A guide for young people

Making things change

A young person's guide to systems, power, and practical action



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systems | cybernetics | complexity

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Begin anywhere

Something you want to change. Something you want to create.

A rule at college. A river being polluted. A place to make music with other people. You may want to stop something harmful, protect something valuable, or bring something new into existence. Systems change can begin with any of these.

You already participate in arrangements that shape what people can do. Systems thinking can help you investigate those arrangements, question your account of them, and find ways to act. Systems leadership raises further questions about who shapes the direction, whose authority is accepted, and how people become able to act together.

This guide draws on a broad field of systems, cybernetics, and complexity, and on my own practice and teaching. It offers questions, explanations, and examples. It doesn't assume that learning the vocabulary makes you a capable practitioner.

Two invented examples run through it: students dealing with an unreliable college bus, and a group creating a music space. Their people, events, and figures are fictional. They show reasoning, not evidence of a successful intervention.

Read in any order. The pages have an order; the work won't follow it neatly. Acting may change what you understand, what you want, and who you understand yourselves to be.

03-08 Purpose, boundaries, and worlds

09-13 Power, leadership, and approaches

14-19 Dynamics, organisation, and action

20-27 Two examples, learning, and responsibility

28-32 A working page and further learning

Sources and further learning: pp. 30-31.

Two starting points

Look at what happens. Notice what is already possible.

Your bus repeatedly reaches college after registration. You receive warnings for lateness. An earlier bus clashes with caring responsibilities. The next bus is later still. A tutor sees missed teaching; an administrator sees an attendance code; the operator sees a tightly timed route.

Follow the relationships: journeys, registration rules, information, money, and decisions. The warning may discourage someone from seeking help, leaving staff less aware of the transport barrier. But don't assume every instance of lateness has the same explanation. Start with actual occasions and check your account.

Elsewhere, friends make music in bedrooms and share recordings. Someone knows how to repair equipment; someone can organise a room; someone makes newcomers feel welcome. They want somewhere to play together. Their starting point is an existing collection of capabilities and relationships, with possibilities they haven't yet explored.

Both situations involve purposes, boundaries, resources, power, and learning. Neither requires someone to stand outside 'the system' and redesign everybody else's life. Your actions become part of what happens next, and other people can respond in ways you didn't expect.

Remove a barrier

Students cannot reliably reach the teaching they need.

Grow a possibility

People already make music; what could they create together?

Try this

Choose something you want to protect, change, or create. Describe one occasion, the people involved, and something already working that you would want to preserve.

Sources 01, 09, 11

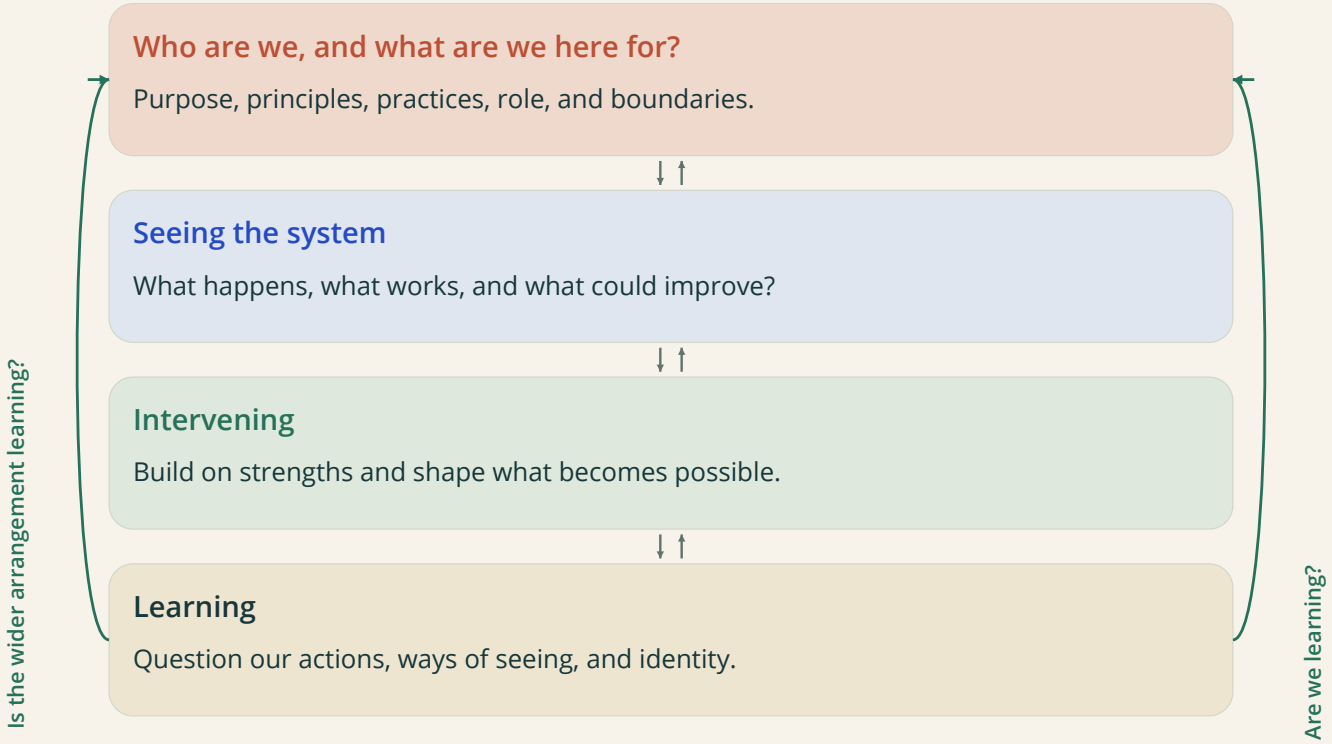
A framework for systems change

Purpose, seeing, acting, and learning change one another.

