



Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times

Synthesis Paper

Executive Summary

Resource

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Deborah Ghatge, Jane Lewis

Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation

David Welbourn

Centre for Health Enterprise,
Cass Business School, City University, London



Acknowledgements

The Co-Production Group for the study

Catherine Doran, Corporate Director of Children and Families, Harrow Council (Chair)

Colin Green, Director of Children, Learning and Young People, Coventry City Council (Deputy Chair)

Ann Baxter, Independent Consultant

Carole Bell, Head of Children's Commissioning, London Tri-borough Council and Inner NW London PCT

David Derbyshire, Director of Practice Improvement, Action for Children

Steve Goodman, Director, Morning Lane Associates

Cassandra Harrison, Senior Adviser, Local Government Association

Amanda Hatton, Sector-led Solutions

Denise Hyde, Director of People, North Lincolnshire Council

Sarah Norman, Strategy Director, Community, Wolverhampton Council

Murray Rose, Director, Service for People, Darlington Borough Council

Tom Savory, Assistant Director, Strategy and Commissioning for Children's Services, Norfolk County Council

Hugh Sherriffe, Assistant Director Children's Services, Midlands, Barnardo's

Dwynwen Stepien, Head of Early Intervention and Family Support Service, Croydon Council

The Virtual Staff College

Anton Florek, Chief Executive

Alix Morgan, Head of Operations

Fred Paterson, Associate

Mark Dalton, Senior Project Manager

Patrick Scott, National Lead for Succession Planning

The Research Advisory Group

John Harris, Associate, The Children's Improvement Board

Dez Holmes, Director, Research In Practice

Deborah McKenzie, Director of Organisational Development, Public Health England

Heather Rushton, Exploring Choices

Debbie Sorkin, Chief Executive, National Skills Academy for Social Care

The Colebrooke Centre & The Centre for Health Enterprise

Robert Warwick, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Health Enterprise

Jenny Graham, Research Associate, Colebrooke Centre

Susan Mould, Administrator, Colebrooke Centre

Foreword

The phrase may be overused, but it is truer than ever that "*the only constant is constant change*". To embrace this, it seems to me, is a pre-requisite for those aspiring to, let alone already in, leadership roles. However, an appetite for a moving target alone is not enough. We must relish not only inconstancy, but also its partners-in-crime uncertainty and ambiguity. Long gone is the time when the answer to all our leadership challenges/woes (delete as applicable) was to get a helicopter view: stand back far enough, we were advised, and the apparent confusion will dissipate and, ultimately, the picture will become clear enough for understanding and solutions to present themselves. The trouble, we found, with helicopters is that they only give this clarity when the land below is settled and the air above it free of cloud. And this is not the world we are in.

This research is, therefore, both a welcome and necessary contribution to the cause of getting to grips with the multi-faceted and ever-evolving nature of leadership. By carefully interrogating the nature of both system leadership and leadership across systems, the report helps make sense of the theoretical underpinnings and the practical applications of both. And such findings are wholly apposite to those working presently in children's services. Whether through experience, research or both, more and more of us are understanding that the old laws of linearity, command and control, and heroic leadership are in urgent need of repeal. Firstly, children's services is (at least) one complex system in itself - and it then interacts with a whole set of other complex systems. Secondly, the children's services system is not the sole preserve of the Director of Children's Services. Responsibility for its leadership is distributed amongst directors, lead members, leaders, chief executives, LSCB chairs and the wider corporate leadership of the council and partners organisations. Different parts to play, for sure, but all with one vision to deliver.

And it is with this in mind that, as Chair of the Children's Improvement Board (a body dedicated to a continuously self-improving children's services system), I am involved in the early stages of a piece of work that seeks to understand how best to develop a shared learning space in which this multiplicity of leaders can, together, develop their understanding of the repertoire of leadership insights, approaches and styles that, if acted upon, will make the most difference to outcomes for children and young people. Further, as this research sets out, in designing an integrated learning programme, the focus needs to be on the so-called softer skills: influencing, enabling, adapting and, critically, consensus-shaping to achieve common cause. But favourite for me amongst all of these characteristics is humility: not to be confused with a renouncing of passion and commitment but, rather, a recognition that complex systems with their inherent mix of critical, tame and wicked issues demands a distribution of the leadership task that has little or no place for the hero innovator.

