

**Natspec Annual Conference 2017**  
**Aston Business School Conference Centre**  
**21<sup>st</sup> March 2017**



## **Systems Leadership: how to lead when you're not in charge**

---

**Debbie Sorkin**

**National Director of Systems Leadership, The Leadership Centre**

**[Debbie.Sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk](mailto:Debbie.Sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk)**

**[@DebbieSorkin2](https://twitter.com/DebbieSorkin2)**



# Why you need Systems Leadership if you're leading in specialist education: because

- a) you're not always in charge
- b) 'no plan survives contact with the enemy'
- c) it's complex : so you get incremental improvement (like British Cycling)





- ...they're new, recalcitrant or intransigent – you don't know what to do, you put up with poor systems because you're used to them or the issues have been around for ever and seem impossible to fix
- ...they can't be solved in isolation
- ...they sit outside single hierarchy and across systems
- ...you don't know where they start or end – sometimes you can't even agree on what the issue is
- ...there are no right or wrong solutions; rather you need to aim for progress and better developments
- ...you work with constant uncertainty and ambiguity

And there's a lot of it about: complexity and wicked issues are increasingly the norm. Specialist education has a head start here



- Struggle to **match growing demand with smaller resource pot**: public sector cuts falling heavily on education/local government despite Budget announcement (e.g. local govt still to lose >£10bn in central grant by 2020). Mirrored in other areas, e.g. NHS financial gap growing and impact increasingly visible (*de facto* rationing in places for elective care, poor A&E performance, staff shortages etc)
  - Implications around unmet need and statutory responsibilities
  - Emphasis on integration, but seen in terms of **structures**
  - Additional fluidity brought about by **plans for devolution**
  - Broadening range of stakeholders and **audiences** – more routes to navigate and relationships to build (and re-build when people leave)
  - Difficulties in demonstrating **public value and having it acknowledged by the public**, at the same time as changes in **public expectations** – personalisation, co-production, independent living – all coinciding with worry about deterioration in future services
-

## So Systems leadership is seen across public services as a way of working with complexity



“Leaders are struggling to innovate, integrate, manage demand and find new solutions.”

“Leaders are wrestling with ‘wicked issues’ that shape-shift and defy resolution, and which cannot be resolved by single agencies acting alone.”

“We are...applying systems thinking to the practical reality of trying to achieve complex change.”

*Sue Goss, ‘A View from the Bridge’, OPM May 2015*

The idea behind Systems Leadership is to ask some different questions and work with some different people, to get to a shared ambition on which you can co-operate to get real change



### Systems Leadership:

The **collaborative leadership** of a **network** of people in different places and at different levels in the system, creating a **shared endeavour** and **co-operating** to make a significant change.

### Questions to start with to get to the shared endeavour:

What do we want services to be like for people in our place?  
Who else needs to be in the room?