An outcome, such as being able to learn or finding a place to belong, arises through many interacting activities and conditions. You can influence those conditions. You can't simply command the outcome into existence.

The framework below keeps four concerns in play. You can enter through any of them. An action can reveal a relationship you hadn't seen. That discovery may change your purpose or the role you take. Learning can challenge every part of the account.

The big picture: outcomes arise through complex, adaptive systems.



All four concerns are in play together. Return to any of them.

> **Try this**
>
> Which part are you attending to most? What might change if you brought one of the other parts into the conversation now?

Sources 01. Adapted from my systems change framework; these are logical levels, not linear steps.

Using the framework

A discovery can change the work you think you are doing.

The students begin with a clear request: stop warnings caused by the late bus. While investigating, they discover that several people have stopped attending the first lesson altogether. Records describe them as disengaged. The students now have reason to examine access to teaching, beyond the warning process.

That changes what they look at: the first lesson, caring and paid work, route decisions, and ways to catch up. It may change their purpose from getting individual exceptions to improving access. They may also reconsider their role: are they collecting complaints, representing others, organising a group, or helping create different arrangements?

An early action can teach them more. A tutor offers catch-up time, but some students can't use it because they are working. The action reveals a limitation in the original account. Waiting for a complete map before acting would have concealed that discovery for longer.

Keep two learning questions alive. What are we learning about our explanation, actions, and role? What are the college, transport provider, and students becoming able to notice and change together? A campaign can learn a great deal while leaving the wider arrangements unable to respond.

The people intervening

Can we change our action, explanation, purpose, or role?

The wider arrangements

Can relevant evidence change ordinary work, decisions, or purpose?

Try this

Record one finding that could change your action, one that could change your explanation, and one that could change your purpose or role.

Sources 01, 11

Systems and boundaries

What are you treating as a system, and why?

A useful account of a system explains something about relationships, organisation, and behaviour. Listing buses, roads, students, staff, and money won't tell you why teaching is repeatedly missed. You need to investigate how they interact, and what their organisation makes possible or difficult.

There are real buses and real consequences. There is also a choice about the account you construct. A study of punctuality, a study of access to education, and a study of the operator's finances bring different relationships into view. None becomes complete simply by being called 'the system'.

A boundary sets what you will consider: people, activities, places, and time. Widening it may reveal costs displaced onto others. Narrowing it may make a decision possible. You don't have to solve national transport policy before changing an attendance rule, but you should record the wider conditions that matter.

Your account also participates in the situation. Calling lateness a discipline problem makes some responses seem natural and others unreasonable. Changing that description can change the choices people notice, while material constraints remain.

Ask who benefits from your boundary. Put yourselves inside the account: your funding, friendships, preferred explanation, and actions affect the enquiry. Invite someone affected to redraw it. Their version may challenge what you had treated as obvious, including your definition of improvement.

Attendance enforcement

Registration, codes, warnings, and exceptions. What does this framing hide?

Access to learning

Teaching, journeys, care, work, and decisions. What becomes possible here?

Try this

Complete: 'We are treating ___ as a system to help us decide ___.' What does that framing leave outside, and who carries the consequences?

Sources 01, 02, 03

Purposes and outcomes

Whose improvement, recognised by whom?

A college may describe its purpose as education. Students may seek qualifications, friendship, safety, or a route into work. Managers may be held to attendance figures and finances. These purposes can support one another or conflict. Agreement on the word 'success' won't settle the differences.

Compare what people say they seek, what decisions and rewards encourage, and what people experience. Stafford Beer's challenge to examine what a system actually does can expose a contradiction. It doesn't prove that every persistent effect was intended, or that a whole situation has one secret purpose.

An output is something produced or done: a travel pass, meeting, or catch-up session. An outcome, as I use the term here, is a benefit a person or community would recognise in their life. A pass matters if it helps someone reach learning they value. Issuing passes isn't sufficient evidence of that benefit.

Ask what the arrangement enables people to do, and what effort, time, cost, or humiliation it demands. Look beyond the average. An improvement for one group can exclude another or move a cost elsewhere. Those affected must be able to challenge both the purpose and the account of success.

Said

Education and opportunity.

Rewarded

An attendance figure.

Experienced

Teaching missed; warnings received.

Try this

Describe a benefit in the words of someone affected. What would they be able to do, and what burden would be reduced? Who might dispute your definition?

Sources 01, 07, 11

Different worlds

An attendance code and a missed lesson are different realities.

People can encounter the same event through different worlds of work and meaning. To a student, the warning may threaten their place at college. To an administrator, it may follow automatically from a code. A manager receives a summary across hundreds of records. Each position makes some things visible and others difficult to notice.

My five worlds model helps connect people's lives, service work, management, leadership, and the work of learning and change. It isn't a classification of five kinds of person. Learning must connect and reshape the other worlds, rather than sit in a separate improvement team.

Follow a real event across them. How does a journey become an attendance code? What disappears when codes become a performance figure? Which decisions does that figure encourage? What information would let somebody act differently? Simply adding more reports may increase overload without improving understanding.

Check your account with people doing the work and people living with its consequences. Their worlds may contain different purposes and standards, not just missing facts. More viewpoints won't automatically assemble into one agreed picture. You may need a way to work together while retaining a disagreement.

Learning and change connect all four worlds

People's lives
What can I do? At what cost?

Service work
What happens when help is sought?

Management
What supports and resources the work?

