# Viewing leadership from a systemic perspective

## 10

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### OBJECTIVES

- To present a whole-systems approach to leadership and its improvement that addresses the question: 'How can the organization best consider its own leadership needs, and ensure that appropriate leadership is applied, so that the organization is better led as a whole?' (*Note:* This is very different from asking typical individual-based questions such as 'What qualities do leaders need?' and 'How can we develop better leaders?')

- To shift the focus towards developing the organization's leadership process, and intervening to ensure appropriate leadership is applied in practice, recognizing the collective leadership culture.

- To clarify assumptions, models and theories that underpin the use of organization development (OD)-based leadership interventions that are aligned with challenges, once we can see and understand the contexts as complex systems.

## Introduction

Organizations have to respond to changing moods, new ideas, discoveries and emerging disciplines. Things happening in their environment matter to

leaders, including – but not limited to – those that directly comment on the leadership process. But what is ephemeral fad and what is here to stay? Language is not immune from fashion. New words can help managers think afresh, exchange ideas, even see their roles differently. The buzzwords *systems*, *whole systems*, *systemic* and *holistic* have entered the organization lexicon. Take leadership in the UK's National Health Service (NHS) and Sir Robert Francis's Public Inquiry into the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust failure. His report resounded with 'system' words, using them like stents to free up the flow of meaning in a sclerotic body (*HSJ*, 2015).

Systems jargon is not simply new language in ideas that were first bottled long ago. The 'new' sciences of systems thinking and complexity are reaching parts of bureaucratic bodies previously occluded by comfortingly familiar, but out-of-date, assumptions about what makes organizations effective. Coming under the microscope is the long-dominant, individual-centric view of management. The alternative systems lens through which to magnify the world – including the world of leadership – is now coming into sharper view. Extending the NHS theme, the contrasted quotes below illustrate the change:

> *Yesterday:* If Florence Nightingale were carrying her lamp through the corridors of the NHS today she would almost certainly be searching for the people in charge. (Griffiths Report on NHS: DHS, 1983)

> *Today:* If Florence Nightingale were walking NHS wards today, she would be looking beyond them: out into general practice; into community services; into the private and voluntary sectors; and into social care. She would be looking for the other leaders who would help her make her wards work better. For it has been clear for many years that the NHS cannot provide the best outcomes and experience for patients – and indeed cannot solve its own problems – alone... Among those to whom Florence Nightingale would also be looking are patients. (The Future of NHS Leadership Report: *HSJ,* 2015)

Among shifts hinted at here are from one leader to many, from elites to shared leadership, from personalization of the leader to the activity of leadership, from autocratic styles to more democratic ones, from simple structures to complex relationships and partnerships, and from one-sided delivery to co-creating solutions. Over time, leaders and leadership adapt because their surroundings are continually changing – including the workplace, society, economics and technology.

In Florence Nightingale's era, if we wanted to find out about leadership we would expect to find the answer in the leader. In that conception, leadership is a property of the individual leader (usually senior managers when taking a lead). We are slowly becoming aware that most of the clues to leadership – what it is, why it is seen as failing in a given instance, what is needed, and what breathes life into it – are to be found in the organization context, in the system that surrounds 'leaders'. Seen like this, leadership is a property of the organization. It has its own collective leadership culture, to which managers belong and conform.

From this perspective the leadership activity being played out in the organization can be mapped, studied, managed and improved as a system, not simply applied *to* a system by an individual leader who sees the system as 'out there'. And what is true of leadership per se is equally true of leadership development activities and programmes. Much leadership development activity is still trapped in the old way of thinking rather than being inherently linked with its environment.

## The metaphor of the fish tank and the fish

Most employment policies and development practices target individual managers. Such individuals are assumed to be in control of their job – the system doesn't receive much consideration. Yet a better analogy is that managers are all at sea, subject to powerful system waves over which they have little control.

So what do we see if we liken the organization and its people to a fish tank? The matter of how clean, clear, safe and nutritious the system is affects whether the occupants shine in front of interested parties. The fish exist in a complex ecosystem. Bigger and hungrier fish have a say too. But there are other things going on.

When we become more observant we notice how good swimmers some are, who are the star fish, the personal favourites, and who are the less glamorous supporting cast. We observe pecking orders (to mix the metaphors) and detritus. We see species whose job is to clear up the mess at the bottom, and those who service the hygiene needs of those 'higher up' and keep their image clean. We notice fish that compete for attention and favours. We may also sense fear, wariness and caution as the fish keep looking over their shoulder

(in a manner of speaking), seeking hiding places from the sharks. There are some fish we rarely see.

## *Translating the metaphor into organization language*

How individual fish swim is akin to competency. Show-offs are good at managing their image. Personal favourites remind us of the dangers of the halo effect: those who look good get more than their fair share of credit and their weaknesses are overlooked. The food chain represents the hierarchical power structure and struggles for ascendancy. As we look up at the less attractive side of those who are climbing the career ladder we are reminded that much of the mess and toxins is emitted by the bigger 'fish'.

Shoals tell us that some people find safety in numbers, combining their strength with others if they are to survive and get their fair share. The range of species reminds us of silos, turf/territory disputes, no-go areas, and in- and out-groups. Some 'fish' are more prepared than others to raise their head above the parapet (mixing metaphors again), while others lie low and try not to be noticed, or they pretend to be busy when they have little to do. Some prefer to be big fish in a small pond, and others prefer the reverse. Some appear to glide effortlessly while paddling furiously out of sight – like the serene swan.

There is food for good behaviour. There are predators, bullies and gangs. There are big fish and small fry. There are acolytes and mischief makers. Rules, protocol, bureaucracy and injunctions try to create order out of chaos but achieve little. A murkiness hangs over the place, making it difficult to see ahead and navigate the system. There's an official and an unofficial feel to the place, things that are rational and other things that are dark and in the shadow. There are some things that are 'undiscussables'. Political under-currents lie just below the calm surface.

