The Art of Change

Curated and produced by John Atkinson, Emma Loftus and John Jarvis on behalf of the Systems Leadership Steering Group
Preface

For ten years, the Leadership Centre has sought to further our knowledge of what really works in response to the challenges of social issues in places around England. Through working with political, community and organisational leaders, the focus has evolved from local leadership projects through ‘Total Place’ to today’s ‘system leadership’ and ‘local vision’ work.

Working now with partners from across the health and social care systems, supported by the ‘Systems Leadership Steering Group’, local vision projects are underway or delivered in over fifty locations, in counties and cities, towns and boroughs. Each has focused on how great local leadership can make a great place. Each has explored how we might help people live more meaningful lives through the avenue of a particular defined social issue such as reducing food poverty, tackling obesity or addressing long-term health conditions.

In so doing we have been able to determine how different forms of leadership can influence these issues for the longer term. By experiencing successful approaches in one setting, people have been able to develop their capacity for leadership across a much wider system.

This guide is assembled from talking with the ‘enablers’ who have worked with each of these places. We asked them to share the models and approaches they have used in engaging with those places and the issues they chose to focus on. As such it is a rich and pragmatic handbook, based in real experience, sometimes honed over decades. It makes no pretence of being exhaustive or academically rigorous. Instead it shows how this work has been approached and offers a fresh perspective into working with novel and intransigent social issues whilst drawing on an extensive body of knowledge and wisdom.

Acknowledgements

The Art of Change Making draws on a huge tradition and body of work that has its roots in many sources. We have tried always to go back to the original thought and credit the creators of the ideas and tools we have used. You will find the links to sources at the foot of each page and at the end of the guide. The people who built these ways of seeing the world and working with it and in it are the founders of this work.

John Atkinson deserves specific acknowledgment for the ideals he set in representing such an important body of work. Without his relentless drive, direction and contribution as editor, this piece of work would not have become what it is now.

We would also like to thank the team of enablers who suggested the elements we have covered. They have given freely from their practice and from their decades of learning. You will see their names throughout the work to illustrate how they have used each item. They are a hugely skilled and experienced bunch and have access to much wisdom. In particular we should like to thank Jill Barrow and Matt Gott for their thought and assistance in considering how everything could be brought together.

Emma Loftus deserves particular recognition for the hours of painstaking research and writing that brought each element to life. Most of the words here are hers; drawn from a desire to represent each element in a straightforward, easy-to-access way that respects deeply the original authors.

The Leadership Centre
2015
Navigating the Guide

From Evolutionary Biology to Process Consultation – these are things enablers have used in doing their work in places

With the huge number of approaches, models and tools being used we had to find some way of organising them that not only made logical sense to a reader, but which is accessible in a dip-in and dip-out kind of way for those using it as a daily tool.

The integrated leadership model

In organising ‘The Art’ we used the integrated systems leadership model developed through research commissioned by the Systems Leadership Steering Group as the basis for categorisation.

Public service context, systems leadership and systems leaders – an integrated model

This was then recorded in a matrix that is at the back of this book. This allows you to search for something that achieves a particular outcome – and there may be more than one approach to use.

For example – you need an approach that changes the way people are relating, thinking and feeling, and that helps disturbs the system and create shared vision and values. Looking at the matrix you find that Social Movement Theory could be used for this.

The chapters of the Art of Change Making

As it turns out, reading a book through a spreadsheet isn’t much fun, so it’s handy that as we progressed through categorising each element against the integrated leadership model a different order emerged. The content appeared to self-organise. Elements appeared to naturally fit into the categories; understanding systems, understanding groups and understanding people, then tools and skills. This is the basis of the chapter structure we have used, though, you could also organise them in a different, yet equally valid way.

There are over seventy different models and approaches assembled in this handbook under the headings we have described. This is clearly not the only way to order such a range and depth of thought. Multiple ways of making sense of a situation is of itself a characteristic of working with complexity. These headings do however provide one useful frame for understanding the relationships and connections between these models and approaches and as such provide a good way to explore the richness and meaning that they add.

Understanding people, groups and systems

We have defined people, groups and systems as below. There are no hard and fast rules defining these, they are porous and fluid.
Introduction
As our organisations have grown we have adopted ways of running them that are designed to do just that. They run our existing organisations efficiently and practically. We have systems of reward and recognition, strategy and planning, finance and information that help us run these organisations smoothly and deliberately.

