

## *System Leadership*

*To practice a discipline is to be a lifelong learner. You never arrive; you spend your life mastering disciplines.<sup>i</sup>*

Leadership scholar Peter Northouse emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and problem-solving. He stresses that “Knowledge has a positive impact on how leaders engage in problem-solving. ...[K]nowledge and expertise ... make it possible for people to think about complex system issues and identify possible strategies for appropriate change.”<sup>ii</sup> Additionally, it allows leaders “to use prior cases and incidents to plan for needed change ... [because] it is knowledge that allows people to use the past to constructively confront the future.”<sup>iii</sup> The ability to apply systems thinking to problem-solving, learning from past problems, and applying lessons to future change is one of the reasons for this book. But I hope that the knowledge of system theory, systems thinking, and tools will spark leaders to pursue more than just problem-solving and healthier change. I hope they will become, in essence, system leaders who intentionally integrate a systems perspective in everything they do, from daily work to strategic, long-term planning.

Peter Senge outlines several essential skills of a system leader.<sup>iv</sup> First, they must be able to “see the larger system,” in addition to its parts.<sup>v</sup> Next, system leaders effectively foster “reflection and more generative conversations.”<sup>vi</sup> In other words, they specialize in building collaborative environments and conversation as the basis of decision-making. Finally, they accomplish this by moving leadership groups away from “reactive problem solving to co-creating the future.”<sup>vii</sup> System leaders recognize the distinction between “problems ‘out there’” versus “in here,” and they know “how the two are connected.”<sup>viii</sup> As a result, they are able to create “space for change,” which enables “collective intelligence and wisdom to emerge.”<sup>ix</sup>

But, that takes effort and practice to learn and apply new ways of thinking and leading. One of the most profoundly practical leadership propositions I’ve encountered was Senge’s statement that “Practicing a discipline is different from emulating a model.”<sup>x</sup> The effort will be worth it. Here are some suggestions on applying systems thinking, which can gradually grow to become a default outlook.<sup>xi</sup>

**Practice seeing the whole rather than parts.** This first practice is central to systems thinking. Seeing in wholes rather than single events or patterns is transformational. What is the connection?

**Practice looking for connections:** Look for links in everything. Nothing exists independent of everything else.

**Practice changing perspectives.** For me, this is the illustration of the hag and the young woman. With practice, perspective change becomes more natural. How does perspective change from different parts of the system?

**Practice surfacing and challenging mental models.** Understanding one's assumptions about the world and how it works reveals how mental models may limit perspective and the thinking processes.

**Practice anticipating unintended consequences.** This is particularly important for church leaders. What might be the result of a proposed change or policy? How might that impact other parts of the system?

**Practice looking for changes over time.** Recognize that today's events are not isolated from patterns of the past, and they contribute to events and patterns of the future.

**Practice seeing yourself as an integral part of the system.** Understanding that you, as a leader, are part of the system—impacting the entire system by what you do or don't do—is essential for systems leaders. This perspective includes letting go of the search for someone to blame and focusing more on looking at the structure and its influence on system behavior.

**Practice embracing ambiguity.** This is an essential practice in a VUCA world. It means being able to hold the “tension of paradox and ambiguity”<sup>xiii</sup> and not feeling forced to apply a fix or to make something happen quickly.

**Practice looking for leverage.** Understand that the solutions to systemic problems are not always “close in time and space,” so finding leverage points requires patience and insight from studying the system.

**Always watch out for win/lose attitudes.** Win/lose thinking is linear thinking. It can apply fixes to symptoms but not implement effective long-term solutions to systemic problems.

**Distinguish between underlying problems and symptoms.** “Work to understand the underlying problem before addressing any of the symptoms.”<sup>xiii</sup> Systems leaders work on solving the foundational problem, rather than merely treating symptoms.

**Understand there are no broken systems.** Every system is perfectly structured to accomplish the outcomes it is producing. Every church is creating the outcomes it is designed to produce. If the outcomes are not what leaders expect, they need to address the systemic problems, including the structures that are producing them.

**Apply systems to ministry planning.** Churches are open systems, continually interacting with their environments. The interaction of church and environment is the key point of our mission. Systems leaders recognize that all ministry is accomplished in systems. How we reach our neighbors and serve our communities is influenced by systemic factors. Remember to incorporate these systems thinking habits when planning ministry to reach the community.

**Gather learning partners.** As you share your new learning with others, find others who want to learn with you. Learning occurs better with a group. Spend time talking about what you are learning, and discuss current events from a systems perspective.