We notice these things if we have developed the ability to see the organization as a whole system. Yet rarely do managers focus on the quality of the fish tank and what surrounds the fish: they mostly notice individual fish and become fixated on them. But if the water is toxic, the fish suffer. If there is no movement in the water, it will be deprived of life-giving oxygen, will stagnate and develop a cloudy bloom, making it difficult for fish to see ahead. Wise owners do not blame the fish for their poor performance. They do not take the fish out from time to time to give them a spot of training,

tell them to smarten up and look more lively, and then plop them back in the same dirty water. Instead they clean the tank.

## *Cleaning the tank is the real work*

Toxins arise from natural, accidental or deliberate causes, and from various internal and external sources. The law of entropy captures the natural progression of decay, degeneration and growing disorder that besets any organism. Renewal activity can attempt to recreate order and clean conditions (Tate, 2009a: 187–202). It may also help with unnatural causes, accidental or deliberate. However, as Bettridge and Whiteley (2013) point out, the more pervasive toxins emanate from less tangible external influences, including economic theory and assumptions about what makes for operational efficiency. These too are part of the enveloping system in which people swim. What to some are desirable features may, to others, produce too comfortable a working climate. To some bosses, a fearful work environment is toxic, while to others it is necessary if people are to work hard. Amazon, for example, has been criticized for electronically tagging employees (*New York Times*, 2015). The most powerful toxins can infect a whole organization culture and damage a business's reputation. Differing values – often more McGregor's Theory X than Theory Y concerning employees' assumed motivators – find their echo within the management hierarchy.

The metaphor draws attention to the relationship between the fish and their manager, with colleagues, the culture and all else that surrounds them. It raises questions about the organization's design, operation and management that go deeper than the climate and nourishing the fish. The 'fish tank' that is the organization needs to be understood as a system, one that offers scope for improvement if the 'fish' are to be able to see their way around, handle the political currents, enjoy themselves, feel safe and secure, and deliver what owners want. Questions prompted include:

1  What risks are people taking when they exercise personal leadership?

2  How can leadership be more widely distributed?

3  How can the hierarchy work more effectively?

4  What does no one dare talk about?

5  Where can feedback channels be improved?

(*Note:* The above section is an edited extract taken from Tate, 2013b.)

> ### Suggested action: Responsibility for the fish tank
>
> - Learn to notice the water, to analyse, value and manage the water as much as the fish; don't look through/past it.
>
> - Appreciate that it is healthy water that gives fish life.
>
> - Stop blaming the fish when their performance fails to delight.
>
> - Don't take the fish out for a spot of training to smarten them up, then drop them back in the same dirty water.
>
> - Recognize that fixing the fish doesn't fix a fish tank that's become smelly (unless it's the biggest fish that get fixed).

## Seeing challenges as system contexts for interventions

Reflect on the myriad ill-health problems facing large organizations. Think about their challenges and manifestations, not just in the NHS, but in all public services, institutions, companies like banks and supermarkets, governments, global business, even the planet itself. Once you see things in terms of systems, you begin to see them everywhere. You question how you were previously thinking and what you were previously seeing. This is brought out in an extract of a conversation between Matthew Taylor (Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts) and Steve Hilton (former Director of Strategy for Prime Minister David Cameron) (RSA, 2015):

> *Taylor:* I have no difficulty with an argument that says that what matters is not human nature so much as the structures in which we find ourselves. This isn't about good guys and bad guys; it is about the way that the systems affect us.
>
> *Hilton:* Generally, I think people want to be kind and treat others in a decent way. When you end up in a system that gets too big and bureaucratic and removed from that, people are unable to behave in a 'human' way. The systems do not allow them to do that.

The systems mindset illuminates a complaints call centre, an overflowing jail, a shortage of affordable homes, a fractious company board, a backlog of court cases, a money-laundering bank, a lavish reward policy, a G7 summit, Fifa's football governance, child obesity, a polluted ocean. If people are involved in its evolving and complex form, then it's a living ecosystem with multiple interdependencies, much like nature, responding to its environment. This is hardly new; the origins of systems thinking go back over 100 years:

> There used to be 'lack of system', now we have 'the system', that is, every little detail has to go up and down five or six levels of the hierarchy, a mountain of paper is generated... I am now extremely weak and am gradually conking out to the greater glory of 'the system'. (Georgy Chicherin, a workaholic foreign minister in the first Bolshevik government, writing to Leon Trotsky in the hope that he would share such discontent with Vladimir Lenin, the architect of the Russian Revolution, one of the most remarkable, surprising and audacious change management projects in history. (CIPD, 2015: 39–43)

As this Soviet example shows – albeit on a world scale – some systems have or are problems, some have failed or are failing, and some can simply be better understood, managed and led towards improvement. The challenge before us is to see that what we experience in our own organizations, and in aspects of everyday life, become clearer when we understand them as systems. Systems offer an explanation and a way forward. In the same manner, social workers in child-protection work are trained to understand that the family system is the route to understanding a dysfunctional child's behaviour. Leadership is akin to a child of its parent system; that is, leadership behaviour can be traced back to its organization context.

## Stuck systems

Systems become stuck and require action to unstick them. This is also true of their subsystems. In the above example the subsystem of leadership was stuck. The process of unsticking began in 1985 with Mikhail Gorbachev's bold reform programme of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness).

**CASE STUDY**    Michael Brown's legacy

Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed on 9 August 2014 by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri, prompting protests and riots. On 24 November, the St Louis County prosecutor announced that a grand jury decided not to indict Mr Wilson. The announcement set off another wave of protests. In March 2015 the US Justice Department called on Ferguson to overhaul its criminal justice system, declaring that the city had engaged in constitutional violations.

