

Leading Together

System Leadership Workbook

About this workbook

This workbook has been designed to accompany [Leading Together](#), our series of five learning-burst videos on Systems Leadership.

The series was created to support leaders within systems to deepen their understanding of system leadership and systems thinking, how to create culture and vision within a system, and how to better work collaboratively at place and system level to improve services and population health within their area.

It supports reflection, application to practice, and ongoing development across system, place, and neighbourhood contexts.

How to use this workbook

People learn differently. Some prefer listening, others reading, writing, drawing, or quiet reflection. This workbook includes explanations, narrative from the videos, reflective pauses, and practical exercises.

You do not need to complete sections in order. Notice what draws your attention - that is often where the richest learning sits.

Section One: Systems Leadership

Everyone works within systems. Whether you name them or not, systems shape what is possible every day. A system is a collection of people, organisations, processes, relationships, and resources that interact to create outcomes.

Systems evolve and adapt - they rarely behave in neat or predictable ways. Leadership in systems does not sit above the work, it happens within and between relationships.

The accompanying [video](#) focuses on the foundations of what system leadership is, why it matters and you can embed the concepts in practice.

Why Systems Leadership Matters Now

Across health, social care, public health, local government, and the voluntary sector, challenges do not respect organisational boundaries. Needs shift quickly and pressures overlap with no single role or organisation holding the full picture. Systems leadership matters when progress depends on shared purpose, trust, and collective responsibility.

Reflection: Your systems

Take a moment to think about the systems that you operate in.

1. What systems are you currently part of?
2. Which feel most alive or most strained?
3. Where does your role sit within them?

Complicated and Complex

Some challenges are complicated and require expertise, planning, and technical solutions. Others are complex - they involve people, behaviour, culture, identity, and uncertainty. Most of our work sits firmly in the complex space.

Core Capabilities of Systems Leaders

Systems leaders notice patterns rather than isolated events and work through connections rather than control. They stay present when answers are unclear. These capabilities grow through practice, not position.

Reflection: Noticing Patterns

1. What patterns keep repeating in your system?

2. What conversations never quite resolve?
3. What behaviours are rewarded or discouraged?

From these questions above, think about where your strengths lie in the spotting of patterns and who you need to speak to (if possible) to move conversations and discussions forward.

Open and Closed Systems

When organisations behave as closed systems, leaders focus on control, structure, and predictability. In open systems, leaders pay attention to relationships, context, and interdependence. Most systems you work in are open, whether they acknowledge this or not.

Reflection: Open or Closed?

1. Where does your organisation behave as if it is closed?
2. Where is it clearly shaped by external forces?
3. What becomes visible when you view it as open?

Complex Adaptive Systems

Complex adaptive systems are non linear, interconnected, emergent, and adaptive. Leadership emerges through interactions, not hierarchy. The question shifts from who is the leader to where leadership is happening.

Leadership as Interaction

1. Where do you see leadership emerging informally?
2. What conditions allow this to happen?
3. What stops this happening?

In summary, this section has introduced you to some foundational aspects of systems leadership and enabled you to begin to gather some information, insights and themes in relation to the systems in which you operate.

Section Two: Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is a practice which can help us see reality more accurately. Instead of asking what is wrong, we ask who or what is interacting and rather than blaming parts, we examine patterns. The accompanying [video](#) explores some core principles in including interconnectedness, dynamics over time and the benefits of using feedback loops to help uncover patterns.

Feedback Loops

Feedback loops explain why challenges persist. Reinforcing loops accelerate specific behaviours, and balancing loops stabilise aspects of the system.

Exercise: Creating a Feedback Loop

The video provides an explanation on reinforcing and balancing loops. Choose a recurring issue that you have currently in the system that you are operating in and think about the inputs, processes and outputs involved.

After you have watched the video reflect on these 3 questions:

1. What reinforces the issue?
2. What balances it?
3. Where might a small shift matter?

System Mapping

System maps help us understand structure before solutions. They show purpose, flow, connections, and waste. These maps visualise the major components of a system and how they connect.

If a system map is new to you, recommended reading beyond this workbook includes [Thinking in Systems](#) ([Donella Meadows](#), 2008) and [An Introduction to System Thinking](#) (Gerald M. Weinberg, 2001).

