Systems Leadership, Systems Change, Systems Theory, and Systems Practice (And Systems Convening)

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Introducing myself

Connect @antlerboy on LinkedIn Twitter Mastodon

Systems community of enquiry: www.syscoi.com

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systems | cybernetics | complexity

business evolutionary | avid learner

Learn with me in the RedQuadrant tool shed

All the links are at bentaylor.com

Contents

- SO many systems things!

- Systems change

- Systems leadership

- Systems practice, systems thinking

- Systems convening

- 'Robust systems'

- Where it often goes wrong

- Discriminating these approaches

Work in progress… perhaps comparable to 4/10 years!

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SO many systems things!

Systems Leadership

Usually 'exercising hierarchical authority over a set of institutions that are supposed to work together'. Less often 'leaders who are good systems thinkers', occasionally 'finding ways for a group of organisations relating to some common perspectives or boundaries to work more effectively together'

Systems Change

Can be: 'change The System'; create alternative authority systems; reshape structures to generate 'better' (more equitable, inclusive) outcomes. Often norms around 'connection', 'the system seeing and understanding itself', unified governance etc – 'organising the system'. SC and SL blend and cross

Systems Theory

In practice, often over-simplified version of Systems Dynamics, something and/or General Systems Theory – and perhaps some concepts from complexity theory ('the story of autopoeisis'). Potentially: underlying core patterns of the dynamics of organisation, nature.

Systems Practice

In practice often some basic 'mapping' – gesturing at something related to Causal Loop Diagrams etc, usually 'flat' – i.e. no hierarchy of structures, properties, effects, and 'naïve first order' – assumed to be correct and objective, and technically changeable.

And Systems Convening

Social learning about social learning: narrative work on 'convening call' and benefits, and work on legitimacy, boundaries agency, power, identity. This is why it's so good!

And Systems Weaving

Facilitative, opportunity seeking, network thinking based, relationships.

Mentions for

Constellations, futures work, (systems) design, Adaptive Leadership…

How to make some useful distinctions?

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A giant universe of good and bad stuff

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Systems change

The big picture: outcomes arise from complex, adaptive systems

Who are we, and what are we here for?
Principles and practices

As we see the system, we might see our role differently or renegotiate boundaries ▲▼ Our boundaries determine what the systems is and how we can look at it

Seeing the system – things you can see, and things that happen
What works, and what are the opportunities for improvement?

Intervening in the system helps up to see it better and from different angles ▲▼ Seeing the system allows us to choose how and where to intervene

Intervening in the system
Building on strengths and shaping positively

The results of our interventions can make us question every level of the framework ▲▼ Interventions generate learning about how to work at every level

