



Systems Leadership: Beyond Boundaries



Summary of a workshop hosted at Bristol Business School on 3rd June 2015

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Introduction

The transformation of public services, including the integration of health and social care, is a significant priority in the UK. Increased accountability, budget cuts, policy reform, public enquiries and media attention form a backdrop against which providers are expected to innovate and improve services, whilst simultaneously reducing costs. In response to these challenges a 'systems leadership' approach, which promotes partnership and collaboration across organisational and professional boundaries, is increasingly being advocated by those responsible for implementing these changes (for a review see Ghate et al., 2013).

Systems leadership calls for a fundamental rethinking of the nature and purpose(s) of leadership – from centralised and hierarchical to dispersed and inclusive. In order to support this transition the Leadership Centre¹ and partners have commissioned and delivered a number of programmes, including *Systems Leadership: Local Vision,* which takes a place based approach to facilitating and enabling systems change. Bristol Leadership Centre at the University of the West of England has been commissioned to evaluate the first two years of this programme and have recently compiled an interim report (Bristol Leadership Centre, 2015).

This document captures learning and insights from an event held at UWE, Bristol on 3rd June 2015 that brought together over forty professionals engaged in public sector transformation and change, including staff from local councils, government departments, universities and charities, to share and reflect on the nature and processes of systems leadership. Discussions were informed by the Local Vision interim evaluation report and provocations from three leading figures in the field:

- Keith Grint, Professor of Public Leadership and Management, University of Warwick
- Robin Hambleton, Professor of City Leadership, University of the West of England
- Joe Simpson, Director the Leadership Centre, London

We begin with a summary of key themes and insights, followed by a review of each of the three provocations. A list of participants is given in the Appendix.

¹ http://www.localleadership.gov.uk

Key themes and insights

Whist Systems Leadership is being widely advocated as a way of addressing the challenges facing public sector organisations we should be careful not to overstate the claims that are made for it. Systems Leadership will rarely be *the* answer in isolation, it will fit into an ecosystem of approaches that must co-exist in order to address the challenges faced by our organisations. As Joe Simpson highlighted in his provocation:

"If I have had a serious accident, I do not want to co-produce the emergency operation that follows. I just need to be kept alive. If however, I need to spend the next five years in rehab, I would like some say in how I'm looked after..."

Whether we are policy makers, front-line staff, service-users or senior managers, a key challenge we must set ourselves is to better understand the different approaches and their suitability for the different problems we face. Evidence suggests that the types of problems that Systems Leadership is best suited to addressing are 'wicked'. These are complex and contested issues where there is no singular view on the nature of the problem and how to solve it; such problems require sustained multi-stakeholder engagement that can be hard to achieve. Advocates of Systems Leadership suggest that it is better placed than other approaches to address wicked problems as they require collaboration and cooperation across boundaries and require individuals in organisations to become sensitive to each other's priorities and the needs of the system as a whole. There is evidence to suggest a failure of leadership within health and social care in the UK to recognise wicked problems as complex and intractable, applying traditional management approaches that don't resolve them and frequently make things worse (e.g. Raisio, 2009, Keasey et al., 2009). In advocating a Systems Leadership approach we must not lose sight of the need to engage middle managers (often regarded as 'blockers' of change) who play a key role in maintaining continuity and protecting the organisation from the whims of individual 'leaders', the latest policy directives and management trends.

The success of Systems Leadership interventions depends on the people involved and the nature of their involvement. Sometimes the conditions are more favourable than others; sometimes a balance can be found between consensus and conflict, and interventions can bring out unique qualities in people, innovative solutions and lasting change. These conditions are difficult to understand and replicate across different localities. Ultimately, as Professor Keith Grint notes in his provocation, systems leadership is difficult so it's only worth doing where you have strong support and a shared problem that requires it. There are, he argues, benefits to bringing in highly skilled facilitators to act as a catalyst for change in localities, to hold space for discussion and to help shift thinking in order to create the conditions in which change can occur. People do not spontaneously work in systems ways and the Local Vision programme is finding that in the early stages of the project, Enablers can play an important role in problem framing, bringing participants together to help make sense of how the issue is understood and to surface new understandings.

However, interventions such as Local Vision often struggle to identify their impact on service users and their services. The challenges include demonstrating causal links, the timeframes involved and the complexity of attributing the impact of interventions that are highly connected to other interventions and initiatives. Emergent findings from the Interim Evaluation of the *Local Vision* programme suggests it has helped participants refocus on shared purpose as the basis of motivation and in some places leadership behaviours are shifting from controlling (which prioritise the needs of the organisation) towards collaborative approaches (that seek to generate benefits for the collective system through more innovative ways of working). However, it was too early to identify measurable changes in behaviours and outcomes.

