



Systems Leadership:

Applying systems intelligence to drive impact and results in multi-stakeholder, complex systems.

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Applying Systems Intelligence to Drive Impact and Results in Multi-stakeholder, Complex Systems.

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Objectives

We were pleased to lead this session for UNDP leaders on systems leadership. Our objectives for the session were to:

1. Develop awareness and insight into systems leadership as an enabler of multi-stakeholder collaboration initiatives.
2. Provide perspectives on systems intelligence as the next leadership essential after emotional intelligence.
3. Explore how mindfully grounding in the natural intelligence of the body - head, heart, gut - empowers our systems intelligence.

Leadership Context and Implications

We are living in a VUCA world:

- Volatile – change happens rapidly and on a large scale.
- Uncertain – the future cannot be predicted with any precision.
- Complex – challenges are complicated by many factors and there are few single causes or solutions
- Ambiguous – there is often little clarity on what events mean or what effects they may have

In 2020 we have seen how the VUCA concept has been amplified and we coined the term 'Virus-VUCA'. What does this V-VUCA world mean for our leadership? We see three important implications.

1. It is no longer possible for one smart leader to have all the answers

The 'hero on the rock' command and control mode of leadership will not cut it for many of today's leadership challenges. The interplay of networks of intelligence are increasingly needed to solve complex problems. The ability of a leader to tap into the collective intelligence through systems thinking has become critical to success.

2. The future is emerging moment by moment

Yet leaders are so distracted that they struggle to maintain awareness of this continual unfolding. Disruptions still take us by surprise. Did the world properly anticipate Covid19? (Wasn't there discussion about an airborne Corona Virus following SARS and H1N1?!) More than ever leaders need to be mindful, self-aware, other aware, and systems aware. They need to be able to connect deeply with each other and with what is unfolding in order to read global system dynamics and respond with speed.

3. Our past experience and current mental models will not be sufficient to solve the challenges of the future

To attain the needed levels of adaptability to lead broad systems change, leaders need to make the mental shift to embracing uncertainty. They need to let go of what they certainly know and be willing to co-lead together in the unknown, leveraging each person's unique strengths and insights to read the subtle signals of change.

What is Systems Leadership?

We asked the UNDP participants: **What do you understand by Systems Leadership?**

Your responses showed great insight and we want to make sure they are captured here for all to share:

Holistic; leaders that can lead system transformation; emotionally intelligent; leading the whole; managing all the moving relationships and pieces and different components at multiple levels; being able to sense the whole, to see multiple perspectives, listening deeply, seeing beyond the tip of the iceberg; all parts are interconnected; embracing complexity; a clear direction and move forward in a sustainable manner; drive transformative change in diverse transversal areas; considering different pieces, interactions and scenarios; build the capacity of leaders for system transformation; from the Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Entanglement.

We then asked: **How is systems leadership relevant in our (Virus) VUCA world?**

Your responses were again telling:

Respond with agility to a rapidly changing world; ambiguous means complexity, find solutions to complex problems, embrace and navigate complexity; ensure the most vulnerable groups won't be sacrificed when the system is disrupted and transforming; able to generate trust, be inclusive and pivot, willing to challenge the status quo and stand ground while respecting the dignity of all; provide integrated solutions, build back in a better way; be caring, putting well-being above efficiency.

3 Principles of Systems Leadership

Systems Leadership is extremely challenging. In our view, these 3 Principles provide the foundation for systems leadership to become possible.

1. Focus on the ‘Being’ versus the ‘Doing’. Exploring who we are being with each other requires as much focus as the traditional focus on what we are supposed to be doing as leaders. Most leaders are aware of the importance of emotional intelligence; the key question for each of us is how well do we actually practice the daily balancing act of ‘Being’ and ‘Doing’ amid the pressures of task, action and deadlines?

In the first session in this series, Gelong Thubten spoke eloquently to us about being self-aware, aware of and compassionate towards others, gratitude, and the power of mindfulness.

2. Leading from the ‘Whole’ rather than from ‘The Rock’. This is about having systems intelligence: within your team, and across the organisations you deal with globally, there is a collective intelligence that you are continually tapping into, sensing the system dynamics and unfolding what is being created in the system – to inform your leadership decisions.

The leader perspective that we are all part of and contributing to a larger whole changes our leadership: it opens us up to our own part in what is emerging in the system, creates connections and possibilities, fosters collaboration, and makes possible the co-creation of new culture for the whole system.

Juxtaposing hero leadership with servant leadership, and seeing oneself as part of the system, creates a shift in consciousness: a lead and follow / follow and lead mindset.

3. Leading from the Emerging Future rather than the Past. The future is emerging moment by moment, even as you are reading this article. Change and disruption are everywhere. So this principle addresses the issue of how to lead at the growth edge in a fast changing, complex world. If you are still doing leadership the way you were 5 years ago, then you are probably falling behind.

We can create the best strategic plan in the world, showing where we want to be in 3 years’ time. But the reality is that the world will actually unfold differently between now and then – and the place we need to be 3 years’ hence is most likely quite different. To avoid a painful system adjustment, the art is to tune your systems intelligence so that you stay in harmony with what is unfolding in the broad environment, making adjustments to the plan as you go. The Covid experience of 2020 has taught us that par excellence.