Following an investigation, a scathing report laid bare 'the systemic bias' and abuse that pervades Ferguson's police department and municipal court system. This included Ferguson's justice system acting as a 'collection agency': 'Ferguson has allowed its focus on revenue generation to fundamentally compromise the role of Ferguson's municipal court,' the report said. The court primarily uses its judicial authority as the means to compel the payment of fines and fees that advance the city's financial interests.

Minor municipal code violations turned into multiple arrests, jail time, and payments that exceeded the cost of the original ticket many times over. A new judge, Donald McCullin, appointed in June 2015, ordered that all arrest warrants issued in the city before 31 December be withdrawn. People who have had driver's licences suspended will be able to obtain them and start driving again.

'Ferguson unrest: Judge withdraws pre-2015 arrest warrants', BBC News online, 26 August 2015)

If leadership is the problem, is it also the solution? If so, by whom and of what kind? As long as anyone can remember there has been the lack of a consensus over a leadership approach that responds to complex challenges. Conventional leadership development programmes don't provide the answer. The complexity is more apparent now and better understood than ever it was, requiring us to rethink the contribution of leadership and addressing such questions as:

- How can we balance the individual and the system?
- How do systems relate to leadership development?
- How can systems stop the scandalous waste of leadership capability?

- How do systems affect managers' competency and use of frameworks?

- How does a systems approach improve governance?

(For deeper study and help with such questions, readers may access the Institute for Systemic Leadership website (**www.systemicleadershipinstitute.org**) for books, articles and papers listed under this chapter's references.)

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**Suggested action: Seeing the system challenges**

- Identify system challenges that you face that are stuck.

- Reflect on where leadership is the problem and where it is the solution.

- Build a consensus for a systemic leadership approach.

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## System blindness and system sight

Almost 100 years ago the prescient Mary Parker Follett realized that organization performance needs to factor in the way relationships affect collective performance: 'We should notice, too, what is sometimes forgotten, that in the social situation two processes always go on together: the adjustment of man and man, and the adjustment of man and the situation' (Parker Follett, 1924: 122).

Echoing Follett in 1936, Kurt Lewin, the founding father of social psychology, propounded his view in the heuristic B = f(P, E). An individual's *B*ehaviour is a *f*unction of that *P*erson's personality, competence, training, etc and his or her *E*nvironment. Given today's talk of 'skills' shortages, it is salutary to be reminded of Lewin's largely forgotten dictum on how performance is delivered (Tate, 2013b). With a nod to the nascent discipline of systems thinking, Lewin pleaded: 'It is necessary to find methods of representing person and environment in common terms as parts of one situation' (Lewin, 1936: 12).

We now accept that the system is a substantial determinant of organization performance when compared with individuals' contributions. W Edwards Deming, a quality and productivity systems specialist who came to embrace the systems perspective, recognized this:

> Placing blame on workforces who are only responsible for 15 per cent of mistakes where the system designed by management is responsible for 85 per cent of the unintended consequences... A manager needs to understand that the performance of anyone is governed largely by the system that he works in... it is the structure of the organization rather than the employees, alone, which holds the key to improving the quality of output. (Deming, 1986: 23–4)

The social psychology phenomenon known as the 'fundamental attribution error' explains the above and is running unrecognized in the background of most performance and behaviour issues.

### The fundamental attribution error

Social psychologists speak of the 'fundamental attribution error' – the tendency for people to overemphasize personality-based explanations for behaviour, while underemphasizing the role and power of situational influences. The consequence is that people assume that what a person does is based more on what kind of person he or she is, rather than the social and environmental forces at work on that person. (Tate, 2009a: 31)

In looking for explanations, reviewers of performance attribute successes or shortfalls to the reviewee's disposition and don't sufficiently consider situational factors (put very crudely: 'all fish, no fish tank'). To address perceived deficits, reviewers seek remedies in the individual more than in the situation. Compounding this effect, consideration of situational factors is made even less likely because of the distorting effect of actor-observer bias; that is, reviewees take situational factors more into account than does the reviewer, and more than would the reviewer as an explanation for his or her own behaviour in similar circumstances. The presence of hierarchy in the relationship further distorts any gap in viewpoints. While the reviewer is given the power to judge others, his or her own behaviour is a direct factor in the relevant performance.

# Discomfort with systems thinking

Some people have an aversion to systems and the language of systems. Is the system really real, they question? There are system deniers, those who claim that systems exist only in the imagination – systems cannot be seen or touched. It seems odd to them that systems are talked about as though they have personality and exhibit human-like behaviour, can take decisions and act. For them, systems lack independent agency; all that exists is conversations. It is true that systems are indeed a mental construct, a way people have found of talking about an intangible concept. But systems are in good company; they are as real as, say, hierarchical power, which is another construct. The truth is that we really do experience and feel the power of 'the system'. Ergo, it exists.

The word 'system' is used in several ways: sometimes on a grand scale (eg the NHS system), and sometimes to refer to more local and tangible work arrangements and processes: systems may be macro and micro. The word is also commonly used for IT, and systems are related to culture. But culture says more about values, while system says more about how work gets done, how parts relate to each other and to the whole. The system transcends company boundaries, whereas culture usually refers to a particular organization, profession or other subset. The system seems the more tangible concept of the two: easier to diagnose what changes one could make to the system to bring about improvements, whereas knowing where to begin to attempt to change the culture seems more daunting. People also find it easier to blame the system than the culture.

