

What is 'systems leadership'?

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To a definition.... and beyond

Systems leadership has come to mean working beyond organisational boundaries to address issues of mutual concern.

This raises questions that challenge many assumptions about how to address issues that are of interest beyond the individual. Particularly it raises questions about the nature of society, what we choose to do together and thus the role and function of public services.

What is 'the system'?

So long as we keep our work comfortably within organisations or professions we can leave this question comfortably on the edge of our perception. It is seen as a little esoteric, if not eccentric. We can live safely with the assumption that the way we run our organisation is the way things should be run, that our organisation exists for good purpose and we are a value to society.

Yet if, as we did recently in Suffolk, you take an issue such as helping people at point of crisis in mental health, you find that those who might have some role in improving things for people at such a point include commissioners of services, providers of services (where services might include mental, primary and acute health services, the police, probation, employment, social care, learning & education, housing, leisure, environmental services...), politicians, voluntary & charity organisations, advocacy groups, carers, the people in crisis, and the public. With no pretence that this is an exhaustive list. You also find that the nice, neat definition of 'people at point of crisis in mental health' doesn't really help when people are fluctuating between the needs of crisis, recovery and prevention.

In other words, once you start to unfold the problem the nature of the problem becomes increasingly complex and the number of players, and different players, involved starts to rise. This gives rise to a tendency to reinforce the organisational boundary. Such a messy, complex problem is just too hard for individuals to comprehend so we parcel it up into packets of problem we can understand and manage and tell ourselves that we have done a good and right thing. We convince ourselves that we can manage the relationships between these packets and in so doing create a burgeoning bureaucracy.

Except of course we cannot. Almost every 'serious case review' that investigates issues such as the death of a child from abuse finds that information could have been better shared between agencies. If only things were more joined up.

So 'the system' that we refer to is rarely a single organisation or even the public agencies in a place. It involves a wide range of commercial and not-for-profit organisations and a complex web of individuals. The idea that these will conform to a model of leadership that is based on a single organisational model with its hierarchical power structures is simply not sustainable. Traditional organisational models of leadership and their associated behaviours just don't stand up in this environment.

Where does the power lie?

Power comes from many sources. In organisational models of leadership, whether it is recognised or not, positional power accruing from your rank and thus status within the organisation counts for a lot. People said of the Duke of Edinburgh that 'he was always happy to forget who he was, so long as you remembered it!'. Even when we think we are not relying on our position, it is still there, influencing our relationships with the people we work with.

When we start to work within the wider 'system' this is still true to an extent but it's relevance diminishes. We retain a certain degree of respect for senior people in any organisation, public or private and especially if they wear a uniform, but their impact on us is less. They can still get things done in their part of the system but not across the whole.

This raises levels of anxiety, for them and for us. For the organisational leader, there is still an element of feeling responsible for the problem even though they cannot solve it alone. Depending on their approach and maturity this can result in either a giving way of power or of drawing it in. Where people feel responsible for something they have little real control over it can feel deeply unsettling and become a source of stress. This often results in attempts at direct and controlling behaviour. Typically this is manifest in non-attendance at meetings, attempting to control the agenda and not sharing resource.

In fact, power in 'systems' is exercised in many ways. Politicians, campaign and advocacy groups claim popular mandates. Experts assert a unique knowledge and assurance about the circumstances. The disenfranchised 'vote with their feet',

perhaps by withdrawing from the process leaving others powerless to get anything done.

‘Systems leadership’ approaches therefore need to recognise and work with multiple and confusing sources of power if they are to get anything to happen and to recognise that these may be in contradiction or conflict.

What is really going on?

Given the plethora of individuals and organisations identified in almost any ‘system leadership’ project, there are inevitably a wide range of views and opinions as to what is going on, what influences this, who might be responsible and even what the issue really is. Each asserts its own point of view as the correct one and from their particular standpoint, each is!

It is seductive to believe that there is some objective ‘reality’, that if we can capture the correct data and process it properly we will arrive at an answer that makes sense, that all can agree on, that is ‘a fact’. This becomes an increasingly expensive search for the holy grail. This information, and its expert interpretation, becomes a new source of power.

Some of the current work on ‘Smart Cities’ typifies this. The belief is that by utilising the increasingly massive computational power at our disposal and by measuring a wide range of things happening in our cities, this ‘big data’ will enable city managers to make increasingly smart decisions in real time. Or have the technology make them for them, according to somebody’s design.

What this misses is that social activity is generative. When we come together as people we make new and at times unexpected things. We decide to act in all sorts of ways, not all of which are entirely predictable. And there are always unintended consequences to actions, some positive some less so. It is this variation that helps us adapt, improvise and experiment to discover new and novel ways of doing things. For ‘Smart Cities’ the implication is that the information is most valuable in the public domain, so people adapt their behaviour in the moment, not locked in the data banks of technology companies or city managers. Real life is analogue, not digital.

So it is not possible to ever really know what is going on. It is forever changing and it is open to at least as many interpretations as there are agencies involved. For systems leadership the challenge is not to determine an absolute view as to ‘what is’ but to

develop ways of working with the unfolding information available to all involved so people can make their own 'smart decisions' as to what they want to do. This after all, is what we really do anyway, all the time. The challenge is to make our knowledge and assumptions more common in the belief that the quality of everyone's actions will increase in relation to the task in hand.

