

Systems Leadership, Systems Change, Systems Theory, and Systems Practice (And Systems Convening)



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Introducing myself

Connect @antlerboy on [LinkedIn](#) [Twitter](#) [Mastodon](#)

Systems community of enquiry: www.syscoi.com

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systems | cybernetics | complexity

business evolutionary | avid learner

[Learn with me in the RedQuadrant tool shed](#)



www.publicservicetransformation.org



All the links are at bentaylor.com

Contents

- SO many systems things!
- Systems change
- Systems leadership
- Systems practice, systems thinking
- Systems convening
- 'Robust systems'
- Where it often goes wrong
- Discriminating these approaches

Work in progress... perhaps comparable to 4/10 years!

SO many systems things!

Systems Leadership

Usually ‘exercising hierarchical authority over a set of institutions that are supposed to work together’. Less often ‘leaders who are good systems thinkers’, occasionally ‘finding ways for a group of organisations relating to some common perspectives or boundaries to work more effectively together’

Systems Change

Can be: ‘change The System’; create alternative authority systems; reshape structures to generate ‘better’ (more equitable, inclusive) outcomes. Often norms around ‘connection’, ‘the system seeing and understanding itself’, unified governance etc – ‘organising the system’. SC and SL blend and cross

Systems Theory

In practice, often over-simplified version of Systems Dynamics, something and/or General Systems Theory – and perhaps some concepts from complexity theory (‘the story of autopoiesis’). Potentially: underlying core patterns of the dynamics of organisation, nature.

Systems Practice

In practice often some basic ‘mapping’ – gesturing at something related to Causal Loop Diagrams etc, usually ‘flat’ – i.e. no hierarchy of structures, properties, effects, and ‘naïve first order’ – assumed to be correct and objective, and technically changeable.

And Systems Convening

Social learning about social learning: narrative work on ‘convening call’ and benefits, and work on legitimacy, boundaries agency, power, identity. This is why it’s so good!

And Systems Weaving

Facilitative, opportunity seeking, network thinking based, relationships.

Mentions for

Constellations, futures work, (systems) design, Adaptive Leadership...

How to make some useful distinctions?



A giant universe of good and bad stuff

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Systems change

The big picture: outcomes arise from complex, adaptive systems

Who are we, and what are we here for?

Principles and practices

As we see the system, we might see our role differently or renegotiate boundaries



Our boundaries determine what the system is and how we can look at it

Seeing the system – things you can see, and things that happen

What works, and what are the opportunities for improvement?

Intervening in the system helps us to see it better and from different angles



Seeing the system allows us to choose how and where to intervene

Intervening in the system

Building on strengths and shaping positively

The results of our interventions can make us question every level of the framework



Interventions generate learning about how to work at every level

Learning

About our interventions, our way of seeing, and our identity

Are we learning?

Is the system learning?