Learning
About our interventions, our way of seeing, and our identity
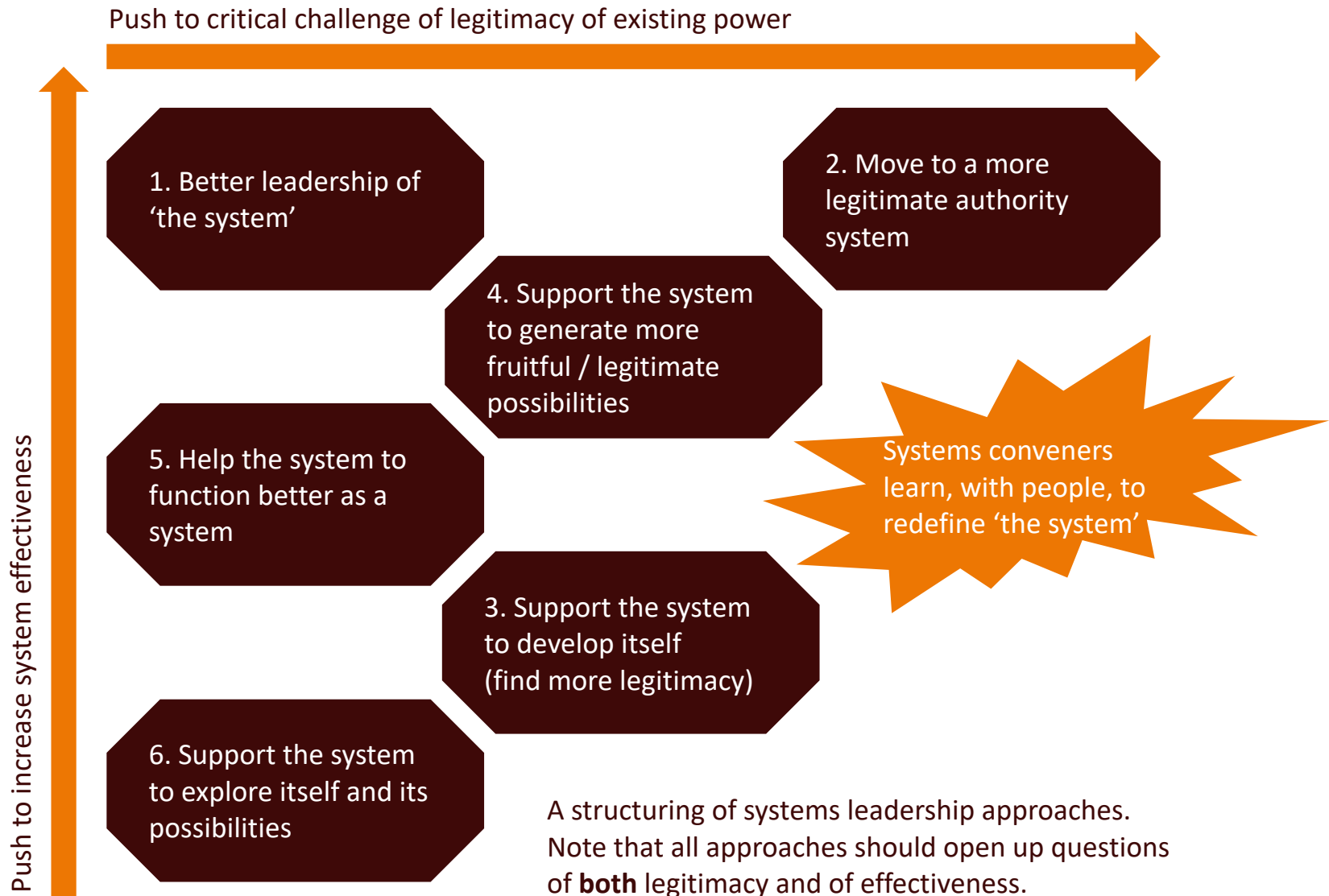
Is the system learning?

Are we learning?

These are logical levels, not linear steps – all working simultaneously

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SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

Systems leadership

Push to critical challenge of legitimacy of existing power

Push to increase system effectiveness

1. Better leadership of 'the system'

2. Move to a more legitimate authority system

4. Support the system to generate more fruitful / legitimate possibilities

Systems conveners learn, with people, to redefine 'the system'

5. Help the system to function better as a system

3. Support the system to develop itself (find more legitimacy)

6. Support the system to explore itself and its possibilities

A structuring of systems leadership approaches. Note that all approaches should open up questions of **both** legitimacy and of effectiveness.

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SYSTEMS PRACTICE, SYSTEMS THINKING

My idea of core systems thinking

'To understand is to know what to do' Wittgenstein

'I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of which story or stories do I find myself a part?' MacIntyre

So. In a world of complexity, with coexisting nebulosity and pattern, that can be interpreted in unlimited ways and only partially controlled…

- distinctions, framings, ways of seeing emerge and allow us to make sense of things,
- to make the complexity manageable,
- and generate meaning and value, purpose, and legitimacy, power, and ethics.

We shape our world, and our world shapes us.

- This includes what we see and don't see, the (un)discussable, cues for behaviour, etc.