The video shares [John Seddon](#)'s System Thinking Cycle, and the short article below describes other ways of mapping a system:

[Tools for Systems Thinkers: Systems Mapping | by Leyla Acaroglu | Disruptive Design | Medium](#)

Reflection: Purpose From the User Perspective

1. What is the espoused purpose of your system?
2. How would those who use it describe success?
3. Are there any targets that have been created that distort the purpose of the system?

Exercise: Map your system(s)

You can use the ideas from the video or the links above to start to map your system. By taking time to do this you'll see where your strengths lie as well as areas that could create potential challenges ahead.

Section Three: Place Based Leadership

This [video](#) will explore what it really looks like to lead with and through placed-based partnerships.

Place-based partnerships are not new, however the level of complexity, expectation, and interdependence around them is ever increasing. Place based partnerships are collaborative arrangements between organisations and stakeholders, bringing together health, social care, local government, voluntary and community and social enterprise organisations as well as local business, citizens and communities to integrate services and address the broader determinants of health.

Their purpose is to improve health and wellbeing for a defined local population by working together, not in silos. To enable this and connect system, place, and neighbourhood, leadership must be agile across all three.

Levels of Place

1. **System level** focuses on strategy and scale.
2. **Place level** focuses on coordination.
3. **Neighbourhood level** focuses on lived experience.

Reflection: Working across Levels

1. Which level do you operate in most?
2. Which do you understand least?
3. Who helps you bridge them?

Asset Mapping

Asset Mapping is a practical and visual process used in Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) to identify, organise, and connect the strengths, resources, and capacities of individuals, groups, and organisations within a community or place.

Asset mapping is the process of discovering and documenting the tangible and intangible resources (people, skills, relationships, spaces, institutions, and services) that exist within a community, and can be mobilised to improve wellbeing and drive local change.

Rather than focusing on deficits (what's missing), and problems (What's wrong here?) asset mapping asks *'What strengths already exist in this place that we can build on?'* to reveal people, spaces, skills, and relationships already present.

Exercise: Mapping Assets

List the assets in your place, for example individuals, groups, institutions, spaces and culture.

1. What areas can you see are underused?
2. Can you see any new people, spaces or places that you could engage with more?
3. Now prioritise the areas in point 2. How can you engage with each new person, space or place?

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership helps us navigate challenges with no clear answers which is often the environment of place partnerships and has emerged as a crucial framework for navigating complex challenges. [Video 3](#) introduces [Heifetz & Linsky's Leadership Theory](#) and further information can be found in the article below:

[The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World | Harvard Kennedy School](#)

Adaptive leadership focuses on leaders' ability to adapt to changing environments and respond to challenges that don't have straightforward solutions. It is particularly relevant in place-based leadership, where local challenges are often complex and require flexible, context-driven responses.

Reflection: Core components of adaptive leadership

1. The Balcony View

Leaders give themselves the opportunity to step back from day-to-day operations to observe patterns, power dynamics, and underlying issues. Instead of being caught up in the action (like being on a dance floor), leaders move to the balcony to see how things connect and what needs to change.

1. When was the last time you stepped back?
2. What patterns become visible from there?
3. Who else needs to join you?

2. Technical or Adaptive?

Technical challenges often have a clear solution which is solved by experts using existing knowledge while adaptive challenges require people to change mindsets, habits, and values with no single expert having the answer. Think about the system(s) that you are in and whether you have a tendency to opt for the technical challenges, the adaptive challenges or a combination of the two. The accompanying [video](#) gives more detail on the difference between and examples of the two types of challenges.

From your perspective, thinking about the work that you are currently engaged in:

1. What challenges can be solved with expertise?
2. What requires mindset or behaviour change?
3. How does your response differ?

3. Regulating Heat (Managing Discomfort)

Change can be uncomfortable for those involved, and the job of a leader is to ensure that a balance is struck - if the pressure towards productivity is too low, change is unlikely; and if it is too high, change may be met with resistance and burn out.

Thinking about your current situation:

1. Where is pressure productive?
2. Where is it overwhelming?
3. What would happen if you adjusted it slightly?

4. Give the Work Back to the People

Adaptive challenges cannot be solved by one person or one role. They require collective thinking, shared ownership, and the courage to let others lead. The role of the leader is not to fix the problem for people, but to create the conditions where they can think, contribute, and act together. This means facilitating conversations, offering simple frameworks for sense making, and trusting those closest to the work to shape the solution.

1. Where are you currently stepping in to solve when the system needs you to step back?
2. What space could you create for others to think and work this through together?
3. What support or structure would help people take more ownership?

