



# Using Systems Leadership to Shape Change: Introductory Masterclass

---

**Debbie Sorkin**

**National Director of Systems Leadership, The Leadership Centre**

**[Debbie.Sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk](mailto:Debbie.Sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk)**

**[@DebbieSorkin2](https://twitter.com/DebbieSorkin2)**



## Why Systems Leadership matters: because

- a) you're not always in charge;
- b) 'no plan survives contact with the enemy';
- c) it's complex



**And you're increasingly likely to come across it if you're trying to deal/  
work with public services**



**“The complexity of the system within which public health operates, and the move towards place-based working, supports the continuing and growing need for a skillset that means that public health professionals can work across organisations.”**

**Strengthening systems thinking and leadership is one of five key and interlocking themes in ‘Fit for the Future: A review of the public health workforce’, PHE May 2016**

**“Local system leadership is required to ensure that the totality of public resources are brought together to address shared priorities for health improvement.”**

**LGA Health and Wellbeing Boards Diagnostic Tool 2016/17**

**“System leadership is needed...it involves...developing a shared vision...learning and adapting...and having an open and iterative process that harnesses the energies of clinicians, patients, carers, citizens...independent and voluntary sectors, and local government...”**

**NHS Planning Guidance to 2020/21, December 2015**

---

Overall purpose of the Masterclass: for you to learn about, and be able to use, Systems Leadership approaches in your system – including spotting what might be really going on



- **Session 1:** Complexity and wicked issues: background to Systems Leadership: what it is, how it works, when to use it
  - **Session 2:** How to deal with wicked issues: learning from research and projects around the country; practical lessons in systems behaviours, what works and what doesn't
  - **Session 3:** Getting started and trying it out: an exercise in framing and reframing
  - At each stage, there'll be an opportunity to reflect and discuss what this means for you, and about how you might make some real progress, even if (especially if?) you're not feeling like a medal-winner at the moment
-

## **Session 1**

### **Leading in Complexity:**

### **Living Systems and Wicked Issues**

---

Context: the issues that people are wrestling with in public services are increasingly complex



- Struggle to **match growing demand with smaller resource pot**: NHS financial gap is growing and impact is increasingly visible (*de facto* rationing in some places for elective care, staff shortages, departmental closures, reconfiguration). Mirrored in other public services (e.g. local govt to lose >£10bn in central grant by 2020, cuts falling heavily on social care)
  - Implications around unmet need and statutory responsibilities
  - Emphasis on integration, but seen in terms of **structures**
  - Additional fluidity brought about by **plans for devolution**
  - Broadening range of stakeholders and **audiences** – more routes to navigate and relationships to build (and re-build when people leave)
  - Difficulties in demonstrating **public value and having it acknowledged by the public**, at the same time as changes in **public expectations** – personalisation, co-production, independent living – all coinciding with worry about deterioration in future services
-

## Systems leadership is seen across public services as a way of working with complexity



**“Leaders are struggling to innovate, integrate, manage demand and find new solutions.”**

**“Leaders are wrestling with ‘wicked issues’ that shape-shift and defy resolution, and which cannot be resolved by single agencies acting alone.”**

**“We are...applying systems thinking to the practical reality of trying to achieve complex change.”**

*Sue Goss, ‘A View from the Bridge’, OPM May 2015*

---

Systems Leadership can do this because of how it's defined:  
taking complexity as a given; cross-sector, partial and working with  
shared endeavour, relationships and TRUST



**“Systems Leadership:**

the **collaborative** leadership of a **network** of people in different **places** and at different **levels** in the system, creating a shared endeavour and co-operating to make a **significant change.**”

**About leading:**

when you're not in charge  
when you need to ask  
when it's complex  
when you have no money