So, please read on. The leadership for the future is ours to shape in unison.



Mark Rogers
Chief Executive, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council &
Past Chair (SOLACE), Children's Improvement Board

Distilling 'systems leadership': executive summary

Introduction

This summary is a distillation of key messages from a multi-method study commissioned in 2012 by the Virtual Staff College (VSC)¹ on systems leadership, or leadership across multiple systems, for children's services. The study was carried out by a partnership of researchers specialising in the science and practice of social care implementation² and health management, based at the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation and the Centre for Health Enterprise at Cass Business School, City University London.

The research reviewed and built upon theory about the leadership of both whole systems and complex systems, but was also intended to be practically useful to those in leadership roles in public services. The synthesis paper brings together the findings of seven source papers of varying scope, each of which describe different elements of the research. These source papers include:

- secondary analysis of the international literature on leadership in complex systems
- qualitative depth interviews with 29 leaders working in public services across England
- a group of case studies of three real world leadership scenarios in locations across England
- four review papers and short case studies of systems leadership in child and youth services in the USA, Canada, Australia and Denmark

The design of the study, and the interpretation of its findings, was developed in collaboration with a co-production group of 14 highly experienced leaders and innovators in public and voluntary sector organisations, and with a Research Advisory Group convened by the VSC.

The messages from the study can be summarised in relation to three broad questions:

1. What is systems leadership: what lies at its heart, conceptually and in practice?
2. What is special about systems leadership: how (if at all) does it differ from other constructions of leadership and what messages are new or surprising?
3. What is the relevance of systems leadership: what can it add to current thinking and practice in relation to current debates about leadership of public services to children, families and others?

The detailed arguments and the evidence on which they rest are elaborated in the main **synthesis paper**.

What is systems leadership?

Concepts and definitions

There was a powerful consensus across all sources for the research that the current backdrop to leadership of public services presents extraordinary and perhaps historically unprecedented demands and challenges, combined with unparalleled opportunities to take advantage of the flux and create positive change. This is certainly true in the UK, but international perspectives suggested that the UK is not alone in this. Boundaries between organisations or agencies, and between the roles of key personnel at all levels are becoming ever more fluid and permeable as jobs and teams that were once separate are merged. Following the global financial crisis, the impact of successive waves of re-structuring and cuts to staffing numbers at all levels are beginning to take hold and are likely to intensify. There is proliferating complexity and unpredictability, and, according to many participants, a sense of being caught in a 'perfect storm' of increasing public need, demand and expectation, coupled with decreasing resource and capacity. Leaders talk of wrestling with persistent 'wicked issues'³ that shape-shift and resist resolution, and which cannot be solved by single agencies acting alone. They also talk of 'a one-time opportunity' to make changes that can streamline services sufficiently to withstand the turbulence and ensure their survival and even improvement into the future. The need to lead more efficiently and effectively has never been greater, and yet in some fields senior leadership positions remain unfilled, with fewer rather than more applicants willing to take up the challenge.

Systems leadership builds on *systems thinking* but goes further, putting the theory into practice. In its simplest formulation, systems leadership is an attempt to effect change for the social good across multiple interacting and intersecting systems, resting on the assumption that better and more efficient public services can result from more joined-up working across multiple service sectors. Systems leadership has been identified as a potentially powerful response to the particular contemporary conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (referred to by some using the acronym VUCA) – indeed, as possibly the *only* response that may help leaders to navigate in such times. Other, more traditional or familiar forms of leadership – those focused around single organisational or agency remits, reliant on the deployment of resources over which leaders and managers have direct authority (so-called 'command and control' approaches), and using mandate derived from hierarchical position – are manifestly weak in the face of such conditions. Experience shows us that logic-based, linear approaches to problem solving are not an effective approach to wicked issues characterised by paradox, and the non-linear, 'emergent' nature of systems leadership both as a *construct*, and *in practice*, seems intuitively to be a better fit to the challenges of the present moment.