### What not to start with:

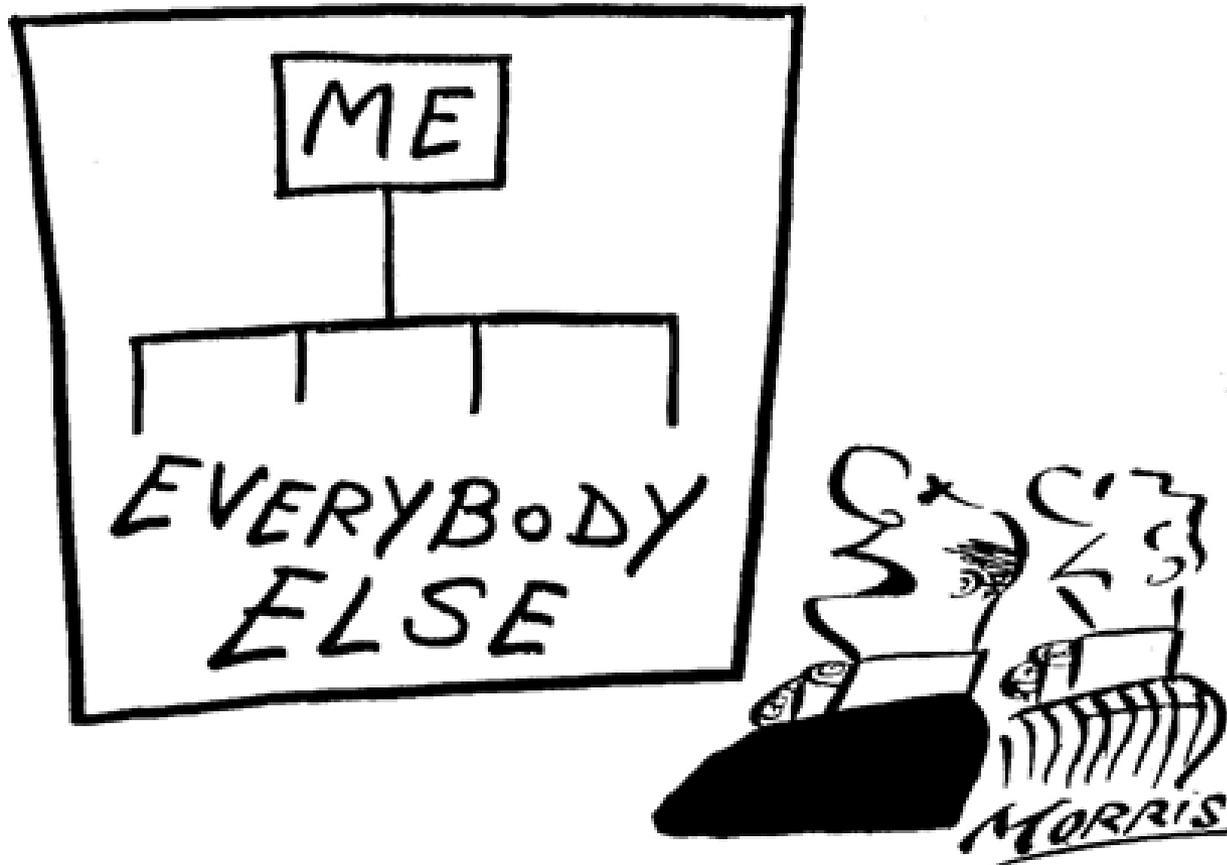
Structures/organisations/hierarchies  
Governance  
Money

### The basics:

Relationships, influence, trust: "Systems move at the speed of trust"  
Partial, clumsy and emergent solutions  
Going slow to go fast

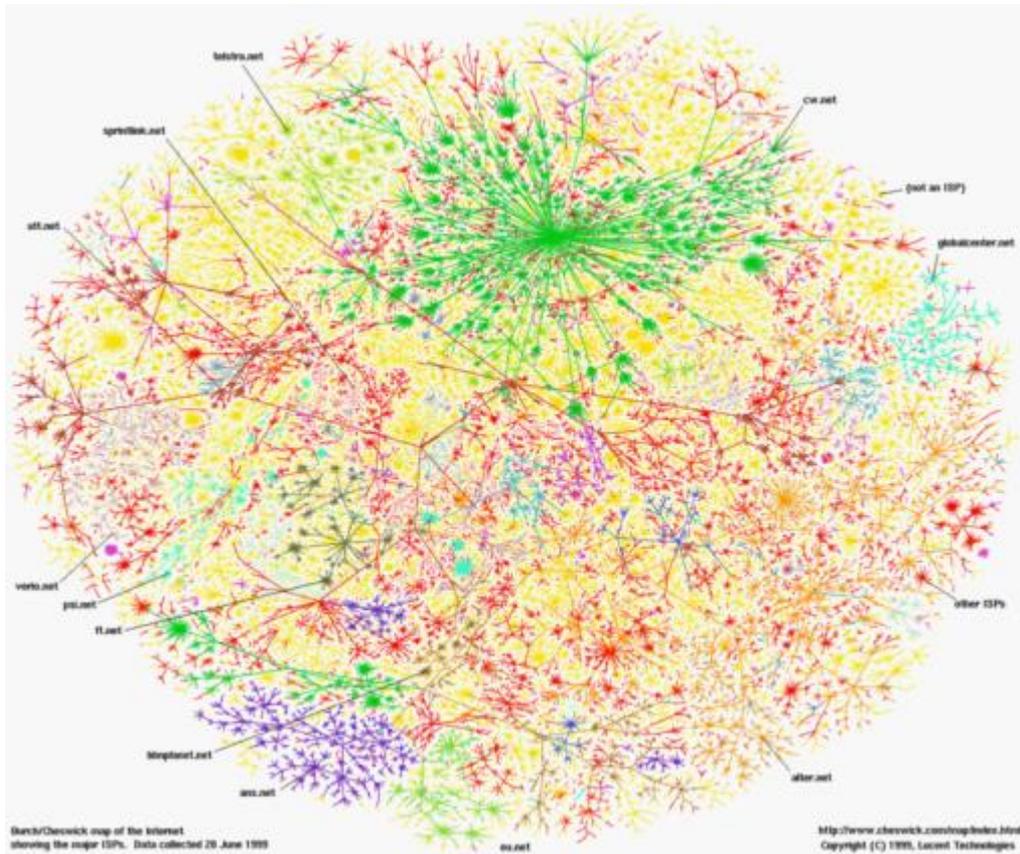
A woman with short grey hair, wearing a black blazer over a white shirt, is smiling and holding a large white sign. The sign has the handwritten text "This matters for all of us" in black ink.