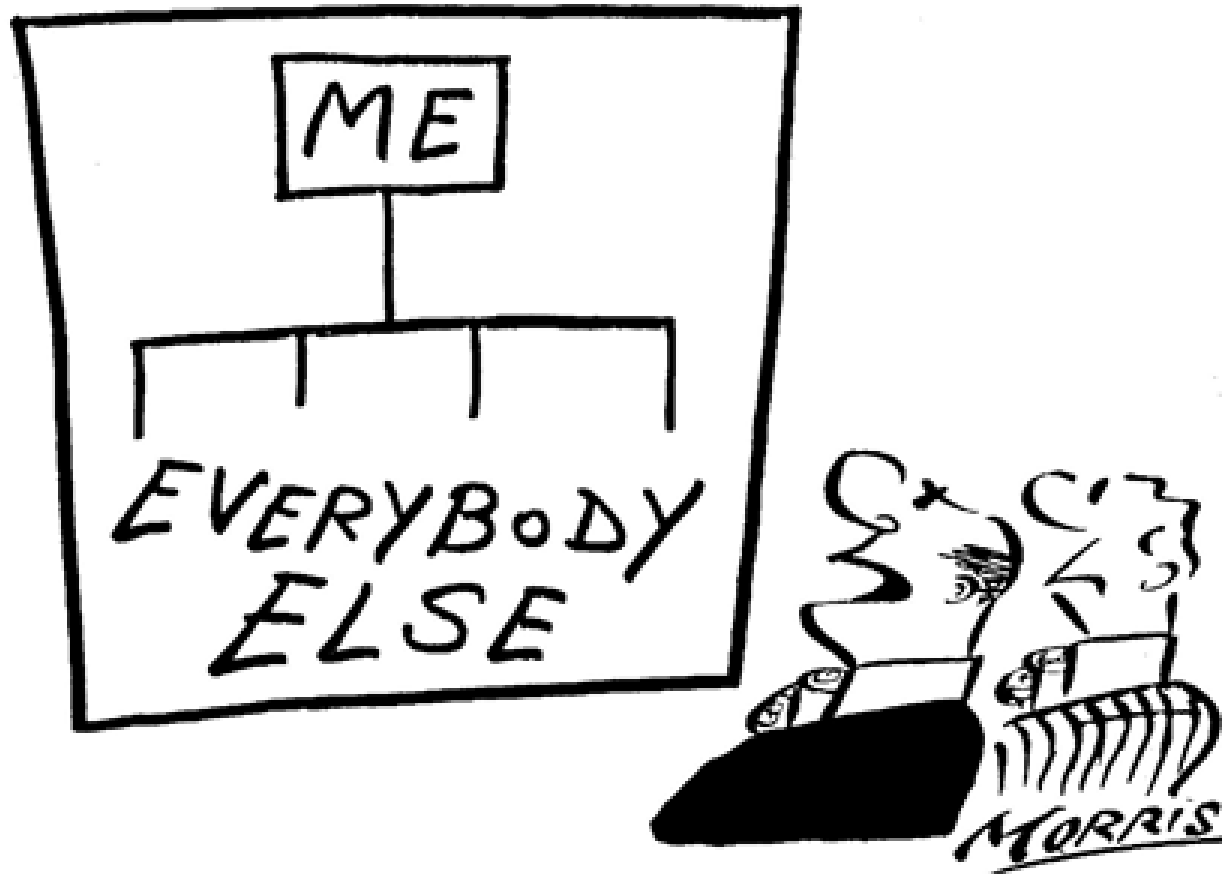
**About shared ambition/relationships:**