Yet, the complexity, nebulosity and pattern, and multiple interpretability remain.

- Feedback can create learning shocks – what we thought, was wrong.
- The natural development or results of our ways of seeing and being can seem undesirable.
- Our existing multiple worlds of meaning can create conflict, exploitation, and confusion.
- And people have agency; they can never be fully predicted or controlled.

We can learn. To act differently, to reframe, to change our identity.

systems | complexity | cybernetics is about working with this (I say)

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'OK but get real… practical'

- Systems Laws – see The Grammar of Systems, Hoverstadt

- Systems approaches – many and varied – see SCiO professional competency framework, the Level 7 Apprenticeship, or many other sources
  - sound working knowledge of at least three approaches, including at least two of the widely-used systems methodologies or approaches: Critical Systems Heuristics, Soft Systems Methodology, System Dynamics, Viable Systems Model.
  - Understands the applicability, benefits and limits of each systems approach for each situation, and how to integrate them into a broader methodological design.
  - Understands relevance of, and knows methods for, determining appropriate scope, scale and systemic levels, for understanding, diagnosing and modelling situations, or for system design.

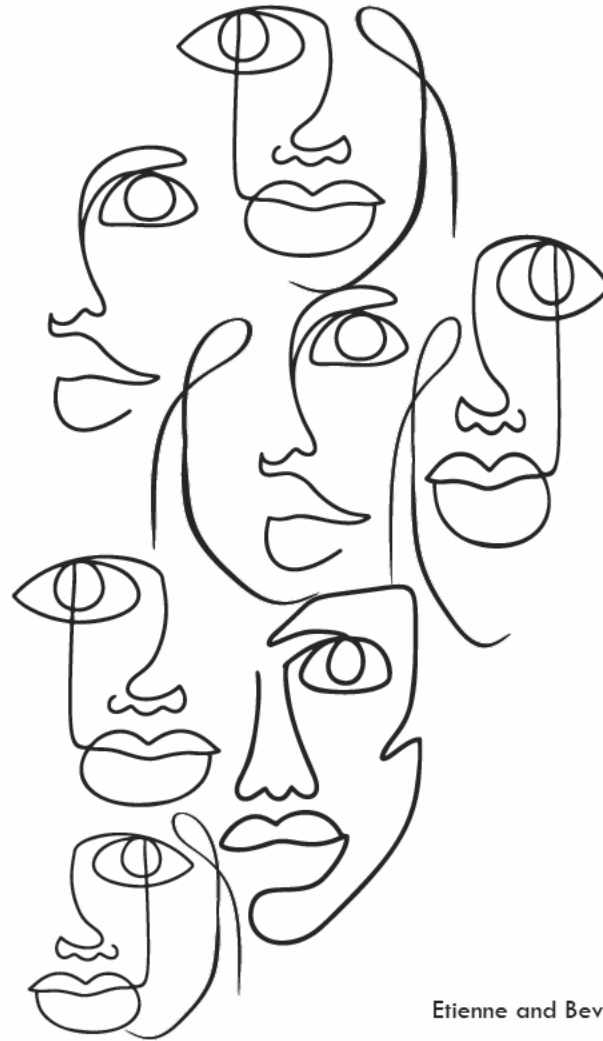- systems | complexity | cybernetics *arguments* – see every forum ever!

Systems practice is not mysterious – it is necessarily complex

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SYSTEMS CONVENING

Systems Convening
A crucial form of leadership for the 21st century

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner

You may not have heard about them; what they do is rarely in their job description. You may not even be aware of what they do; they tend to act as enablers rather than taking credit or seeking the spotlight. But they are here—working on sustainable change, across challenging silos, in complex social landscapes, amid changing circumstances. We call them *systems conveners.*