This matters for all of us



"I like to keep things simple."

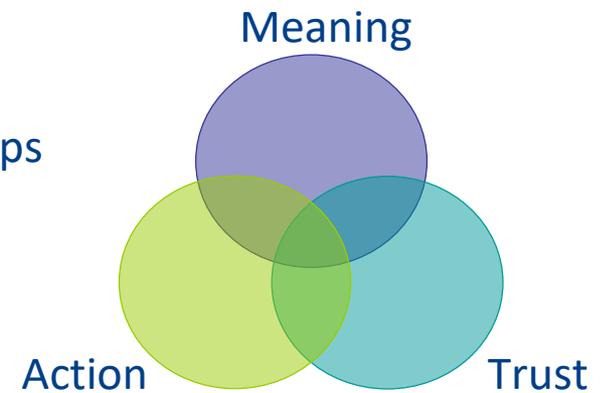
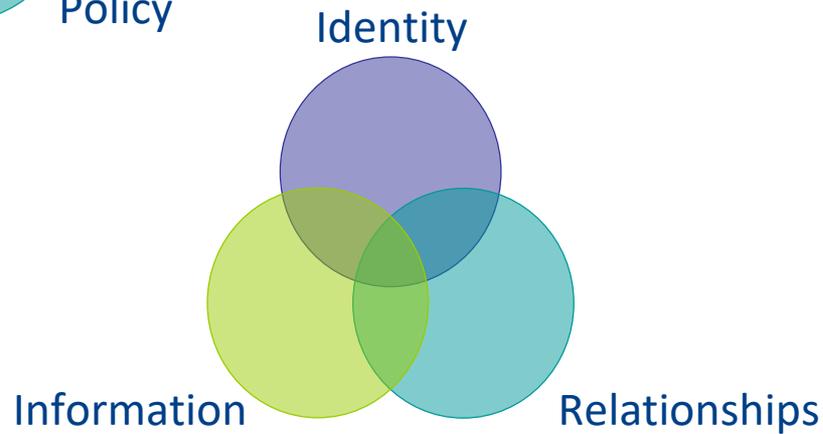
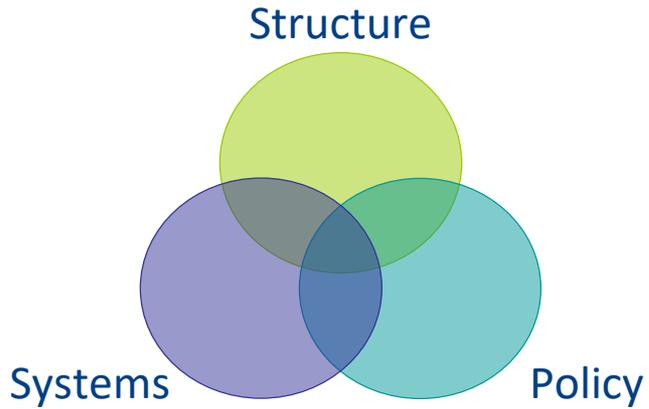
A system is much more kinetic and open-ended – which is why it gives you room for manoeuvre



**A system:**

**a set of individuals, organisations or bodies working together or interacting in some way as part of an interconnecting network; a **complex whole****

# You can think of a system as a living thing: Myron Rogers' "Working with Living Systems"



Some living things are nice....



But not all...