Leadership
What purpose, culture, and direction?

Try this

Follow one event from a person's life to a decision about it. What is translated, lost, or changed at each crossing? Take that account back to the people involved.

Sources 01, 09, 11

Power and legitimacy

Who can act, and why should their decision count?

Power includes control of money, rules, information, work, and access. It also includes organising support, refusing cooperation, creating alternatives, and changing what people regard as possible. Formal authority is one source of power; it isn't the whole account.

Find out who can change what, who can block it, and what constrains them. Then ask why their authority should be accepted, by whom, and on what terms. A decision can be authorised under current rules while those rules remain open to challenge.

Keep effectiveness and legitimacy under examination together. An unfair arrangement can become more efficient. A representative group can lack the resources or capability to achieve its purpose. Inviting people into a meeting doesn't establish either.

Werner Ulrich's boundary questions examine who benefits, who controls resources, whose knowledge counts, and who can challenge the account for people affected but absent. Ask how things are and how they ought to be. These prompts condense a fuller framework; they don't replace its twelve questions.

Apply the challenge to your own group. Who sets the agenda? Who can disagree? Who claims to speak for others? How can that claim be questioned or withdrawn?

Effectiveness

Can this arrangement achieve a worthwhile purpose? What enables it to do so?

Legitimacy

Whose purposes and authority count? On what grounds, and open to whose challenge?

Try this

For a decision you care about, identify its current authority, the grounds claimed for that authority, the people affected, and a way they can challenge it.

Sources 01, 02, 03

Systems leadership

There are different things you could be trying to change.

Systems leadership, as I use it, enables people to shape direction and act together while investigating and changing the patterns they participate in. Developing individual qualities can help; it doesn't supply that enquiry or the organisational changes.

The term also covers different activities. My six approaches help distinguish them. These simplified descriptions can overlap; they aren't six steps or a ranking from modest to radical.

1 Improve existing leadership

Help the attendance lead use better information and judgement within current authority. Keep that authority open to examination.

2 Change authority arrangements

Seek a more legitimate way of deciding: for example, a defined student role in transport decisions. Test representation and real power.

3 Enable development from within

Help affected people develop purposes and arrangements they can shape. Examine who controls the facilitation and whose proposals survive.

4 Grow different possibilities

Support experiments or alternatives, such as a different journey arrangement. Investigate their capability, legitimacy, and effects on others.

5 Improve systemic functioning

Connect information, decisions, resources, and responses across college and operator. Change the organisation that makes cooperation difficult.

6 Explore possibilities

Help people investigate capabilities and relationships without fixing the destination in advance. Let possible directions emerge, and examine them critically.

Try this

Which approach describes your current work? Would another approach change your purpose, partners, or relationship with existing authority?

Sources 01, 02. Every approach needs questions about both legitimacy and effectiveness.

The part we play

Our ordinary responses can keep the pattern going.

Understanding another person's pressures can help. Also investigate what you do from your own position. Barry Oshry describes recurring responses to systemic conditions. They can make a difficult arrangement surprisingly good at reproducing itself.

You may occupy several positions in one day. A student organiser can be a top in the group, a middle between students and college, and a user of the bus service. These are relationships and conditions, not permanent personality types.

Position and pressure	A familiar response	A different leadership stand
Top Overload	Take all responsibility; others become dependent.	Create responsibility throughout the group, with the information and authority people need.
Middle Competing demands	Absorb pressure from every side; lose your own judgement.	Retain independent thought and action. Make constraints and choices discussable.
Doing the work Disempowerment	Hold those above responsible and withdraw from the wider concern.	Take a contribution to the whole, while making real constraints visible.
User Neglect	Withdraw and hold ‘it’ responsible.	Help shape a response where you can; keep responsibility for provision visible.
Helper Pressure to prove value	Rush to provide an answer and become indispensable.	Build a co-learning relationship and strengthen others’ capability to act.

These are patterns to investigate, not excuses for harm or a demand that the least powerful repair everything.

> **Try this**
>
> Choose a relationship in which responsibility is collecting on one side. What do you do that contributes to that pattern? What different contribution could you make without pretending you control the whole situation?

Sources 09, 11. Adapted from Oshry and my teaching on systemic spaces and leadership stands.

Organising together

Give differences, common ground, autonomy, and the whole room to work.

A music group needs different capabilities: playing, welcoming people, managing sound, and keeping track of money. It also needs shared practices, personal judgement, and enough mutual commitment to do something together.

Oshry's four dynamics help investigate this organisation. They aren't four virtues to maximise separately. Specialisation can become turf warfare. Shared practice can become compulsory sameness. Autonomy can become abandonment. Collective commitment can silence people whose contribution doesn't fit.

Try concrete arrangements. Let people develop distinct skills, then bring them together to share what they discover. Agree which decisions need a common rule and where people can use their judgement. Protect individual contributions while making responsibilities to others explicit.

Watch what the arrangement produces. If the sound team controls every choice because nobody else understands the equipment, capability and power have become entangled. Sharing knowledge may change both. If everyone must decide every detail, participation can exhaust the group and prevent anyone doing the work.

Differentiate

Develop distinct capabilities and room to adapt.

Homogenise

Build common ground and dependable shared practices.

Individuate

Enable personal judgement, contribution, and autonomy.

Integrate

Support one another and coordinate the whole.

> **Try this**
>
> Choose a recurring group decision. What should be shared, what needs a distinct capability, where is personal discretion useful, and what commitment holds the contributions together?

Sources 09, 11

A repertoire of approaches

Different questions can lead to different interventions.