History
Our understanding of organisations is a product of their history. In the early industrial revolution as people flocked to our rapidly growing cities our work was to service the machines that fuelled our growth. People were hired hands, that toiled on lathes and looms and this language persisted in our organisations. For centuries, leading hands and charge hands were job roles and in some places they continue in existence to this day.

The guiding Cartesian philosophy that shaped this growth was reductionist in nature. By breaking things into their constituent parts we could understand anything. We saw it in physics, in biology, in chemistry. Classification and order were the norm, things that could be measured could be understood and were valuable. Things that were intangible were not.

In organisations this found its form in the organisation chart, a way of mapping the hierarchy, power structures and information flows that it is assumed make our organisations function. We have built financial management tools and performance management processes to reinforce this and to optimise performance. Managing a nation's health and social needs took on an industrial scale and with that it became an industrial process.

The paradox
In many respects this really is efficient; to manage operations at any scale without structure risks huge waste and inefficiency. And yet, almost paradoxically, the effect of running our organisations in this fashion has given rise to just such waste, with real human consequences. We face novel and intransigent problems that are not resolved by deploying our standard operating procedures and improvement techniques. The more we try to do so, the more we have created a burgeoning bureaucracy. For example, we see the need for senior leaders to align the work of health and care professionals in our towns and cities so we form a Health and Well-Being Board to govern this. This board has no delivery or commissioning capacity so we create sub-boards that bring together the executive heads of the organisations to coordinate their activity. At the same time, they are still governed by their existing political structures, governance, regulations and monitoring. And so a proliferation of meetings arise whereby senior people meet in various guises and locations yet the capacity to truly change people's lives alters little. We have created a costly way of addressing social issues and yet at times, there seems so little progress as return on our significant investment in this social fabric.

Tools and Skills
Tools are things you could pick up and do today that produce a defined output.

Skills are things that you can try today, but through practice you will get better and refine your approach.

Publication structure
Designed to be easy to access, with the connections between the different models and approaches made clear, anyone facing a difficult issue where the resolution requires the interaction of different organisations and social groups will find this an invaluable asset in designing and approaching their work.

Some people will want to read through this work sequentially, building page by page a perspective of what it says. In doing this you will start with some of the big conceptual ideas that are by their very nature, complex and challenging. Other may use it to dip into and out of, following their curiosity and inspiration. That too will work. We have linked pages and concepts to help that happen. Either way is fine. There is something for everybody here. So find your own way through “The Art of Change Making”; a way that helps you get from it whatever you find most useful.

We hope that they way the document is structured allows you to access it from different perspectives and angles.

Page structure
Each page is made up of;
• An explanation of the item
• Relevant diagrams
• How it has been applied in real life by the enablers
• Links to other relevant items
• Sources
The challenge
The ways of thinking that were designed to efficiently run our organisations are proving less than efficient at addressing the complexity of modern life. Running our organisations efficiently is not enough. If we are to address the changing expectations of the relationship between the citizen and the state, the demographic change in society and the reduction in levels of funding for public services our existing patterns of thought must be stretched to encompass this new and complex dynamic. The recent five-year view for the NHS in England is predicated on reducing the numbers of people entering our hospitals. Yet this figure has risen repeatedly. There is no precedent through which our current organisations demonstrate the capability for delivering such significant levels of behaviour change within our society.

Thinking differently
This points to the need to consider the problem differently. Einstein suggested that problems couldn’t be resolved from within the same level of thinking that created them. To work with complex issues that have multiple causes, issues that we can improve or make worse but never completely resolve, requires a way of addressing these issues that recognises their complexity and inherent messiness. It requires us to consider this very human activity as a living process, one that recognises the multiplicity of relationships and connections we have as human beings, one that recognises our capacity to adapt to situations and to adapt situations in order to make something new that addresses our needs.

The approach to strategy that asks where are we now, where do we want to be, how are we going to get there, falls flat for issues where the situation, desired outcome and thus the means of getting there are contested. To work in this contested space requires us to work on the relationships between people, teams, organisations and communities. That means doing this from a standpoint that recognises they are not boxes on an organisation chart but are instead complex networks with multiple connections, relationships and values. With this will come a capacity to adapt and a search for meaning.