**And some systems really are out to get you:  
Systems are not necessarily neutral  
Maturana & Varela – evolutionary biology**



- **Organisms, from single cells to eco-systems have a variety of characteristics in common**
  - **They have evolved to be in a perfect relationship with their environment**
  - **It is a symbiotic relationship, the organism/organisation defines the environment and the environment defines the organism**
  - **Organisms are self-referencing, they act to preserve their own identity (autopoeisis)**
  - **If there is an external source of perturbation the organism acts to kill it, be it internal or external.**
  - **If the organism is held perturbed for sufficient time it adapts to this new condition.**
-

From Systems to Leadership:  
make Systems Leadership practical by emphasising  
leadership at all levels, and by grounding it in behaviours



**Not just about authority at the top of organisations**

It's a practical understanding – and awareness –  
about *how* you do what you do, and the impact on  
others

So it's about behaviours, and taking responsibility  
for them

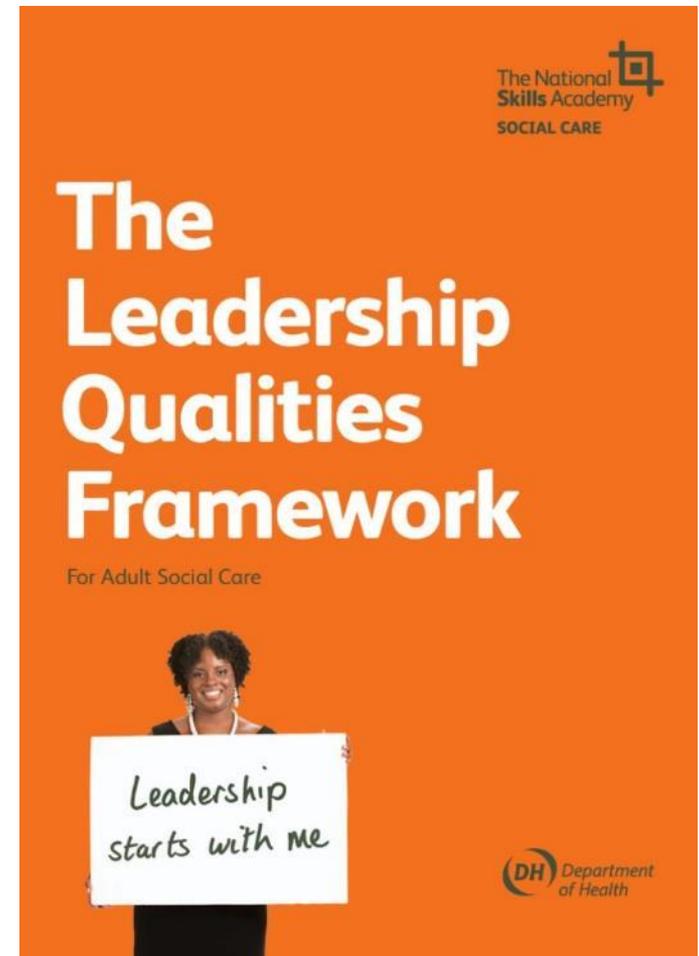
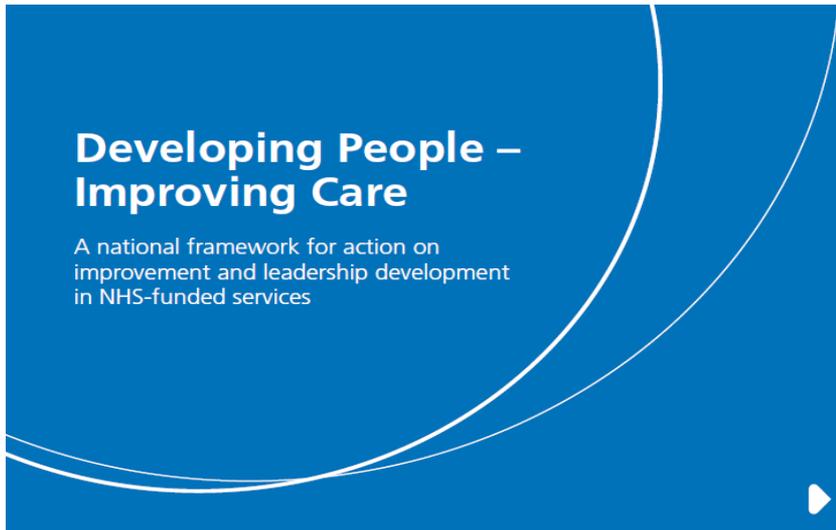
And it's everyone's business – people working at all  
levels in all sectors