**Maintain your optimism.** Systems thinking is not too complicated. It can be learned. And it is an “antidote to this sense of helplessness that many feel” in VUCA times.<sup>xiv</sup> It is a discipline to discern the structures underlying complex situations and how to leverage change amid complexity and ambiguity.<sup>xv</sup> The ability to see what is actually happening and to discern a way out is energizing for leaders. It helps stifled leaders breathe again. It forestalls burnout. And, as Scripture teaches us, it all begins by restructuring how we think.

Systems thinking re-enlivens churches to be able to risk change, to discuss the “undiscussable,” and to move forward in healthy ways without the necessity of gaining absolute, 100 percent.<sup>xvi</sup> As people sense the freedom to speak and the freedom to make mistakes, “willingness to confront conflict” grows as well.<sup>xvii</sup> Systems thinking reduces the sense of organizational and personal helplessness that exists in stuck churches, and systems thinking tends to produce a sense of efficacy, hope, and optimism, which increases organizational and personal and resilience.

Leaders will continue to encounter CAVE (Constantly Against Virtually Everything) people in every church.<sup>xviii</sup> Systems leaders can pursue effective courses of action without being derailed by CAVE people because systems thinking doesn’t assign blame or identify the culprits of opposition. They recognize opposition as systemic resistance and treat it accordingly. Diffusion of innovation theory demonstrates that the majority of vocal opposition will eventually disappear as the change becomes normalized. This means that systems leaders must persevere

through the transitions. Old habits die hard. New habits are slow to form. But the benefit of systems thinking in the church will be worth the effort.

Ultimately, systems thinking impacts the health and effectiveness of church leaders and their churches in a positive way. Systems thinking provides a solid basis for becoming healthier and more effective in whatever leadership position and whatever organization or ministry you lead. The old adage that goes something like, “Insanity is repeatedly doing the same things and expecting a different result” applies. As much as we would like to maintain equilibrium (and so would everyone else), leaders are *called* to more than maintenance—they are called to lead growth and change. Systems thinking heavily impacts our approaches to change.<sup>xix</sup> It shapes our expectations and even our anticipation of change. Systems leaders recognize that change is an ongoing process in any system and that they can guide and shape change effectively forearmed with systems knowledge and tools.

**Integrate learning organization and adaptive leadership concepts.** Sharon Daloz Parks emphasizes that “To exercise leadership, you need to build a systemic framework that will yield a bigger picture and give you access to a larger field of understanding and action.”<sup>xx</sup> The combination of systems thinking, the learning organization, and adaptive leadership accomplish that.

Both the learning organization (characterized by the work of Peter Senge and Chris Argyris) and adaptive leadership (Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky) are based on systems thinking. Senge called systems thinking the central discipline of the five disciplines of the learning organization. Of the five disciplines, systems thinking and mental models are directly applicable. The three remaining disciplines—personal mastery, building shared vision, and team learning—are significantly enhanced through the application of systems thinking.<sup>xxi</sup> Systems leaders will find that learning and applying learning organization concepts is a natural progression and application of systems thinking.

Heifetz and his colleagues produced works that demonstrate “the relationship among leadership, adaptation, systems, and change.”<sup>xxii</sup> Systems thinking and processes are advantageous to adaptive leaders as they lead their congregations to engage in adaptive change. The advantage of seeing from a new systems perspective—getting on the balcony—empowers leaders to diagnose and intervene in their churches in powerful and productive ways. But change produces resistance, and leaders must deal with the resistance.

Heifetz observes that “leadership requires disturbing people—but at a rate they can absorb.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Systems-wise leadership helps people absorb change. Congregations expect their leaders to give them the “right answers,” but not to “confront them with disturbing questions and difficult choices.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Employing adaptive leadership approaches creates “risk, conflict and instability” because adaptive work, just as systems work, addresses underlying structures, mental models, and “deeply entrenched norms.”<sup>xxv</sup> Resistance to change is deeply ingrained with fear and anticipation of loss. Heifetz explains it this way:

You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain.<sup>xxvi</sup>

System leaders can accomplish adaptive work in the church by using systems tools that help others adopt the “disturbing news” that deep change is necessary rather than “kill[ing] the messenger.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Neither systems thinking nor adaptive leadership removes the pain of change. But they can lessen it. This is true because of the nature of systems thinking. There is no need to search for enemies, people to blame, or culprits who opposed the change because the problem is the system structure. Everyone in the congregation can focus on something, not someone, as the problem. Adaptive work challenges deeply ingrained beliefs, habits, and mental models, and systems approaches focused on gaining common vision and shared mental models can lessen anxiety regarding change. Systems-based adaptive leadership promotes healthy change in other ways as well.