We asked the participants about the prevalent leadership style of the leaders they work with - ranging from ‘hero on the rock’ to systems aware. While 50% of leaders were seen as directive ‘hero on the rock’ style, encouragingly 38% were showing qualities of systems leadership. This is exciting - and there is always room to grow!

Some Principles of Systems

Owning the Whole

We are all part of a larger whole and everything affects everything else in the eco-system. We are all having an impact all the time, whether we are aware of it or not, and whatever is created in the system, we are all co-responsible. So we need to take ownership!

When leaders of teams understand this, they can no longer say, “The trouble with this team is they ..” They have to say “The trouble with this team is we ...”. Because, whatever your place in the hierarchy, you are part of the system dynamics that are being co-created.

Emergence

Systems are always in a complex dance of flux, change and emergence – especially human systems. The emergence has a different quality than the component parts. For example, you could study the properties of hydrogen and oxygen forever without discovering wetness: put them together and you have the emergence of water. Thus, systems leadership draws on the creative intelligence of the whole, which has a different quality from the many parts.

It requires systems intelligence to be able to sense the emergence and determine the right leadership interventions to make in any moment to take the system forward on its shared purpose.

A way of looking at this is to imagine if the system could speak: it could tell you what is going on and what the system needs or wants. The art of systems leadership is to be able to hear ‘the voice of the system’, make interpretations, and intervene to keep the system healthy and performing.

Human systems have a natural and innate intelligence that sparks innovation. The greater the systems intelligence across members, the greater the opportunity to optimise dynamics and enhance performance. In our complex world, it takes the insights, perspectives and diverse talents of the whole system to generate the innovation needed to lead sustainable transformation.

Shared Purpose

Systems leadership needs a shared purpose for the system members to align around. This is critical: the art of co-creating and co-leading, often in the face of conflicting ideas or opinions, becomes easier and smoother when a system is operating from a shared understanding and commitment to its purpose and the capacities needed to achieve it.

Organically Agile

Nature abounds in examples of how to lead in an agile, organic, systemic way. We like the example of the flock of geese. Geese are naturals at systems leadership. They fly in a V formation and, as a system, sense who needs to be in the front at any point in time: the toughest spot, pointing direction and taking all the head wind. If, at a particular moment, a different strength is needed at the front (or in the second row, the middle or the back) the geese shift and re-pattern their system organically. They move forward or back according to the collectively sensed needs of the whole and the future that is emerging. In this

lead and follow, follow and lead paradigm, there is no place for ego or standing on hierarchy. Whatever your order is in the flight pattern, you have a vital role to play in the achievement of shared goals together.

Systems leadership is founded on trust, allowing each member to take the lead at the appropriate time, contributing a particular talent or strength to meet the needs of the moment, always held by the shared purpose, and always knowing that they will show up for each other.

How would it be if the system you are co-leading knew how to fly in formation, just like the geese?

Enhancing Systems Intelligence Through Embodied Leadership

The quality of our systems intelligence impacts the depth of our insight into the system and our ability to leverage the strengths and opportunities in the system.

At Leadership Coefficient we enhance systems intelligence for both individuals and teams by supporting people to access their whole body intelligence - head, heart and gut. Connection to the full power of our body intelligence deepens self-awareness and supports leaders to be more purposeful - as Staci Haines discussed in the 2nd Session in this series. By learning how to leverage the strengths of different power centres in the body, leaders gain new resources to help deal with complexity.

We use our [Embodied Leader Strengths Profile \(ELSP\)](#) to profile each member and the system as a whole in a highly experiential (body-based) approach that creates systems intelligence that sticks. Using the ELSP methodology and team constellation models, it is possible to reveal system capabilities and dynamics through a number of different lenses on key, essential system capacities: developing strategy, leading transformation, consolidating an organisation, driving the agenda forward, picking up from the impulse and anticipating, holding and slowing down to ensure clarity and calm, visioning, fast prototyping, architecting and validating solutions, realising change.

The methodology supports individuals and whole systems to become coherent across all three intelligence centres and to leverage full system capacities. Accessing our full embodied intelligence heightens systemic intelligence and enhances awareness, insight and decisions in the crucial aspects of leading transformational change.

Our [ELSP White Paper](#) provides more information, as does our recently published [Case Study](#) about systems and embodied leadership in leading transformation at a Local Government Organisation in Australia, Singleton Council.

Conclusion

We hope to have raised your awareness, curiosity and insight into systems leadership. It is a learning journey - and we have just dipped a toe in the water. Our work stands on the shoulders of Mindfulness

and Embodiment. Our [Embodied Leadership Strengths Profile \(ELSP\)](#) provides a path forward by enabling the system to reveal itself through multiple lenses. Through embodiment we have the opportunity to grow our capacity to take on the challenges of our increasingly volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous world.

With deepest respect and gratitude, and in service of effective multi-stakeholder, complex systems, we invite you to reflect:

- What is a key insight you gained from reading this article and/or listening to the session?
- What is one systems leadership action you will take to make an immediate impact in your work?
- What do you need more to develop yourself further as a systems leader?

We would love to hear from you.

Jane Weber

Director, Leadership Coefficient

Anna Leong

Singapore Partner, Leadership Coefficient

Other Reading

Other reading about Systems Leadership can be enjoyed by subscribing to our [Systems Leadership Insights Series](#)

Highly relevant to this UNDP series, we think you will also enjoy our latest article: [Slowing Down to Go Fast](#)