It therefore enables you to lead across  
organisational boundaries

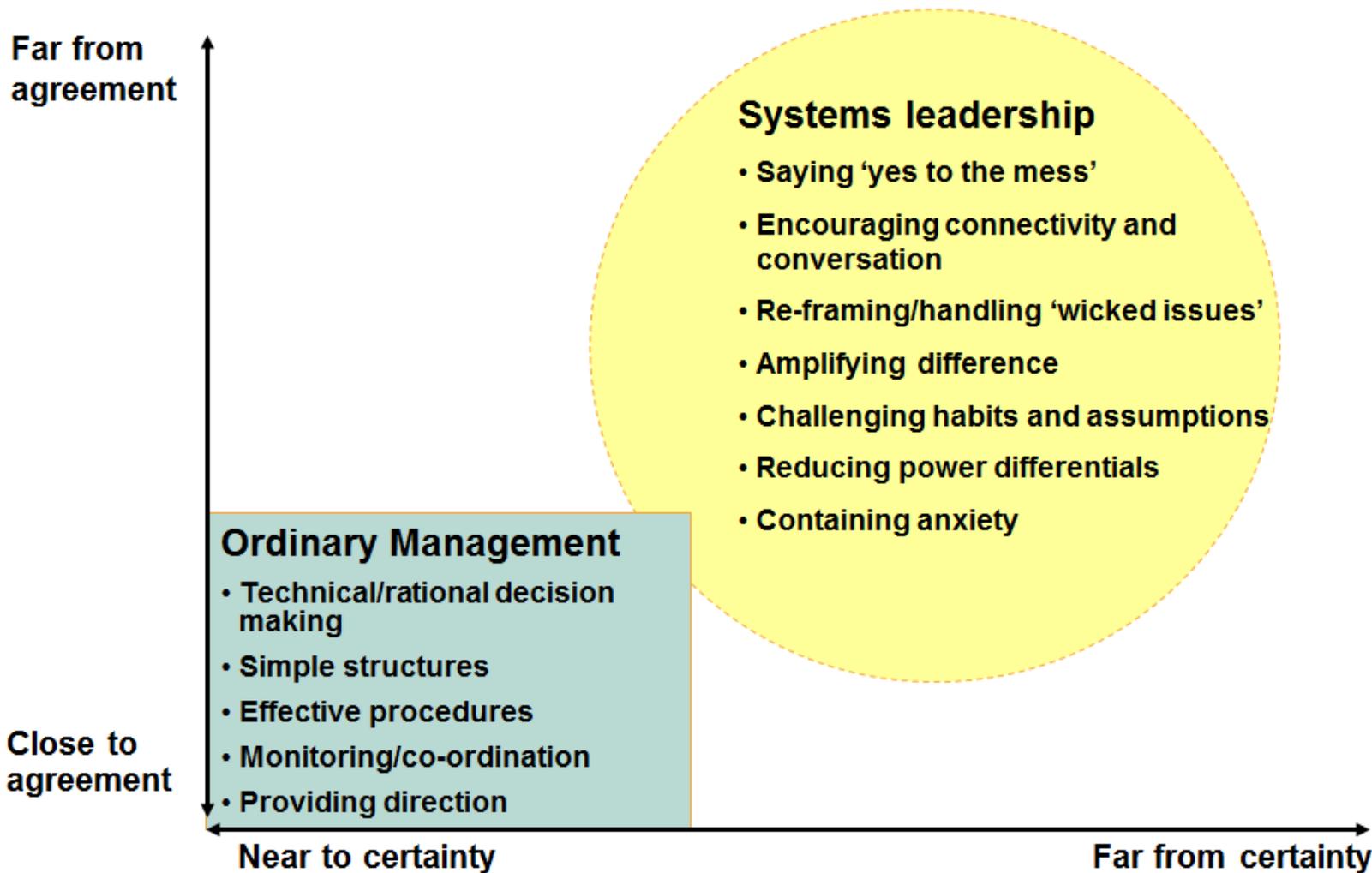
You can use frameworks to drive culture



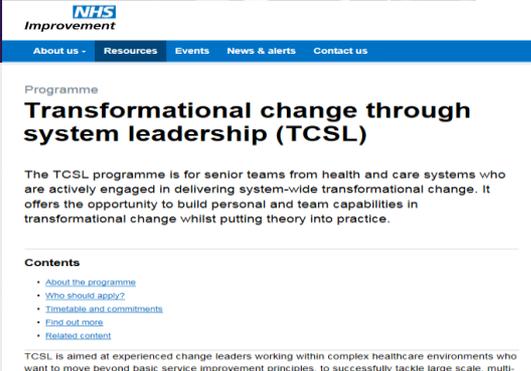
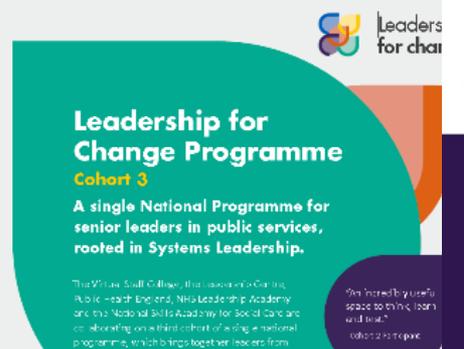
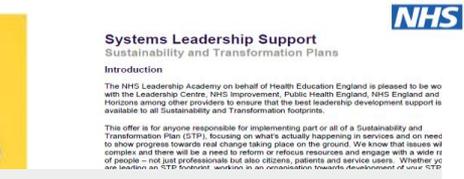
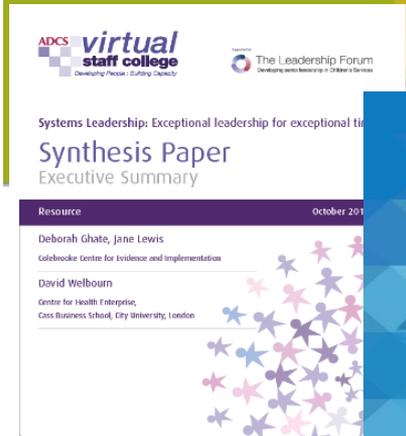
Tools to help you describe leadership:  
levers to pull – frameworks that put leadership  
behaviours into practical form. Pilfer these relentlessly



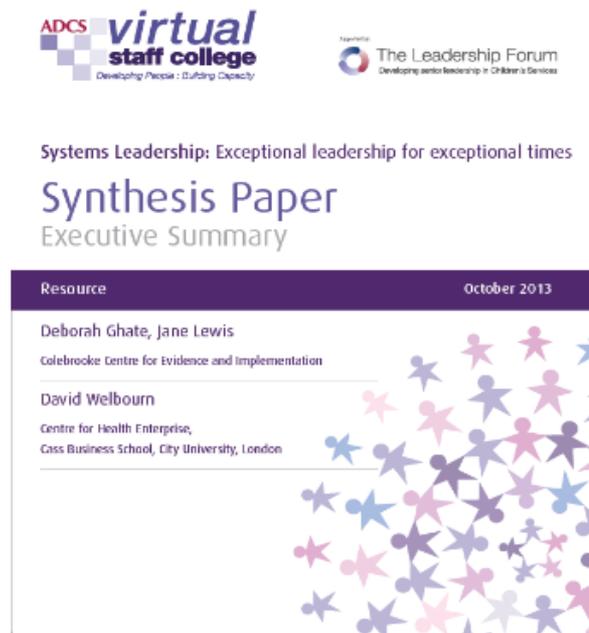
NB You don't need to be a Systems Leader all the time. You use Systems Leadership when you've got a complex – “wicked” – issue. The key thing is to know what you're dealing with: Ralph Stacey



# There's lots of learning about Systems Leadership, and about what works and what doesn't, from national and regional programmes: pilfer these relentlessly (see references on last slide)



# Learning from research: six dimensions of Systems Leadership around behaviours that lead to change



- **Ways of feeling** - about strong, personal values