Their stance is both visionary and pragmatic. They look at the social landscape in which they operate—an organization, a city, a community, a country, the world—and they see unrealized potential that exists across traditional boundaries and silos.
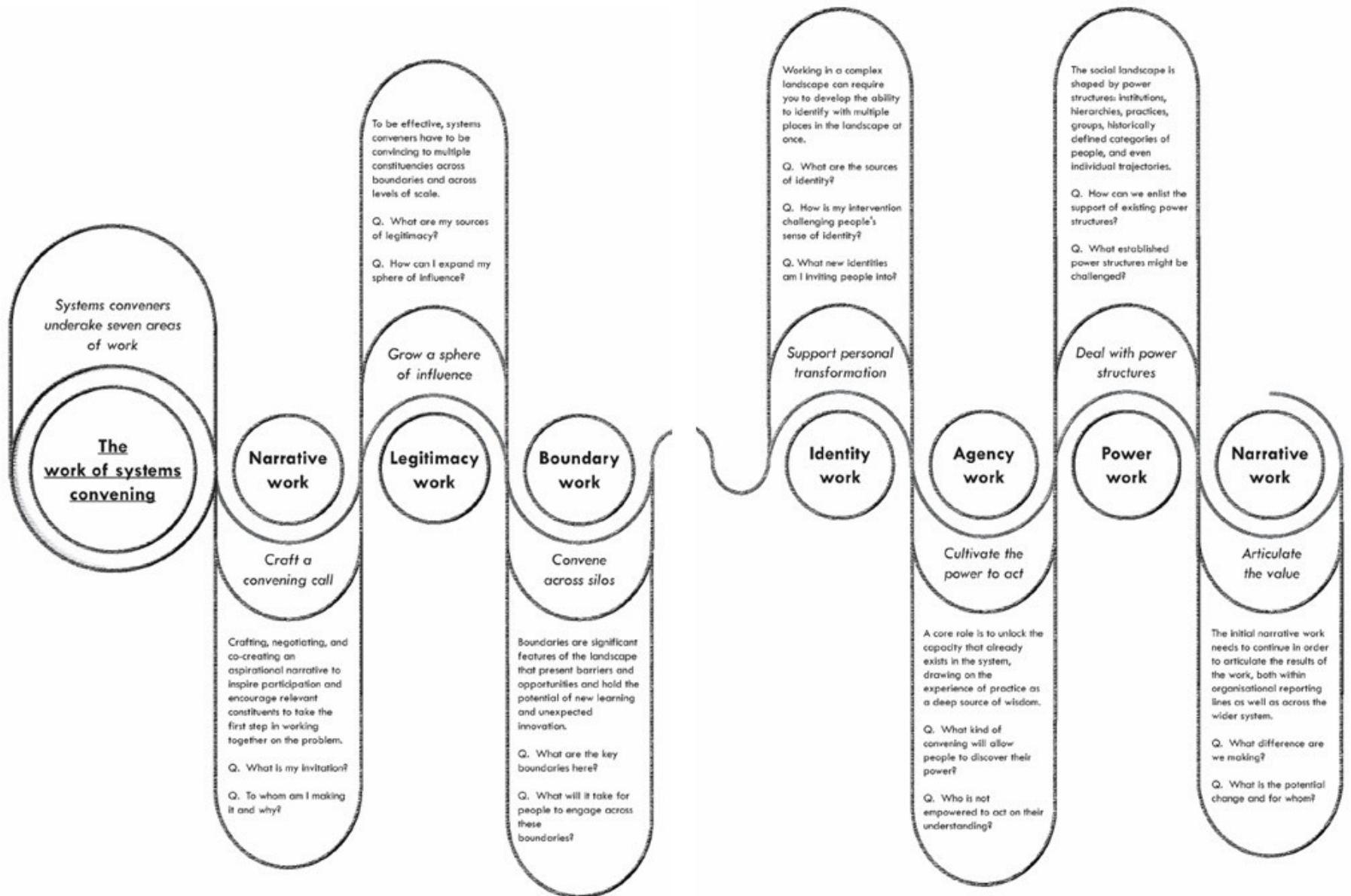
Many challenges today require learning that brings people together across different practices, different institutions, different goals, different cultures, different loyalties. Systems conveners seek to enable the conversations and learning across these boundaries that are needed to make a difference.