5. Protect the Voices from Below

In every system, some perspectives are easier to hear than others. Those closest to the lived reality of a challenge often hold the most insight, yet their voices can be overlooked. Adaptive leadership involves actively noticing whose voices are missing and intentionally creating safety so different perspectives can be shared and valued.

1. Whose perspective is currently absent from the conversation?
2. What conditions would help them feel safe enough to speak openly?
3. How will you ensure their contribution influences what happens next?

Section Four: Reimagining What's Possible - System Leadership for Change and Culture

This [video](#) focuses on how change takes place in complex systems and what kind of leadership creates environments where people don't just survive change but grow through it.

Traditional leadership often treats change as something to be designed, rolled out, and controlled. You plan it, implement it, and measure whether it has achieved what it set out to do. Systems leadership works with a different reality, change behaves less like a project and more like a living system.

In a system, change emerges through relationships rather than instructions. It grows from the connections you nurture, the behaviours that are modelled and reinforced, and the way feedback is noticed and acted upon. Local priorities matter and the community needs shape the direction and focus. The system responds, adapts, and evolves as a consequence of this and this kind of change is dynamic, sometimes messy and rarely follows a neat, linear plan.

Emergent change asks leaders to make a fundamental shift in mindset. Instead of asking *'how do I control this?'* the question becomes *'how do I create the conditions for the right change to emerge?'*. This requires a different form of leadership, one that focuses on enabling rather than directing.

Emergence usually begins at the edges of the system, for example a conversation that shifts understanding, a new way of working between two teams, a small test of change, or a shared realisation that something is not working as it should. These moments may seem minor, but they create ripples which when supported form pathways. Pathways become patterns, and over time, patterns shape culture.

Reflection: Emergent Change

1. What small shifts are already happening?
2. What conversations are shaping culture?
3. What are you noticing rather than fixing?

External Change and Internal Transition

[William Bridges' Transition Model](#) reminds us that every change has two distinct but connected dimensions - the external change and the internal transition. External change is what happens around people. It is the visible, operational shift

for example a new structure, a redesigned service, or a merger and because it often feels tangible, organisations often focus their energy here.

External change is only half the story. It tells us what is changing, not how that change will be experienced. People do not leave behind their habits, loyalties, identities, or assumptions simply because a new pathway has been announced. They carry these with them, and this is why systems leadership is so important.

In complex systems, implementing the external change is rarely the hardest part. The greater challenge lies in everything the change sets in motion beneath the surface for example changes in role or status, or uncertainty about identity and belonging. The role of the systems leader is to hold the external change with clarity and coherence, while recognising that the internal transition takes longer and requires far more care as this is where the real transformation happens.

Leading in complexity means paying attention to the emotional landscape of change - the fears and hopes people carry, the disconnection that can surface during periods of uncertainty, the need for psychological safety. Systems do not change unless people feel safe enough to take the next step. Top of Form
Bottom of Form

Reflection: Supporting Transitions

1. What might people need time to letting go of?
2. What could remain the same that could support this transition more effectively?
3. What support do you need to help you with this as a systems leader?
Where can you go to access this support?

Culture of Belonging

During periods of change, one of the most powerful stabilising forces is belonging. When people experience belonging, creativity increases, the courage to speak up grows and connections deepen. Belonging acts as an anchor in uncertainty, helping people stay engaged even when the path ahead is unclear which is vital during emergent change. When outcomes are not fully known in advance, people need relational safety in order to experiment, reflect, and adapt together. Without belonging, systems revert to caution and compliance however with it, they move towards learning and shared ownership.

Reflection: Belonging in your system

1. Where in your system do people feel most connected and where does belonging feel fragile?

2. What everyday practices could you strengthen to help people feel seen, heard, and valued during change?
3. How are you role modelling belonging through your own behaviours and choices?

Section Five: Distributed Leadership

This final [video](#) concentrates on distributed leadership and motivation.

At the heart of systems leadership is the power of we. You may influence a system, convene people, or act as a steward of direction, but meaningful change in complex systems is always collective. This is why distributed leadership matters so deeply.

Distributed leadership invites everyone in the system to take responsibility for their role, their choices, and their impact. Leadership lives in the interactions between people, tools, and context, not simply within individuals, and when leadership is distributed, motivation shifts. People move from waiting to be told what to do, to seeing themselves as contributors to change and responsibility is not removed; it is released to others. This creates the conditions for agility, resilience, and trust to grow, allowing the system to respond rather than react.

