

Good afternoon, everyone. I hope you're well. My name is Justin Placide, and I welcome you today to day two of the Civil Service Live online. It's a different way of doing it, but I'm hoping that we've all been able to, you know, provide you with some form of entertainment, knowledge or hopefully connections. And we definitely intend to do this one again in this session. I'm lucky enough to be working with two other great panellists. One is Sophie Tidman. I hope I probably pronounced that wrong. I'm hoping I've pronounced it right. You're smiling. That's a good start already. That's what I like to see. She'll be helping us guide through this session and I'll give you a bit more background about her in a moment. Also, as well, my other personal friend, I'm hoping by the end of this session is John Paul. And John Paul Marks is the Director General for Work and Health Services at the Department for Work and Pensions. He's smiling, so I know I'm doing a good job already. So there's going to be a bit of a slideshow that I'm going to hand it over to Sophie to lead with. But before we do that, I want to give a bit of background around Sophie because I had the honour to meet her last week and speak to her online and she's got one of those kind of infectious personalities that just make you want to get involved, make you want to engage and make you want to listen. So hopefully, to all of the 2,700 delegates who are listening to us now, you'll feel the same way that I do. So Sophie, without no further ado, before you go into the slides, would it be alright if you could give the listeners, the delegates, the audience a bit of background?

Thank you, Justin. Yeah, my name is Sophie Tidman. I'm a coach and facilitator. What I like to do is bring a bit more creative and mindful practices into the public debate, to tackle complex systems, with more creativity, with more inclusion and to really start to shift systems, the systems, complex problems that we see around us today. My background, I started in Treasury, I'm an economist, a recovering economist by background. I've worked in Africa with governments in Africa, and now I'm back in the UK. Yeah, so let's start. Welcome. You're very, very welcome to the session on leading in complexity. It's a real pleasure to be together with you here today. The first half of this session, we're going to be exploring the stance of leadership in complexity. So really how you show up in the midst of complexity, and it's this being part of leadership that proceeds, supports, and simplifies the action, the doing part of leadership. That's why we're focusing on it today. And the second part of the session is, I will lead you through an experiential exercise. So please bring with you a complex problem that you're grappling with today. Something that's really live for you, and also bear in mind through the first half of the session as well. So firstly, let's talk about complexity. How do you know you're dealing with complexity? What does it look like?

Firstly, complex problems have four qualities. Firstly, there's there's no single root cause. So think about the North-South divide in this country. It's very difficult to identify one single root cause, it's a complex interplay between economic history, geography, transport links, public services. Secondly, there's no single owner. Think about social care system. The reason this is one of the reasons it's such a tricky challenge is because there's there's no clear there's a bit of ambiguity about ownership, both between central and local government and between the state and the individual and families. Thirdly, the situation is continually evolving. So sometimes we say emerging. Think about raising a daughter. So as a whole, she's much more than the sum of her parts, her education her genetics, her health, and that means and they sort of interplay with each other in often unseen ways and very unpredictable ways. So that might mean that my strategy, my tactics for influencing her one day, for example, to get her to bed at a reasonable time, might be totally redundant the next day. And finally, a complex problem

is generated and sustained through patterns of action, patterns of action that may be rational for individuals and organisations but when aggregated result in collective harm. Think about antibiotics and microbial resistance. A lot of people talk about, we've seen more complexity around us, and certainly there are a lot of complex problems from social care, youth unemployment, high street regeneration, homelessness. But also you're born into complex systems, you know your family, there's loads of complex problems within families and your teams, your organization's you will be seeing complex challenges all the time. So, you know, when you bring your complex challenge, you can go as small as you like, or as big as you like. So quick question, just to test check in really, i'd love to hear from you, and I think it'd be really beneficial to kind of connect to the bigger group, what is your perspective on leading in complexity? So just keep it to one word in the chat. One word, really your gut instinct. first thought is the best thought, What's your perspective on leading in complexity?

And I'm gonna keep chatting. But please keep interacting on the chat box.

