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How to see the system you are in

One of many practical 'how-to' resources published by the Institute for Systemic Leadership.

The full list appears at the end of this resource.



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Notes

These practical implementation resources are designed for use by senior executives and leaders, organisation trainers, educators, developers, coaches, mentors, and internal and external consultants.

Resources are available from The Institute for Systemic Leadership at www.systemicleadershipinstitute.org. To view the list and instructions please consult the website's Resources Centre.

The pricing regime reflects the Institute's wish to make these resources widely available. Bundling several resources into one order helps keep the cost down. There is a lower rate for those who are paying from their own pocket rather than a corporate budget.

All the resources are broadly similar in style. They all contain practical advice with questions to prompt reflection, advance thinking, analysis and action planning. They do not prescribe solutions or give answers, they help readers think through matters in their own unique context and plot their own learning and action.

The resources bridge the learning-action divide, filling that rare gap of being underpinned by research while remaining highly practical and implementable in real organisation contexts. They are not excessively theoretical or technically difficult, but they do challenge the imagination and the norms of conventional thinking in the typical organisation. What all the resources have in common is a foundation in systemic thinking and complexity science.

Each of the resources is short, just a few pages. What they lack in length they make up for in depth. They do not require a lot of time to read, but the issues they pose do call for the time and freedom to think, and a willingness to embrace discussion with colleagues.

Readers will approach these resources from a range of understanding and experience, both systemic and non-systemic. For some, topics such as 'How to distribute leadership more widely' and 'How to conduct governance from a systemic perspective' may call for imagination and a willingness to change. We have no choice but to work with 'what is' if we are to change it. And 'what is' for readers will vary widely. We recognise that ideas about change will severely challenge what some readers and their colleagues and clients, have grown up to believe about management. Other readers will have less of a problem with such material. The systemic leadership model does question long-standing traditional views about managers' roles, ways of thinking, sources of authority, and leadership style. But we believe there is no point in simply preaching to the converted. Be prepared for alternative ways of thinking.

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HOW TO SEE THE SYSTEM YOU ARE IN

This resource will help anyone working in an organisation see the dynamics of what is going on around them and what to focus their attention on when looking for improvement. It is a great place for anyone to start. Making system changes at this level or more strategically comes later.

The resource builds on 'The Fishtank Metaphor' in this website's Theories, Definitions and Principles. Please read that summary first. After learning to see the system, please use the follow-up resource 'How to improve the health of the fishtank'.

The fishtank metaphor invites us to see and think at least as much about what is going on in the fishtank as what is going on in the fish. The underlying principle behind using this metaphor is this:

People's work behaviour is strongly affected by what surrounds them and what goes on between them and others – that is, the nature and quality of the multiple relationships and interactions. These relationships are with other people but also with things in their environment.

At any given time their behaviour depends on from what is happening in the relationship. It is said to be 'emergent'. Their behaviour is not isolatable to the individual, independent of those multiple relationships. Indeed, to think and talk of 'individuals' as though synonymous with 'people' (as many do) is an identity category error. People's behaviour is not truly individual. We may like to believe we are free and performance is our own choice and responsibility, and that we can be held accountable for that. But this is not so. This is one reason why individual performance appraisal is flawed and leads to little improvement for the organisation.

What the employer is interested in is the behaviour that comes out of that relationship, and that behaviour is not of one party or the other, but is shaped by both. It is the product of that relationship (both with people and things). This stark realisation and change of mindset holds implications for how we think about people's and the organisation's behaviour and how we manage their performance and that of the system we swim in.