- **Ways of perceiving** - about listening, observing and understanding
- **Ways of thinking** – about intellectual rigour in analysis and synthesis
- **Ways of relating** – the conditions that enable and support others
- **Ways of doing** - behaving in ways that lead to change – includes narrative and reframing skills
- **Ways of being** – personal qualities that support distributed leadership



# Think about looking for, and encouraging, Systems Leadership behaviours in your teams when you're looking to build systems capacity



Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times

## Synthesis Paper

Executive Summary

Resource

October 2013

Deborah Ghate, Jane Lewis

Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation

David Welbourn

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



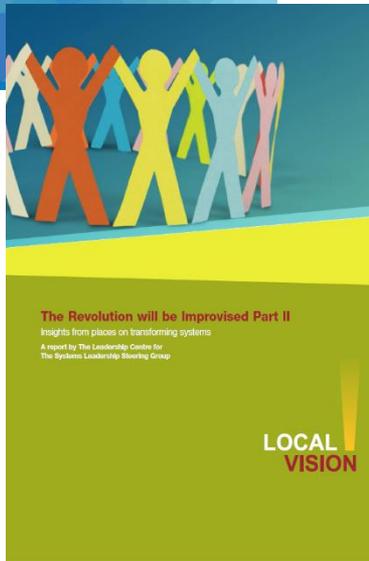
The Colebrooke Centre  
for evidence and implementation