So it's not quite my slide, but it's all right. When we think about the traditional type of leader, we often think of kind of somebody who's very forward oriented, who's very directed and pushing their agenda out into the world, and that approach, you know, that very focused approach works quite well when talking about technical problems where there's a clear owner, where there's a clear goal in mind where there's very neat causal pathways if A, then B. So take, for example, putting a man on the moon, incredibly complicated, amazing thing that was done, but it was a technical challenge, not a complex, not a complex problem. The challenges with that form that idea of leadership, it can easily become blinkered, when we're thinking about a complex problem, because it's focusing, it often focuses on the most obvious physical manifestation of a challenge. So for example, you know, you could focus on getting homeless people homes. But you're not when you've got 300,000 homeless people in the UK, pre COVID, obviously. That, that approach isn't sustainable. It's firefighting. It's reactive. It's not solving the real roots of the problem. So what we have to do is really open out and look at the underlying patterns, the underlying relationships, beliefs, values, incentives, that produce the outcome we want to shift. So a nice example of the government working on this is the gender pay transparency legislations. Not actually working on specific cases or, or the incidence of gender pay disparity, but the enabling environment around it, and then that policy set off quite a lot of dynamism had it had its own momentum. The really great thing about opening up broadening your vision in complexity is that you start to recognise the wisdom of the system. Every system is always working. It always serves a purpose, whether that's our purpose is is up for debate. It's usually serving another purpose, one we're not often aware of, and it's, it's always serving some people, some of the time. When we, it's very tempting to start looking at what's wrong with the system, trying to change things trying to adopt best policy, best practice. But unless we really understand who the system is serving, and what purpose it's serving, and also its strengths, it's very difficult to actually start to shift the system. There's a really intuitive way to think about the shift from that directed focused perspective on leadership to a broadening out which is to soften the gaze. So I'd invite you all to do an exercise with me now if you can, come to standing and take your gaze away from the computer, maybe out of a window if that's available to you, or to a blank space blank wall that's fine too. Let your posture be balanced and relaxed but upright and become present to the environment around you. So notice all the sounds, the sounds from far away and the sounds most close to you. So perhaps the sound of your own breathing.

I'm bringing your complex challenge to mind now. And as you do, let your gaze soften, let this skin around your eyes the muscles around your eyes soften and bring into your awareness your peripheral vision.

And it's as if with each inhale you're welcoming in all the messiness of the system.

All the complexity.

And on the exhale, there's a letting go. Just a little bit of the need to control.

And ask yourself what or who am I missing out?

In my awareness of this system.

What are the strengths? What are the resources? I've forgotten.

Another way to put this is a phrase from improv theatre, actually, it's saying yes to a mess, embracing the ambiguity and being in uncertainty. And notice from that exercise, was there resistance? Did you find that quite difficult or challenging? Was that quite natural? Where is your preferred embodied leadership style? Is it that kind of focused or directional dialogue? Or is it a more broad, inclusive style, both of which are totally valid but appropriate at different times in the midst of different challenges.

And notice that it's quite brave place to be, to be in uncertainty.

It's quite brave to to not know the answer to not have the answer. And it can feel quite paralysing like, oh, I'm never gonna be able to do anything because it's just too messy. It's just too complicated. So next, we're going to play a TED talk, a very short Ted Talk, which I think shows really beautifully, that if you just stick with it, you just stay in the messiness for a little bit. You can quickly find clarity.

You feel completely overwhelmed when you're faced with a complex problem. Well, I hope to change that in less than three minutes. So I hope to convince you that complex doesn't always equal complicated. So for me, a well crafted baguette fresh out of the oven is complex, but a curry onion, green olive, poppy cheese bread is complicated. I'm an ecologist and I study complexity, I love complexity, and I studied that in the natural world the interconnectedness of species Here's a food web or a map of feeding links between species that live in Alpine lakes in the mountains of California. And this is what happens to that food web when it's stocked with non native fish that never lived there before all the greyed out species disappear, some are actually on the brink of extinction, and lakes with fish have more mosquitoes, even though they eat them. These effects are all unanticipated, and yet, we're discovering they're predictable. So I want to share with you a couple key insights about complexity we're learning from studying nature that maybe are applicable to other problems. First, is this the simple power of good visualisation tools to help untangle complexity and just encourage you to ask questions you didn't think of before. For example, you could plot the flow of carbon through a corporate supply chains in a corporate ecosystem, or the interconnections of habitat patches for endangered species in Yosemite National Park. The next thing is that if you want to predict the effect of