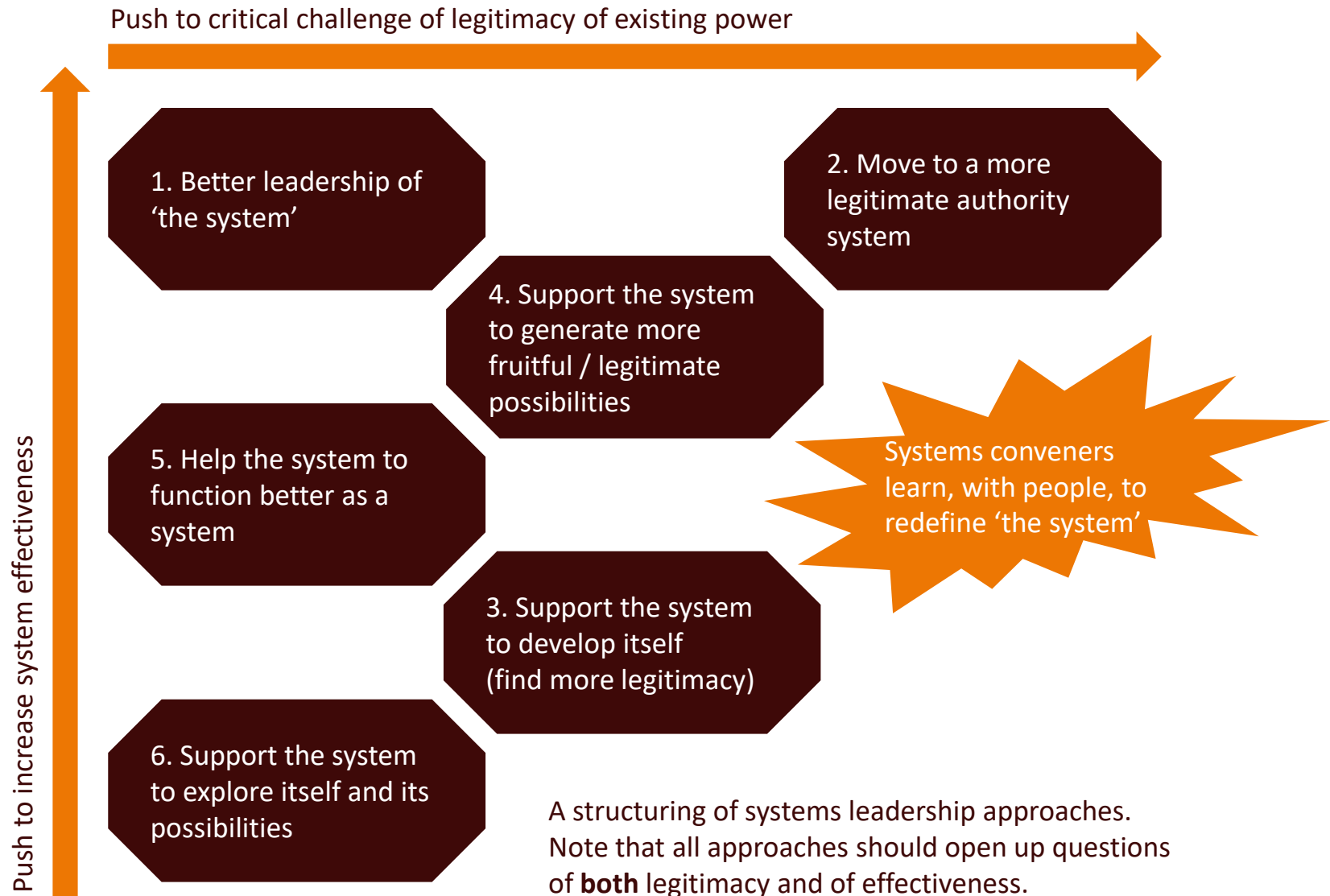
These are logical levels, not linear steps – all working simultaneously



A giant universe of good and bad stuff

SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

Systems leadership





A **giant** universe of good and bad stuff

SYSTEMS PRACTICE, SYSTEMS THINKING

My idea of core systems thinking

‘To understand is to know what to do’ Wittgenstein

‘I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of which story or stories do I find myself a part?’ MacIntyre

So. In a world of complexity, with coexisting nebulousity and pattern, that can be interpreted in unlimited ways and only partially controlled...

- distinctions, framings, ways of seeing emerge and allow us to make sense of things,
- to make the complexity manageable,
- and generate meaning and value, purpose, and legitimacy, power, and ethics.

We shape our world, and our world shapes us.

- This includes what we see and don’t see, the (un)discussable, cues for behaviour, etc.
-

Yet, the complexity, nebulousity and pattern, and multiple interpretability remain.

- Feedback can create learning shocks – what we thought, was wrong.
- The natural development or results of our ways of seeing and being can seem undesirable.
- Our existing multiple worlds of meaning can create conflict, exploitation, and confusion.
- And people have agency; they can never be fully predicted or controlled.