Systematic is not systemic. These words are frequently confused. A common mistake is claiming that a deep-seated problem is systematic, when systemic is the correct word; see Table 10.1. Given these definitions, it is easy to see why organization failings are systemic rather than systematic. In muddling these words – as many do – thinking becomes confused too. The mistake is easily

**TABLE** 10.1    Systemic and systematic

| | |
|---|---|
| **Systemic** | Located in the system or having an explanation that relates to how a system works |
| **Systematic** | Anticipated, well-planned, having clear steps, rational, organized and measured |

explained: everyone grows up knowing what 'systematic' means, but for many the word 'systemic' is less familiar, barely understood. Yet the words have almost opposite meanings. When Sir Ian Blair (then the Metropolitan Police Force's Commissioner) tried to explain the fatal shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell underground station in 2005, he described the killing as 'systematic' (Tate, 2009a: 237, 254). In the United States in 2015, shootings of black youngsters by white policemen were examined from a 'systemic' perspective, as we saw in the Ferguson case. Similarly, the frantic scenes at the French port of Calais in 2015 of migrants from north Africa seeking a better life in Europe can be viewed and understood through a systems lens.

There are also various categories of system that need to be seen and understood separately. At one level are 'designed abstract systems', designed to serve some explanatory purpose (Checkland, 1999: 111). Quite different are 'human activity systems', observable in the world and more or less consciously ordered in wholes as a result of some underlying purpose or mission. A key distinction is between 'hard systems', which assume that the world is a set of systems that can be engineered; and 'soft systems', which assume that the world is problematic, but that the process of enquiry into these situations can be organized as a system.

## *The myth of predictability and control*

Managers' training and education place a high value on things being conducted rationally, logically and analytically. There is an implication that managers can predict and control things and deliver planned results accordingly. Managers are taught to value and liken the organization to a smooth-running machine. So they come to believe that what they do in their job should be systematic, and that it is their job to create order and impose solutions, as in the example below:

**CASE STUDY**   Banking on truthfulness and compliance

Barclays Bank's multimillion-pound academy to train over 2,000 staff in truthfulness and compliance is well-intentioned but may be misguided ('Barclays school to teach staff to avoid scandals', 4 July 2014). The individuals being singled out for retraining are neither naturally wicked nor ignorant of the truth and company rhetoric; they are responding to

the way hidden forces in the system in which they work operate. These forces encourage particular behaviour, often contrary to espoused company values and policies. Instead of training, Barclays would do better to understand the way the system works its wicked way on individuals. Without such an understanding at the system level, the bank will drop retrained 'fish' back in the toxic 'fish tank' water and find they swim in the same old way. It is the water that needs refreshing more than the fish.

# The rise of 'wicked' problems

Politicians' piecemeal attempts to manage such situations sometimes fail because they confuse complex situations with complicated ones. And they lack a systemic understanding of a complex situation, especially the more acute 'wicked' variety (Grint, 2008). They behave as though the issues are systematic. They think the problems are linear, linking cause and effect, but complex social situations are non-linear. Outcomes from managers' action are often unpredictable. Unintended consequences are common.

In system terms things are said to be 'complex' where the interaction between the parts produces emergent effects that cannot be predicted from those parts. This is especially true of social systems because people's views, experience, values, prejudices, thoughts and ideas, etc and their likely effect on others when interacting are not predictable. By contrast, things are said to be 'complicated' when they consist of many parts, but that with enough expertise or computer processing power, they are amenable to being solved and the right answer found. Grint explains that wicked problems:

- are complex, not complicated;
- have interdependencies that mean they cannot be solved in isolation;
- sit outside a single hierarchy;
- lack a clear definition of what success looks like;
- have no clear stopping point;
- may be intransigent: we may need to learn to live with them;
- contain symptoms of deep division;
- have better or worse development rather than right or wrong solutions;

- require political collaboration rather than scientific processes;
- call for leadership rather than management.

Wicked problems are contrasted with 'tame problems', which may be complicated but not complex. Tame problems lend themselves to known and uncontested solutions; they can be solved by tried and tested good practice, and sometimes by best-practice solutions if the problem is simple and one mind is sufficient. Wicked problems on the other hand require leadership; they necessarily involve many stakeholders and their viewpoints, competing interests and expertise in tackling them. The intractability increases when the solution further fuels the problem, as for example in Germany's generous solution to the problem of large numbers of Syrian asylum seekers in 2015. This solution may lead to more refugees turning up on Germany's doorstep as word spreads, so the problem may recur.

As today's Florence Nightingale hinted earlier, trends in society, economies and modern structures are shaken up by complexity-inducing forces such as globalization, multiculturalism, outsourcing, and cross-boundary partnerships. These push an increasing number of today's organizational leadership challenges in the direction of wicked problems. They call for a multi-experience and multi-perspective response where the task is to ask appropriate questions and engage in collaboration (Tate, 2013b).

### Suggested action: Developing system sight

- Embrace the new vocabulary.

- Remember that a manager's performance is a function of personality and environment.

- Recognize the 85/15 per cent split between the system/individual that accounts for mistakes.

- Allow the system to enter the room and to be considered in managers' performance discussions.

# Challenging the traditional, individual-centric model

Most people instinctively associate leadership with leaders, especially when bemoaning the lack of it. These leaders are individuals – usually managers but not always – who somehow 'do' leadership. Most of the leadership literature vests leadership in the person of the individual leader, and this is equally true of so-called 'leadership development' (actually usually *leader* development). This focus leads to a preoccupation with the ideal leader's qualities and behaviours, devoid of organization context and relationships. It leads to singular models of leadership for a given organization ('the way we do leadership in XYZ'). The task in this chapter is to break with that tradition and open readers' eyes to something more that is going on in organizations when we think and talk systemically about 'leadership' activity. This amounts to a paradigm shift:

> The familiar approach overlooks key aspects of reality about the application of leadership in an organization. Crucial among these is that a manager's leadership activity is not pursued by individuals acting alone, confidently, trusted, and free of restraint or political interference. Leadership is foremost a social activity, an empathic as much as a cognitive pursuit, one conducted through relationships. Moreover, leadership wholly depends on interacting not just with colleagues and other people, but also with other organizational things. These various interconnecting pieces are part of a complex leadership puzzle located in the manager's immediate environment, in what goes on around and between managers. (Tate, 2013b)

If we accept that leadership is a property of the organization as well as of the individual, then responsibility and agency have a dependent, symbiotic relationship. Individuals' leadership impacts upon the organization. But that system also impacts upon leadership activity. In particular, the system limits how much disturbance it will accept, thereby acting as a constraint on leadership's power.