one species on another, if you focus on only that link, and then you blackbox the rest, it's actually less predictable, than if you step back, consider the entire system, all the species, all the links and from that place, hone in on the sphere of influence that matters most. And we're discovering with our research that's often very local to the node you care about within one or two degrees. So the more you step back and embrace complexity, the better chance you have of finding simple answers and it's often different than the simple answer that you started with. So, let's switch gears and look at a really complex problem courtesy of the US government. This is a diagram of the US counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, it was front page of the New York Times a couple months ago, instantly ridiculed by the media for being so crazy complicated, and the stated goal was to increase popular support for the Afghan government. Clearly a complex problem, but is it complicated? But when I saw this in front page of the Times, I thought great finally something I can relate to, you know, this is I can sink my teeth into this. So let's do it. So here you go. For the first time ever a world premiere view of this spaghetti diagram as an ordered network, the circled node is one we're trying to influence, popular support for the government. And so now we can look one degrees, two degrees, three degrees away from that node, and eliminate like three quarters of the diagram outside that sphere of influence. Within that sphere, most of those nodes are not actionable like the harshness of the terrain in a very small minority or actual military actions. Most are non violent, and they fall into two broad categories, active engagement with ethnic rivalries and religious beliefs and fair, transparent economic development and provisioning of services. I don't know about this, but this is what I can decipher from this diagram in 24 seconds. When you see a diagram like this, I don't want you to be afraid, I want you to be excited, I want you to be relieved, because simple answers may emerge. We're discovering in nature that simplicity often lies on the other side of complexity. So for any problem, the more you can zoom out and embrace complexity, the better chance you have of zooming in on the simple details that matter most. Thank you.

Just trying to get to the right slide.

I'm trying to get back tech team not sure I can do that. There we go.

Okay.

So one of the things that that video raised was how complexity and complex complexity theory has, has borrowed has been inspired by the natural world. In this post industrial society, our kind of go to metaphor often is the machine. So we often think about the levers of government, think about organisation as machines that need to kind of be oiled and to work more efficiently. Even we think about the human brain as a machine and that analogy carries a lot of implicit assumptions. You know, there's a lot of neat causal pathways that people assume, or desire, and it often puts the Civil Service and government at the top of this hierarchy, sort of calibrating the machine and pulling the levers, and there's also another assumption there, that if we just had enough time, enough information, if we were just smart enough, we could figure out the perfect policy solution or the perfect technical, technological fix for whatever problem we're facing. Now, I want you to think of a different metaphor, a different paradigm, which is thinking of complex systems as living organisms, and how do living organisms change? They adapt, they evolve. So one big solution that we can point to is the British three point pronged plug, which is clearly the best plug in the world. Because it's the most safest, the most safe,

and it's kind of the most satisfying to use, except obviously, if you step on it. But you know, this was developed post war, and very few other countries have adopted it. Because their system didn't want to really adapt. It was very costly for different individual nation national systems to adapt to a whole different solution. You can see there's a lot of inertia in systems and sort of throwing kind of big solutions at them, they often like react a bit like an immune system, and just reject, reject because they want to keep on. They're resilient, systems are resilient, and they've got their kind of sticky. So what does this mean? So the RSA has a brilliant paper on this, and the phrase they use is think like a system, act like an entrepreneur. And that's all about being opportunistic, and finding lots of different, finding rightness, in the system, like where's ready for change? What's the window of opportunity, this particular moment in time where we can shift the system? And finding lots of little ways where we can, like, push the system, tip it into a different equilibrium, rather than confronting it. There's a really nice quote from Eunice Pauling, who is a Nobel Prize winner in the last last century. The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas. So think about in your team, like, what is the generation of ideas like? What what are you what are you wanting to learn about next? How you learning, evolving, adapting with the system?

I would really point to we haven't really got time to talk right now. But human-centred design and also the sort of nudge behavioural economics background, and policy thinking goes really well with the ideas around complexity. So lots of quite small experiments, quite safe experiments, don't rely on a lot of political capital. And they fail fast. So you're not talking about pilot, you're talking about experiments where you can kind of find out, find out stuff about the experience of users, the behaviours of users, in a matter of a few weeks, or even sometimes a few days. Right. I'm gonna pass it over to JP now.