Heifetz’s description of adaptive challenges demonstrates they are synonymous with systemic issues. Getting on the balcony is seeing from a systems perspective. Adaptive challenges are systems issues. Giving the work back is applying systems theory to social systems. Systems thinking is deeply intertwined with adaptive leadership.

Adaptive leadership emphasizes that leaders must “give the work back” to the people who need to make the change. Leaders cannot, and should not, do all the adaptive work. As Heifetz explains, leaders must resist “the pressure to take the responsibility for solving problems off [the congregation’s] shoulders and instead mobilizing [them to do] their share of the adaptive work.”<sup>xxviii</sup> But people will consciously or unconsciously avoid work that will upset the systemic equilibrium.<sup>xxix</sup> So, engaging congregational leaders and others in group model building

processes can promote and facilitate accomplishing adaptive tasks in two ways: by minimizing work avoidance and by resisting the temptation to redefine adaptive work as a “technical problem.”<sup>xxx</sup> Work avoidance comes in various guises, like denial, scapegoating, passing the buck, blaming, and character assassination, among others. The point is that group systems processes, like modeling, help overcome work avoidance by demonstrating the work is necessary, common, and productive. No scapegoat to take the blame is required because the group has come to a common understanding of the adaptive change and the necessity of the change.

Adaptive leadership “is a profound shift because it fosters a greater capacity to see the big picture [and] recognize complex patterns.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Previously, “One’s world [could] be perceived as manageable. . . . In contrast, within a systemic view, one’s world becomes larger, more complex, less manageable, and one is vulnerable to feeling overwhelmed, diminished, and less secure.”<sup>xxxii</sup> But systems leadership addresses the anxiety by preparing leaders “to deliver disturbing news and raise difficult questions in a way that people can absorb, prodding them to take up the message rather than ignore it or kill the messenger.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> The “kill the messenger” reactivity is overcome by a systems approach, in which the search for someone to blame is negated by the search for the problematic systemic structure. In a systems church, the problems are not the people; they are the system. That significantly increases the likelihood of church leaders “staying alive” in leadership because it reduces “the extent to which you become the target of people’s frustrations.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> A central part of systems leadership—“giving the work back to the people”—keeps church leaders out of the line of fire.<sup>xxxv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (2nd ed.), (New York: Crown Publishing, 2006), 10.

<sup>ii</sup> Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (8th ed.), (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2019), 162–163.

<sup>iii</sup> Northouse, *Leadership*, 162–163.

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton, and John Kania, “The Dawn of System Leadership,” *Policy & Practice* (February 2019): 14.

<sup>v</sup> Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, “The Dawn of Systems,” 14.

<sup>vi</sup> Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, “The Dawn of Systems,” 14.

<sup>vii</sup> Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, “The Dawn of Systems,” 15.

<sup>viii</sup> Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, “The Dawn of Systems,” 15.

<sup>ix</sup> Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, “The Dawn of Systems,” 15.

<sup>x</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 11.

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- <sup>xi</sup> Linda Booth Sweeney, “Thinking Habits,” accessed December 21, 2019, <http://www.lindaboothsweeney.net/thinking/habits>.
- <sup>xii</sup> Sweeney, “Thinking Habits.”
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ollhoff, Jim and Michael Walcheski, “Making the Jump to Systems Thinking,” *Systems Thinker*, 17 No. 5 (June/July 2006): 9.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 69.
- <sup>xv</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 69.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Chris Argyris, *Organizational Traps: Leadership, Culture, and Organizational Design* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 15–16.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Argyris, *Organizational Traps*, 15–16.
- <sup>xviii</sup> David A. Shore, *Launching and Leading Change Initiatives in Health Care Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 4.
- <sup>xix</sup> Michael Beer, *Organization Change and Development: A Systems View* (Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear Publishing, 1980).
- <sup>xx</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2005), 149–150.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 6–9.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 13.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change* (Rev. ed.), (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2017), 20.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 20.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 20.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 12.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 12.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, 305.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 154.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, 307.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Daloz Parks, *Leadership*, 55–56.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Daloz Parks, *Leadership*, 55–56.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 12.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 139.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 139.