety and public value and enough flexibility to enable transformational change and creativity.

BETTER QUESTIONS RATHER THAN BETTER ANSWERS

“The leader’s role with a wicked problem is to ask the right questions rather than provide the right answers because the answers may not be self-evident and will require a collaborative process to make any kind of progress.”

Keith Grint (2010)


When faced with a complex system problem, the systems leader ensures that all of the work of problem analysis and experimentation is done by the people directly involved. They see their role as defining the question from the whole system, user/community/society perspective - rather than being drawn into trying to provide the answer.

It is by looking at what is really going on in the wider system that we can identify the core questions to be addressed. Systems leaders make a point of spending time where the real work is done – in communities, families, at the front line, at the ‘customer’ interface. They seek to understand the reality of what is happening there - with an open mind. They strive to understand how the whole system actually works in practice. They know that what we decide to notice can blind us to other possibilities. They understand that exploration needs to be undertaken with an open mind and not blinkered by our own narrow interests about our little bit of the system.

“Helping people see the larger system is essential to building a shared understanding of complex problems. This understanding enables collaborating organisations to jointly develop solutions not evident to any of them individually and to work together for the health of the whole system rather than just pursue symptomatic fixes to individual pieces.”

Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton and John Kania (2015)  

From the wider system perspective, the question is one about the transformational change that is required. It becomes a question which is beyond the authority or ability of any one individual or team to solve.

If we take a systems perspective to outcomes and targets, we arrive at a set of open questions. Rather than prescribing the solution, these questions are specific about the required outcome. For example:

- In what ways can we further reduce teenage suicides by a quarter over the next 3 years?
- What can we do to cap the pharmacy spend for the next 2 years?
- What new ideas can we test to increase average life expectancy by 5 years by 2030 in the deprived areas of our city?

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR GENERATIVE CONVERSATIONS AND EXPERIMENTATION**

System wide problem-solving involves a broad range of stakeholders. The collaborative process is key because through dialogue comes shared commitment. People are more likely to change their attitudes and assumptions when they work together on a complex issue.

Engaging in genuine dialogue and shared reflection is critical. It enables people to listen fully to views which may be different to their own. It also enables people to understand more about each other’s experiences and perspectives. Shared understanding builds trust and enables more collective creativity.

It is important for the systems leader to recognise that people are likely to feel daunted by being asked to struggle with a complex issue over which they have limited influence. It is unlikely to be in the job descriptions of most of those involved! Systems leadership needs to counteract our natural tendency to avoid the really difficult work - by blaming others for the problem, by pretending the problem could be solved if only there were increased resources, or by assuming that it is the sole responsibility of the ‘senior managers’ to make the difficult decisions.

The systems leader knows that it is highly unlikely that there will be a single clever answer. Making progress with “adaptive challenges” is about trying lots of different ideas and building on those that work. There has to be enough support for something new to be tried as a test of change; consensus is not essential. What is important is to experiment with ideas which have some prospect of success.

Experimenting with new ways of working will often bring with it a sense of loss - perhaps the loss of status, or of valued relationships, or of a place of work. There may have to be a fundamental re-thinking of what is “right”, what people are responsible for doing, and how decisions will be made.

“Getting an organisation to adapt to changes in the environment is not easy. You need to confront loyalty to legacy practices and understand that your desire to change them makes you a target of attack”.


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The system leader manages their own fear and distrust. They help regulate the distress in others that comes with changing hearts and minds. They disappoint people at a rate that they can tolerate. They create time for talking through the feelings of uncertainty, frustration and pain. But they resist the temptation to ‘rescue’ people. Compassion is about acknowledging the legitimacy of others’ feelings – not about trying to soothe and comfort.

This means that the systems leader needs to be able to bring potential conflict into the open – ‘conflict’ in the sense of differing points of view. Difference is the driver of creativity; defensiveness is the real enemy of change. It is typically the way that an alternative point of view is defended as if it is ‘right’ that causes the conflict. That is when conflict becomes stressful – when there is frustration, anxiety and anger. Trusted leaders are skilled at turning a heated debate into a respectful dialogue – one in which it is possible for people to acknowledge the legitimacy of concerns about trying a different way of doing things.

The leader is able to bring the stakeholders with different agendas, perspectives and culture together and to keep outcomes for users and society at the centre of the dialogue. They treat people as adults who are capable of dealing with difference and the feelings associated with disagreement.

The leader who is able to work in this way flies in the face of the conventional expectation: i.e. that the leader alone will provide the answers. The leader can expect to be criticised for not ‘rescuing’ people from the stress of struggling with the problem.

CREATING SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND FLEXIBLE TEAMS

Clinicians and managers are increasingly needing to work in multiple multi-professional teams – working together on different projects and initiatives some of which cross organisation boundaries.

Amy Edmondson advocates that we move away from the concept that teams are fixed and stable – thereby allowing that team membership will change as the work changes. Someone included in a team at the start of the work may not have a key part to play later on – at which point there might be value in bringing in people with other skills. Professional people need to be accountable for using their time most effectively, including opting out of and opting into meetings according to the needs of the work at hand.

Rarely can transformational change be the sole responsibility of an individual employee. Creating shared responsibility for outcomes helpfully creates fuzzy boundaries between roles and encourages flexibility in terms of team memberships. ‘Shared’ responsibility does not imply that individuals are no longer personally accountable. Individuals remain personally accountable for their own behaviour - for delivering what they say they will deliver, for how they spend their time, for overcoming interpersonal difficulties and for asking for help when they need it.

INVESTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF “LATERAL LEADERSHIP”

System leaders who are committed to transformational change foster “lateral leadership”. They seek out and encourage people who are constructive dissenters and those who are well-intentioned rule-benders. They welcome in the voices of dissatisfaction – from clients, communities, other departments, other organisations. Change is catalysed by people who are frustrated with the current system and/or who have strong ideas about doing things differently. Sometimes they might be regarded as a ‘pain in the neck’ because they challenge the status quo. But their motivation to engage in exploration with others is likely to trigger positive progress.

Systems leaders expect that transformational change may cost time and money. They make it possible for people to have time and space to meet. They create opportunities for the dialogue and the collaborative experiments that lead to new thinking. They invest in communication across boundaries.

People are encouraged to shadow peers in other departments and organisations as a way of developing “lateral leadership” and building mutual commitment to transformational change. Processes such as “action learning” are used to bring groups of people together from different departments and/or organisations and/or communities. “Open space” events bring representatives of whole systems together. System leaders expect people to spend time networking and engaging with the wider issues.

31. See the resources on “Action Learning”.
If we are seeking change and innovation at a whole systems level, then leadership development needs to be seen as a whole system requirement. Leadership skills are needed by everyone with a contribution to make. Collaborative leadership development programmes provide development opportunities on a cross-organisational basis. They seek to reach people who would not otherwise get the opportunity for such development.

Also see Further Resources relating to Systems Thinking & Systems Leadership.