They can do this because they take on a particular kind of leadership that creates synergies, often between unlikely learning partners. They are interested in doing what it takes to make a real difference, more than in complying with convenient metrics, following strict job descriptions or making showy moves. They know that most challenges cannot be addressed by one person or even one group.

When seeking to make a difference, they are ready to embrace the full complexity of the human world; they are willing to engage the perspectives of all involved to create outcomes that even they wouldn't have expected. They welcome bottom-up initiative as an engine of transformation because they believe that change is more likely to be sustainable when people, and unlikely alliances among them, have an active part in it. Systems conveners play the long game with dogged tenacity.

Knowing that real transformation of contexts, cultures, boundaries, and identities takes time, they are prepared to go the distance, moving incrementally through a series of successes and failures.

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What it looks like in practice:	Convening call	Legitimacy	Boundary		Identity	Agency	Power	Value creation	
	For you, the convener.		For you to enable/		set up the conditions for participants to		For conveners and participants.		
Engagement — Encounters and social spaces that invite interactions, such as conversations, debates, joint reflection, doing things together, or producing shared artifacts.	Negotiate the call with people and invite them to co-develop it	Build trust through personal interaction, listening, offers of assistance, and showing understanding that reflects their perspective	Engage directly with people from other locations Inquire into what we can do together to make a difference?		Develop a sense of themselves and their competences in new ways by how people engage with them — or not	Be recognized as a contributor, be listened to	Have conversations with those in power to negotiate how they and you understand a situation	Have people exchange the stories of how their participation is creating value for them	**Engagement**
Imagination — Good stories that draw people in, field trips, role plays, pictures, documentaries, maps, and visuals; building aspirational narratives, visions, and scenarios for possible futures.	Imagine what can be achieved and why other constituencies need to be included	Help people see where you are coming from and why your own journey puts you in a position to promote your vision	Imagine what others experience in their context, their aspirations, and their struggles		Understand who/ where others are in the broader landscape. Feel allegiance to communities or groups too diffuse for belonging based on interactions (e.g. lovers of a music style, citizens of a nation) Envision a new self in the future	Foresee the implications of new agency in own context	Build a picture of the power structures and politics relevant to achieving your and others' aspirations	Have people imagine how certain activities or tools might create value to make a difference that they care to make	**Imagination**
Alignment — Agreements, setting goals and expectations, division of labor, workplans, rules, codes of conduct, audits, procedures, checklists, forms, standards, legal systems, and moral frameworks.	Have the convening call incorporate and align with demands of accountability people identify with or are subject to	Show that you understand—and can align with—what they care about or are accountable to	Take into account what others have done about the issue at hand Coordinate across boundaries to achieve common goals		Articulate what kinds of non-negotiable aspirations, values, or principles people identify with	Seek agency withing the confines of existing accountability systems Demand that accountability systems and targets realign to include own perspective and agency	Understand and communicate what is non-negotiable for those who have formal power and those who don't	Have people agree on aspirations for areas where creating value matters and how to monitor that	**Alignment**

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The work of systems convening

Systems conveners undertake seven areas of work

Narrative work

Craft a convening call

Crafting, negotiating, and co-creating an aspirational narrative to inspire participation and encourage relevant constituents to take the first step in working together on the problem.

Q. What is my invitation?

Q. To whom am I making it and why?

Legitimacy work

Grow a sphere of influence

To be effective, systems conveners have to be convincing to multiple constituencies across boundaries and across levels of scale.

Q. What are my sources of legitimacy?

Q. How can I expand my sphere of influence?

Boundary work

Convene across silos

Boundaries are significant features of the landscape that present barriers and opportunities and hold the potential of new learning and unexpected innovation.