Systems, cybernetics, and complexity form a broad, overlapping field. Their labels often obscure differences. Examine what a particular approach asks, assumes, and enables you to do. The same bus situation can support several enquiries.

Soft Systems Methodology

Compare organising punctual journeys with organising access to learning. Develop models of purposeful activity from different worldviews, then use them to question the situation.

A possible move: reconsider first-session arrangements rather than optimise the existing journey alone.

Critical Systems Heuristics

Examine who benefits, who controls resources, whose expertise counts, and who can challenge decisions. Compare what is with what ought to be, including affected people who are absent.

A possible move: change whose knowledge or decision rights count in transport planning.

System dynamics

Investigate feedback, accumulation, and delays. Test whether warnings, missed teaching, and avoidance reinforce one another. Keep the proposed causal links and their evidence open to challenge.

A possible move: interrupt a reinforcing loop and reduce a backlog at a feasible rate.

Viable System Model

Investigate coordination, resources, operational information, adaptation, and identity at relevant levels. Can the college and operator respond to what students experience?

A possible move: connect a reliable signal to resources and an authorised response.

Try this

Choose two of these approaches. What different evidence would each need? What different action might it suggest? Keep a disagreement visible if combining the accounts would conceal it.

Sources 01, 03-07. These examples introduce questions; they are not instructions for mastering the methods.

Feedback

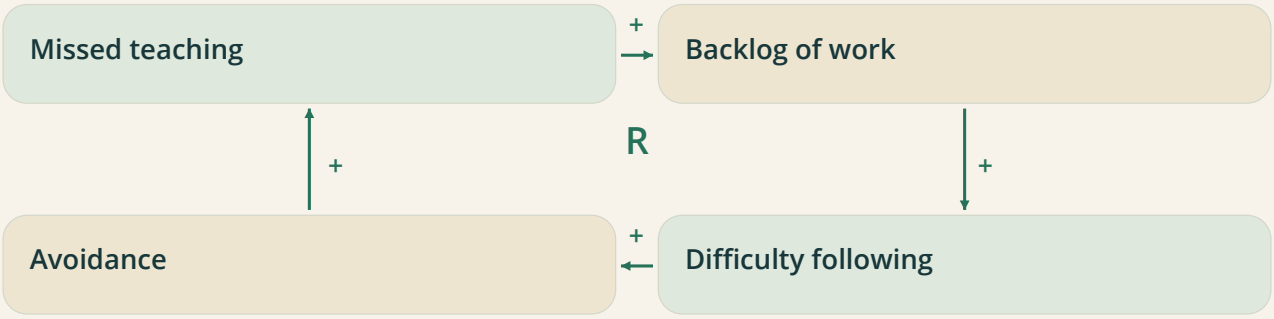
Consequences can return to strengthen or counteract a change.

A causes B is a chain. It becomes a feedback loop when a route leads back to influence A. Missed teaching may increase a backlog, make lessons harder to follow, encourage avoidance, and lead to more missed teaching. This is a possible reinforcing loop, not an established explanation of every student's experience.

'Reinforcing', sometimes called 'positive', doesn't mean good. The same pattern can strengthen mutual help or deepen exclusion. A reinforcing loop can amplify a decline as well as an increase.

A balancing loop counteracts a gap or disturbance. A growing backlog may prompt effective catch-up effort, which reduces unfinished work. Such regulation can also preserve an arrangement you want to change: just enough concession may reduce pressure without removing the problem.

For every arrow, explain the mechanism and check the evidence. Mark the goal where a response aims to close a gap. Ask who sets that goal, what information they receive, and what response is possible. A diagram doesn't prove causality, and people can change how they respond when circumstances change.



A proposed reinforcing loop. '+' means more of the first tends to produce more of the next, other things equal.

> **Try this**
>
> Trace one proposed loop. Say what every arrow means. Identify the weakest-supported link and an observation that would make you revise it.

Sources 05, 06

Accumulation and time

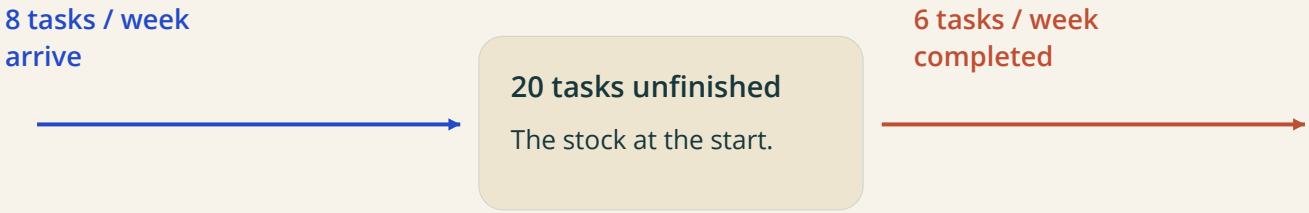
Count what builds up, what changes it, and how long effects take.

Some things accumulate: water, money owed, unfinished applications, or work to catch up on. System dynamics calls an accumulation a stock. Flows change it over time. New tasks add to a backlog; completed tasks remove work from it.

Suppose 20 comparable tasks are unfinished. Eight arrive each week and six are completed. The backlog grows by two tasks per week. A plan to reduce it must change those rates. Keep units consistent: tasks are a stock; tasks per week are a flow. If tasks vary greatly, hours of work may be more informative.

Effects also take time. A timetable must be understood; a catch-up arrangement needs time to reduce missed work. Replacing an intervention too early can destroy something useful. Claiming it always needs longer can protect a failed idea indefinitely.

Before acting, record the starting pattern, what should change first, what may take longer, and what would justify stopping. Review immediate harm while waiting for slower benefits. A change following your action doesn't establish that your action caused it; check other explanations.