We can learn. To act differently, to reframe, to change our identity.

systems | complexity | cybernetics is about working with this (I say)

‘OK but get real... practical’

- Systems Laws – see The Grammar of Systems, Hoverstadt
- Systems approaches – many and varied – see SCiO professional competency framework, the Level 7 Apprenticeship, or many other sources
 - sound working knowledge of at least three approaches, including at least two of the widely-used systems methodologies or approaches: Critical Systems Heuristics, Soft Systems Methodology, System Dynamics, Viable Systems Model.
 - Understands the applicability, benefits and limits of each systems approach for each situation, and how to integrate them into a broader methodological design.
 - Understands relevance of, and knows methods for, determining appropriate scope, scale and systemic levels, for understanding, diagnosing and modelling situations, or for system design.
- systems | complexity | cybernetics *arguments* – see every forum ever!

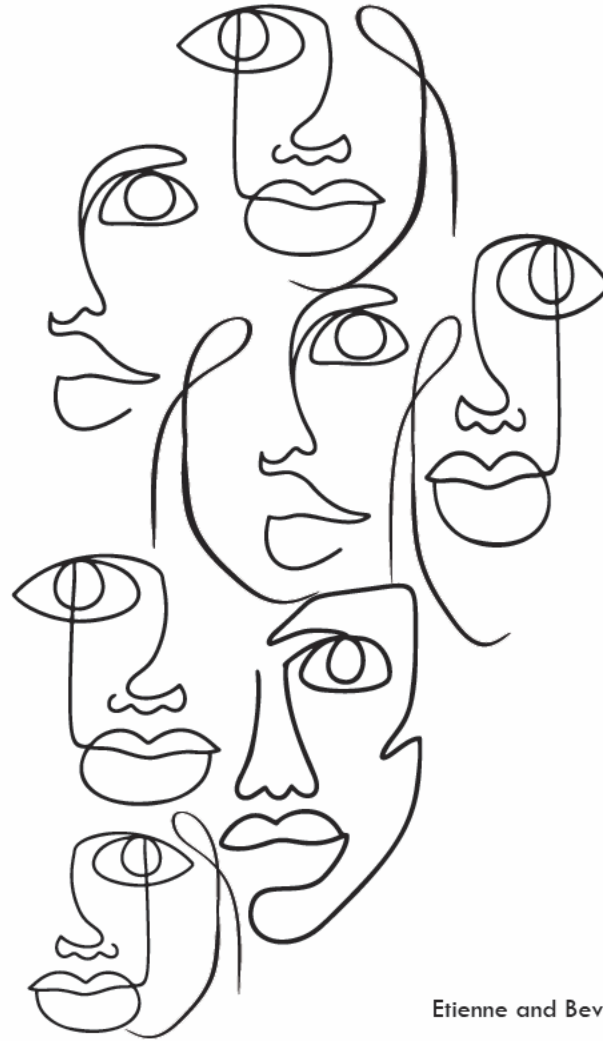
Systems practice is not mysterious – it is necessarily complex



SYSTEMS CONVENING

Systems Convening

A crucial form of leadership for the 21st century



Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner

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This refers to this image, the two diagrams that follow, and the general concepts from the book.

Get the book for free and join the community at <https://wenger-trayner.com/systems-convening/>

You may not have heard about them; what they do is rarely in their job description. You may not even be aware of what they do; they tend to act as enablers rather than taking credit or seeking the spotlight. But they are here—working on sustainable change, across challenging silos, in complex social landscapes, amid changing circumstances. We call them *systems conveners*.

Their stance is both visionary and pragmatic. They look at the social landscape in which they operate—an organization, a city, a community, a country, the world—and they see unrealized potential that exists across traditional boundaries and silos.