The political nature of systems leadership

Clearly every societal problem could be viewed as a system leadership problem. However most of us choose to absent ourselves from the decision making on many things until we are directly and adversely affected. Instead we express a common and collective will through the ballot box in a democracy or through our tolerance of dictatorships. (When the cost of living under the dictator exceeds our tolerance the consequences are bloody.) So one way or another, for many issues, we entrust their resolution to a political body that acts on our behalf to get things done.

This makes one role of politics in system leadership in a representative democracy to set the direction and priorities for the organisations we have chosen to collectively fund on our behalf.

It is not however the only role. For those issues that are messy, that cut across organisations, that have no clear or obvious choice or choices for resolution, voting on a line of approach doesn't resolve conflict, it helps develop it. Instead the political role is to draw together those necessary to address the issue and to legitimise their work outside of the pre-existing formal structures. This is sometimes described as 'making the space' for the right conversations to occur or 'container building'. Professor Ron Heifetz might describe it as 'giving back the work'.

Clearly such a process is open to influence. Who you include determines the likely outcomes, how you manage 'the space' limits the conclusions that can be reached. Too often such processes act to preserve existing power bases and policy preferences. This may deliver short-term gain but over time can be self-limiting. Finding a balance in this can be hard when the confidence needed to offer yourself for public election and scrutiny probably means holding quite firm beliefs as to what is right and proper. The distinction between what is 'good for my place' and what is 'good for my political career' can become blurred over time.

So what does systems leadership involve?

Identity, Information & Relationships

Structures, systems (as in IT, HR, financial systems) and policy fall under the remit of traditional organisational leadership. They are necessary parts of running efficient organisations and it is essential we do them well. Where we don't we waste valuable resource and employ people in endeavours that can become meaningless. There is little worse than repeatedly turning up to work each day to repeat a task that has little or no valuable output. To do impose that on an organisation is to waste people's lives. However, these three things are like Herzberg's hygiene factors. In the same way that poor hygiene in a hospital kills patients but it is not great hygiene that cures them, structures, systems and policy are necessary but not sufficient conditions for building a great place.

Myron Rogers instead suggests that the work of systems leadership is to focus on identity, information and relationships. Who are the 'we' who have a collective interest and energy for addressing the problem we face? What do we individually and collectively know about what is going on in order that we might make more sense of what we are trying to do? How well do we connect to each other so that we might have the opportunity to decide where to place our efforts? That these are posed as questions reinforces Professor Keith Grint's approach to 'wicked' problems, that is, they are addressed by asking questions not following the standard operating procedures.

To work in this manner is to work iteratively. It means slowly building the 'alliance' or 'network' or 'movement' that wish to work on the problem. It means constantly 'giving back the work' to wider and wider groups of people to draw more people into the process. Each time we do this it means working again to establish the evolving identity, form the necessary relationships and share our increasing levels of information. The scale of achievement is limited by the how far you can build this group. Each growing stage necessitates the difficulty of giving up power in order to be effective. We also need to become increasingly proficient in the ways in which we communicate and form relationships.

Large group interventions

In systems leadership we are working with a wide range of individuals and organisations and a corresponding range of information and points of view in respect of the issues we face. Traditional organisational means of meeting and communicating are often ineffective in this work. Standard committee meetings or briefings can be counter-productive. Messages passed through typical cascade

communication systems become meaningless, subject to constant re-interpretation or are ignored or not heard.

There are a whole range of different ways of meeting, conversing and deciding together that are more appropriate to large groups and to widely differing perspectives and power bases. These include 'open space', 'world cafe', 'future search' and 'seven generation thinking' to name but a few. To be proficient in systems leadership requires an understanding of the various options available, what they can achieve and therefore when it might or might not be appropriate to use them.

Often this is developed through a design team that mirrors the system itself. A design team is a small group that plans the approach to be taken, ensuring a wider than single organisational perspective is brought into the process from the outset.

Power, ego and perspective

Working effectively in systems leadership requires a recognition that power is dispersed, that we don't hold the answers and that our views and beliefs are just that, 'our' views and beliefs. In systems leadership cognition is a collective act. The better able we are to work with multiple perspectives, to properly value our own insight and knowledge but not to the exclusion of others and to recognise we are more powerful when we are able to collectively mobilise effort towards what everyone wishes to do, the more we can achieve in this field.

This runs counter-intuitive to those who have reached the top of their organisation or political group through their own strengths, intelligence or industry. In the organisational world it is invariably the individual who is promoted and rewarded. In politics, getting elected means pitting one person and their ideas or ideology against another with immediate and clearly defined winners and losers. The approaches that succeed in these environments are much less effective in systems leadership. It is not uncommon to see highly effective politicians and organisational leaders working increasingly hard within their existing skill base to little or adverse effect in a 'system leadership' setting.

The value therefore of being able to reflect on what is working and what is not for leaders working beyond their organisations is therefore valuable. Sometimes this may involve a coaching relationship with somebody who has a deep understanding of this way of working. For most it requires an element of self-reflection.

Closing thoughts

Too often 'systems leadership' simply means working beyond organisational boundaries without any contemplation of how this might challenge existing models of leadership. Invariably it involves trying to change deeply fixed patterns of activity. This is incredibly hard to do successfully and yet many approach it without any conscious model as to what this might involve and therefore how they might approach the problem. This leaves them little opportunity to learn and make sense of what they are seeing. At best this is unwise and at worse reckless. To engage in work on 'systems leadership' should mean a constant reflection on what we are observing and learning if we are to really make a step forward in improving our approach.