The findings of the study suggest that systems leadership is characterised by two key attributes. Firstly, that it is a **collective form of leadership**: systems leadership is 'leadership as participation' rather than 'leadership as performance', and although it is individuals and not systems that produce change, systems leadership by definition is the concerted effort of many people working together at different places in the system and at different levels, rather than of single leaders acting unilaterally. Secondly, systems leadership *crosses boundaries*, both physical and virtual, existing simultaneously in multiple dimensions. It therefore extends individual leaders well beyond the usual limits of their formal responsibilities and authority.

Systems leadership described in practice

The study suggested that at the heart of systems leadership in practice are shared values and intentions to improve outcomes for service users. This core is surrounded by a complex of interrelated dimensions. Although they overlap, these dimensions can be categorised as:

1. Personal core values (*ways of feeling*)
2. Observations, 'hearing' and perceptions (*ways of perceiving*)
3. Cognition, analysis, synthesis (*ways of thinking*)
4. Participatory style (*ways of relating*)
5. Behaviours and actions (*ways of doing*)
6. Personal qualities (an overarching way of being that forms the essence of both professional and personal style and approach).

Above all, and despite systems leadership aptitudes being put into practice by means of professional styles and behaviours, systems leadership was described as a **mind set**, or a way of thinking about and approaching the leadership role, rather than a set of technical skills or competencies.

1. Personal core values

Personal as well as professional values in respect of public services are fundamental to understanding systems leadership. They are described in the study both as critical drivers of individual systems leaders, and as essential to systems leadership, in that the ability of individual leaders to galvanise the intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) motivations of others is considered to be a hallmark of effective systems leadership. Systems leadership itself is about achieving coherence around a shared set of values or a shared vision. This is the dimension of systems leadership that engages feelings and emotions, and personal core values or "*what gets you up in the morning*", as one participant put it. These shared values or **ways of feeling** concern a determination to achieve better outcomes for people (that is, users of services) at place-based or population level, but also go wider than this, relating to values for public service broadly defined, including a belief in the value of co-operation and partnership. Values that coalesce at this higher level of analysis create a way to transcend the individual and, sometimes competing goals and agendas of contributing leaders and agencies, and allow the diverse groups engaged by systems leadership to work effectively together. This is the shared vision that brings people back to the table to continue with difficult work repeatedly and persistently, even when earlier attempts have failed.

2. Observations and perceptions

Those with experience of systems leadership also describe a perceptual dimension to the work – particular **ways of perceiving** (seeing, hearing or observing) what is happening in the surrounding context that is the beginning of putting systems thinking into the practice of leadership. The description of how this way of seeing operates has much in common with the metaphor of 'getting on the balcony' of the ballroom⁴, the better to view the whole dance floor, as developed in theoretical models of *adaptive leadership*⁶. However, systems leadership theory extends the metaphor by noting that in situations of extreme complexity, volatility and paradox, because of the instability and unpredictability of complex adaptive systems, it will never be possible to see the whole dance floor, even from the elevated vantage point of the balcony. Some parts will always remain out of view, either unseen or unknown. The 'big picture' will therefore contain an element of shadow and uncertainty that must also be taken account of during planning and decision-

making, alongside what is in plain view. In addition, the effective systems leader also sees many other things differently. These include how he or she views his or her own role (which will switch between being a follower and a leader, at different times); the nature of objectives and goals (fundamental to systems leadership is the idea that one's own organisational goals may often be secondary to, and even subsumed by, the wider goals of the collective); and the nature of risk and conflict (both of which are held to be inherently elevated in systems leadership, and which are viewed and used creatively rather than 'managed out'). **Ways of hearing** – and in particular the ability to seek out and listen attentively to 'other voices' was another key perceptual dimension of systems leadership that was stressed by participants in this research. Effective systems leaders were described as eagerly entertaining alternative and diverse perspectives, and ensuring that they sought these out where they were not immediately forthcoming. Systems leaders have to positively welcome challenge, and contradiction, hearing these as a relevant part of the mix of information necessary to good decision making, rather than finding them threatening.