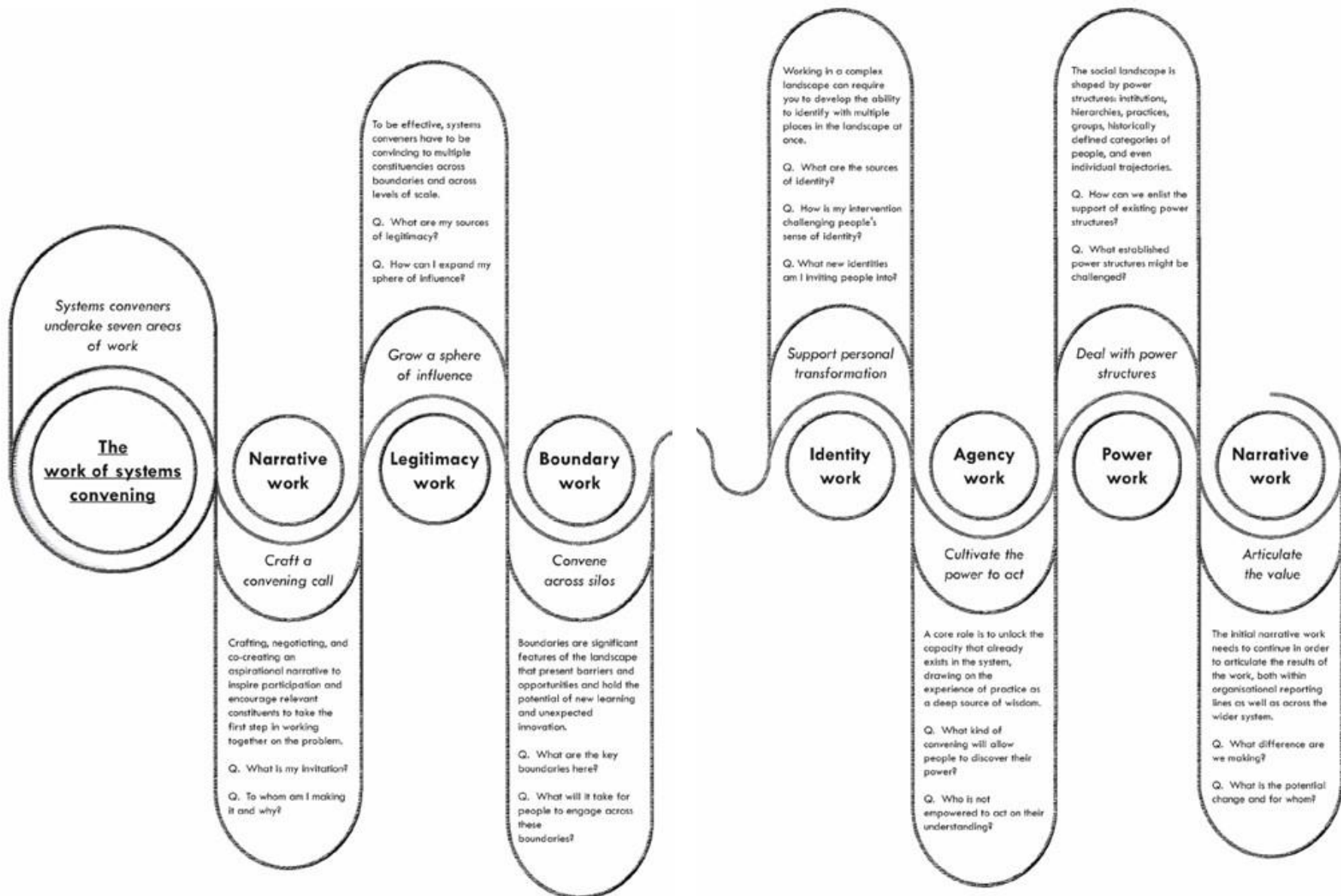
Many challenges today require learning that brings people together across different practices, different institutions, different goals, different cultures, different loyalties. Systems conveners seek to enable the conversations and learning across these boundaries that are needed to make a difference.