Discussions that followed the provocations highlighted the need to do more to capture the learning from initiatives such as Local Vision. Organisations need to look at where initiatives fail and why reflecting on the factors that have contributed to success and/or failure, and how to create the

conditions for change. Some participants felt that an emphasis on 'measuring impact' could be damaging to innovation and collaboration, whilst others noted that, without an evidence base, we risk advocating something that we don't yet fully understand:

"Developing an evidence base/ evaluation of system leadership is key. We need to be able to demonstrate the benefit of system leadership to those who aren't advocates of it, as well to those of us who are" (Workshop Participant)

The provocations by Professors Grint and Hambleton encouraged us to consider whether Systems Leadership was just an idea in vogue or part of the grand narrative of neoliberalism. Certainly it must be understood within the post-war era of British Health and Social Care policy. This history can be crudely characterised by the emphasis in 1970s-1990s on greater competition, the introduction of the market and privatisation in order to address what was then characterised as ineffective, bureaucratic and risk-adverse service delivery. The underlying assumption was that market-based competition would result in greater efficiencies, improvement in the quality of service, better value for money and a clearer focus on the needs of service users. The New Labour era from the late 1990s brought with it acceptance that the Conservative reforms had resulted in better productivity and value for money, tempered with recognition that it had fragmented services and left the most vulnerable even more excluded. With New Labour the narrative shifted from competition to collaboration in recognition that social problems are not amenable to single agency solutions, however, it did not signify a radical departure from the previous market-based ideology (Hall, 2003). The major narratives of current times, following 5 years of coalition government and the election of a Conservative government in May 2015, are of integration of Health and Social Care budgets and services, decentralisation and of service user involvement.

In reflecting on the policy context, moves towards greater health and social care integration could be seen as reflecting the continuing ascendancy of neo-liberalism, moving in the direction of increasing marketisation of public services and the erosion of the public service ethos. On the other hand greater integration could be seen as resolving longstanding issues of fragmentation - leading to enhanced quality of care. The current political drivers seek to place more power in communities to solve their problems. However, in his provocation Robin Hambleton suggested that the current rhetoric about devolution and decentralisation in UK policy is an illusion promoted by Chancellor Osborne and other central government ministers. The British state is, in fact, one of the most centralised governmental systems in the Western World. He points out that the so-called Localism Act 2011 has over 140 centralising measures (according the Local Government Association). He also critiques the recent agreement that was reached between the Dept. of Health and Manchester City Council to give the latter the responsibility for running its own health and social care budget, worth £6bn. The aspiration for such an agreement is that it will enable better ways of meeting the needs for long term support, and that it would end the health and social care divide that is now almost universally recognised as being wasteful and ineffective. However, Robin suggests that the Conservative Government's approach to so-called 'devolution' to cities, such as Greater Manchester, is a 'devolution deception.' The proposals in the Queen's Speech for a 'Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill' do very little to enhance accountability to local people. On the contrary, the cities remain even more accountable to central government because ministers will decide which localities are to have devolved powers as well as the criteria for deciding such powers.

Systems Leadership: Local Vision and similar initiatives are at the forefront of creating place-based leaders who live and work amongst their communities. This is quite different from placeless leaders who make choices that often privilege profit and efficiencies over the best interests of citizens within localities. Discussions suggested that integration at a place-based level is manageable but challenging. You need to engage with user experiences, understand users and their respective communities and engage in open and transparent public dialogue, involving multiple communities and interest groups, to create a coherent approach that resonates with the needs and concerns of local populations.

In summarising key insights at the end of the event Marvin Rees, Mari Davis and Frances Martin, highlighted the following points:

- 1. Clarifying definitions and understandings: we have to be clear what we mean by the system and systems leadership. Sometime people are talking about organisational entities rather than processes and relationships. Systems leadership must be able to work across organisational and sector boundaries.
- 2. Weighing up current demands and future needs: with limited and finite resources systems leaders need to think carefully about how to balance short and long-term priorities. This challenge is compounded by ring-fenced budgets and performance targets, when investing in the long-term may require partners to prioritise and support the work of other organisations/sectors (e.g. police investing in housing to get children off to a good start in life, to increase resilience and to improve the likelihood of good life decisions).
- 3. Rewarding collaboration and innovation: many systems reward organisational loyalty and professional power rather than collaboration and innovation. Systems leaders need to recognise and reward creativity and (responsible) risk-taking that supports interorganisational collaboration and partnership working across boundaries.
- 4. Paying attention to language: the language we use to describe our identity, and the places in which we work, is critical to our ability to work with systems. Language makes things real or not. If the system is not described, if boundaries are not described, if identity is zero-sum game (mutually exclusive and static), then people will find it hard to recognise the need to work across boundaries or to retain a clear sense of purpose and belonging.
- 5. Recognising the importance of relationships: relationships are the essence of systems. Leaders need space (time and physical) together in order to build trust and understanding. Change can be hampered by recycling people within the system (if they are blockers) but blockers may be transformed by changing the system. Individuals and their behaviours both shape and are shaped by the system. Leaders can set the tone and expectation for system, but at the same time they are subject to it.
- 6. Creating a shared sense of purpose: we need to agree what any system is for and to build a collective agreement on priorities and strategy. Often systems will work for ends beyond the intent of any individual or organisation. Without a clear intention, the system defines its own purpose and passes that purpose to us through orthodoxy rather than us defining what the system is for in accordance with what we want/need. Each system is perfectly organised for the ends it produces: even if that end is not what anyone intended.

Provocations

(1) If systems leadership is the answer, what is the question?

Professor Keith Grint, University of Warwick

We have a long history of romanticising leadership (see, for example, Meindl, 1985). When things are going really well or really badly we tend to look at our leaders and hold them personally responsible for success or failure, but when things are just ticking along we rarely consider who is in control. Systems leadership risks becoming a holder for all the romantic notions we have about leadership – a belief that it is the solution that we have been striving for all the time. There is danger in assuming that the only way to resolve intractable problems is with systems leadership - that if only we had 'systems leadership', we would not be in this situation; if only we had it twenty years ago we would not have these problems now.

However, we know that Systems Leadership is much more difficult to do than conventional leadership. People don't often spontaneously form collaborative groups and when a group faces challenges there is a tendency to look for a leader to help navigate a way through the problem. It is important to appreciate from the outset how difficult Systems Leadership is to both start and maintain. We know that collaborative leadership needs facilitation, it needs commitment and in many instances it needs leaders. The whole point of bringing in an Enabler to the Local Vision project is that we appreciate it won't happen naturally, and you need to have somebody to enable the group to work together in new ways.

So, given these challenges do we need a change of culture? And is cultural change difficult or easy? Most of our assumptions about organisational culture are informed by Schein's work, which views culture as 'the way we do things around here' and can be recognised by the artefacts that you get at the surface of the organisation, which are a consequence of and a reflection of deeper seated values and ideals (Schein, 2004). While you can change the artefacts relatively easily, it's far more difficult to change the ideals, values and culture that produced them. That's why, in theory, culture change is so difficult. But if you reverse the argument and see culture a consequence of the artefacts rather than the values - that the artefacts drive the values - then changing culture becomes a little easier.

We are living at a time when complexity and uncertainty are concepts in vogue. In complexity theory you have the absence of a central authority with a grand vision about where we are all going. Complexity theory also implies you can't make change happen from the top down, you can only do it across networks of individuals. Yet, where has complexity theory come from? Is it the new Zeitgeist or just one part of the grand narrative of neoliberalism? There are always windows of opportunities to do something different, however to do something differently you need a level of independence from the 'rest', and most often people who do think and act differently leave the system.

Further reading:

Grint, K. (2010) Leadership: a very short introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grint, K. (2008) Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: the Role of Leadership, *Clinical Leader*, 1(2), 54–68. URL: http://bit.ly/1HqT8CH

Grint, K. and Holt, C. (2011) Leading questions: If 'total place', 'big society' and local leadership are the answers: What's the question? *Leadership*, 7(1), 85-98

(2) Leading Systems: power and politics

Joe Simpson, Leadership Centre

One of the challenges faced by a large proportion of public service, is that different agencies are charged with solving just one part of a puzzle. Think for a moment of a Rubix Cube. Agency A's function is to align the reds; Agency B looks after the whites and so on. Each agency takes turns at trying to solve their part of the puzzle, however, after about six turns only two things have occurred. The first is that the agencies are no further forward than when they started. The second is that the agencies can't stand each other, as each time they think they have solved the problem (i.e. got their side all lined up), the other agency working on the other side messes it up. Systems Thinking is about finding a different way forward, a different way of solving the problem of the Rubix cube. Fritjof Capra makes the simplest summary of the intellectual argument involved. He writes about moving attention away from the parts to the whole, from measuring to mapping, from quantities to qualities, from Cartesian certainty to approximate knowledge (see, for example, Capra and Luisi, 2014). These are all compelling ways of thinking for our time.