3. Cognition, analysis and synthesis

Ways of thinking - aspects of cognition, analysis and interpretation, and abilities in 'sense-making' and synthesis - were also given considerable prominence in the various sources for the research. Systems leaders are required both to embrace complexity and ambiguity, and to make them understandable and tolerable for others. This requires 'translational' and interpretive abilities which were described in the literature and by participants in interviews and case studies in considerable detail. Thus, the intellectual work of systems leadership was described as hard and demanding. It relies on considerable aptitude for précis and summary and skills in the construction and communication of clear narratives and explanations that can condense complexity without oversimplifying, and that can 'tune out' background noise in order to isolate and focus on what information is most salient. It also requires endless curiosity and intellectual agility.

4. Relationships and participation

Systems leadership is described as a way of connecting with others which is participatory, collective and based in what can be achieved through relationships rather than based on individual and component contributions (ie, the sum of the whole is more than the parts). **Ways of relating** therefore become central to the practice of individual systems leaders. Attributes that most support the ability to build and maintain relationships are those of empathy and the ability to take the perspective of the other, not as an end in itself but as way to better align goals and vision. Acting at all times with transparency, honesty and authenticity, and being strongly reflexive and self-aware were emphasised.

5. Behaviours and actions

Technical skills were not at the forefront of descriptions of systems leadership, indeed, there was a strong sense that to focus too sharply on specifying the 'actions' of effective systems leaders was somehow to miss the point. Yet there are **ways of doing** that are fundamental to systems leadership and these are best framed as the behaviours and actions that enable and influence others to make change. What systems leaders themselves do is stimulate, facilitate and enable actions that are taken by others, both in other parts of the wider system, and within their own teams and organisations. For example, the concept of distributed leadership was at the heart of systems leadership; in other words, the idea that leadership does not derive only from positional authority, but comes from aptitude and willingness to take responsibility at all levels of the system. Systems leadership is by definition distributed, and systems leaders themselves create the conditions for distribution by enabling others through empowering and supporting them to take a leadership role. Influencing behaviours are those that have their basis in relationships: accumulating knowledge driven by curiosity about other agencies' perspectives and practices;

building and maintaining relationships on multiple fronts; and winning trust by delivering on promises, giving mutual support, and sharing power and credit. Specific *enabling behaviours* by systems leaders were also identified, for example, 'repurposing' existing structures and resources to fit new endeavours; creatively and skilfully using conflict to create energy; balancing risk with opportunity and using the consequences to open up new routes towards a common goal; and actively ceding power or resources, sometimes deprioritising personal or organisational interests in pursuit of a wider, common objective.

6. Participatory and personal qualities

Explicit in some parts of the literature and implicit in some participants' accounts was the idea that systems leadership involves a particular **way of being**, which becomes a central or unifying dimension of the model. We were able to identify a number of personal qualities attributed to effective systems leaders, which included attributes commonly found in many analyses of the qualities of effective leaders in general, such as energy, drive and determination; bravery and resilience; confidence and the willingness to take risks. But they also included some attributes *less* commonly found amongst the lists of the attributes of successful leaders: humility and magnanimity, for example; and patience. These qualities were described as the default operating system of systems leaders, required as a basis for the special ways of feeling, seeing, hearing, thinking, relating and doing that enable systems leaders to participate effectively in systems leadership.

What is new or different about the idea of systems leadership?