According to Hernez-Broome and Hughes (2004): 'There is a distinct shifting of emphasis in the academic literature away from seeing leadership as the characteristic of certain individuals... towards a view of leadership that exists only in relationships between individuals.' That recognition of relationship is key. It leads to the question: 'What form of leadership will

replace the "heroic" models at the beginning of the 21st century?' (CIPD, 2006). According to Zheltoukhova (2014), 'While the capability of individuals is growing through training and experience, their ability to lead is not always realized, where an organization's context is not set up to meet the need for leadership.'

## *The heroic leader stands in the way*

The heroic model of leadership has had a long life. It continued to hold traction in the 1980s–1990s, despite 'great man' theories having been debunked in the 1950s (Gronn, 1995: 14–27). A consequence is that among older generations a familiar siren call remained: a strong leader was needed 'to sort them out'. But the 'death of deference' makes Generation Y less in thrall to the 'strong leader'. There will always be leaders whom we consider to be wise and experienced, and whose judgement and decisions we value and respond to. But that aside, the trend away from powerful, know-it-all leaders who tell us what to do ushers in more democratic, self-management, peer-based models, as well as systems-based approaches to distributed leadership.

The hero model is not simply outdated: a powerful leader sucks attention and energy upwards and away from what is happening in the system. But that system exists come what may. Whereas the hero is a choice, the system is not. It is whether you pay attention to it that is the choice. And the hero presents a block to managers focusing on what is needed to improve the way the system works, and their involvement and responsibility in that. As we saw with the fish tank, individuals can be a distraction, taking our eye to the nodes rather than what is going on around and between the nodes.

Post-millennial research and new models of leadership are extending what are meant by 'relationship' and 'interconnectedness', and where they are located. We are not simply talking better teamwork here. A systems view takes the discussion much deeper. Systems-based leadership ways of thinking and acting are becoming an essential part of the response to the CIPD's question. 'Whole systems' interventions are gaining popularity. The leadership question becomes: 'How can an organization best understand, expand, release, promote, improve, combine and apply leadership capability suited to its needs?' (Tate, 2013b).

This presents a challenge for the HR profession, one as yet hardly recognized: does its people-focused brief stand in the way of accepting the system's role

in organization behaviour? Even more uncomfortable: are people-oriented professionals especially vulnerable to system blindness? Do some see systems where others see only people (Baron-Cohen, 2003), and regard people as the source of organization problems and of the solutions too? Hence the predominance of training as the assumed answer – and its marginal effect.

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**Suggested action: Challenging the traditional, individual-centric model**

- Come to see leadership as a property of the organization/system.

- Recognize that leadership is manifested in and through relationships.

- Understand why the heroic model of leadership is necessarily under pressure.

- Reflect on how the HR profession is challenged by post-millennial research.

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## *Challenging the status quo*

A frequent issue is a company's treatment of whistle-blowers, so often a case of 'playing the man and not the ball', to use the football analogy of foul play.

Dr Kim Holt was forced from her job as the designated doctor for children in care at St Ann's Hospital in Haringey, North London, in 2007. She and three other doctors had written to management warning that staff shortages and poor record keeping would lead to a tragedy. Shortly afterwards that fear was realized with the widely reported death of Baby Peter Connelly ('Baby P'), where scapegoating featured strongly, especially at the hands of politicians and others trying to protect their own reputations:

> People attacked me, but actually they would have attacked anyone who challenged that culture, who challenged the system... What is wrong is the cover-up. It is the cover-up that needs to be held to account.
>
> It was only very late on that I realized that what I was doing was showing leadership. You can be a manager and not be a leader. And you can be both. And leaders have particular qualities – very strong values, and having a very clear vision of where things should be, where we should be trying to go.

> (Dr Kim Holt, in Timmins, 2015: 49–53)

Dr Holt's experience in raising concerns, speaking up and campaigning for a 'just culture' led to her being given clinical leadership awards. That is another pattern frequently experienced in the life of whistle-blowers. Once the system has failed to crush them, and once cleared of guilt, they are often lauded.

### *Overcoming homeostasis*

There is a further dynamic when it comes to challenging the status quo. Those who have most authority to agree to change are usually those who are most vested in the extant model, values and beliefs. They have the most to lose. In any case, even wise managers who can overcome personal hesitation, or who are under orders, have no choice but to work with the system to change the system. This process of homeostasis applies a natural brake to the business of attempting change.

Where the purpose of an intervention is simply to change the way managers think, this may have an infectious effect on colleagues. The argument here is that the tendency to revert to past habits and wilt under pressure to maintain the status quo does not apply to thinking to the same extent that it does to behaviour and organization change. Thinking may appear less threatening. Moreover, once you have learnt to see all living things as systems, and the scales have fallen from your eyes, there is mentally no going back.

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**Suggested action: Challenging the status quo**

- Keep checking whether you are defaulting to an individual-centric position, and not seeing the system.

- Help your managers change the way they think.

- Strengthen your connections before going out on a limb.

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## Understanding where failure has systemic roots

Leadership failures receive wide media coverage. In the UK, who has not heard of such scandals as the BBC over Jimmy Savile, or South Yorkshire police at Hillsborough?