They can do this because they take on a particular kind of leadership that creates synergies, often between unlikely learning partners. They are interested in doing what it takes to make a real difference, more than in complying with convenient metrics, following strict job descriptions or making showy moves. They know that most challenges cannot be addressed by one person or even one group.

When seeking to make a difference, they are ready to embrace the full complexity of the human world; they are willing to engage the perspectives of all involved to create outcomes that even they wouldn't have expected. They welcome bottom-up initiative as an engine of transformation because they believe that change is more likely to be sustainable when people, and unlikely alliances among them, have an active part in it. Systems conveners play the long game with dogged tenacity.

Knowing that real transformation of contexts, cultures, boundaries, and identities takes time, they are prepared to go the distance, moving incrementally through a series of successes and failures.

	What it looks like in practice:	Convening call	Legitimacy	Boundary	Identity	Agency	Power	Value creation	
		For you, the convener.		For you to enable/	set up the conditions for participants to		For conveners and participants.		
Engagement	Encounters and social spaces that invite interactions, such as conversations, debates, joint reflection, doing things together, or producing shared artifacts.	Negotiate the call with people and invite them to co-develop it	Build trust through personal interaction, listening, offers of assistance, and showing understanding that reflects their perspective	Engage directly with people from other locations Inquire into what we can do together to make a difference?	Develop a sense of themselves and their competences in new ways by how people engage with them — or not	Be recognized as a contributor, be listened to	Have conversations with those in power to negotiate how they and you understand a situation	Have people exchange the stories of how their participation is creating value for them	Engagement
Imagination	Good stories that draw people in, field trips, role plays, pictures, documentaries, maps, and visuals; building aspirational narratives, visions, and scenarios for possible futures.	Imagine what can be achieved and why other constituencies need to be included	Help people see where you are coming from and why your own journey puts you in a position to promote your vision	Imagine what others experience in their context, their aspirations, and their struggles	Understand who/ where others are in the broader landscape. Feel allegiance to communities or groups too diffuse for belonging based on interactions (e.g. lovers of a music style, citizens of a nation) Envision a new self in the future	Foresee the implications of new agency in own context	Build a picture of the power structures and politics relevant to achieving your and others' aspirations	Have people imagine how certain activities or tools might create value to make a difference that they care to make	Imagination
Alignment	Agreements, setting goals and expectations, division of labor, workplans, rules, codes of conduct, audits, procedures, checklists, forms, standards, legal systems, and moral frameworks.	Have the convening call incorporate and align with demands of accountability people identify with or are subject to	Show that you understand—and can align with—what they care about or are accountable to	Take into account what others have done about the issue at hand Coordinate across boundaries to achieve common goals	Articulate what kinds of non-negotiable aspirations, values, or principles people identify with	Seek agency within the confines of existing accountability systems Demand that accountability systems and targets realign to include own perspective and agency	Understand and communicate what is non-negotiable for those who have formal power and those who don't	Have people agree on aspirations for areas where creating value matters and how to monitor that	Alignment



What systems convening is not

- A systems approach
 - in fact, many systems convenors learn later – with great recognition – that they have been reciting prose all their life...
- Programmable, recruitable, plannable, teachable, within boundaries
- About institutional systems like public sector partnerships
- A method or a theory

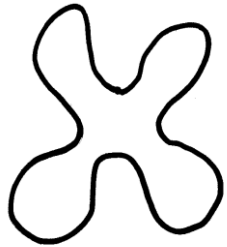
But it is a thing!



‘ROBUST SYSTEMS’

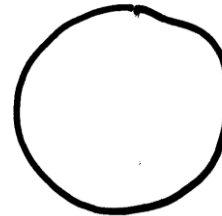
Four things you need to do to create a robust system

Differentiate: increase ability to adapt



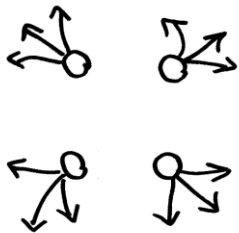
Use the different strengths and capabilities of the different cultures and organisations.