Reflection: Distributed Leadership

1. Where do you already see leadership emerging beyond formal roles in your system?
2. What conditions make it easier for people to step forward and take responsibility?
3. What might you need to let go of to allow leadership and motivation to spread?

Motivation: What Really Drives People in Systems

In complex systems, people are rarely unmotivated. Instead there can be misalignment across the system if the purpose isn't clear, at times feeling controlled by outside factors pulling work in a particular direction for financial or political reasons, or others feel worn down by sustained pressure.

Motivation can be understood as the energy that gets us moving and gives direction to our effort. It is the force that propels action. At work, motivation is shaped by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors - extrinsic motivators are externally controlled, such as pay, promotion, targets, or recognition, while intrinsic motivators come from within, including a sense of purpose, mastery, contribution, or personal growth.

While extrinsic motivators can create short term focus, they don't necessarily generate long-term commitment. Intrinsic motivation is an individual's inner drive to do something because it is meaningful, interesting, or satisfying in itself.

Intrinsic motivation differs from one person to another, however appreciating an individual's intrinsic motivators can help enormously with systems leadership.

The [video](#) highlights [Steven Reiss'](#) work which reminds us that human motivation is rooted in deep core needs, and these needs vary. Some people are driven by purpose, others by mastery, autonomy, belonging, or contributing to something beyond themselves. Systems that assume motivation is uniform slowly disengage people without realising it. Targets, incentives, and performance measures have their place, they can offer clarity and structure but they do not create meaning. In times of complexity, over reliance on extrinsic motivation can narrow thinking, increase fear, and push people towards self-protection rather than collaboration. Systems leadership calls for a more nuanced understanding of what truly drives people.

This [short article](#) is a useful read into intrinsic motivation and alongside [Steve Reiss's work](#) will provide you with useful insights and thoughts to take forward into your practice.

Exercise: Mapping Motivation in Your System

Purpose: to increase awareness of what drives energy, engagement, and disengagement across the system.

Step 1: Think about a team, service, or partnership you are part of. List three or four key roles or groups within it.

Step 2: For each, reflect on what might genuinely motivate them. Consider intrinsic drivers such as purpose, mastery, belonging, autonomy, or contribution, alongside extrinsic drivers such as recognition or progression.

Step 3: Notice any mismatches. Where are people being managed primarily through targets or control when they may be seeking meaning, connection, or trust?

Step 4: Identify one small change you could make to better align the system with what motivates people. This might be a different conversation, a shift in how success is recognised, or creating more choice and voice.

Pause and notice: Motivation grows when people feel understood. Small adjustments in how we lead can release significant energy in the system.

Closing Reflection

As you reach the end of this workbook, take a moment to pause and reflect on your journey. Systems leadership is not about mastering a fixed set of tools or ticking off a list of actions, it is a continual practice of noticing, learning, and experimenting.

Your growth as a leader emerges in the everyday choices you make, the connections you nurture, and the courage you show to step into complexity with curiosity and care. Carry these reflections with you, and allow them to guide the next steps of your leadership journey.

1. What kind of system leader are you becoming?
2. What will you experiment with next?
3. What will you keep noticing?

Video References**Video 1: System Leadership**

Mary Uhl-Bien [Complexity leadership theory: Shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era](#)

https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=KnJzSgYAAAAJ&citation_for_view=KnJzSgYAAAAJ:u-x6o8ySG0sC

Ralph Stacey <https://www.leadershipcentre.org.uk/artofchangemaking/theory/complexity/>

Margaret Wheatley, (2006) *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Video 2: System Thinking

John Sneddon [Systems thinking, lean production and action learning: Action Learning: Research and Practice: Vol 4 , No 1 - Get Access](#)

Video 3: Place Based Partnerships

Heifetz, Ronald A., Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Harvard Business Press, 2009

Video 4: System Leadership for Change and Culture

William Bridges [Bridges Transition Model - William Bridges Associates](#)

Video 5: How Distributed Leadership Transforms Systems

Harris, A., Jones, M., & Ismail, N. (2022). Distributed leadership: taking a retrospective and contemporary view of the evidence base. *School Leadership & Management*, 42(5), 438–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2109620>

Steve Reiss [16 Basic Desires Theory](#)