> Group behaviour is not simply the sum of the behaviour of individuals. It has its own institutional life and responds to other impulses... all the groups we belong to – from family to nation – are subject to compulsions that may well lead to more unrestrained selfishness, more covering up of inconvenient truths, than we would ever display in our personal relationships. (Canon Dr Alan Billings, 'Thought for the Day' on the subject of the Hillsborough Enquiry, BBC Radio 4, 24 September 2012)

Systemic failures do not just reflect the failure of individual leaders in those organizations: they are also major failures of leadership policy and process. In the Hillsborough disaster it comes as no surprise that even the subsequent investigation of the leadership failure was itself an example of systemic failure when police collusion and falsification of evidence went undiscovered and led to a miscarriage of justice, leading to a fresh public inquiry.

In cases like these, the public most want to know *who* failed. They want to see accountability. They want someone in the dock. Yet the legal system itself fails us here, because systems cannot be found guilty; only individuals can. Corporate manslaughter is the closest it gets, and attempts to prosecute are rarely successful. Of the 141 cases opened since the law changed in 2009, only three have resulted in convictions. And even then it is the company and not the system that is in the dock. It is difficult to cross-examine a system.

Following the capsizing of Costa Concordia in 2012, it was the character of Captain Francesco Schettino that was under the spotlight before he was found guilty of manslaughter. Little attention was given to the cruise company's policy of encouraging its ships to go close inshore to give a public 'salute' to past captains (Tate, 2013a). The captain had a relationship going on there, a relationship with the company's head office and its public relations policy.

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**CASE STUDY**   Drowning in bureaucracy

Systems constrain individuals when attempting to take on a leadership role. In a well-reported case, police officers were prevented by regulations from rescuing a drowning child in shallow water; they could only stand by while they waited for fully trained and equipped fire and rescue service officers to arrive. Several factors explain what is going on here:

1  An organization that is risk-averse.

2  Close radio contact between the uniformed police and the control room about the situation they find themselves in.

3  A bank of controllers whose advice to officers is governed by a manual of standard operating procedures.

4  A perceived risk of a police officer (or spouse) losing compensation rights if injured or killed in an incident while acting in breach of standard operating procedures.

5  A quasi-military structure where the first commandment is that the hierarchy must be preserved.

Combined, these factors may stop the police from entering the water.

In strongly hierarchical organizations – as Lawrence Peter (of 'The Peter Principle' fame) put it – 'super-competence in an employee is more likely to result in dismissal than promotion, a feature of poor organizations, which cannot handle the disruption. A super-competent employee violates the first commandment' (Peter and Hull, 1969: 47). The deadly combination of factors in the policing system makes it difficult for an otherwise courageous officer to use personal discretion to waive the rules and use initiative. In the public mind this looks like a lack of leadership, but it is the system that is faulty. (Tate, 2013a)

## *Widening the system relationships*

While leadership is a relationship, an analysis of failures shows that the relationship is not just between people (leaders and their followers), but between leaders and *things*, such as policies, structure, protocols and culture. Other relationships in an organization exist between, say, governance and operations, as in Stafford Beer's Viable Systems Model (Hoverstadt, 2008). The relationship may cross multiple system boundaries, as the Baby P case showed (Tate, 2009b). So, more than skill, and more than leaders, it is usually the *system* of leadership that is found wanting and in need of understanding, examination and improvement.

Too often, the individual thinking pattern is limited to finding and fixing broken parts ('reductionism'), and then reassuring the public and shareholders. Earmarking individuals for retraining is especially popular, but may miss the (systemic) point. The knee-jerk mantra 'lessons will be learnt' will be heard – generally stronger in rhetoric than substance. What is usually missing is a deep understanding of how the organization – and indeed how leadership itself – works as a system.

# Complexity and risk avoidance

All organizations are social systems. Complexity has always been present, but not recognized as such. Only recently have we had the benefit of complexity science to help us understand and respond to it. The risk is that leaders (and HR) ignore this complexity and try to manage people as though they are more known, more alike and more predictable than they really are. Some managers ignore the fact that people talk among themselves and have views about work that have impulses that form elsewhere. Managers know nothing of what is going on in people's minds. Yet, in the traditional model, organizations pretend that these forces can be controlled through bureaucratic mechanisms such as behavioural frameworks designed to ensure that people comply with someone else's assumed best-practice model. Unwisely, this restricts variety (as well as initiative and innovation) among managers.

## *Requisite variety*

Expressed in layman's terms, Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety (Tate, 2009a: 129–30) says that, to survive and thrive, the management resources of a system need to contain as much variety as that which it confronts in the challenges it faces from its environment, otherwise it will be overwhelmed by its environment. As early systems pioneers put it, 'only variety can absorb variety' (Hoverstadt, 2008: 47). Many HR policies and practices fly in the face of that law.

Andy Haldane, chief economist at the Bank of England, recalls leadership practices in which messengers of the impending crisis were systematically disciplined or dismissed, probably throughout the entire banking industry (Saunders, 2015). A powerful leader may intentionally suppress variety if it poses an uncomfortable threat to his own confidently held worldview and his personal authority. HBOS chief executive James Crosby's 2004 dismissal of Paul Moore, his percipient group head of regulatory risk turned whistle-blower, was a tragic case in point in the run-up to the 2008 banking crisis.

Besides the risk aspect of neglecting the messy realities of complexity, there is an opportunity here that often goes begging: that is, the emergent possibilities that open up in the interconnections between people. Taking leadership as an example, leadership is an emergent property of a relationship. The risk is that organizations believe that leadership can be adequately specified, studied and worked on via the individual alone. It cannot.

## *Emergence*

This refers to organization behaviour (good or bad) that arises as a property of interaction in the system; behaviour that is not present, observable or obtainable in any of the parts alone. To take a simple example, speed is an emergent property of a car, but speed cannot be found in any of the parts of the car if it is taken apart (Hoverstadt, 2008: 303).

On a similar basis, since leadership is relational, it follows that action, decisions, ideas, energy, etc that arise when two people engage (or any two or more elements engage) is described as being 'emergent'. So we cannot take people away and train them to be leaders and know what will happen if and when they apply their new-found skills since the outcome (and what the organization is looking for from them) depends on the nature of their interaction with other people and with other elements in the system.