Thanks, Sophie. Hi, there. Hi, Justin. Thanks very much for the introduction. Hopefully you guys can hear me okay. So first of all, colleagues, thank you so much for joining Civil Service live again. We had a fab day yesterday, we've got thousands of people online again today, and it's wonderful to have so many people across the country joining us. Sophie a huge thanks to you for delivering this workshop today. I was certainly enjoying my soft focus there and looking out across London here, out of the window, and actually reflecting, that as a leader, i'm very often focused on driving towards the next task and the action. And we as a Civil service, one of the reasons we, as our strand on leadership have focused on system leadership and asked colleagues like Sophie to help us is we think we've got quite a lot to do to improve to be good at this. And this is not a criticism, but it's a sort of reflection on the nature of life in government, in a silo'd department delivering against a set of precise objectives, often on a short term timetable, defined by a political cycle. And don't get me wrong, those things matter. We've got to do them, we've got to do them well. But, if I think about some of the big problems that I'm thinking about, thinking about the welfare system and the fact that pre COVID we have around 8 million people of working age who are inactive, who could be working but are not, and if we ask ourselves why that is, it's very hard to identify a clear causal factor. Last year one of the things that had a huge impact on me I went to Norwich prison, Wormwood Scrubs prison and Brixton prison, and I joined a programme, which is cross government, a fusion programme looking at system leadership, reflecting on reoffending. Just as Sophie talks about, this is a criminal justice probation rehabilitation system that is constantly evolving, changing multiple actors. What causes the fact that the majority, the majority of people who go to prison go back to prison again? The example that I have that I've been particularly trying to focus on regards to this has been around reoffending. So I was part of a fusion programme.

We went out to Norwich prison, Wormwood scrubs, Brixton, sat with people who had been in prison or were in prison listening to their experiences. So user centred design, really genuinely trying to capture, their very complex journeys into prison and out of prison and asking ourselves, you know, locking up a care leaver, or someone who's been brought up a victim of domestic abuse, so they can spend more time with more criminals making more, having more behaviours compounded in short term sentences. You know, is it a surprise that this criminal justice system, which may well as Sophie was talking about serve the interests of some people, some of the time, actually compounds the problems that are far more earlier, a cause earlier in life as a function of much more complex factors such as childhood upbringing, quality of education, parenting, etc. So then you get into much more early intervention thinking. But how do you stop people having to lead a life that leads them towards crime in the first place? So we now have three fusion programmes across government. One is about reducing reoffending, recognising that we have got people in prison who we don't want to go back, but also about how do we reduce crime and the people being at risk of crime and to an extent tackle the misuse of drugs because we recognise that all three of those systems interact come together and impact on very many communities too much than we want them to too many young people, for example, taking drugs, county lines, you read newspapers. So the challenge to us in the Civil Service, is how do we lead through complexity, be better with systems understand how to map them, understand how to bring people together with shared purpose, understand how to make small experiments all the time on a living, evolving system to make progress, knowing we'll never probably solve that is, but can we improve over time and bring people together and enable and empower teams to solve problems? We want the Civil Service to continue to learn about how to do that. There's lots of stuff on the portal on Civil Service learning about system leadership, so if you want to find out more and do more as a Civil Servant as a system leader, do connect and find out more about it, and then the second part of our workshop, so he's going to talk to us about some tools and techniques that we can use to make progress too. Thanks, Justin. Thanks, Sophie.

Thank you, JP.

So this is the experiential part of the session, and I would really encourage you to bring a complex challenge you're facing. This exercise is not theoretical, it really doesn't work if you're just doing it theoretically, it will just seem very strange. So, as Eric Berlow talked about in his TED Talk, visual tools are really useful. You can say so much in a map that cannot really be said with 1000 words, and all of us sort of map our world implicitly unconsciously, and you can see this in our language when people say, oh, we just don't see eye to eye or she really had my back in that, or even on a big scale in our politics, we talk about left and right. So this exercise is about getting those kind of implicit understanding of those hidden dynamics that happen out in front of us so we can see it with a fresh perspective, and maybe uncover some of the hidden dynamics and insights there. This isn't an analytical exercise, so you're tapping into sort of more emotional, social intelligence. As I said, we're all born into complex systems. You all have this. So don't be scared.

