

Effective Leadership – Plenary Session

Context

The Civil Service wants effective leaders who are inspiring, confident, empowering and live our values:

- *building inclusive teams and encouraging challenge*
- *continually reflecting on their leadership style and develop self-awareness*
- *empowering and developing individuals and teams*
- *demonstrating passion and want to change things for the better*
- *creating a sense of purpose and focus on outcomes*
- *exercising judgement and making good, evidence-based decisions*
- *collaborating, making connections and encouraging cross system working*
- *building teams using experience and expertise.*

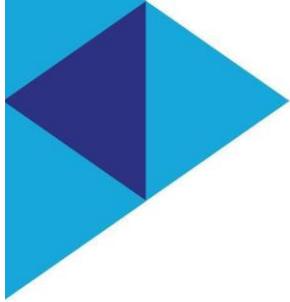
The Effective Leadership Plenary Session focus on systems leadership:

What is Systems Leadership?

The most difficult policy issues are those where there are profound disagreements about what is wrong, what should be done, and how things work. Systems leadership is about making progress when working in complexity - the way people need to behave when they face large, complex, difficult and seemingly intractable problems;

It is about how you lead across boundaries:

- where the situation is entirely new
- where leaders need to juggle multiple uncertainties
- where you cannot predict outcomes
- where you cannot rely on cause and effect
- where there is no management lever you can pull
- where no one person or organisation can find or organise the solution on their own.

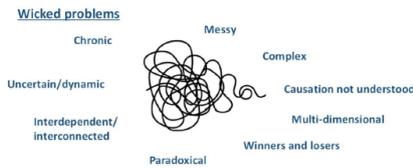


These situations can feel messy and difficult to navigate. They tend not to be susceptible to traditional project management. But they are amenable to systems leadership approaches, tools and techniques. The solution lies in the systems working together.

SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

This thinking on systems leadership was undertaken by volunteers from DfE, DfID and HMRC who reviewed literature and interviewed experts/practitioners. They have been supported by the Strategic Framework team and OD&D Expert Service.

Because many issues we face are “wicked” problems:



Because solutions lie in systems working differently:

What is a system in this context?
Set of individuals or organisations working together or interacting as part of interconnecting network; a complex whole

Because systems leadership is different to other forms of leadership:

“The collaborative leadership of a network of people in different places and at different levels in the system creating a shared endeavour and cooperating to make a significant change”

Source: Virtual Staff College.

Systems leaders see themselves as a leader in a system rather than the leader of a system

Mindset for systems leadership

- Strategic
- Collaborative
- Passionate
- Listening
- Humble
- Self-reflective
- Courageous
- Inspiring

We need systems leaders who:

- Identify and galvanise other leaders;
- Reflect deeply on what’s stuck;
- Iterate through learning cycles as a way of co-creating solutions that will last;
- Dare to experiment and learn from failure.

They have the mindset, resources and relationships to see the bigger system, foster reflective conversations and shift the collective focus.

They create emotional commitment to a shared endeavor, by ceding power to co-create and build self-care/support network to sustain them working in a counter-cultural way

Systems leadership is strongly linked to the stewardship role for Civil Servants and public sector leaders.

Barriers to systems leadership

- Silo mentality
- “The day job”
- Departmental objectives
- Funding arrangements
- Lacking levers of action/accountability
- Short termism
- Tensions and misunderstandings
- Frequent job moves
- It is hard work

Our work on systems leadership is early stage and we’d very much welcome your views. Please do let us have any comments on what resonates with you and what’s missing; and what support you think systems leaders need. If you want to follow up please e-mail ben.coates@education.gov.uk. We would be very keen to arrange a conversation.

How Do We “Do” Systems Leadership?

Systems Leadership starts with common purpose - a clear, shared understanding of what the partners are looking to achieve; why they want to achieve it; and what the pressure points are on the different parties. It:

- is important to build relationships, and therefore trust, with others, so that you can have influence even where you have no ostensible authority;
- is collaborative, adaptive, or distributed, leadership;
- relates to actions and behaviours, that anyone can practice;
- is about leadership, not a single leader.

System leaders see themselves as leaders in the system rather than the leader of the system.

Systems Leadership in Action

At the heart of systems leadership is improving outcomes for service users. It is about where you stop thinking about a problem to be resolved, but rather how you facilitate the most appropriate outcome for individuals dependent on their needs rather than inputs in various aspects of their lives. It is about services tailored around the individual to support what they would like from their lives. For example; Prison leavers face a complex web of challenges that the state struggles to address and which leads to a cycle of social exclusion and reoffending. By bringing offenders, practitioners, and policy makers together, and approaching this long-established problem in a system led way, we can reach better outcomes for the user.

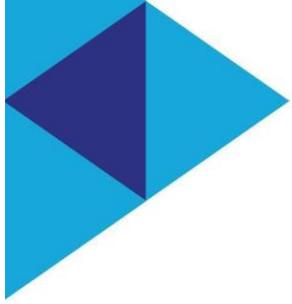
The Key Elements of Systems Leadership



[A Balancing Act, to Harvard Kennedy School](#)

The plenary session will explain how systems leadership provides the infrastructure which enables us to do this.

There are specific behaviours and ways of working that we can adopt, and practise, to get better at working across systems and boundaries.



Civil Service

Live Online

The session will provide practical tools and advice on effective collaboration with insight on the drivers behind successful systems leadership. There will be examples of systems leadership in action on local, regional and national levels, demonstrating the benefits of leading together and collaborating within and across organisational boundaries to deliver better results.

For example, The Strategic Framework is being explored as a way of delivering the Government's top cross-cutting priorities such as reducing crime and reoffending, ending homelessness and tackling addiction. It represents a different way of delivering the major, complex Ministerial priorities which do not fit easily within our departmental or organisational barriers: Using systems thinking to address complex policy challenges that are "systemic".

During the plenary session, there will be opportunities for live delegate questions and comments with all speakers.

After the session there will be a forum where delegates will be able to e-meet and engage and ask further questions about systems leadership and issues raised during the plenary session.

Further Reading

There are different models and toolkits to help you work out what is a complex issue that requires leadership, and what is a more simple issue that can be left to good programme management.

For more information, see pp 171-173 of *The Art of Change-Making* on adaptive leadership; the report *The Revolution will be Improvised II, The Revolution will be Customised* (about applying systems approaches to digital innovation), and Sue Goss, *The View from the Bridge*.

We look forward to you joining us in the Effective Leadership Plenary Session on Systems Leadership!

After the session, please join us on the Civil Service Live Forum to discuss real world examples and your insights into system leadership in the public sector.