



Living Systems Leadership

Encouraging Systems Change

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From linear solutions to systems change

As we face into some of the greatest problems of our times a new mantra emerges, the mantra of 'systems change'. Why? The major challenges facing our world cannot be solved for everyone everywhere through discrete solutions.

For example:

- The challenges of climate change call for solutions that go beyond energy use and governance changes.
- The challenge of ensuring everyone can access healthy and nutritious diets cannot be solved just through increasing use of fertilisers or genetically modified crops to boost productivity.
- The care needed by increasing numbers of elders will be hard to fund through existing patterns of state-based support.

We continue to look for single solutions because that is our usual way of working, it feels comfortable and stable. But in these examples, and in many others, there are no single solutions that can be relied on to overcome the challenges. Our comfort is being undermined by the growing sense that though many things we currently do are good, they may also not be sufficient. Hence the shift to thinking in terms of systems change.

Adapting constantly

In truth, references to the ways in which we have always done things are stories we tell more than they are a reality. The ways that we do things are always adapting. New technology, different forms of governance, resource availability or shortages have all over time shaped the way anything gets done. As humans have moved from small communities, to kingdoms, to democracies, the way things get done has adapted. These changes in modes of governance have been emergent. They have arisen from the contingencies and opportunities of the day, unplanned and undirected.

Can systems change be controlled?

Over the last century another thing has also emerged - a mindset that propagates a belief in our ability to direct and control these sorts of systems changes. Fed on a diet of management speak, we have come to have faith in a falsehood and then take it for granted. That falsehood is that we humans are able to direct and control large scale change in our relationship with our environment.

Can systems change be commanded?

Even those who know that systems change cannot be commanded are seduced by the collective view that it is possible. We join with others in writing reports that describe an ideal future state and the ways to get there. We convene workshops to agree policies. We describe and instigate pilot projects in the hope that we can roll these out as global exemplars. We set outcomes, presenting them as objectives for global change. We do all this because we share a belief that those with the power can be convinced of the need both to command change and then to control it for the common good.

Perhaps, but...

It isn't that reports, policies, pilots and outcomes are bad things. It is that systems change doesn't occur by focusing on these things in isolation.

Systems change is a new state

When we envision systems change as a new state which emerges from what is currently happening, it leads our thoughts and thus our activity into a different plane. A plane where we appreciate that our current institutions exist in the form of unstable equilibria, and that they can be encouraged to move into new forms of organisation around any issue. But we realise that they cannot be directed to transform in this way - our encouragement cannot define the outcome.

How does system change emerge?

The emergence of a systems change arises when, in the presence of sufficient energy and disturbance, the systems shift in ways that enable new (though still unstable) equilibria to form. The shift happens when there is consistent encouragement for change through the formation of new and positive feedback loops; loops which can exponentially amplify even slight-movement in the system.

Supporting the emergence of systems change

As leaders, we do our best to predict how new feedback loops will form, to help make them happen and to anticipate the new equilibrium that will arise. But, we cannot determine how and when the change will happen. We must be content with doing our best to support emergence as it happens (and not doing things that might hinder it).

And yet, much leadership deters emergence

Most leadership activity actually acts to deter the likely emergence of a new state rather than encourage it. Traditional modes of leadership need to hold attention, gain credit, occupy ground and own a message: they can so easily suck energy from those who might otherwise contribute. They may suppress differing opinions in overt ways by use of organisational or personal power. Sometimes they may do this less obviously by crafting mission, vision or value statements that exclude the diversity of thought and opinion.

These forms of power-play minimise disturbance and prevent its value being fully appreciated. By trying to stabilise situations, reduce variation and harmonise approaches, leaders may unwittingly encourage negative feedback which dampens creativity and stifles the potential for emergence.

Leading for systems change

If as leaders, we wish to encourage system change we need to embrace and encourage emergence. To do this we need to:

- 1) Tap into the energy that already exists for any change and feed it.
- 2) Create spaces where disturbance can be heard, encouraged and developed.
- 3) Connect competing and opposing camps in new and novel ways.

Nurturing uncomfortable connections

We cannot just stumble into this. If we are to deliberately foster such disturbance we need to:

- 1) Create environments that nurture uncomfortable connections.
- 2) Work with the existing sources of power that are uneasy with what might be perceived as dangerous dissonance.
- 3) Align with the strands of that power and work with them to weave the cradles within which nascent changes can start to form.

Enquiring wisely - widely and openly

This means the real activity that encourages systems change is not analysis, or programme planning or project management. It is a relational activity that asks us to engage widely and openly, including with those who trouble us. It asks us to enquire into their motive and means. It means we must be ready to listen more than to tell, to connect and not to direct, to propagate and not to control.

Sensing for fluidity and rigidity

As we feel into the existing rhythms within the systems that interest us, we are sensing for their patterns of fluidity and rigidity.

Where might we encourage and accelerate the new?

Where must we pause a while, keep connecting and wait for the readiness?

When the time comes, how will we assemble and use our collective abilities to support the shift?

Power and fragility in our cradle

All the time that we are acting to encourage systems change we must be conscious of the fragility of our endeavour and how easily it can revert back into the existing norm. We must be keenly aware that the environment in which we operate is dynamic, this means that we must constantly attend to that web of relationships and power that forms our cradle.

Credit for the conditions, not for success

And we must train ourselves to let go of our need to be credited with success. As systems leaders we are keenly aware that all systems, in order to preserve their identities, will react rapidly to any attempts at changing. We know that the work we do to form and tend to relationships is what matters the most in creating the conditions for positive emergence - if we focus instead on our personal need to achieve a particular result and receive credit from our peers or beyond, we may fail to see those who we should be seeing and hear the voices that need to be heard. By letting others take the credit and accolades for whatever emerges, we can be happy in the knowledge that we have contributed as catalysts to the enabling of fundamental change.

We know we matter;

that is why it doesn't matter that we don't matter to others.



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