A search for meaning
This is at the heart of this different way of working: a belief that lives should be meaningful. When people are able to live the sort of lives that they would choose to, whether they are patients, carers, front-line workers, clinical leaders, professional managers or simply the general public they take on a responsibility for adapting their environment to make it work. When this happens levels of demand on external services are reduced and services evolve to be more effective.

This handbook brings together a huge and truly impressive body of thought and practice that leads us in this direction. By placing at the core of our work the importance of making lives meaningful, the ways of understanding systems, people and groups alongside the tools and skills that support them bring alive the dimensions of systems leadership. These are described in recent research commissioned the the Systems Leadership Steering Group as ways of feeling, perceiving, thinking, doing, relating and being.

The context for systems leadership
The integrated model for systems leadership has as its outer ring a description of circumstances that lead to the approaches we describe in this guide. If the issues you are facing fall under one or more of these then you will find it helpful to explore this guide further to see the sorts of models and approaches that ‘enablers’ have found invaluable in tackling this work.

Increasing demand
As hospitals report a 10% increase, year on year, in admissions by ambulance of frail elderly people, it is clear that the demand on our public services is rising. It is also more than a volume problem. Our experience of the commercial world tells us that personalised products and responses are increasingly demanded and expected. This makes for new challenges for designers, commissioners and deliverers of public services.

Decreasing resources
At the same time, public services are facing an unprecedented rate of reduction in funding. The natural inclination for those faced with unpalatable decisions is to look for internal efficiencies that will resolve this. The scale of change now challenges whether this is achievable and encourages people to look across organisations to remove unnecessary overlap and duplication. This takes us into a realm where we must work effectively across organisations in a situation where no individual holds hierarchical power and authority.

Wicked issues
Wicked issues are either novel or recalcitrant. We have never faced them before, or our tried and trusted approaches impact little on the problem. They therefore respond badly to objective setting or performance management approaches and demand a more agile, adaptive responsive. This suggests the need to ask questions that help us to consider the real nature of the issue whose responses often involve ‘bricolage’, a melding of different tools, techniques and approaches into a clumsy solution that leads to progress.

Regulation and inspection
Where objectives are clear and the means of achieving them proven, regulation and inspection provides a clear framework and measure for determining progress. In the realm of wicked problems where the context and its responses may be contested, regulation and inspection can result in different forms of gaming and all manner of unintended consequences.

Opportunity
Unintended consequences are not necessarily negative or unpredicted. Often they are a source of rapid adaptation. Changes in circumstance driven by increasing demand or decreasing resource create new opportunities or make existing opportunities seem more palatable. These are rarely properly exploited through our traditional operational mind-set that instead wants to make them conform to existing practice.
**Paradox**

So in a variety of social settings, we see new opportunities arising just as we see our capacity to exploit them diminishing. We see communities wishing to take a greater role in their affairs whilst at the same time expecting a broader range and response from public services. These circumstances cannot be made sense of through a linear response. Systems leadership asks us to hold paradoxical and competing views equally as different perceptions of the same situation.

**Interdependency and interconnectedness**

Organisations and communities are inter-linked and interdependent. Reducing delays for elderly people as they transfer between different elements of care requires many organisations and voluntary services to work in a coordinated manner. Stress in any part of that system, be it financial, quality or volume causes knock-on effects for everyone else, particularly the patient.

**Risk**

In an environment where many organisations are contributing to an outcome, responsibility may not be equally shared. Particular individuals may carry statutory responsibilities, for some there may be financial penalties for particular results. Risk is not shared evenly, even if those in the system wished that it were. Early intervention work also carries risk; new ways of working cannot always deliver projected savings. Any form of approach to working with a new problem, or a new approach to working with an old problem, by its very nature is a step into the unknown.

**VUCA**

Bob Johansen at the Institute for the Future describes the future world as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA). In such environments, traditional management approaches do not yield their normal and expected results. Instead it requires ways of working that can be flexible as they encounter unprecedented situations and can be rapidly adapted as understanding of them grows.

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**Being an ‘enabler’**

Being an effective enabler of systems leadership is more than simply knowing or using the models and approaches we describe. Important though these are, the way you conduct yourself in the work you do really matters and has an at times dramatic impact on the effectiveness of any approach you employ. The team of enablers who have contributed to this guide are highly skilled and many have a long experience of working in this way. However they would not suggest for a second that they have mastered all of the skills we list. For all of us, this form of mastery is a constant search that requires us to be conscious of how we are in each situation in order to learn how we work best.

