



Systems Leadership for Sustainable Development: Strategies for Achieving Systemic Change

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Addressing complex challenges through systems change

The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda includes 17 inter-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each representing complex systems – such as climate, food, health, cities – with myriad stakeholders. Achieving progress on this vast agenda requires a collective embrace of complexity. It challenges individuals and organizations to join together to take collective action through large networks and coalitions, in order to create impact and systemic change at scale.

This requires a departure from traditional top-down, hierarchical and linear approaches to implementing change. Instead it requires new innovative and adaptive approaches that engage broad networks of diverse stakeholders, harnessing their complementary capacities to advance progress toward a shared goal, formed out of an understanding and vision for change of the entire system. This approach is called “systems leadership.”

The concept of systems leadership emerged from practitioners and academics drawing from the fields of complex systems science, business leadership, design thinking, and social change movements. Leaders and experts in diverse sectors and locations have converged around the same key elements involved in fostering systems change. Based on our experience applying and supporting systems leadership in diverse sectors, we believe that broadening the use of this approach could help strengthen efforts to reach the SDGs.

Systems Leadership: A tool for our times

Systems Leadership seeks to address complex societal challenges by combining deep understanding of system dynamics, inclusive engagement and empowerment of all stakeholders, and new forms of collaborative leadership that enable widespread action for system change. Systems Leaders aim to catalyze, enable and orchestrate systems-level change by mobilizing large networks of diverse actors to work together in new ways to achieve a shared goal. Systems Leadership is a combination of knowledge, skills and strategies used to tackle complex challenges. It is comprised of three interconnected elements:

- 1 The Individual:** The skills of **collaborative leadership** to enable trust-building, learning and empowered action among stakeholders who share a common goal
- 2 The Community:** The tactics of **coalition building and advocacy** to develop alignment and mobilize action among stakeholders in the system, both within and between organizations
- 3 The System:** An understanding of the **complex systems** shaping the challenge to be addressed

THE KEY ELEMENTS OF SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP



The CLEAR Framework for Leading Systems Change

In our experience, most systems change initiatives do not follow a pre-defined path – they tend to evolve over time. While each initiative is unique, certain recurring themes appear in nearly all systems-change efforts, suggesting a core set of tactics and behaviors which form the heart of systems leadership across diverse settings.

Through the CLEAR framework for Leading Systems Change, we describe five key elements of the systems change process. These roughly follow the evolution of many systems-change initiatives, but are not necessarily sequential – they may overlap, or repeat in cycles throughout the course of an initiative.

C Convene and Commit

Systems-change efforts often begin in response to a complex problem that stakeholders realize they cannot solve alone. Engaging key stakeholders in dialogue, supported by a trusted facilitator, can enable them to discover shared interests, define a shared goal, and commit to working together in new ways to create systemic change.

EXAMPLE *The **We Mean Business Coalition**, founded by seven business convening organizations, has mobilized more than 1300 private-sector commitments from over 800 companies to combat climate change, and undertakes influential advocacy to encourage government action on specific policy priorities.*

L Look and Learn

Through system mapping, stakeholders can create a shared understanding of the components, actors, dynamics, and influences that together create the system and its current outcomes. This is most effective as a collective, iterative effort, undertaken with an open mind to strengthen knowledge and identify opportunities for action.

EXAMPLE *The **Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition** (GAIN) tackles the underlying drivers of malnutrition in part by understanding and addressing key gaps in the system through policy advocacy, investor and food-enterprise matchmaking, and formation of business alliances to scale availability of fortified foods.*

E Engage and Energize

Building and maintaining stakeholder engagement in a long-term systems-change effort requires open and continuous communication among a broad network. This helps to build trust, commitment and enthusiasm, which encourages the pooling of resources and capabilities in new and innovative ways. Stakeholders can be energized through inspiration, incentives or deadlines; and maintain momentum by defining and celebrating key milestones.

EXAMPLE *The World Economic Forum's **New Vision for Agriculture** initiative engaged 1500 leaders around a shared vision for agriculture-sector transformation. It catalyzed alliances in 21 countries, developing over 100 value-chain partnerships. Highly networked local and global leadership, working toward regular milestones, helped drive momentum.*

A Act with Accountability

Systems leaders encourage widespread multi-stakeholder action which is self-directed but drives toward a shared vision and goal. Galvanizing this type of distributed action across a large network requires clear goals and shared principles to help set the direction; and ongoing evaluation and accountability mechanisms to track and learn from experience. As an initiative grows in scope, establishing coordinating structures and governance systems – such as a Secretariat and multi-stakeholder Board – often becomes necessary.

EXAMPLE ***Every Woman Every Child** (EWEC) is a global movement that intensifies action by governments, multilaterals, the private sector and civil society to address the health challenges facing women, children and adolescents. The Movement's global secretariat supports implementation of the Global Strategy and a Unified Accountability Framework, including a monitoring plan and an Independent Accountability Panel that reviews progress annually.*

R Review and Revise

Systems change is an ever-evolving process of adaptive experimentation, learning, growth and change. Stakeholders can embrace these dynamics with an agile, flexible, innovative and learning-centered approach. Setting clear goals and measurement frameworks at the start of an initiative is key to then monitor, evaluate and report progress. Sharing experiences and solutions can help build capacity and disseminate innovations.