After one week: 20 + 8 − 6 = 22 unfinished tasks.

> **Try this**
>
> Name one accumulation and its inflow and outflow. Then identify an expected delay, a review date, and evidence that would justify acting sooner.

Sources 05, 06. All figures in the worked examples are invented.

Cybernetic organisation

Information helps only when somebody can respond.

A worker can know exactly what would help and still lack the time, resources, or authority to act. Organisation shapes whether local knowledge becomes a useful response or another report sent somewhere else.

Ashby's work on requisite variety asks whether regulation has enough relevant responses to handle the disturbances it faces. In practical terms, one rigid answer may fail people facing very different circumstances. More options help only if people can actually use them. This application doesn't state all the conditions of the mathematical law.

Beer's Viable System Model investigates how an organisation remains coherent and adaptive. Use it to examine the functions below, their relationships, and the capacity available for each. Don't assume your existing departments supply those functions because their names sound suitable.

Consider the student group, the college, and the transport partnership. Each needs ways to organise its work, and their choices affect one another. Resolve what can be resolved locally. Connect issues that need wider action to somewhere capable of responding, without dumping every difficulty upwards or leaving an impossible responsibility below.

Work	Can people respond effectively to the situation?
Coordination	Can activities fit together without constant conflict?
Resources and checking	Can resources be allocated and actual effects examined?
Adaptation	Can the organisation notice change and develop its response?
Identity and direction	Can it examine purpose and balance present and future?

> **Try this**
>
> Where is complexity being absorbed, and where is it being passed to someone with fewer resources? Name a change in information, capability, authority, or coordination that would help.

Sources 06, 07, 11

Systems convening

Build the relationships and standing through which people can act.

Systems convening involves learning across boundaries. It can change what people understand themselves to be doing, who they can work with, and what they become able to achieve. A meeting is one possible part of that work.

The students need a reason to engage that makes sense in their different worlds. A student representative may have standing with classmates but little trust from college staff. A tutor may connect worlds yet be unable to speak for students. Legitimacy has to be worked on; a job title or invitation won't settle it.

Attend to narrative, boundaries, identity, agency, and power as well as legitimacy. How is the concern described? Who can participate safely? What role can each person take? What enables a contribution to affect a decision? What would change who controls resources?

Some people may need their own space before meeting an authority. Sometimes a boundary should be strengthened for safety, rather than crossed immediately. Working together doesn't require everyone to share an identity or agree on everything.

Record commitments, disputes, and changes in relationships. Watch whether people acquire a lasting ability to act together, including when the person doing the convening steps away.

Narrative and legitimacy

Boundaries and identity

Agency and power



Keep learning across these boundaries.

> **Try this**
>
> Identify one relationship that needs work. Is the obstacle standing, trust, incompatible purposes, missing capability, or control of resources? Choose a response to that actual obstacle.

Sources 08, 11

Conflict and collective agency

A refusal gives you something to investigate and respond to.

A refusal can mean no authority, no resources, a genuine concern, a threatened interest, or an excuse. 'They resist change' explains little. Ask what your proposal would alter, what the refusal protects, and what evidence supports your account.

Understanding an interest doesn't oblige you to accept it. You might collaborate where purposes overlap, negotiate over competing claims, organise pressure, refuse cooperation, or create an alternative. These choices can support or undermine one another. Think about how other actors may respond and how that response changes your options.

Agency doesn't begin when somebody senior approves a proposal. People can organise knowledge, relationships, resources, and collective action. Equally, wanting change doesn't give your group authority over everyone affected. Examine the legitimacy of your own claims and how people can contest them.

Before escalation, clarify the change sought, the people able to influence it, available support, and who bears the risks. A student dependent on a service may face costs an outside supporter doesn't. Seek relevant experience from representatives, unions, community organisers, or trusted advisers. Keep the people carrying those costs involved in choosing the response.

Collaborate

Build on overlapping purposes.

Negotiate

Work with competing interests.

Organise pressure

Change the cost of refusing.

Create an alternative

Develop another practical possibility.

> **Try this**
>
> Identify a likely response to your proposed move. What would it protect? How could it change your options, and whose agreement to the risks would you need?

Sources 01, 02, 03, 11

Choosing an intervention

Explain what your action could change, and how.

An intervention is a deliberate attempt to influence what happens. It might provide immediate help, alter a rule, change information, shift resources, redistribute decision rights, or create a new arrangement. Its value depends on its effects in this situation.

Not every useful intervention amounts to systems change. Ask whether it changes the relationships, rules, resources, or organising capacities that reproduce a pattern, and what pattern may develop instead. Local changes can do that.

Meadows's work on leverage points widens the possibilities worth investigating. A place in a list doesn't establish what is feasible, legitimate, or effective here. The familiar iceberg can prompt questions about events, patterns, arrangements, and assumptions. It isn't a depth gauge for ranking the worth of actions.

Compare mechanisms. Suspending an unfair warning protects someone now. Changing a registration rule can prevent repeated harm. A student role in transport decisions changes who can shape the arrangement. A community route creates another possibility, with its own costs and responsibilities.

Connect actions where that helps. Immediate protection can give people room to organise; organisation can support a wider change. Also ask what each action could make worse or unintentionally preserve. Extra catch-up sessions might help learning while concealing a timetable nobody is prepared to reconsider.

Choose a move you can explain and revise. The grandest description isn't evidence that it will do the most useful work.

Immediate protection	Reduce harm while wider work continues.
Rules and resources	Change a recurring constraint or response.
Authority and alternatives	Change who can shape the arrangement, or create another one.