participative/partial/emergent

**“Systems move at the speed of trust”**

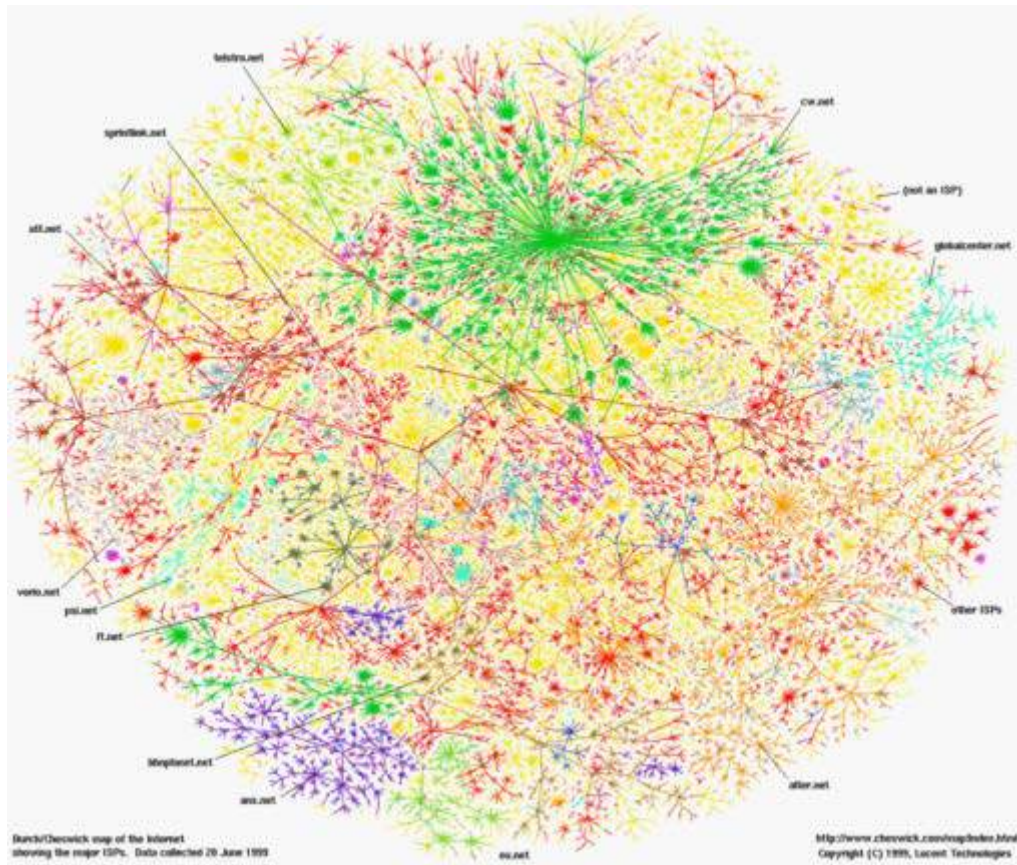
---





"I like to keep things simple."

A system is much more kinetic and open-ended – which is why it gives you room for manoeuvre



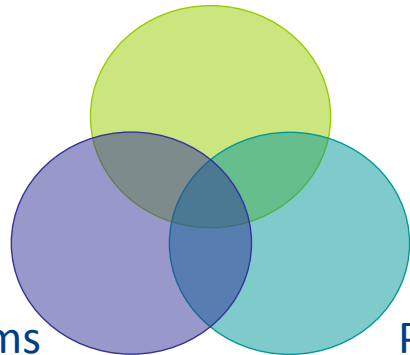
**A system:**

**a set of individuals, organisations or bodies working together or interacting in some way as part of an interconnecting network; a **complex whole****

# You can think of a system as a living thing: Myron Rogers' "Working with Living Systems"



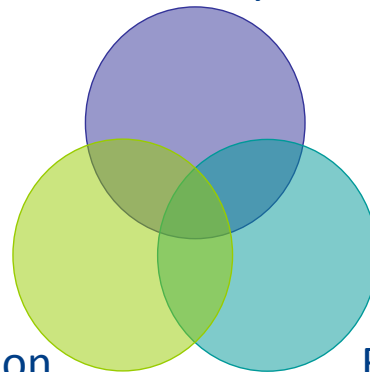
Structure



Systems

Policy

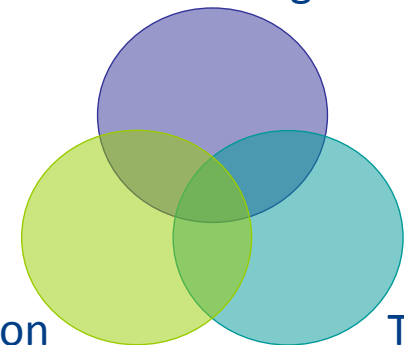
Identity



Information

Relationships

Meaning



Action

Trust

Some living things are nice....



But not all...