EXAMPLE *The **2030 Water Resources Group** supports country-level collaboration for water security, engaging 600 organizations in 14 countries and states on projects and policy reforms. It has commissioned external evaluations and adapted its strategy based on the resulting lessons and insights.*

The Journey of System Leadership: Ten “Aha! Moments”

Participants in systems-change initiatives often describe the experience as a collective “journey” of discovery that evolves over time and lacks a defined roadmap, even if the ultimate goals are clear. Fortunately, many stakeholders encounter similar milestones and challenges which can serve as useful reference points. These often crystallize in an “Aha! Moment” – a new insight that describes the dynamics at a given moment in the journey. Several that we and others have encountered are described below.

1 “No one is in control”

Stakeholders realize that no single entity has authority over the entire system – and that the pathway to change involves influencing, rather than directing, the behavior of the system at hand.

2 “It’s up to us”

Stakeholders transition from blaming others for the systemic problem to recognizing a collective capacity and responsibility to solve it themselves.

3 “Everything is Connected”

Collective mapping and learning about the system generates an appreciation for the many dimensions and connections within and beyond the system at hand.

4 “That’s our North Star”

Stakeholders agree on a shared goal or aspirational vision, which serves to guide and align their efforts.

5 “To Go Far, Go Together”

Building powerful multi-stakeholder coalitions requires engaging, co-creating with and securing buy-in from all stakeholders. This requires significant effort, and is essential to the success of a systems-change initiative.

6 “We’ll find a way”

Challenges and setbacks inevitably emerge in the course of a systems-change initiative. They can serve as powerful drivers of innovation and collaboration, as stakeholders find new ways to solve problems jointly.

7 “I can make a difference”

Connecting to a network can enable individuals to have a broader influence. One person, organization or small group can have significant impact at any stage of a systems-change initiative.

8 “We need coordination”

Systems change initiatives often grow to a scale where a more formalized structure is created to support collective action. This can take various forms, including designation of a coordinating team or Secretariat.

9 “Wow! Change is happening”

Demonstrating tangible progress and celebrating milestones is important to maintain morale and momentum within a large coalition. Progress may be tracked based on agreed indicators; unexpected or intangible outcomes should also be recognized.

10 “We’re in it together, for the long haul”

After the initial excitement of launching a new initiative, maintaining momentum and enthusiasm can be a challenge. Taking a long view, reaffirming commitment, and being open to change and evolution can help initiatives to thrive over time.



The Systems Leadership Mindset

In facilitating systems change initiatives, we have found that mindsets, behaviors, and emotional intelligence play a crucial role in developing and maintaining relationships among the network. Many systems leaders do their best to model and encourage these mindsets and behaviors, including ongoing efforts to:

- **Keep an open mind:** Letting go of preconceptions and adopt a learning mindset.
- **Curate new conversations:** Enabling breakthrough moments through multi-stakeholder dialogue
- **Cultivate shared power:** Practicing a “servant leadership” approach, focused on supporting and empowering others to lead.
- **Encourage innovation through co-creation:** Enabling co-creation through dialogue and innovative solutions design
- **Harness your passion:** Cultivating a strong emotional connection to both the mission and the stakeholder network, inspiring trust and commitment among others
- **Demonstrate your commitment:** Maintaining momentum and building confidence through sustained commitment and enthusiasm
- **Cultivate personal capabilities:** Investing in reflection and self-development to cultivate skillful and principled insight and action.



Mainstreaming Systems Leadership: The Way Forward

Systems leadership offers a set of tactics that are relevant and needed to address the complexity of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the approach remains at an early stage of development in terms of having a consistent definition and application, widespread adoption, and clearly-attributable results. Existing systems leadership experts and organizations could develop greater alignment, and explore the potential for collaboration to enable broader adoption of the approach. Additional partners – such as universities, international organizations, businesses, civil society groups, local and national governments – could contribute valuable research and training capacity. Ultimately, a broader application of the systems leadership approach could be enabled by:

- A **wider understanding of the concept and core principles** of systems leadership;
- Universal access and **availability of information, tools and training programs** to help develop and strengthen system leaders;
- Expanded **mentoring support** for and among systems leaders, to provide support and guidance in navigating challenging dynamics
- Robust and systematic **evaluation and sharing of experiences and outcomes** of system leadership initiatives
- High-level **leadership support** for the systems leadership approach among respected individuals from diverse sectors and regions, embracing it as a tool for empowerment and systems change.

While systems leadership is not yet widely practiced, it offers a potentially valuable tool for addressing the complexity, dynamism and scale of the multi-dimensional challenges underlying the SDGs. As such, it shows great promise as a tool for advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This Executive Summary provides key insights from a full-length report released in September 2019 by the Corporate Responsibility Initiative of the Harvard Kennedy School and posted online at:

<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/programs/cri>

The report was compiled based on desk research, expert interviews, and the co-authors’ experience in facilitating, supporting and analyzing systems leadership initiatives in the health, nutrition, agriculture, environment, and energy sectors. We are grateful to the reviewers who provided valuable feedback and are detailed in the full report; input from readers is also welcome.

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Photo credits: World Economic Forum New Vision for Agriculture Initiative (left); Scaling Up Nutrition Movement (center) and Rich City Rides (right).