The important relationships

1. We relate to other people: colleagues, bosses, subordinates, and perhaps less often or less directly to customers, suppliers, investors, regulators, etc. (This relationship and its effect may be people's most important one.)
2. We relate to non-people elements in our work environment. These include such things as hierarchical power structures, reporting rules and expectations, edicts, pay grades, standing instructions, codes of practice/conduct, policies, incentives, targets, protocols, bureaucracy, committees, etc. (The effect of these relationships is often given less attention than the relationship with colleagues but is significant.)
3. We relate to the *culture* (which may be national, organisational, professional, collective/team) and the various norms of how things are around here and what is deemed normal and acceptable.
4. We relate to the current and local *climate*, the mood, temperature and feel, much influenced by one's present boss.
5. We relate to the *system* of how the work works, how people find their allotted role and space in that, and how our personal contribution relates to that. This is, in large measure, what we are up against when we blame the system. The term 'system' is commonly given a more all-encompassing meaning, including the elements listed above. (This relationship's effect is more powerful than people might expect.)

To sum up: the key relationships are all those things that are *going on between us and others*, and all those things that are *going on around us*:

- *Between*: Other people with whom we are relating and who affect us or are affected by us, and how behaviour adapts accordingly. The resulting behaviour of the relationship may be 'emergent', not that of either one party or the other, but a product of the interaction.

- *Around:* Structural elements lack their own agency (except where someone with sufficient authority in the organisation decides to make a change, for example to policy). How we relate to structural elements (how much we choose to care, take notice, and allow ourselves to be influenced by them) affects our behaviour and our response.

How we respond to the system

In the case of structural relationships, our responses are mostly unconscious, automatic, habitual, as we settle into our familiar patterns that others have come to expect of us. How we relate and adapt to these variables is a function of our personality, values, courage, etc. Some of us are respectful, sensitive, deferential, cautious, compliant, etc. Others are more spirited, rebellious, impatient, challenging and so on. Some of us want to belong to and fit in with the crowd. Others are more content to be different, even building a reputation as such. Some fall in the middle of the bell curve, while others are outliers or deviants (from the norm), often proudly so. In these relationships we may seem more individual, but in reality no more free.

Appreciating the system

What are we seeing when we use this fishtank metaphor? If the water represents the system that the fish swim in, then it is far easier to notice and concentrate our attention and energy on the fish than the water. So we end up managing and blaming the fish. And to improve performance we mostly resort to training – often inappropriately – because training seems to offer a solution that is unavailable to problems with the water. They may be slippery sometimes, but we can get hold of individual fish, even shoals, but the water ...

The fishtank is one system that we experience daily, one that practically plays a conscious role in our working life and the business of survival. But there are many systems existing at various levels, all with subsystems; for example, your organisation exists in a capitalist system. There is not just one system that you or your employees experience. And what we experience as the system will differ from how others experience it and how they choose to relate to it. Systems are everywhere; for example, we may choose to analyse and improve leadership and how it works as a system. This, of course, is what 'systemic leadership' and this website does.

Is the system really real?

When we do apply our mind to it, while the system seems important, it also seems intangible. We cannot see the fishtank system in the way that we can see the fish. So in what way is the system real? Is it just imaginary? To take an analogy, while we can experience love and know it exists, we cannot literally see it or touch it as such. But we don't doubt that love is real. This conundrum poses a philosophical problem for those who argue against reifying systems, fearing treating abstract things as though they were concrete objects and then trying to address them directly. This charge is sometimes laid at the door of culture too. Culture change rightly comes with the caution to guard against assuming that one can manage it as readily as shifting a person's behaviour (and that's difficult enough) or moving a desk.

In this resource we are treating the system as literally intangible but nonetheless in its own way observable and real. If we can perceive it in this way we can become more conscious of the system – a necessary first step in trying to do something about it and how we can live better in it. This system may be best approached obliquely (like, say, happiness), rather than a something to be managed as a 'thing'. Aspects of the culture and the system will evolve and change as a result of many things that are happening all the time – the connections, conversations, explorations, experimentations and new ways of thinking. But systems may also be consciously redesigned and restructured in limited ways, as shown in this suite of resources.