In understanding what is new or special about accounts of systems leadership in particular, as contrasted with other forms of leadership, it is important to first note the overlaps or commonalities. Systems leadership is probably best described as a close relative of adaptive leadership, and characterised by many of the same flexible, agile and nimble qualities needed by those leading complex organisations through change. Like adaptive leadership, accounts of systems leadership emphasise that working 'in the zone of complexity'⁵ or 'the zone of productive distress'⁶ requires a willingness to entertain ambiguity and uncertainty, and to act as a 'container' for these unpredictable elements for colleagues who may find change in these contexts challenging, stressful or threatening. Like adaptive leadership, systems leadership both thrives on, and is a response to, flux in the wider environment.

But what is different in the construct of systems leadership - leading across multiple systems rather than within single organisations - is the particular emphasis on mind set and approach, rather than actions and technique, including personal qualities as well as professional styles. It is much less about the specificities of process ('how' goals are achieved), since these must by definition be allowed to vary given the multiple players at the table; and much more about 'why' (the shared vision of what is important), and 'what is achieved' (the ultimate outcome). What is also, perhaps, counter-intuitive about systems leadership is that accounts of effective systems leaders are about as distant from the idea of the traditional 'hero leader' - fearless, forceful and uncompromising - as it is possible to get. Systems leadership was described as all about the skilful harnessing and holding in creative tension the energy in the wider system, rather than driving through change by sheer force of will and exercise of power. Systems leadership was described as being as frequently about 'willingness to give things away' as it was concerned with achievement of one's own goals or promoting of one's own agency agenda. In this respect, systems leaders were often not engaging in 'win/win' transactions (in the sense of 'you win, I win') but in a situation where an individual, whether an organisation or a person, might have to cede ground in order that the wider collective might benefit: *"to gain more, you have to give away"* (and thus, in a sense, 'we win, even if I lose'). Some participants talked of this as requiring the nurturing of a stronger spirit of public service that emphasises wider public service goals over the goals or working practices of the specific existing professions or agencies. Others suggested that existing human resource approaches to identifying

and nurturing future leadership capacity may need rethinking, and should place more emphasis on the professional styles and qualities that foster systems leadership, and less on those that conform more closely to more familiar, but arguably outdated, ideas about what makes a good leader.

That systems leadership is fundamentally ‘distributed’⁷ and arises in many places, not just at the peak of traditional triangular organisational hierarchies, may also add a further novel dimension. In this sense, systems leaders are charged not only with their own ‘succession planning’ in the narrow sense, but in nurturing and enabling multiple other potential and actual leaders, in real time, both within and outside their own organisational boundaries. The behaviour and attitudes of systems leaders will therefore vary depending on time, place and context, sometimes leading, sometimes following, depending on the circumstances. These ideas about the complexity of roles and action also led participants in the study to reflect differently on the time horizons of leadership achievements: what they described in systems leadership is a ‘long game’ as well as a ‘distributed game’, where patience and confidence and a degree of resilience were needed to accommodate the sometimes lengthy and/or unpredictable time lines over which systems change occurs, and rewards and payoffs are realised. Many people will be working towards the ultimate goal, but “*you have to recognise it may not be in your own lifetime.*”

Does an understanding of systems leadership contribute to thinking about public services?

Participants in the research, in all cases and all countries, stressed repeatedly that systems leadership is not some kind of ‘silver bullet’ for the public service challenges currently being faced. Systems leadership cannot magically create new resources or compensate for poorly managed or severely under resourced basic services. It also requires, at all levels, high calibre, well-prepared, intelligent people who share a commitment to creating public value⁸.

However, within the study it was possible to discern an emerging discourse about what makes for exceptional leadership in exceptional times, and what variations on existing models of leadership may be best suited to working for whole-systems improvement alongside individual organisational efficiency and effectiveness. The study identified a picture of the circumstances that are most permitting, and that are the optimal ‘authorising environments’⁹ for systems leadership. This picture included factors at many levels: organisational, systemic, political, personal, national and local. It resonated with an ambitious narrative about public service improvement, including how to create an optimal balance between localism and centralisation. It also resonated with a growing critique about public service and approaches to leadership within it, which has followed in the wake of national debates about the underlying causes of recent horrific failures of care in care homes for the elderly and vulnerable, in hospitals and in social work teams in various parts of the UK¹⁰.