**CASE STUDY**    'Why am I surrounded by idiots?'

A FTSE 100 chief executive once said to his HR Director, 'Why am I surrounded by idiots? Will someone take them away and train them to be leaders?'

When people look out at what surrounds them, they tend to see things that are 'out there', beyond them and beyond their own responsibility and culpability. They are correspondingly blind to issues that are 'in here', either within themselves or happening in the space between them and others. In this case, the chief executive was blind to those alternative perspectives. The CEO placed all the fault in the other party: '*they* are not leaders'. He was overlooking his own role in appointing them, agreeing their goals, appraising their performance, and awarding their bonuses. More important, he was 50 per cent of the relationship he had with each of them.

Leadership is conducted in and through relationships. The leadership manifested is a function of both parties, not just the person being complained about. It is not the responsibility of one party or the other. It is a product of both acting together; it springs from the nature and quality of the connection that they experience in their relationship.

The leadership behaviour is both unpredictable and different from that of either of them acting independently. And the boss's behaviour will be different with each director, and the director's behaviour would be different with a different chief executive. And their behaviour with their chief executive will be different when all directors are together as a management board than when they are alone with the boss. In other words, the behaviour is contextual. Being sent away to be trained to be a leader misses the point. This becomes obvious once you see these relationships as a system, each a different system.

(This real-life situation with the above-quoted CEO has been developed into an imagined conversation to show how its resolution might play out under three possible scenarios, each based on where the particular HR adviser is coming from: a) a training and development mindset, b) an HR mindset, and c) a systems mindset; see **http://www.systemicleadershipinstitute.org/ resources/case-studies/**)

### Suggested action: Complex problems and systemic failures

- When something or someone fails, first assume that it is a system issue rather than an individual to be found and blamed.

- When the challenges are complex, bring a range of diverse experiences and perspectives to bear.

- Shun the temptation to believe that a powerful individual will solve problems that no one else has managed to do.

- Don't design arrangements that are more complex than they need to be.

- Embrace and apply systems thinking principles.

## Levels of systemic leadership thinking and practice

A spectrum covers systems, management and leadership, and how ideas are developed, taken up and applied. The strands of thought cover two related

fields of interest. They address the latest understanding, structure and nature of organizations and work. Running alongside this is interest in the future of management and leadership, preferably linked to the first preoccupation. Common ground comes in the 'new' sciences, especially systems, complexity and chaos theory.

As part of this, and sometimes as a counterweight to the individual-leader perspective, more organization-focused leadership models have been appearing in the last 20 years. These are sometimes used as the basis for leadership development programmes. Some models recognize complex adaptive systems and complex responsive systems, with a leadership reply offered by system(s) leadership, whole-system(s) leadership, systemic leadership, and so on.

Individuals are of course agents, and thankfully many stand out and make their mark as leaders; but in the systems view it is ultimately a well-running integrated system that delivers outcomes and results for customers. Organizations succeed or fail as systems, and a key leadership responsibility is to optimize and continually try to improve that system. The territory falls into four broad levels in the challenge to traditional thinking.

## Level 1

At the first level, some protagonists are content simply to highlight the importance of considering the impact that the individual leader has on the organization; ie more than leading people: also leading and changing the organization. This barely qualifies as systemic, though it uses the language and is offered as such by some consultancies.

## Level 2

This viewpoint can be found in much of the public-sector literature on system(s) leadership and whole system(s) leadership. It implicitly accepts that an organization's services are delivered by systems more than by individuals acting independently. And systems need managing and leading by 'leaders', who it is said need to understand these things. So, these models include what individual managers (often in senior 'leadership' positions in the hierarchy) need to know and do if they are to succeed in leading and managing their organization as a system (for examples, see Timmins, 2015). Senge *et al* (2015) capture the need: 'The deep changes necessary to accelerate progress against

society's most intractable problems require a unique type of leader – the system leader, a person who catalyses collective leadership.'

Such models remain at heart individual-centric, and the leadership talked about sounds heroic. Furthermore, research casts doubt on the assumed ability of a single leader to think outwardly in a systems way and also to display emotional intelligence in relationships (Goleman, 2013). Note too that the approach assumes that leadership is inherent in what these leaders do by virtue of their positional authority, as opposed to acts of personal leadership open to all.

## Level 3

At a third level the ideas and theories are more advanced. The shift is towards understanding leadership as a property of the system, and itself a system. Besides helping leaders run big projects, we are interested in how whole organizations can live a different kind of leadership.

'While we all had our heads under the bonnet of the car trying to work out why we lost the election, these people jumped into the car and drove it off' (Andrew Rawnsley, the *Observer*, 6 September 2015, commenting on the campaign to elect a new leader of the UK Labour Party). This illustrates the easy temptation of reductionism compared with more imaginative holism. And it responds to the instinct to analyse rather than synthesize – breaking things down to find the broken parts or elements rather than bringing things together into new wholes. But note that action on developing elements remains a valid and necessary synthesizing activity, as Rawnsley pointed out: 'The MP for Islington North [Jeremy Corbyn] was alone among the candidates in putting on his campaign website a link to the £3 sign-up. The teams of all three of his rivals made a terrible mistake in not spotting how this would radically influence the race.'

Approaches at this level examine how the new sciences of systems thinking, allied with complexity and chaos theory, have the potential to fundamentally alter the purpose, role, shape, nature, possibilities and preoccupations of leaders and leadership, as well as of how organizations work and are viewed. Wheatley (1999) claims that the beginning of the 20th century heralded the end of the hegemony of Newtonian (ie reductionist) thinking: 'In the quantum world, relationships are not just interesting; to many physicists they are all there is to reality... The quantum world has demolished the

concept of the unconnected individual' (pp 32–4). She points out that with relationships:

> we give up predictability and open up to potentials. None of us exists independent of our relationships with others. Different settings and people evoke some qualities from us and leave others dormant. In each of these relationships, we are different, new in some way.