As evidence for this systems perspective, the classic Robbers Cave experiment in 1954 powerfully revealed *Realistic Conflict Theory* at work within and between two groups of young boys. More important for us here, the case revealed to those who were responsible for assembling the groups and giving them tasks how the relationship system could be manipulated and encouraged to manifest extremes of good and bad relationships, and good and bad outcomes. Some of the group behaviours seemed natural and predictable to participants; e.g. self-organising and sorting out a hierarchy of relationships, and competition within and across groups. But other behaviours were dependent on outside forces, such as the tasks and the rules given

to the groups. The organiser could be seen to have positive or negative effects on a group's state of health. Interestingly, cross-group superordinate goals had a powerful binding effect across the groups – bosses please take note.

The lessons to be learned from the fishtank serving as an organisation metaphor are these: (i) the system *is* real, powerful and will assert itself, (ii) people in positions of power can apply themselves to work design variables and have a bearing on the nature and feel of the system, (iii) the group as a whole exhibits behaviour, and (iv) intra- and inter-group outcomes and results can be constructive and/or destructive.

Now, with that backdrop, you can begin to use the fishtank metaphor for people's work environment in your own organisation, and reflect on these questions (sharing with colleagues if possible):

THE NATURE OF YOUR WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

Dynamics

- How warm and reassuring is the water?
- How active are the 'fish'? How bright and vigorous are they generally?
- How scary is the fishtank? What makes it so?
- Do fish need to mind their backs or look over their shoulder? (If fish had shoulders!)
- How easy is it for fish to see and navigate their way around?
- How strong are the political currents? How choppy is the water?
- Are the currents an invigorating challenge or dangerous?
- Is there enough welcome movement, thereby oxygenating and preventing stagnation?

Shelter

- Are there safe places to recover?
- Is it too easy to hide?
- How are these places used?
- Is it best to keep one's head down?
- What happens if you stick your neck out? (If fish had necks!)

Contributors

- Who contributes most of the toxins?
- Who is responsible for removing toxins and keeping the 'water' nourished?
- Who is responsible for advising the executive board on the overall health and wellbeing of the tank?
- How is this responsibility conducted practically?
- Do managers notice the fish and see them as the problem/solution, rather than notice the water and the effect it has on the fish?
- Who are the biggest fish? How do they behave?

- Are the big fish harmless plankton feeders (like the shark in the Institute's illustration) or more like great white sharks?
- Do you notice the smaller fish? What behaviour of theirs do you attribute to the water?
- Do smaller fish seek to glow in the presence of the big fish, or try hard to avoid contact?
- What species of fish are looked upon favourably?
- What species are looked down upon?
- What is the pecking order? (If fish were hens!)
- How does the food chain work? Who serves and who is served?

How about you?

- What sort of fish are you in your own eyes?
- How do you think you are seen by other fish? How does that affect their behaviour with you?
- Describe your life in the fishtank.
- How do you relate to other fish?
- What effect do you personally have in dirtying and in cleaning the water?

Benefits of seeing the system

- You see what is happening in the organisation and what explains it.
- You see new possibilities for interventions that you haven't recognised before.
- You see the possibility of transformational change.
- You see solutions to problems that have hitherto proved intractable.
- You see a new way to bring about culture change.
- You can no longer look the other way, but become stirred to do something about it.

By way of topical examples in one sector, the challenges of tackling care home scandals such as Winterbourne View and Mendip House in the UK no longer seem beyond any hope and scope of reform. Training individual managers alone cannot address such 'wicked' problems. Nor can heroic leadership.

The shift to a systemic mindset is fundamental: from machine to network, from individual to relationship, from judgement to curiosity; from plan to planning, from predicting to complexity, from control to freedom, from blaming to learning.

Curiosity about what is going on replaces assessing, judging and complaining about people's lack of ability and poor performance. You can't allocate blame fairly and easily without first seeing, and taking account of, what is happening in the system. Nor can you manage the organisation's performance.