Don't be mindful in this exercise, it's gonna take a while, about, not not quite 20 minutes.

So be absorbed in it, but don't be in your head, kind of trust your gut instincts in this. We had some pre-session questions, I'm not sure, maybe some of you didn't get a chance to look at them, which is fine.

So i'm just going to go over them now, and you can you can think about them, i'll give you a bit of time to think about them. If you've already completed them, maybe have a little review of them. The first question is summarise the issue you face in relation to a complex system in one short sentence or a question. So I think somebody, somebody put in one of the chat and one of the questions that came up in the chat is about kind of understanding the question and having a lack of direction, and even this exercise of kind of putting, like, what is the issue? What is the like, the current really most challenging issue can be really clarifying, rather than just be like, oh, there's this there's a little bit messy, like, what is the issue right now?

I'll give you a bit of time to think about that.

Secondly, if you could move forward on this issue, just one small step, what would be different or what would you have?

And then finally, what are for the four to five key elements at play in this issue? So you're very welcome to identify individuals or organisations but also think about whether there's some values here at play, or potentially like a policy, or an organisational goal, team mission, for example, because systems aren't just the physical manifestations that we see around us, they're driven deep down by mental modes by our shared social assumptions and beliefs and values. So it's really important to to represent that. Really, you can put anything in a map, it's your map. And give you some time to think about that. Make sure you have some space near you. You don't need very much space. I mean with clear boundaries, a tabletop is ideal to create your map.

Right.

Okay. So have around you some objects, some really small household objects like a stapler, coffee mugs, even children's toys, find something with a bit of directionality in it is useful. So a coffee cup with a mug is great. You can also just use post its with an arrow on them for example, anything, really you can use and identify out of those four or five elements, what's the most important element in your system right now.

Give it a physical representative.

Place this representative where it feels right. I hope all the rest of the panel are doing this exercise and leading by example. So place this representative where feels right. So again, feeling into meeting the system, whereas where it is, where it's at, not where you think it should be, not where you want it to be.

And what is really true right now.

And notice, as you place it mindfully, the direction in which is pointing, the size relative to the rest of the space, relative to the boundaries.

And even with this very simple, first step, you might notice you might have an insight here, and you can write this down.

Make a note on a poster, whatever makes sense to you.

So now, identify the second most important element out of those four or five elements and give it a physical object, one of the coffee cups or whatever you have around you. And place the second representative mindfully in relation to the first and to the system boundary, noticing the distance between the two. And how they are oriented towards each other. So whether they're facing each other, looking in opposite directions, not might not quite meeting each other's gaze, where feels right, rather than where you feel it should be.

Notice what you notice.

And perhaps consider is this better or worse, than the map with just one representative

Now identify the third most important element and give it a physical object and place this third representative, again mindfully, feels right.

And consider in this system who gives too much? And who gives not enough? This is a really useful sort of systems oriented question. Often when we see systems quite disruptive, just you know, what's the word?

It's quite disruptive systems. Often it's because there's not a balance, out of balance in terms of giving and receiving. And you can see that in your individual life where, you know, there might have been burnout for example, in a team, people are giving too much. You can also see this in kind of in the broader system with you know, an ageing society people often thinking about intergenerational equity, giving and taking.

So just look at it from your point of view or your map though, whether that's, that's something that's relevant.

Make any notes you want to make.

On the next, identify the fourth most important element and give it a physical object.

Place the fourth representative mindfully.

And again, notice kind of the space how that might be changing things.

Anything you notice about the distance between the representatives and how they're oriented towards each other?

Another very useful systems question is who or what has been forgotten or excluded in this system.

Again, in a team, it might be if somebody left a team in quite bad circumstances and that's not really addressed, that can be quite distracting and lead to dysfunction in that team, and then in the same way, there's voices in in society in a social system policy question that have been systematically excluded, that can often lead to dysfunction.