Try this

For two options, name the relationship each could change, the people able to act, the resources needed, another actor’s likely response, and a possible harm.

Sources 01, 02, 05, 11

The bus: an initial action

Protect people now, and make the action informative.

The students seek a three-week trial: suspend automatic warnings for delays on the unreliable route, offer protected access to missed work, and record whether students can reach the teaching they need. This is a concrete decision the attendance lead can consider.

Design the evidence collection with students and staff. Use shared route information where possible, rather than requiring every student to prove the same known delay repeatedly. Check what happens to someone whose circumstances aren't captured by that information. Collect only what the enquiry needs.

State a prediction: removing unfair warnings and improving catch-up access will make seeking help safer and reduce unfinished work. It won't make the bus earlier. Record that limitation, and maintain a separate route to decisions about transport and first-session arrangements.

Agree resources, responsibilities, duration, and a review date. Give participants a way to report trouble and challenge decisions. Identify who can pause or change the trial. A small experiment can still expose somebody to a large cost; being called a pilot doesn't make it harmless.

The trial is one contribution to an enquiry already in progress. Students can continue organising and examining access while the authorised change runs.

Starting position

What happens now, and to whom?

Prediction

What should change, and why?

Stop or revise

What harm or evidence would trigger action?

Review

Who will judge the findings, and when?

Try this

Complete: 'We expect ___ because ___. We will look for ___ by ___. We will revise or stop if ___.' Who can challenge those terms?

Sources 01, 03, 11. Fictional example; no claim of a real trial.

The bus: evidence and consequences

Fewer warnings. The same missed teaching. More administration.

Suppose warnings fall and students say asking for help feels safer. One student's unfinished work falls from 20 comparable tasks to 14: eight new tasks arrive and ten are completed each week for three weeks. Catch-up support provides a plausible contribution to that change.

Yet missed teaching is unchanged. Some students can't use catch-up time because it clashes with paid work. Staff spend longer recording exceptions. The trial has reduced some harm and helped some students; it hasn't resolved access to morning teaching.

Don't force these findings into one success score. Check who benefited, who didn't, and what each person had to do. Was work reduced overall, or moved onto students and staff? Does the new process depend on a sympathetic person finding extra time?

Examine other explanations too. Were buses more reliable during the trial? Did staffing change? Keep a contribution claim proportionate to the evidence. A useful decision doesn't always require certainty, but the uncertainty should remain visible to those making it.

Continue protection from unfair warnings where justified. The remaining findings should change the next enquiry, rather than become awkward details removed from the report.

Warnings and help-seeking	Some harm reduced; asking for help feels safer.
One student’s backlog	20 □ 14 tasks: 20 + 3 × (8 − 10).
Access and workload	Missed teaching unchanged; some excluded from catch-up; extra administration.

> **Try this**
>
> State what improved, what did not, who carried extra work, and what remains uncertain. Which finding challenges the original explanation most?

Sources 01, 05, 11. Invented figures and findings.

The bus: changing the work

What does this make us reconsider?

The students began by seeking exceptions. They may now question why access to teaching is treated as an individual's attendance problem. That changes their purpose, the boundaries of the enquiry, and potentially their role. They could become organisers of a wider access group or participants in designing different arrangements.

Several leadership choices are open. Improve decisions within the college's current authority. Seek a student role in transport decisions. Help affected groups develop their own proposal. Create an alternative journey arrangement. Investigate coordination across the college and operator. Or keep exploring before settling on a design.

Compare those choices against both legitimacy and effectiveness. A new committee may look representative yet lack any resources. An effective workaround may rely on unpaid student labour or exclude people whose circumstances differ. Changing who decides won't, by itself, make a bus available.

The group also needs learning to outlast the campaign. Who will review access information with students? Who can change the timetable, teaching arrangements, or resource allocation? What happens when evidence conflicts with a performance target?

Students needn't repair the transport economy. They can connect immediate protection, local changes, and action at a wider level while remaining explicit about what each contribution can achieve.

Initial account

Seek exceptions to an attendance process.

A possible revised account

Organise access to learning and examine who shapes the arrangements.

Try this

Return to the framework on p. 4. What has changed in purpose or identity, seeing, action, and learning? What can the wider arrangements now learn and change?

Sources 01, 02, 07, 11

The music space: creating possibilities

Start with capabilities people already have.

Friends want somewhere to make music together. They already have instruments, recordings, repair skills, local contacts, and ways of helping newcomers join in. They call the idea Saturday Sessions. Their purpose isn't settled by the name: rehearsing, performing, learning, and simply spending time together suggest different arrangements.

They try one borrowed-room session with the venue's agreement. Some people want to perform; others want a quieter place to learn. Someone who makes music on a phone doesn't regard the available instruments as an invitation. People with paid work can't attend the proposed time.

The group now has more to work with than a plan written by its keenest members. It can reconsider the invitation, timing, equipment, and use of space. Existing capabilities become visible through doing something together. People who weren't initially seen as organisers may become central to what happens next.

They agree a small shared budget, distinct tasks, and decisions members can make for themselves. They record what participants value, whose effort sustains the session, and who remains absent. Benefits such as belonging develop through people's participation; hiring a room doesn't manufacture them.



Already here

Skills and enthusiasm

Relationships and trust

Equipment and spaces

Ways to welcome people

What could these make possible together?

> **Try this**
>
> Name something people already do that you could help grow. What do they value about it? What might formalising or expanding it damage?

Sources 01, 09, 11. Saturday Sessions is invented.

The music space: when it grows

Success can change the purpose, power, and organisation.