However, whilst Systems Thinking is in itself an interesting movement, there is a risk as Keith says in over-stating the claims that are made for it. The idea that a systems approach solves every problem is absolutely crazy. Surely we need to consider systems approaches as one approach to problem solving amongst many and the trick is to have the skills to recognise which approach is needed and when? For instance, if I have had a serious accident and need an urgent operation I don't want to coproduce the operation. I just want someone to keep me alive. If I am going to spend the next five years in rehab, I would like a say in how those services are delivered. Jocelyn Bourgon (2011) and other writers such as John Kotter (2012) have both explored the utility of mixed modes of problem solving.

But why is collaboration between organisations so difficult? There are many answers that have been put forward. Some relate to power and the view that no one wants to cede power; some relate to notions of organisational culture and particularly what people call the middle management block. People who advocate for systems thinking will argue that systems sustain themselves against change. Personally, I don't find any one of these answers compelling on their own. We do need to reflect more deeply on organisational culture and traditions. For example, middle management are not the 'blockers' but the sustainers and codifiers of tradition. In many change programmes the leaders spend a lot of time working out the vision, and then spend a lot of time trying to implement it failing to realise that unless they have involved middle managers in codifying the new tradition it just won't work. Part of the job of middle managers is to sustain tradition against the leaders. If we are going to move forward in Systems Leadership, we must understand how to respect the existing traditions and their validity for certain circumstances. We need to work across different knowledge systems and look at how you can build on these to get good stuff done. It is really hard and it takes time and commitment. You don't want to be doing systems leadership unless you absolutely need to.

Further reading

- Atkinson, J. Loftus, E. and Jarvis, J. (2015) *The Art of Change Making*. London: Leadership Centre. URL: http://tiny.cc/artofchange
- Bourgon, J. (2011) A New Synthesis of Public Administration: Serving in the 21st Century. McGill-Queen's University Press
- Capra, F. and Luisi, P.L. (2014) *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kotter, J. (2012) XLR8 Accelerate. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press.

(3) Place-Based Leadership and the Inclusive City

Professor Robin Hambleton, University of the West of England

"All private effort, all individual philanthropy sinks into insignificance when compared to the organised power of a great representative assembly like this." (Joseph Chamberlain, Mayor of Birmingham - Speaking to Birmingham Council, 10 November 1875)

In Britain we are living in an era, which I can only describe as 'centralisation on steroids'. We have now had almost a century of centralisation. In the last 30 years, in particular, we have become the most centralised major state in the Western World. The recent Localism Act, for example, has over 140 centralising measures in it. Central government does not want to give up power. If you look at recent initiatives such as the proposed devolution arrangements for cities like Manchester and the Greater Manchester region, this is nothing more than a devolution deception. Despite the rhetoric about 'devolution' these places are not to receive any more tax-raising powers at all. Rather they are being instructed to implement devastating public spending cuts and they are being made directly accountable to central government ministers, who have decided the terms through which power is granted and how success is to be evaluated. We should never forget that we are in one of the most centralised systems in the world and what this means for innovation and place based power. Many of the local services we now enjoy in Britain - parks, museums, public transport, health and education - all stem from the efforts of local, place-based leaders. Central government has not invented these services; at its best central government is good at learning from places and spreading ideas. What we need to get more positive about, and we are in Systems Leadership, is about claiming power back for place.

In my new book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, I document inspirational accounts of civic leadership in different localities in fourteen different countries. No other western democracy is pursuing a policy of 'centralisation on steroids'. This is because centralisation, still less 'super-centralisation', represents a flawed model. My book is values driven. I argue that cities, and localities in general, should be governed by powerful, place-based democratic institutions, where all residents are able to participate fully in civic life, not just the long established but also the newly arrived, and where civic leaders strive for social justice and play a role in protecting the natural environment on which we all depend. Some decision makers are what I call placeless leaders. They are not bad people, but when they are making their decisions, they are not required to think about the consequences of their decisions for the local communities affected by their decisions. International companies are often one such example. Making investments designed to make profit, they will close facilities in local areas that are not making enough profit even if that damages the place, and even if they are profitable. Because of globalisation place-less power is now out of hand, and even states are struggling to keep it in check. I must stress I am not anti-business, but I am anti-placeless power.

In my book I have developed a conceptual framework for civic leadership. In any locality there is a system of place-based governance. The activities of place-based leaders are shaped, or constrained, by four factors: (i) environmental limits, (ii) economic drivers, (iii) social and cultural forces and (iv) governmental (or legal) requirements. These factors then influence the five types of leadership that occur in localities: (i) political, (ii) community, (iii) business, (iv) trade union, and (v) managerial and professional (see Figure 1).