Think about who or what has been forgotten or excluded in this system in your system.

And if you haven't put yourself in this map

it might be interesting, to put yourself in now. Often we think we sort of stand above the system or a bit detached from it. But whatever you're doing, even if you don't think you're doing anything, you're always part of the system, always influencing people whether you're aware of it or not. It's useful to see okay, i'm actually facing a different way or maybe i'm too close to this problem.

Maybe I don't want to be here.

Place yourself in relation to the other representatives now.

If you've already put yourself in,

it might be interesting to represent what might have been excluded, if there's something that came to mind in that previous slide. What some people do, in this exercise, is always put a representative in for the most vulnerable in the system. It's quite a useful check, really, you could even put like the users, actually where are they in your system? Have you totally forgotten them? Are they at the centre of the periphery? But if you've got four representatives, and you feel like that is really clarifying the situation you don't feel like you need to put more, don't complicate it, because this exercise is about coming to the essence of an issue, not about being totally inclusive of everything.

I'm gonna stop talking for a minute to give everyone time to consider.

Touch your own representative. So it's quite nice to get a better feel for the map. You can touch different representatives and touch your own representative in this and think about what's the essence of being here in this place? In one sentence of truth, really, what is it like to be you leading this complexity? This can be really clarifying, finding clarity in complexity, this can be really helpful. So th is is it to get the kind of felt sense. So again, don't be analytical. It can be something as simple as I can't see what's going on. Or

i'm quite alone here.

You might want to note down on a post-it.

The words will feel true or right to you.

Make any notes you want to make and you might want to take a photo, it's quite nice exercise, quite easy to take a photo that might actually help your memory more than taking notes.

So, we've been looking at kind of the wisdom of the system as it is, mapping the system as it is, and now we're moving on to the kind of what's the step towards better? So fine you might even feel like this already in the previous steps. You might want to move something. So think what would be a step towards better? Which element do you want to try to move which feels right to move? And this is really about finding okay, where is the system wanting to move? How can I move with the flow of the system rather than fighting it?

You can try a few options if you like. If you've moved something, ask yourself what? What does your system require to now enable this first movement towards your goal? Is there a resource that you need? Is it just time?

And you can keep that up. I mean, I might have gone too quickly for some people there. So stick with your map, if you'd like to continue exploring it. If you're done, dismantle the map, but as you do so it's quite helpful to just dismantle it mindfully, and just see which bits you take off first, because that's also quite useful information. And if you found any resistance or any frustration while doing that exercise, like, that's fine, there's no negative, bad emotion with this. There's no wrong way to feel, it can be quite useful to notice actually, if I feel frustrated with this because, often that's reflecting kind of the frustration in the system as well. Something else in the system. Brilliant. Thank you. Your time, it's been really wonderful to be here with you. I wish I could see more of your faces. I really hope that you leave the session, with a little bit more ease with complexity, a little bit more, a bit more welcoming of complexity in your work. And perhaps with a bit of curiosity, and maybe some fresh insights, that would be wonderful. So go well into your day. Thank you very much. I'm going to hand off to Justin to tie up any loose ends.

Thank you very much, Sophie. And thank you again, JP, and apologies once again, for anyone who was slightly querying where we all went. Don't worry, we didn't go and get a cup of tea. I hope that you have definitely enjoyed this session. I've seen a couple of questions in the chat room already. One, Sophie, if that's okay, someone did ask, if you'd be willing to share your slides, i'm more than happy to talk to you about that offline. There was, I believe, an opportunity as well for the forum. So if any of you have time, please join us in the forum. There should be details also as well, that you would have received when you did register. And thankfully, again, please use the forum to not only discuss your views, provide some feedback, also, as well on what, you know, Sophie's talked about, what JP'S alluded to as well, and also as well experience some of the other exercises that are running. So without further ado, because once again, I do realise we're running over time, I would just like to apologise but at the same point, actually look at it from a positive you actually got an additional five minutes of listening to Sophie, JP and myself. So wherever you are, whatever you are doing, please stay safe, please enjoy the rest of the Civil Service live sessions, and hopefully, we'll see each other either virtually online or maybe bump into someone at one of their departments. Take care and goodbye.