Suppose the sessions attract more people. Equipment needs maintenance, the room feels crowded, and the organiser begins making every decision because answering separately seems quicker. Dependence grows. Other members stop offering ideas. A helpful response is producing a less capable group.

A sponsor offers equipment on condition that every session becomes a public performance. Some members want that. Others value the chance to learn without an audience. More money could increase capability while redirecting the purpose towards the sponsor's priorities.

The group has choices. Negotiate the condition, seek another source, stay smaller, divide activities, or change its purpose openly. There is no automatic answer supplied by the word 'systemic'. Ask whose judgement counts, how a decision can be challenged, and what those affected can realistically do.

Revisit the four dynamics. Distinct rehearsal groups may help different interests, but they need ways to share resources. Common booking practices can help without requiring identical music. Personal discretion needs some coordination. The founder can distribute responsibility and help others acquire the necessary knowledge.

The group may come to see itself as looking after a shared resource. That brings different responsibilities from arranging a single afternoon. Its identity changes through participation and decisions, rather than through choosing a more impressive label.

The offer

More equipment, conditional on public performances.

The decision

Who chooses the purpose, and what would each option enable or exclude?

Try this

Identify a condition that would make growth undesirable. What needs preserving, what needs to change, and who should help decide?

Sources 01, 02, 09, 11. Hypothetical continuation of the invented example.

Learning that changes something

Are we learning? Are the wider arrangements learning?

You can revise an action while keeping the same explanation. You can change the explanation while retaining the same purpose and role. You can also reconsider what you are trying to do and who you are in relation to it. My teaching uses these distinctions to examine learning at different logical levels.

Keep the same questions open about the wider organisation. A reflective campaign group doesn't establish that the college has learned. Someone must be able to receive relevant information, question established interpretations, make decisions, and change the work.

Build that ability into ordinary arrangements: reviews involving affected people, records of disputed findings, time to investigate, authority to change rules, and a way to revisit purpose. Learning has material requirements. A notebook full of insight won't supply missing decision rights.

Who is learning?	Action	Explanation	Purpose and identity
The group intervening	Improve the trial or session.	Question the explanation or framing.	Reconsider the purpose and our role.
The wider arrangements	Change ordinary work.	Change how evidence informs decisions.	Revisit authority, purpose, and identity.

What information, time, resources, and decision rights make each change possible?

> **Try this**
>
> Choose one important finding. Where could it change an action, an explanation, or a purpose? Identify who can make that change and what enables them to do it.

Sources 01, 07, 11. The distinctions describe my use here; learning terminology varies across traditions.

Making change last and travel

Pass on the conditions and reasoning, as well as the visible practice.

A pilot can depend on one person repeatedly bending the rules. A music group can depend on one organiser who never gets a night off. When that person leaves, the benefit disappears. Find out what is holding the arrangement together, including invisible work and personal favours.

Ask what needs to become dependable: resources, knowledge, decision rights, coordination, and relationships. Also ask what should remain adaptable. Turning a trusted informal network into a rigid process can remove the capability that made it useful.

When another group wants to copy an approach, share the explanation, conditions, failures, and unresolved disagreements. A catch-up session with paid staff time is different from the same named activity squeezed into a lunch break. Let others test and adapt the reasoning in their circumstances.

Look across levels. Some changes are possible in one group; others involve a college, provider, or wider funding decision. Connect those enquiries without assuming that the largest scale is always the best place to act.

Consider more than one future: funding ends, demand grows, a key organiser leaves, or a provider changes. Identify signals to watch and capabilities that would keep useful options open.

Capability
Who knows how, and who can learn?

Authority
Who can decide and revise?

Resources
What makes the work possible?

Connections
What links the relevant levels and activities?

> **Try this**
>
> Imagine the improvement has disappeared six months from now. What probably happened? Which supporting condition could you strengthen without removing useful freedom?

Sources 01, 07, 09, 11

Responsibility and freedom

Take responsibility for your contribution and its consequences.

You can take responsibility without accepting blame for a situation you didn't create or pretending you can control it. Examine what your actions enable, constrain, or make harder for others. Include what happens when you decline to act.

Who carries the risk of a campaign? Who agreed to their story being used? Does a persuasive account require someone to disclose distress? Good intentions don't settle these questions, and treating people respectfully doesn't establish that an intervention will work.

Notice your own rewards. Recognition, funding, belonging, or an expert role can make it difficult to admit that your contribution isn't helping. You might preserve a role because it matters to you after it has ceased to serve the people concerned. Make room for others to challenge that possibility.

Look for ways of enlarging people's practical possibilities, including their ability to refuse, disagree, or leave. A group that campaigns for freedom can still punish members who question its organisers.

You may choose to join, negotiate, organise, create, refuse, rest, or step away. Ask what support and protection you need, and what responsibility belongs to people already paid or authorised to act. Your life has claims on you beyond this piece of work.

Practical possibilities

Can people contribute, question, refuse, change their role, or leave? What conditions make those choices real?

> **Try this**
>
> What would make continuing unacceptable to you or someone affected? What can you change about your own contribution, and what responsibility must remain elsewhere?

Sources 01, 03, 10, 11

A working page

Keep the four concerns in play.

Use these spaces in any order. Revisit them after action or a surprising finding. Keep earlier versions, and note what changed your mind. An unanswered question is something to investigate, not a gap to fill with invented certainty.

Purpose and position

Whose improvement? Who are we, and what role are we taking?

Seeing

What happens? What works? Which framing, evidence, and absences?

Acting

Who could change what, with which resources, authority, and support?

Learning

What could change our action, explanation, purpose, or identity?