TAKING THINGS FORWARD

Reflect on your responses to the issues raised above and then consider the following:

1. How well does the fishtank metaphor help you see what is going on in your organisation?
2. What have you learnt from this about the state of your organisation's fishtank?
3. What have you learnt about your own presence in the fishtank?
4. What patterns do you see being repeated time and time again?

5. How might your organisation learn to better see the system using this metaphor?
6. What would improve your fishtank's overall health and wellbeing?
7. What deep-seated issues are you beginning to see through fresh eyes that give you hope?

More generally on the issues raised in this resource:

8. Which issues force you to think hard?
9. Which intrigue or pleasantly surprise you?
10. Which bother or cause you concern, or you disagree with in principle or practically?
11. Which do you consider the most important?
12. Which would you rather avoid?
13. What is familiar 'territory', already understood and being practised in your organisation?
14. What scope is there for doing differently some of the things touched on? Which things?
15. How would it be to implement the advice in this resource?
16. What kind of improvement effect would addressing these issues likely have?
17. How can you prepare the ground for a conversation with others?
18. Who else do you want to talk to about the ideas in this resource?
19. What action are you going to take? What are you going to do next?

CONNECTIONS

- How to improve the health of the fishtank
- How to clarify perceptions of what action to take
- How to build a system improvement strategy
- How to avoid disorder, degeneration and decay
- How to undertake an organisation needs analysis

MORE HELP

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Management (APPGM), Parliamentary Commission on the Future of Management and Leadership. Evidence submitted by Dr William Tate, The Institute for Systemic Leadership, 2014.

See the author's *The Search for Leadership: An Organisational Perspective*, Triarchy Press, 2009.

Tate, W., *Managing Leadership from a Systemic Perspective* (white paper), London Metropolitan University Business School, Centre for Progressive Leadership, 2013.

Tate, W., 'Viewing leadership from a systemic perspective', Chapter 10 in *Organizational Management: Approaches and Solutions*, (eds. Stokes, P. et al), Kogan Page, 2016.

Tate, W., 'Linking leadership development with business need: From individual to organization', Chapter 11 in *Leadership in Organizations: Current Issues and Key Trends* (3rd edition), ed. Storey, J., Routledge, 2016.

Support in the form of advice, coaching, mentoring, training, education and consultancy is available on request: info@systemicleadershipinstitute.org. Tel 01252 792322.

PRACTICAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE FROM THE INSTITUTE FOR SYSTEMIC LEADERSHIP

Set	Title of Resource	Note interest
Core	1. How to get managers to show more leadership	
	2. How to stop wasting leadership	
	3. How to distribute leadership more widely	
	4. How to see the system you are in	
Learning & Development	5. How to improve managers' learning	
	6. How to clarify parties' roles in leadership development	
	7. How to shortcut the transfer of learning	
	8. How to supervise development providers	
	9. How to balance supply and demand perspectives	
Organisation Development and Design	10. How to deliver today's needs and also safeguard tomorrow	
	11. How to undertake an organisation needs analysis	
	12. How to see and plug gaps in your organisation	
	13. How to make development more strategic	
	14. How to counter natural disorder, degeneration and decline	
	15. How to make the undiscussable discussable	
	16. How to intervene in the shadow system	
Change and Improvement	17. How to avoid and dismantle silos	
	18. How to improve the health of the 'fishtank'	
	19. How to clarify perceptions of leadership action to take	
	20. How to build a system improvement strategy	
	21. How to lead and manage change	
Performance Management	22. How to use parallel streams to bring about change	
	23. How to interpret your S-Curve lifecycle	
	24. How to hold managers to account for their leadership	
	25. How to distinguish successful from effective leaders	
	26. How to lead executives who are themselves leaders	
	27. How to appraise performance systemically	
HR	28. How to conduct governance systemically	
	29. How to sort good bureaucracy from bad	
	30. How to manage leadership talent policy	
FREE BONUS	31. How to improve leadership using the full HR spectrum	
	32. How to tackle physical and psychological abuse	
FREE BONUS	Systemic Leadership top tips	