Cass Business School  
CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

- **Willingness to align around a shared purpose or ambition**
- **Able to build engagement/relationships and really listen: able to reframe/influence**
- **Preference for outcomes over processes**
- **Not being bound up with role and with a willingness to take risks**
- **Able to work reasonably well with conflict and uncertainty**
- **Having a strong commitment to a service in a particular place**

# Learning from practice: *Systems Leadership – Local Vision, Leadership for Change*, Integration Pioneers



- **Start with the end in mind:** children, services, staff
- Focus on **relationships**, broader connections/networks, shared purpose
- It's fine to use your **values**
- As long as you've got a **shared purpose**, you can **start small** and take the scenic route: and **keep going** even if it takes longer than you think
- Work with a **coalition of the willing** and meet offline – where the real work gets done
- Use **fail-safe experiments, prototype and tweak:** you're looking for progress, not a solution
- Get political/senior **air cover** where you can
- Listen and **observe** – and be willing to **cede leadership**
- Use emotionally resonant **narratives** and **reframing** to change perceptions

So what do we know?

On the one hand, it's not a silver bullet (NB: there *is* no silver bullet):  
'stuff' will get in the way



- **Culture and history** are key
  - **Geography** really does make a difference
  - It takes **time** and feels **messy** – and so it can go against cultural grain, external initiatives and financial exigencies
  - Powerful **organisational imperatives** can and will trump a broader vision
  - Places find it hard to shift from a shared purpose/high-level vision to a more detailed version – **there comes a point where you need to put cards on the table**
  - The key is to **hold fast to the shared endeavour** and to **see yourselves, your teams and the organisations you work with as central enablers** of system transformation – not just 'going along with yet another initiative'
  - **And hence there's value in having an (internal) Enabler to hold people to the work**
-

That said, it can work:

Independent evaluation: Systems Leadership can change cultures, behaviours, ways of working and outcomes



**“There is no doubt that Local Vision has enabled some significant shift in mindset and resulting behaviours for some, which has led to new, more inclusive ways of working within the community.”**

**“...with realisation among many of the potential for collective leadership as part of a wider system and accompanying intent for new ways of working...working in non-hierarchical ways, building links and partnerships across organisations.”**

**“Local Vision has produced benefits and value for a diversity of stakeholders, such as influencing strategy, generating income and opportunities...and improving services and client outcomes.”**

*Interim and Final Evaluations of the first place-based programmes for Systems Leadership  
– Local Vision, University of the West of England, June/Oct 2015*

---

Places around the country are using Systems Leadership to work in partnership and do things differently - including with schools and young people



### Cheshire West and Chester: reducing social isolation

Worked with local communities: identified different cohorts of people suffering social isolation and developed community-led approaches involving schools, HAs, faith groups, emergency services.

### Calderdale: increasing exercise levels

Programme to increase levels of exercise amongst secondary school pupils, especially girls – included training school pupils to undertake research. Outcomes included very different ideas about what forms of exercise appealed – boxercise and taekwando, not zumba.

### Wakefield Pioneer: connecting services

3 Connecting Care Hubs now set up, with people working together from single sites: teams include community matron, staff nurses, OTs, physios, therapy support staff, pharmacists, VCS and social services. Outcomes include extended and faster access, quicker referrals and more seamless care.

### LB Waltham Forest Pioneer: data-sharing

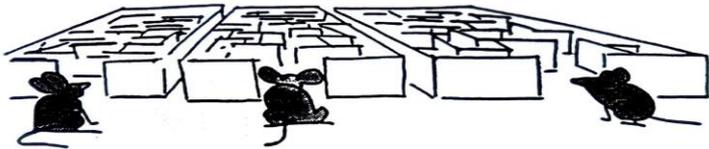
Developed shared care record now used across primary and secondary care, social care and other public services.