First and foremost, participants stressed that single agencies can no longer respond effectively to wicked issues unless they work collectively and across the system. Single agencies have neither the budget nor the human resources to respond to the current level of expectation and demand; nor do they have sufficient know-how for solving complex multi-dimensional problems unless they pool information and skills with others. This, in a sense, is consistent with the now substantial evidence about what service users (and especially those with greatest needs) want and need from public services, which is not usually a ‘single service response’ (or commonly, a sequence of single service responses often over many years), but a joined up, multi-dimensional response to a series of interlocking issues.

In such a context, it was noted that leadership for change cannot anymore be exercised through command and control; this cannot work in contexts where authority is not recognised, and where control of resources resides elsewhere. Instead, influence and ‘nudge’¹¹ are required. According to the study, these are most effectively achieved by leaders whose personal styles and attributes build

strong relationships based on agreement around shared values; whose focus is on outcomes rather than compliance with processes; who can tolerate ambiguity and bring clarity to complex analyses; who understand that risk of failure inevitably accompanies experimentation and innovation; whose relentless curiosity and reflective style has led them to understand the perspectives of others; and who value the challenge that others bring to the table as strongly as they understand their own core objectives.

Understanding the parameters within which effective systems leaders can best operate inevitably leads to reflections on the fitness of the current environment to 'authorise' or encourage systems leadership to flourish. The study suggested that organisational or system cultures based heavily on regulation of compliance with process (so-called target-driven approaches) will not be conducive to the appetite for innovation that accompanies the best systems leadership, whereas those cultures that identify underlying values, high-level outcomes and overarching aspirations can actively support the effort. Organisation and system cultures that encourage questioning and challenge will create climates that enable more creative use of existing resource, and will allow different styles of leadership and management to emerge and be valued. Cultures that display intelligent tolerance of risk will both encourage experimentation, and will value, and be able to share more openly, the learning that comes from making conscientious mistakes.

Below, the figure shows one way of thinking about how the current UK context of public service, the practice of systems leadership and the attributes of systems leaders fit together in a nested, integrative model. In the following synthesis we explore these ideas further.