Across all four: who is affected, who can decide, who carries costs, and what can the wider arrangements learn?

Adapted from the framework on p. 4. Date your account and record who helped challenge it.

Developing your practice

Learn enough to use an approach, and recognise its limits.

Return to a situation you care about with a question worth investigating. Learn an approach that can do useful work on that question. Use it with others, compare your reasoning with an experienced practitioner, and examine the consequences of what you try.

For Soft Systems Methodology, work with different accounts of purposeful activity and use models to structure enquiry. For Critical Systems Heuristics, learn the full boundary questions, including the contrast between what is and what ought to be. For system dynamics, practise causal reasoning, accumulation, rates, delays, and evidence. For the Viable System Model, investigate functions, relationships, recursion, and variety before proposing a design.

These approaches make different demands. Four names in a toolkit don't establish that you can use them or combine them well. Retain differences that matter; don't manufacture agreement between methods to produce one impressive diagram.

Keep records of decisions, surprises, corrections, and effects on people. Ask what you can now notice or do that you couldn't before. Also ask whether anyone else has acquired more room to act.

You needn't decide what kind of systems person you are. Develop a practice that remains open to challenge, including challenge to the role you have made for yourself.

A working question

What could this approach help us investigate or change?

A disciplined challenge

What does it assume, what does it miss, and what would change our account?

Try this

Choose one live question and one approach to study. Name the evidence it needs, a person who could challenge your use of it, and a real opportunity to learn through action.

Sources 01, 03-07, 11. Sources and routes into further learning follow.

Sources and further learning

Questions, methods, and organisation

01 **Benjamin P Taylor**

Systems Leadership, Systems Change, Systems Theory, and Systems Practice (and Systems Convening), presentation, 28 June 2023; especially slides 6, 8, 10, 18, and 24. The framework on p. 4 and distinctions throughout this guide are adaptations, not a new generic change cycle. The public presentation is linked here:

https://antlerboy.com/library/systems-leadership-change-practice/

02 **Benjamin P Taylor**

Six ways to see systems leadership (2021), with the companion schema; and Where are the systems in 'systems leadership'? (18 October 2026). The six approaches on p. 10 are simplified, overlapping distinctions, not a progression.

https://i2insights.org/2021/06/22/systems-leadership/

https://chosen-path.org/2026/10/18/where-are-the-systems-in-systems-leadership/

03 **Werner Ulrich**

A Mini-Primer of Critical Systems Heuristics. For boundary judgements, motivation, control, knowledge, and legitimacy. The prompts here condense themes from the full twelve-question framework. See pp. 6, 9, 13, and 18.

https://www.wulrich.com/csh.html

04 **Peter Checkland and John Poulter**

Learning for Action (2006). For Soft Systems Methodology: purposeful activity models used to support enquiry and action across different worldviews. See pp. 6, 8, 13, and 29.

https://www.wiley-vch.de/en/areas-interest/finance-economics-law/learning-for-action-978-0-470-02554-3

05 **Donella H. Meadows**

Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System (1999); Thinking in Systems, edited by Diana Wright (2008). For feedback, accumulation, delays, and interventions, with cautions against easy recipes. See pp. 14-15 and 19-21.

https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/

06 **W. Ross Ashby**

An Introduction to Cybernetics (1956), particularly Part III on regulation and control. Requisite variety on p. 16 is a practical application, not the full mathematical statement.

https://www.rossashby.info/

Sources and further learning

Leadership, participation, and the author's teaching

07 **Stafford Beer**

Designing Freedom (1974) and Diagnosing the System for Organizations (1985). For organisation, regulation, autonomy, coordination, adaptation, identity, and recursion. See especially pp. 7, 13, 16, 22, and 25-26.

https://houseofanansi.com/products/designing-freedom

08 **Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner**

Systems Convening: A Crucial Form of Leadership for the 21st Century (2021). For social learning across boundaries and the work of legitimacy, identity, agency, and power. My brief synthesis appears on p. 17. Free book available from the authors.

https://wenger-trayner.dreamhosters.com/systems-convening-book/

09 **Barry Oshry**

Seeing Systems, second edition (2007), and his work on Organic Systems. For systemic positions, recurring responses, and the four dynamics. See pp. 8 and 11-12. The leadership stands also reflect my later teaching and adaptation.

https://bkconnection.com/products/9781576754559_seeing-systems

10 **Heinz von Foerster**

Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition (2003), including Ethics and Second-Order Cybernetics. For our participation in what we describe, the consequences of our actions, and practical possibilities. See pp. 4-6, 11, 25, and 27.

https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/b97451

11 **Further teaching and practice**

My teaching on outcomes in complex adaptive systems (June 2025), systems convening and boundaries (April 2025), systemic spaces and leadership stands (October 2025), and four dynamics (2023) informs the examples and applications. The distinctions are my synthesis, not identical claims made by every source.

https://www.systemspractice.org/

Both examples and their figures are invented. Diagrams are drawn for this guide. Illustrations retained from the first draft were generated with AI, with visual references to Hockney, Haring, Ravilious, Moore, Hepworth, Meštrović, spomenici, and Armenian textile traditions.

Second draft · 10 November 2026 · v0.02 BT

Before your next move

01 What are we trying to protect, change, or create, and for whom?

02 Who are we in this situation? What part do our actions play?

03 How are we framing it? What works already, and what does our account leave out?

04 Who can act, who should decide, and who carries the consequences?

05 What could we do, with which capabilities, relationships, resources, and support?

06 What could change our action, explanation, purpose, or role? Can the wider arrangements learn too?

Keep purpose, seeing, acting, and learning in play together.

Benjamin P Taylor
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