Homogenise: increase stability



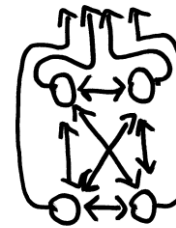
Actively learn about all the cultures and organisation. Share knowledge, best practices. Incorporate aspects of one another's cultures and practices.

Individuate: increase autonomy



Put your unique talents on the line. Identify and encourage the full use of the talents of all.

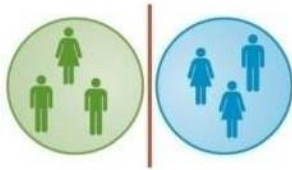
Integrate the system as a whole



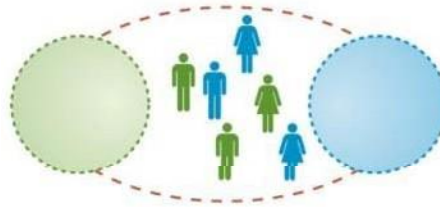
Create a compelling system mission. Feed and support one another. Modulate behavior in the service of the whole.

Barry Oshry (Organic Systems) and Stafford Beer (Viable Systems)

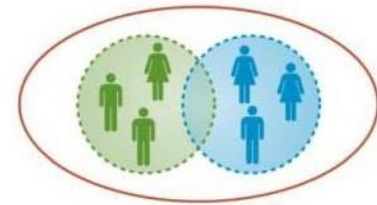
Help the system to connect to itself



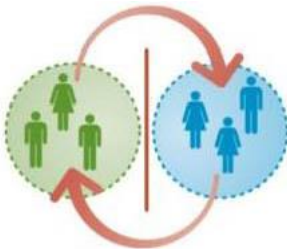
Strengthen boundaries
for safety and security



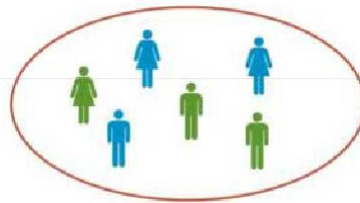
Suspend boundaries
for confidence and trust



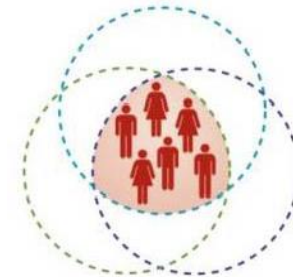
Cross-over boundaries
for interdependence and
collective learning



Understand boundaries
for awareness and respect



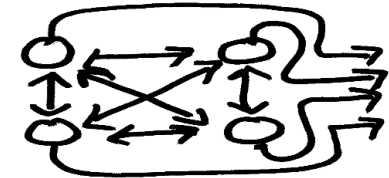
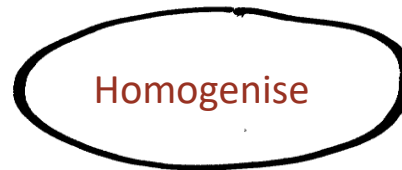
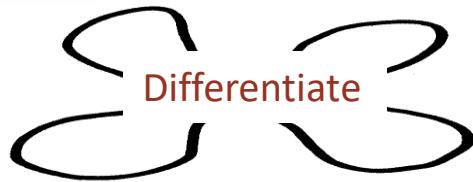
Reframe boundaries
for shared ownership
and accountability