Q. What are the key boundaries here?

Q. What will it take for people to engage across these boundaries?

Identity work

Support personal transformation

Working in a complex landscape can require you to develop the ability to identify with multiple places in the landscape at once.

Q. What are the sources of identity?

Q. How is my intervention challenging people's sense of identity?

Q. What new identities am I inviting people into?

Agency work

Cultivate the power to act

A core role is to unlock the capacity that already exists in the system, drawing on the experience of practice as a deep source of wisdom.

Q. What kind of convening will allow people to discover their power?

Q. Who is not empowered to act on their understanding?

Power work

Deal with power structures

The social landscape is shaped by power structures: institutions, hierarchies, practices, groups, historically defined categories of people, and even individual trajectories.

Q. How can we enlist the support of existing power structures?

Q. What established power structures might be challenged?

Narrative work

Articulate the value

The initial narrative work needs to continue in order to articulate the results of the work, both within organisational reporting lines as well as across the wider system.

Q. What difference are we making?

Q. What is the potential change and for whom?

What systems convening is not

- A systems approach
    - in fact, many systems convenors learn later – with great recognition – that they have been reciting prose all their life…
- Programmable, recruitable, plannable, teachable, within boundaries
- About institutional systems like public sector partnerships
- A method or a theory

But it is a thing!

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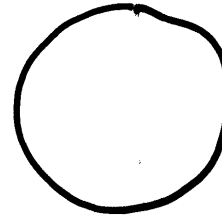# 'ROBUST SYSTEMS'

Four things you need to do to create a robust system

Differentiate: increase ability to adapt
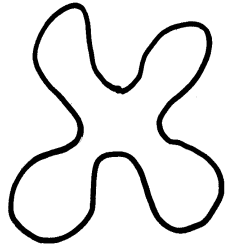
Use the different strengths and capabilities of the different cultures and organisations.

Homogenise: increase stability

Actively learn about all the cultures and organisation.
Share knowledge, best practices.
Incorporate aspects of one another's cultures and practices.

POWER

LOVE

Individuate: increase autonomy
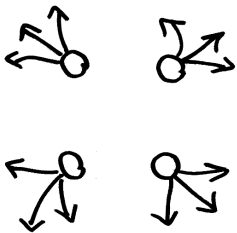
Put your unique talents on the line.
Identify and encourage the full use of the talents of all.

Integrate the system as a whole

Create a compelling system mission.
Feed and support one another.
Modulate behavior in the service of the whole.

Barry Oshry (Organic Systems) and Stafford Beer (Viable Systems)