Enabling work often involves connecting different people and organisations. As such we become holders of privileged information and unique insights. The temptation to retain these and to create relations of dependency with our clients is seductive. It is also self-limiting. It is vital to remind ourselves whom we are serving in this work, even if that can at times be a little difficult to discern.

Characteristically, we think being an effective enabler involves some combination of the following list. This is not an exhaustive list and as we suggested, mastery is never achieved. However, our hope is that by sharing our thoughts it allows the opportunity for people to consider their practice and the routes by which they might develop.

**Neutral**

We think it is really hard to work as an enabler when you are perceived as belonging to, favouring or supporting one part of the system. In order to reflect the multiple dynamics in any system leadership work it is necessary to impartially reflect your observations. Of course, these too are simply our perceptions, but if we are not seen as neutral, are seen as having a particular viewpoint, then they are heard less clearly and their impact is reduced.

**Ego-less**

Your work as an enabler is not about you. If you are seeking respect and recognition you will be seen as not working in the best interests of the whole system. It will also lead you towards specific approaches that may deliver more immediate impact, where at times part of the art is to slow down, hold the ambiguity and allow events to take their course.

**Observant**

As an outsider who is connecting to a system you bring a fresh perspective. What you see and feel matters. Things that may not seem at first to be important may be significantly new or different for the existing players. By noticing the things that strike you as different, disturb you or confuse you, it is possible to add real value to the system with which you are working. This can lead you into new lines of inquiry or prompt the system to reflect differently on its activity.
Reflective
The impact of much enabling work is felt over time. Reflecting on what you think you see going on (and how you know that), stops you falling into the same traps that the system itself may be caught in. Reflecting with others on what you think you are seeing is a really valuable way of helping a system become more reflective of itself.

Knowledgeable
When enablers rely on only one model or approach they lead the people they are working with to consider things from their enabler perspective. By having a broad range of models and approaches that they can use, enablers are able to find a way of considering and working with an issue that allows people in the system to make sense of what is going on in a way that they will find valuable and retain in their work.

Generous
Effective enablers generously offer of themselves to the systems they are working with. This can be about the time they commit, as it is often necessary to meet a wide range of people in a wide variety of settings. It is also about knowledge. Part of the work of enabling is to build an enduring capacity for change in the system so imparting an enabler’s acquired wisdom is essential.

Inquisitive
A naturally curious approach leads enablers to try and understand what they are seeing. It also encourages them to follow lines of enquiry that may go beyond the initial remit of the task. By trying to understand what is going on in the system, and how people really know, they can generate new and different approaches. By going beyond the obvious they expose new connections that change people’s understanding of how their system really works.

Empathetic
Human systems are made of people. At times working beyond normal lines of reporting and authority in the service of many demands can cause people considerable discomfort or stress. Good enablers understand the range of behavioural responses this can create and appreciate the different and at times conflicting perspectives of all involved.

Creativity
There are many elements in the pages that follow, but one you will not find is on creativity. We thought about this long and hard and actually had a few goes at writing one. Each time we did this it didn’t quite feel right. It felt as if what mattered in this topic wasn’t being properly covered. Yet time after time, organisations describe what they are missing as just this, creativity (or sometimes ‘entrepreneurship’). What is it that makes this so hard to describe?

When we reflected further we felt that creativity was a very normal and natural human attribute. It is always there. People by their very nature are innately creative. What happens is we create systemic or group conditions that inhibit this creativity from working in service of our objectives. Everyday, in order to get their work done, people must find ways around finance or technology systems that don’t naturally enable them to do what they need to do. They need to work with multiple and conflicting values and objectives and find a route through these that enables something of value to be done. Just doing the day job can sometimes be a hugely creative act.

Steve Jobs, founder of Apple Computers once said, “Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn’t really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That’s because they were able to connect experiences they’ve had and synthesize new things.”

So on reflection everything we offer here is about human creativity. If we meet, think and act in ways that allow us to bring our collective intelligence, skills and experience to bear on the problems we face, we are allowing creativity to arise in the interactions between us. Use the ways of thinking, skills and tools we offer here and you will release the creativity inherent in being human.
“Learn how to see. Realise that everything connects to everything else”

Leonardo Da Vinci