**Where to start:  
practical first steps for you, your teams  
and the organisations you work with**



- Be on the lookout for **work avoidance**: doing the wrong thing busily
  - Identify an issue where you can do **real work**: follow the energy, have **honest conversations** and work towards a **shared endeavour**
  - Use your **values**, start from where you are, use what you have, start small: **build relationships and alliances with a coalition of the willing** – and **meet offline**
  - Create a **holding environment** – bring the right people together, especially real leaders who are making change happen (or who could do so): **keep citizens at the centre**
  - Understand the **scope for changing the system** and **choose your battles/interventions**
  - Only have a formal meeting **if it's useful**: = if it changes something
  - Expose the conflict and **cherish your outliers**
  - Challenge norms – **'why don't we...'** and be a deliberate disruptor: **explore new ways to do things**
-

Worth pasting to the wall:  
Myron Rogers' "Working with Living Systems"  
Myron's Maxims



### Myron's Maxims:

- People own what they create
- Real change takes place in real work
- The people that do the work do the change
- Start anywhere but follow it everywhere
- Keep connecting the system to itself
- The process we use to get to the future determines the future we get

## What this means for you and the people you work with



- See yourselves, your teams, your pupils and your partners as **systems leaders and enablers - part of a wider system with a shared ambition**
  - **Base ideas of leadership on behaviours and values** – hold yourselves to account
  - **Develop your people:** make Systems Leadership part of their CPD
  - Embed strategies and skills for real co-production – **young people and citizens are the centre**
  - **Start small** and use what you have – often more than you think
  - Use influence – you don't always need formal power. So **make connections and build relationships, alliances and networks:** think beyond traditional roles
  - **Just look to make progress:** give it time, allow for mistakes, adapt, take the scenic route and keep going: **it really is possible to work in new ways and see change in places**
-

**Potential areas to think about:**

**What are the behaviours that you're seeing?**

**How might Systems Leadership help you?**  
**Who else in your College might help you?**

**Where are you already using Systems Leadership?**  
**What are you learning? Where else might you apply it?**

**One thing you're going to take away**

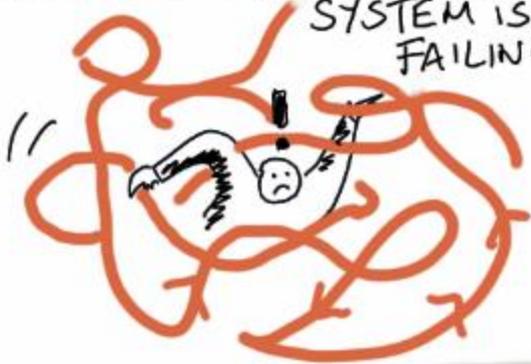
---

The key thing is to start somewhere, and think about what you can do and the coalition you might work with.

Thank you.



THE FEELING THAT THE SYSTEM IS FAILING



I AM PART OF THE SYSTEM, I CAN CHANGE IT FROM WITHIN



NO LONGER WAITING FOR SOLUTIONS TO COME DOWN FROM ON HIGH...



NO MORE THEY SHOULD DO THIS...

NO MORE THEY SHOULD DO THAT....

RECOGNISE YOU HAVE POWER TO INFLUENCE

Billerooks2015

# Systems Leadership – more information



[www.leadershipcentre.org.uk](http://www.leadershipcentre.org.uk)

[Debbie.sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk](mailto:Debbie.sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk) [@DebbieSorkin2](https://twitter.com/DebbieSorkin2)

Systems Leadership website: [www.systemsleadership.org](http://www.systemsleadership.org)

The Revolution will be Improvised I & II - <http://tiny.cc/revolution> and <http://tinyurl.com/jhnllck>

NHS Leadership Academy – [www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk](http://www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk)

Developing People – Improving Care - <http://tiny.cc/odzijy>

Systems Leadership/Virtual Staff College research - <http://tinyurl.com/VSCSEC>

Pioneers One Year On report: <http://tinyurl.com/olfozgx> and Year 2 Annual Report: <http://tiny.cc/89ns9x>

Evaluations – <http://tiny.cc/LV-InterimEval> and via <http://tiny.cc/ebtjby>

Sue Goss, A View from the Bridge – <http://tinyurl.com/p9c4rv2>

Transformational change through system leadership - <https://improvement.nhs.uk/resources/tcsl-programme/>

Leadership for Change and Future Leaders – [www.leadershipforchange.org.uk](http://www.leadershipforchange.org.uk)

The Art of Change-Making – <http://tiny.cc/TheArt>

The Leadership Qualities Framework – <http://tiny.cc/4vpt1x>

---