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Help the system to connect to itself
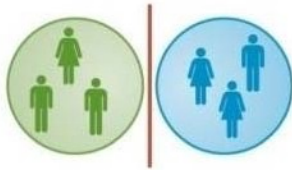
Strengthen boundaries for safety and security
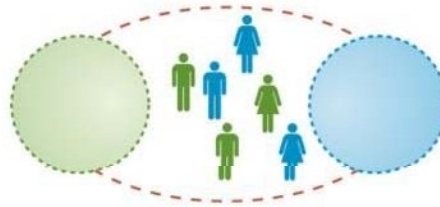
Suspend boundaries for confidence and trust
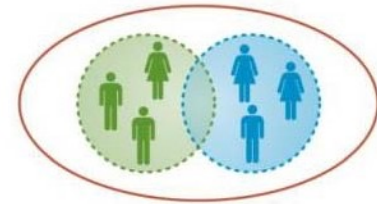
Cross-over boundaries for interdependence and collective learning
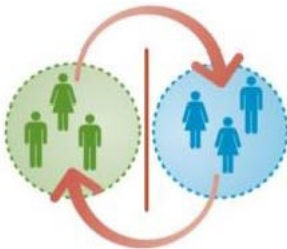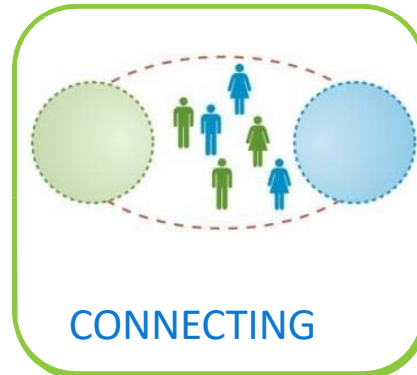
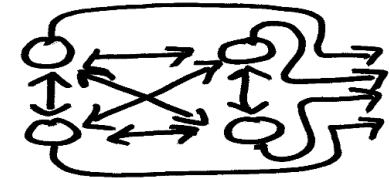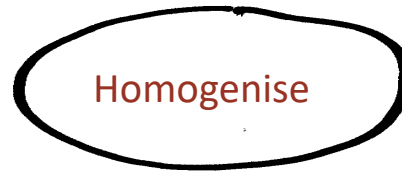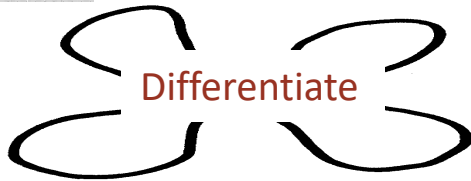**Understand boundaries for awareness and respect**
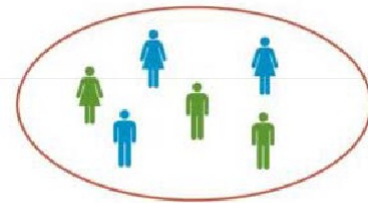
Reframe boundaries for shared ownership and accountability
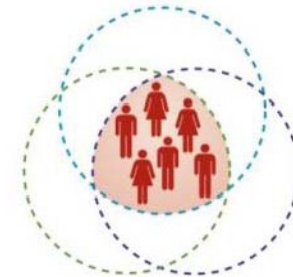
Change boundaries to reinvent or find alternative futures

From the Centre for Creative Leadership

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Six boundary spanning practices

Differentiate

Homogenise

Integrate

Individuate??

BUFFERING
Outcome = Safety & Security

CONNECTING
Outcome = Mutual Confidence & Trust

WEAVING
Outcome = Interdependence & Collective Learning
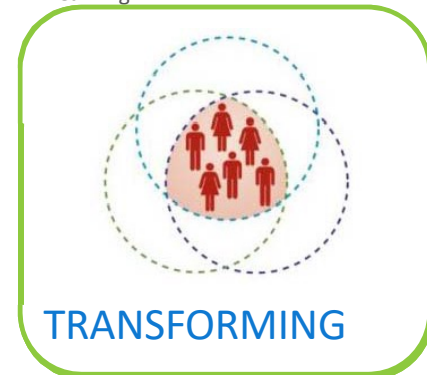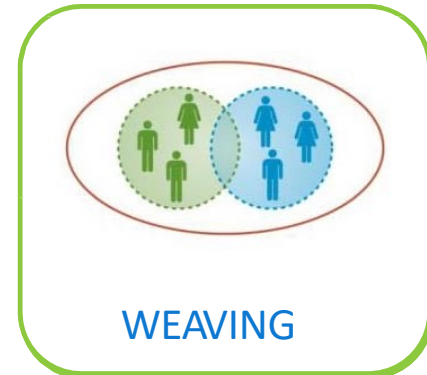
REFLECTING
Outcome = Awareness & Respect

MOBILIZING
Outcome = Community, Ownership & Accountability

TRANSFORMING
Outcome = Reinvention & Alternative Futures

Study and learn   Systems Leadersh and Systems Prac   **Take on and share**   **Bigger picture together**

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See also 'ego traps' at
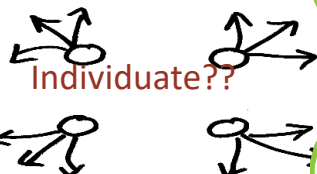
https://bit.ly/fourquadrantsofthinkingthreats and below