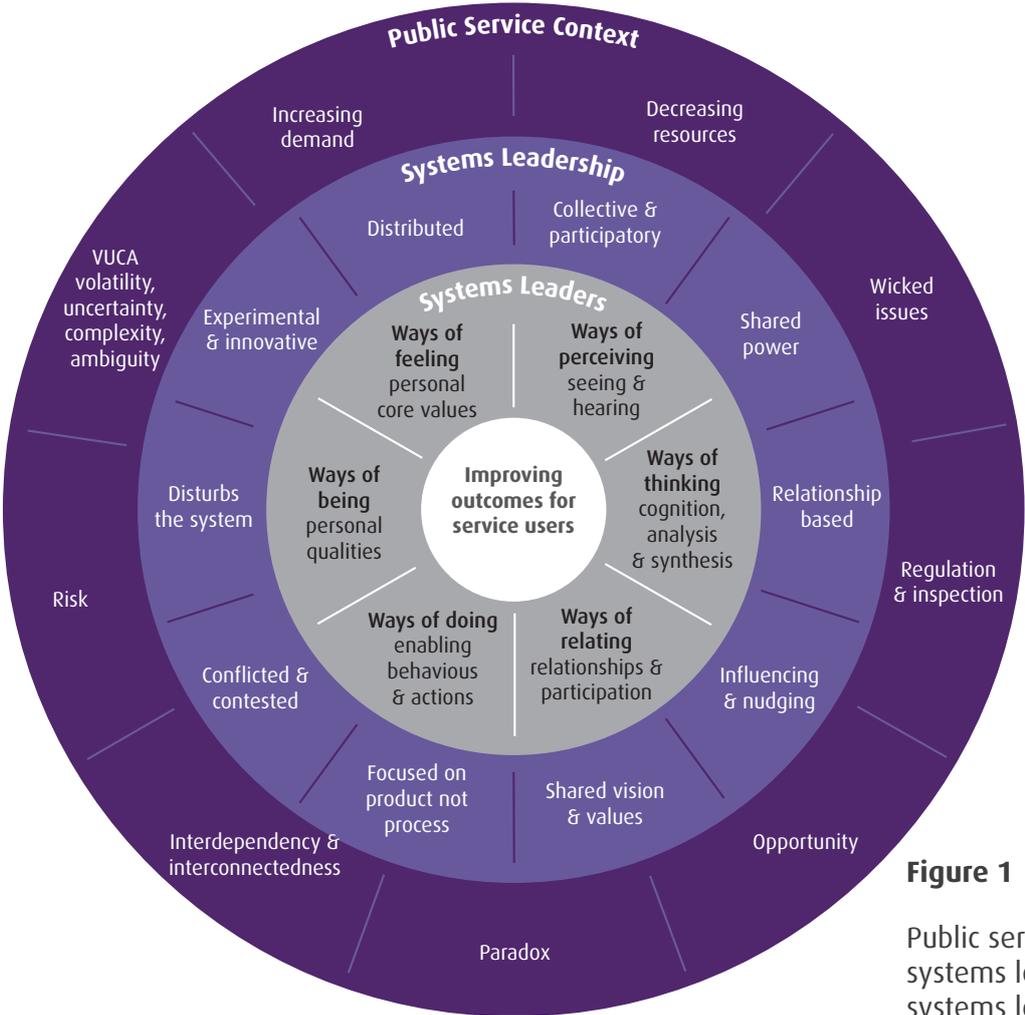


Figure 1
Public service context, systems leadership and systems leaders - an integrated model

Appendix 1. Systems leadership at a glance

Systems leadership is described as

- a necessary response to volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, and to resource pressures
- done within and across organisational and geopolitical boundaries, beyond individual professional disciplines
- done within and across a range of organisational and stakeholder cultures, often without direct managerial control of resources
- a collective rather than individual endeavour
- distributed across many levels and roles
- having outcomes for service users at its heart

Systems leadership is achieved through

- influence and 'nudge', not formal power
- alignment around common vision or purpose: improved outcomes for service users
- a focus on the outcomes and results, not the process
- strong but robust and honest relationships
- a mind set, rather than specific actions and behaviours

Individual systems leaders practice through personal styles based in

- Ways of feeling (personal core values)
 - values and commitment
- Ways of perceiving (observations, and hearing)
 - observing 'from the balcony' as well as 'from the dance floor'
 - allowing for the unseen and unpredicted
 - seeking and hearing diverse views
 - sensitivity to other narratives

- Ways of thinking (intellectual and cognitive abilities)
 - curiosity
 - synthesising complexity
 - sense-making
- Ways of doing (enabling and empowering)
 - narrative and communication
 - enabling and supporting others
 - repurposing and reframing existing structures and resources
- Ways of relating (relationships and participation)
 - mutuality and empathy
 - honesty and authenticity
 - reflection, self-awareness and empathy
- Ways of being (personal qualities)
 - bravery and courage to take risks
 - resilience and patience
 - drive, energy and optimism
 - humility and magnanimity

Systems leadership flourishes when

- the authorising environment, whether organisational or systemic, tolerates risk and accepts multiple pathways to outcomes
- there is willingness to cede organisational goals for collective ambition
- positional authority is not the only source of legitimacy
- it builds on local and place-based initiatives and networks
- Qualities, motivations and personal style are more important than specific competencies and skills
- Relationships are central to leading through influence and allowing challenge and difficult conversations
- Challenge, conflict and 'disturbing the system' are integral

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Sir Colin Campbell Building
Triumph Road
Nottingham
NG7 2TU

T: 0115 7484126

E: dcsladership@virtualstaffcollege.co.uk

www.virtualstaffcollege.co.uk

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