

THE DAWN OF SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP SNAPSHOT

-  **See the larger system.** Re-directing attention: seeing that problems “out there” are “in here” also—and how the two are connected
 -  **Foster reflective and generative conversations.** Re-orienting strategy: creating the space for change and enabling collective intelligence and wisdom to emerge
 -  **Shift from reacting to co-creating the future.** Practice, practice, practice: all learning is doing, but the doing needed is inherently developmental
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Excerpt from: Senge, P. et al. (2015). *The Dawn of System Leadership*. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

“Today, many of us are “swimming in the same river”—trying to cultivate collective leadership in diverse settings around the world even while our larger cultural contexts remain firmly anchored to the myth of the heroic individual leader. This search for a new type of leadership creates a real possibility to accelerate joint learning about system leaders. For undoubtedly we are at the beginning of the beginning in learning how to catalyze and guide systemic change at a scale commensurate with the scale of problems we face, and all of us see but dimly.

Though they differ widely in personality and style, genuine system leaders have a remarkably similar impact. Over time, their profound commitment to the health of the whole radiates to nurture similar commitment in others. Their ability to see reality through the eyes of people very different from themselves encourages others to be more open as well. They build relationships based on deep listening, and networks of trust and collaboration start to flourish. They are so convinced that something can be done that they do not wait for a fully developed plan, thereby freeing others to step ahead and learn by doing. Indeed, one of their greatest contributions can come from the strength of their ignorance, which gives them permission to ask obvious questions and to embody an openness and commitment to their own ongoing learning and growth that eventually infuse larger change efforts.

As these system leaders emerge, situations previously suffering from polarization and inertia become more open, and what were previously seen as intractable problems become perceived as opportunities for innovation. Short-term reactive problem solving becomes more balanced with long-term value creation. And organizational self-interest becomes re-contextualized, as people discover that their and their organization’s success depends on creating well-being within the larger systems of which they are a part.

There are three core capabilities that system leaders develop in order to foster collective leadership. The first is the ability to see the larger system. In any complex setting, people typically focus their attention on the parts of the system most visible from their own vantage point. This usually results in arguments about who has the right perspective on the problem. Helping people see the larger system is essential to building a shared understanding of complex problems. This understanding enables collaborating organizations to jointly develop solutions not evident to any of them individually and to work together for

The second capability involves fostering reflection and more generative conversations. Reflection means thinking about our thinking, holding up the mirror to see the taken-for-granted assumptions we carry into any conversation and appreciating how our mental models may limit us. Deep, shared reflection is a critical step in enabling groups of organizations and individuals to actually “hear” a point of view different from their own, and to appreciate emotionally as well as cognitively each other’s reality. This is an essential doorway for building trust where distrust had prevailed and for fostering collective creativity.

The third capability centers on shifting the collective focus from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future. Change often starts with conditions that are undesirable, but artful system leaders help people move beyond just reacting to these problems to building positive visions for the future. This typically happens gradually as leaders help people articulate their deeper aspirations and build confidence based on tangible accomplishments achieved together. This shift involves not just building inspiring visions but facing difficult truths about the present reality and learning how to use the tension between vision and reality to inspire truly new approaches.

Much has been written about these leadership capabilities in the organizational learning literature and the tools that support their development.³ But much of this work is still relatively unknown or known only superficially to those engaged in collaborative systemic change efforts.”