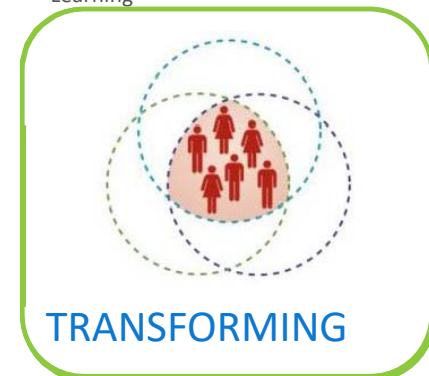
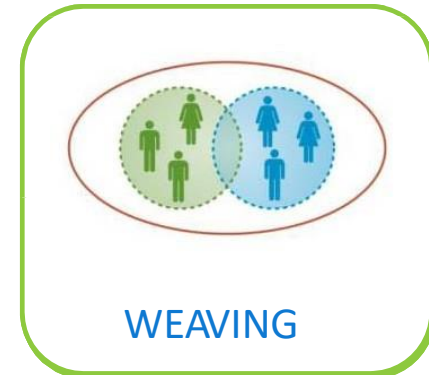
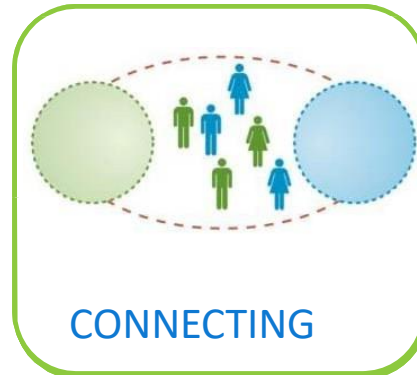
Change boundaries
to reinvent or find
alternative futures

From the Centre for Creative Leadership

Six boundary spanning practices



Integrate



Outcome = Safety & Security

Outcome = Mutual Confidence & Trust

Outcome = Interdependence & Collective Learning

Outcome = Awareness & Respect

Outcome = Community, Ownership & Accountability

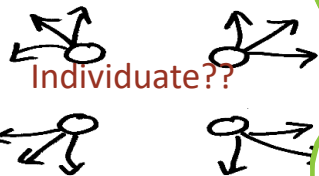
Outcome = Reinvention & Alternative Futures

Study and learn

Systems Leaders
and Systems Prac

Take on and share

Bigger picture together





See also 'ego traps' at

<https://bit.ly/fourquadrantsofthinkingthreats> and below

WHERE IT OFTEN GOES WRONG

A first set of challenges

- Not seeing the whole
- Believing we know what the whole is
- Assuming the whole that we see is real and concrete
- Denying the realities of the parts
- Assuming that seeing we are part of the whole creates a paradigm shift
- Believing that we are speaking from a different paradigm
- Denying the problems inherent in the whole
- Ineffectual and counterproductive approaches as a result of the above

Speaking from a specific context



DISCRIMINATING THESE APPROACHES

So, how might we discriminate?

Interrogate for:

- an appreciation of epistemological and ontological complexity (or, better still, non-dualist complexity) that the type of leadership questions encountered in systems leadership inherently involve
- acknowledgement of ethical complexity and a shadow side of leadership and change
- an appreciation of fundamental human, systems, complexity and/or cybernetic laws; these are the patterns that underlie individual or organisation-level behaviour, from the tendency of those 'done to' by the system to develop shared identity and solidarity, to the Conant-Ashby Good Regulator Theorem (that something capable of regulating a system must be a model of that system)
- ethical considerations not being mistaken for means; 'doing the right thing' does not automatically mean that the system will thereby be improved
- understanding of the ever-changing nature of the system, along with contested power, ethical, and other dynamics
- multiple definitions of the system-in-question and of leadership, to avoid static systems mapping and mechanistic intervention that takes only a first-order perspective
- practical action and
- shared triple-loop learning.

I welcome conversation!

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The RedQuadrant Way tool shed

This framework brings together a set of methods, approaches, practices, tools and frames, set out at more fully in link at bottom, particularly:

- An understanding of organisation functionality (the Viable Systems Model, outside-in demand management and operational effectiveness, strategic and adaptation capability);
- An understanding of human relationships in organisation (Barry Oshry's Organic Systems Framework, systems leadership theory (along the lines of Jacques and Macdonald et al), multiple perspectives, capabilities, and other organisational development approaches); and
- Intervention theory and method.

Cohort-based mentoring, action learning, online/blended learning, meta-contextual approach.



<https://bit.ly/RQtoolshedshowandtell>