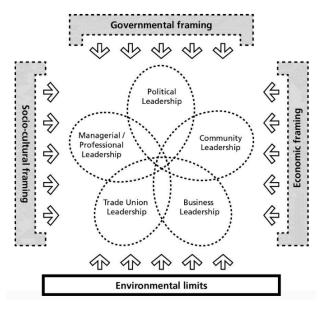


Figure 1: A framework for civic leadership (Hambleton, 2015)

The innovation zones occur in the interaction between these leadership zones. Someone who I shared this framework with described these zones as conflict zones, rather than innovation zones. This is usually the case. However I argue that this is precisely why place-based leadership matters so much. It can orchestrate a process in which different views and perspectives can be shared and areas of common ground can be identified. In the work we are each doing, it is a good idea to focus on place. Yes, we belong to an organisation, but part of our work is about place and improving the quality of life by collaboration with a variety of organisations across this place. Places, and colloboration within places, can form the basis for social innovation.

Further reading:

Balducci A. and Mantysalo R. (eds) (2013) *Urban Planning as a Trading Zone.* New York: Springer Hambleton R. (2015) *Leading the Inclusive City. Place-based innovation for a bounded planet.* Bristol: The Policy Press

Keohane N. O. (2010) *Thinking about leadership.* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press Sandel M. (2012) *What Money Can't Buy.* London: Allen Lane

Next steps

This report summarises just one in a series of activities linked to the evaluation of *Systems Leadership: Local Vision* by the University of the West of England. Phase two research runs until August 2015, with submission of the final evaluation report in September. Following publication of findings we anticipate a range of dissemination and engagement events. Please let us know if you would like to be added to the mailing list: BLC@uwe.ac.uk.

For more information on Systems Leadership and Local Vision please access the following resources:

- Local Vision Interim Evaluation Report http://tiny.cc/LV-InterimEval
- The Revolution will be Improvised http://tiny.cc/vise
- The Art of Change Making http://tiny.cc/artofchange

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Appendix: Workshop participants

Delegate	Organisation	Job Title
Yusuf Ahmed	The University of the West of England	Associate Professor Public Service
John Atkinson	Fusion	Management Enabler, Chief Executive
Janet Atherton	Sefton County Council	Director of Public Health
Richard Bolden	The University of the West of England	Professor of Leadership and
Menara Bolacii	The oniversity of the West of England	Management
Nick Chapman	The University of the West of England	Research Associate
Mark Dalton	Leadership Centre	Project Manager
John Deffenbaugh	Frontline	Director / Enabler
Gareth Edwards	The University of the West of England	Ass. Prof of Leadership Development
Anita Gulati	The University of the West of England	Client Director
Matt Gott	The Innovation Unit Ltd	Enabler and Senior Associate
Elizabeth Green	The University of the West of England	Research Assistant
Keith Grint	Warwick University Business School	Professor of Public Leadership
Robin Hambleton	The University of the West of England	Professor of City Leadership
Clare Holt	Warwick University Business School	PhD Student
Ross Jago	Plymouth City Council	Performance and Research Officer
John Jarvis	Leadership Centre	Head of Operations
Emma Loftus		Co-author of The Art of Change Making
Lucie Magill	Leadership Centre	Programme Support Officer
Frances Martin	Worcestershire	Integrated Care Director
David Owen	The University of the West of England	Research Associate
Peter Pinfield	Healthwatch Worcestershire	Chairman
Marvin Rees	Bristol City Council	Director
David Relph	Bristol Health Partners	Director
James Rimmer	University Hospitals Bristol NHS	Executive Director of Strategy and
In a Cimerana	Foundation Trust	Transformation
Joe Simpson	Leadership Centre	Director Chair Caldon Kay
John Simpson	Goldenkey	Chair Golden Key
Debbie Sorkin	Leadership Centre	National Director of Systems Leadership
Seth Thevoz	Leadership Centre	Programme Administrator
Rich Watts	National Development Team for Inclusion	Programme Lead
Sam Webster	Worcestershire County Council	Connecting Families Strategic Manager
Holly Wheeler	OD and Leadership Coaching	Enabler
lan Smith	The University of the West of England	Senior Lecturer in Economics
Tina Joyce	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland	Programme Director
Tim Whitworth	Transformation through change	Principle
Mari Davies		Leadership Development Consultant
Joanna Copping	Bristol City Council	
Rhiannon Beaumont- Wood	Public Health Wales	Director of Nursing