WHERE IT OFTEN GOES WRONG

A first set of challenges

- Not seeing the whole
- Believing we know what the whole is
- Assuming the whole that we see is real and concrete
- Denying the realities of the parts
- Assuming that seeing we are part of the whole creates a paradigm shift
- Believing that we are speaking from a different paradigm
- Denying the problems inherent in the whole
- Ineffectual and counterproductive approaches as a result of the above

Speaking from a specific context

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DISCRIMINATING THESE APPROACHES

So, how might we discriminate?

Interrogate for:

- an appreciation of epistemological and ontological complexity (or, better still, non-dualist complexity) that the type of leadership questions encountered in systems leadership inherently involve

- acknowledgement of ethical complexity and a shadow side of leadership and change

- an appreciation of fundamental human, systems, complexity and/or cybernetic laws; these are the patterns that underlie individual or organisation-level behaviour, from the tendency of those 'done to' by the system to develop shared identity and solidarity, to the Conant-Ashby Good Regulator Theorem (that something capable of regulating a system must be a model of that system)

- ethical considerations not being mistaken for means; 'doing the right thing' does not automatically mean that the system will thereby be improved

- understanding of the ever-changing nature of the system, along with contested power, ethical, and other dynamics

- multiple definitions of the system-in-question and of leadership, to avoid static systems mapping and mechanistic intervention that takes only a first-order perspective

- practical action and

- shared triple-loop learning.

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I welcome conversation!

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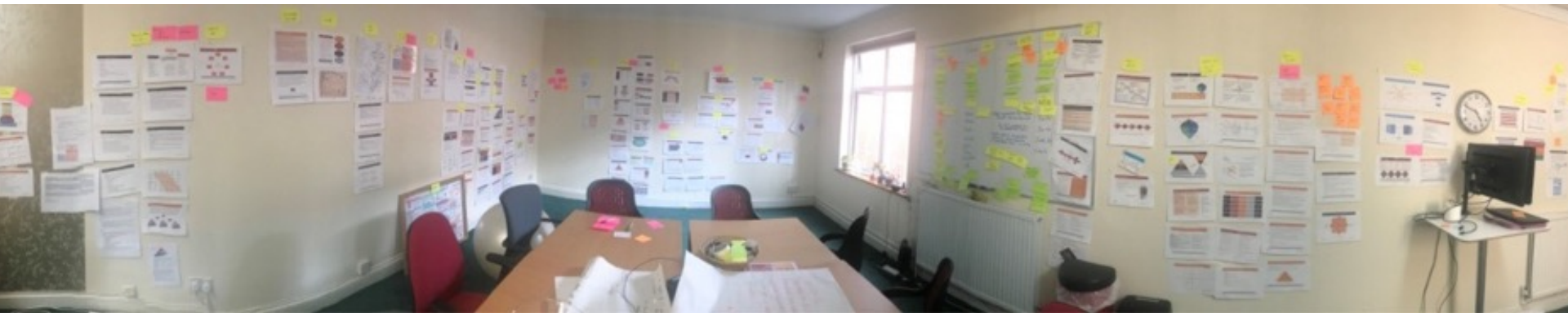
All the links are at bentaylor.com

The RedQuadrant Way tool shed

This framework brings together a set of methods, approaches, practices, tools and frames, set out at more fully in link at bottom, particularly:

- An understanding of organisation functionality (the Viable Systems Model, outside-in demand management and operational effectiveness, strategic and adaptation capability);

- An understanding of human relationships in organisation (Barry Oshry's Organic Systems Framework, systems leadership theory (along the lines of Jacques and Macdonald et al), multiple perspectives, capabilities, and other organisational development approaches); and

- Intervention theory and method.

Cohort-based mentoring, action learning, online/blended learning, meta-contextual approach.

https://bit.ly/RQtoolshedshowandtell

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