According to Senge (1994: 25):

> In the realm of management and leadership, many people are conditioned to see our organizations as things rather than as patterns of interaction. We look for solutions that will 'fix problems' as if they are external and can be fixed without 'fixing' that which is within us that led to their creation.

## *Level 4*

These ways of thinking tell us that human organizations have more in common with nature than has previously been understood and accepted. Nature's life path draws on natural processes for its own self-organization and management.

The Dutch company Buurtzorg (translating as 'neighbourhood care'), established in 2006 by Jos de Blok, is causing some commentators to take notice of the self-management movement. The company employs 9,000 community nurses, largely ex-state employees, who wanted greater freedom in how they manage patients, free of bureaucratic controls. The company now operates internationally (Laloux, 2013).

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### Suggested action: Levels of systemic leadership

- Learn more about systems thinking and complexity science and relate them to your own experience and daily practice.

- Consider where a problem requires both system and people skill sets (maybe in more than one person).

- Challenge your organization's present state of systems thinking development.

- Check out how systemically embedded providers' approaches really are.

# Concluding thoughts

Once we reframe leadership in terms of the organization, and not just the individual leader, that role and relationship need managing on behalf of the employer, otherwise it won't happen. Leadership is a key organization resource, and resources need to be managed. In that sense – paradoxical as it may sound – the practice of systemic leadership needs managing (Tate, 2014), as this chapter has shown. Here are some meta questions:

- How does a systemic perspective change leadership's purpose?
- How does the language of systemic leadership change conversations?
- How can managers change the way they think about leadership and their own role in it?
- How can they keep this in the forefront of their minds, rather than react to things that come their way?
- How can governance become systemically driven?
- How can the process of accountability be robustly managed?
- What should systemic leaders focus their time and energy on?
- Where are the weakest links that are letting down the whole system?
- How can the organization get better at learning from its mistakes?
- How clear is it where responsibility lies for the healthy functioning of the system?

We are aiming for a model for managers to use, based on the principle that 'every good regulator of a system must be a model of that system'. In cybernetics this is known as the Conant–Ashby Theorem. It means that managers should have in mind an understanding of a relevant and effective model of the system they are attempting to manage. 'The manager's ability to manage any system or situation depends on how good their own model is. Without a relevant model a manager cannot manage' (Hoverstadt, 2008: 302–3).

Very few managers have a mental model of the system for which they hold responsibility. If they had, they would be better able to gauge the likely effect of their actions on the system. Instead, managers guess what affects what, announce forecasts and set targets, producing unintended consequences that someone then has to deal with. Without a systems appreciation, and lacking a view of (or indeed responsibility for) the whole system, pressurized managers may push stuff elsewhere with little thought about the consequences.

This echoes Gregory Bateson's admonition that 'We all cling fast to the illusion that we are capable of direct perception, uncoded and not mediated by epistemology' (Brockman, 1977). In other words, we need to know how we know. At the same time, managers need to be aware that they are themselves inside the system. Again quoting Bateson: 'We are not outside the ecology for which we plan – we are always and inevitably a part of it' (Bateson, 1973: 512).

Systems are nested. The manager has responsibility as a regulator of that part of the organization as a system for which he or she has responsibility. There is also the leadership (sub)system and its improvement. The points of advice below, coupled with the diagram of the leadership system (see Figure 10.1), constitute a partial model for the manager to have in mind as a 'regulator' of those systems:

- Concentrate on the whole and the interconnections between the parts.
- Focus on the system's purpose ahead of its processes and procedures.
- 'Look out' for things (synthesis) more than 'look into' things (analysis).
- See what is actually happening ahead of what needs to happen.
- Check what is going on in the organization by personal examination.
- Strengthen feedback loops.
- Understand, facilitate and value emergence.
- Be pulled by what the customer wants; hear the customer voice.
- Understand demand and respond to it (avoid provider-supply dominance).
- Make continual improvement of the system a prime goal of leadership.
- Consider all the players and actors, of which the organization is one.
- Become aware of natural oscillations and progress along a natural lifecycle.
- Stimulate and seek organizational learning.
- Consider practically how 'lessons will be learnt'.
- Embrace the edge of chaos as a necessary concomitant of improvement.
- Value and make the most of uncertainty, rather than espousing certainty.
- Understand the forces leading to entropy – the amount of disorder in any system.

**FIGURE 10.1** Systemic leadership: a concept map

**ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS**

POSITIONAL LEADERSHIP

'Making tomorrow better than today'

**Leading** (improvement and change)

Twin responsibilities

**Managing** (daily operational delivery)

Includes initiative, challenging norms and status quo

PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

Individual managers

Management teams

Collective management

Coaching (may be systemic)

Development

Identification of skills, behaviours, traits, competencies, needs

System blindness

Fundamental attribution error

**Managers**

**Staff members**

**The individual (leader focus)**

is a property of

Improvement and change

The leadership process

System sight

Fish tank metaphor

**LEADERSHIP**

is a property of

The organization's leadership needs

Organization and leadership culture

Organization challenges

THE LEADERSHIP ENVIRONMENT

Fads and fashions

Systemic thinking and complexity

Holism not reductionism

organization variables (policies, protocols, incentives, etc)

**PURPOSE: 'To be well/better led as a whole'**

**The organization/ system**

Stuck system(s), repeating patterns

Leadership theories, models, ideas, plans

eg more widely distributed leadership

other people

Relationships and interconnections

with

THE LEADERSHIP PROCESS

**Leadership activity being applied**

eg decision taking, performance management, etc

Actively managing the delivery of leadership

eg holding managers to account

Supervision by line manager

**FOCUS MAINLY ON THE INDIVIDUAL**

**FOCUS MAINLY ON THE SYSTEM**

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