**And some systems really are out to get you:  
Systems are not necessarily neutral  
Maturana & Varela – evolutionary biology**



- **Organisms, from single cells to eco-systems have a variety of characteristics in common**
  - **They have evolved to be in a perfect relationship with their environment**
  - **It is a symbiotic relationship, the organism/organisation defines the environment and the environment defines the organism**
  - **Organisms are self-referencing, they act to preserve their own identity (autopoeisis)**
  - **If there is an external source of perturbation the organism acts to kill it, be it internal or external.**
  - **If the organism is held perturbed for sufficient time it adapts to this new condition.**
-

You make Systems Leadership practical by emphasising leadership at all levels, and by grounding it in behaviours



**Not just about authority at the top of organisations**

It's a practical understanding – and awareness – about *how* you do what you do, and the impact on others

So it's about behaviours, and taking responsibility for them

And it's everyone's business – people working at all levels in all sectors

It therefore enables you to lead across organisational boundaries

You can use frameworks to drive culture

---

Tools to help you describe leadership:  
levers to pull – frameworks that put leadership  
behaviours into practical form. Pilfer these relentlessly

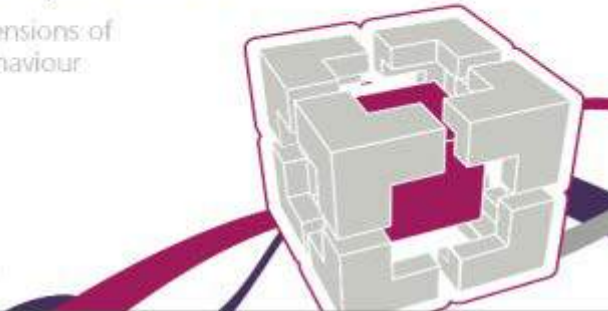


Version 1.0

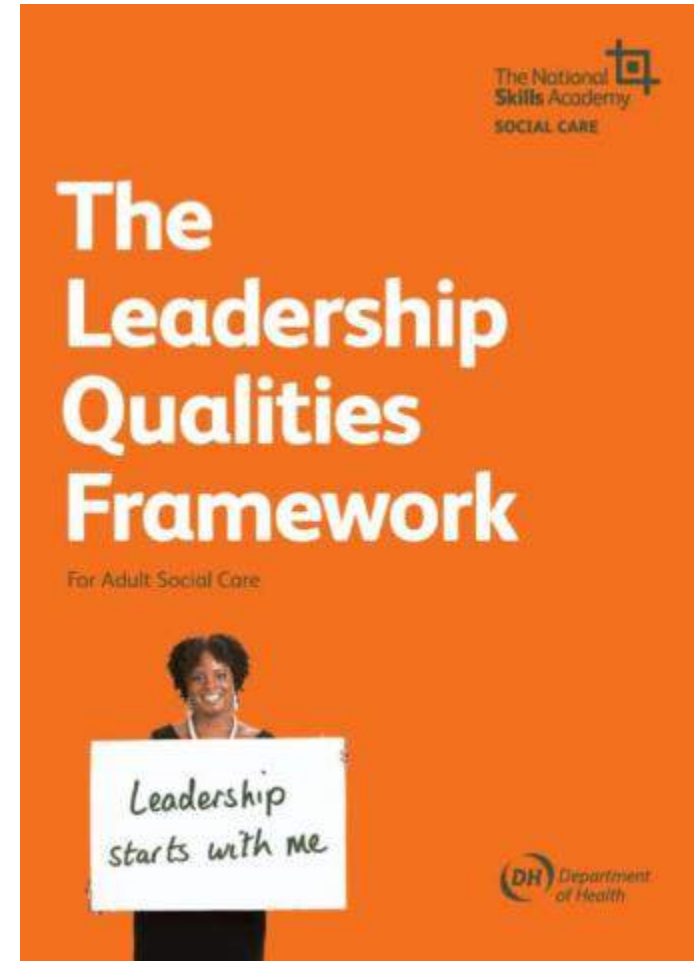
**NHS**  
Leadership Academy

## Healthcare Leadership Model

The nine dimensions of  
leadership behaviour



[www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk](http://www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk)





# You don't need to be a systems leader all the time: Keith Grint: critical, tame and wicked issues



Different kinds of issues require different kinds of change and different kinds of approach:

- **Critical issues: Commander**
  - **Tame issues: Management**
  - **Wicked issues: Leadership**
-

- Portrayed as self-evident crisis; often at tactical level
- General uncertainty: though not ostensibly by commander who provides 'answer'
- No time for discussion or dissent
- Legitimises coercion as necessary in the circumstances for the public good
- Associated with command and encouraged through reward
- **Commander's role is to take required decisive action, i.e. provide answer to problem**



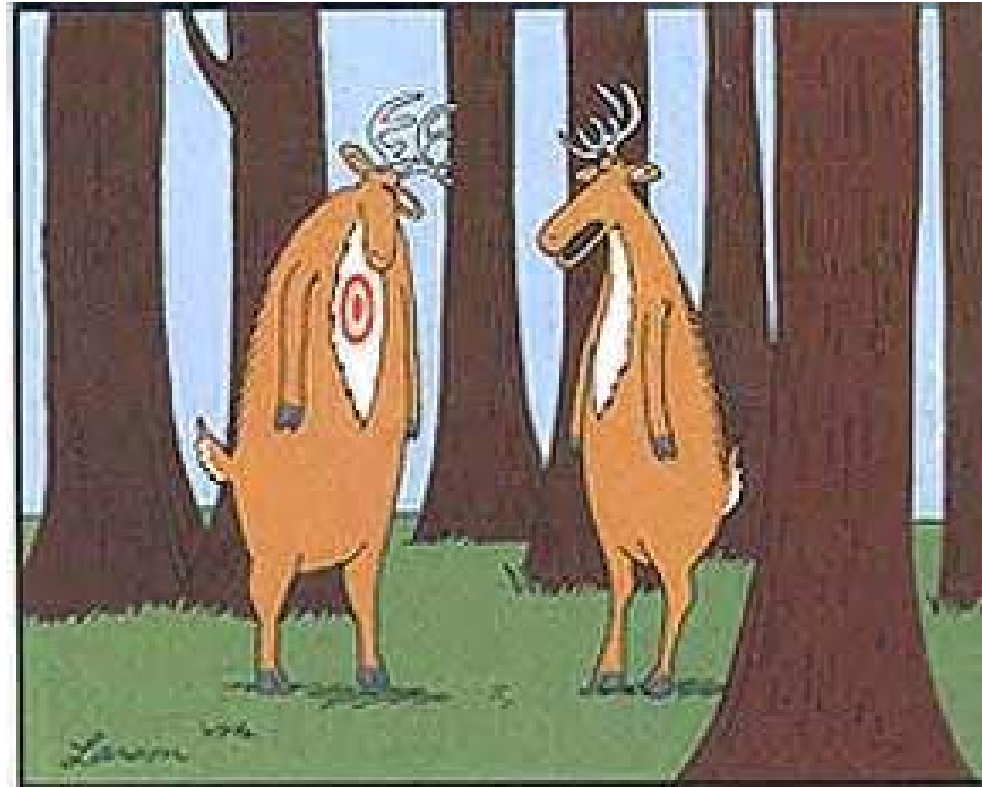
- Issues as puzzles – there is a solution
- Can be complicated but there is a unilinear solution to them
- These are issues that management can (and has previously) solved
- There are established methods which are known to work
- Heart transplants, relocation and launching a new product are all tame issues
- **Management's role is to engage the appropriate process to solve the issue: technical leadership**



- New, recalcitrant or intransigent – you don't know what to do, you put up with poor systems because you're used to them or the issues have been around for ever and seem impossible to fix
- Complex – issues can't be solved in isolation
- Sit outside single hierarchy and across systems
- No stopping rule and therefore no definition of success
- No right or wrong solutions; rather you aim for progress and better developments
- Uncertainty and ambiguity inevitable
- Leadership role is to ask the appropriate question and engage collaboration: adaptive leadership



- Clamour to sack people
- Go for blame
- Go along with pretending that everything's working
- Put things in the blue box



"Bummer of a birthmark, Hal."

## How NOT to deal with wicked issues: clamour to sack people



**Oct 2013: Sky TV, breaking news...Baby T**

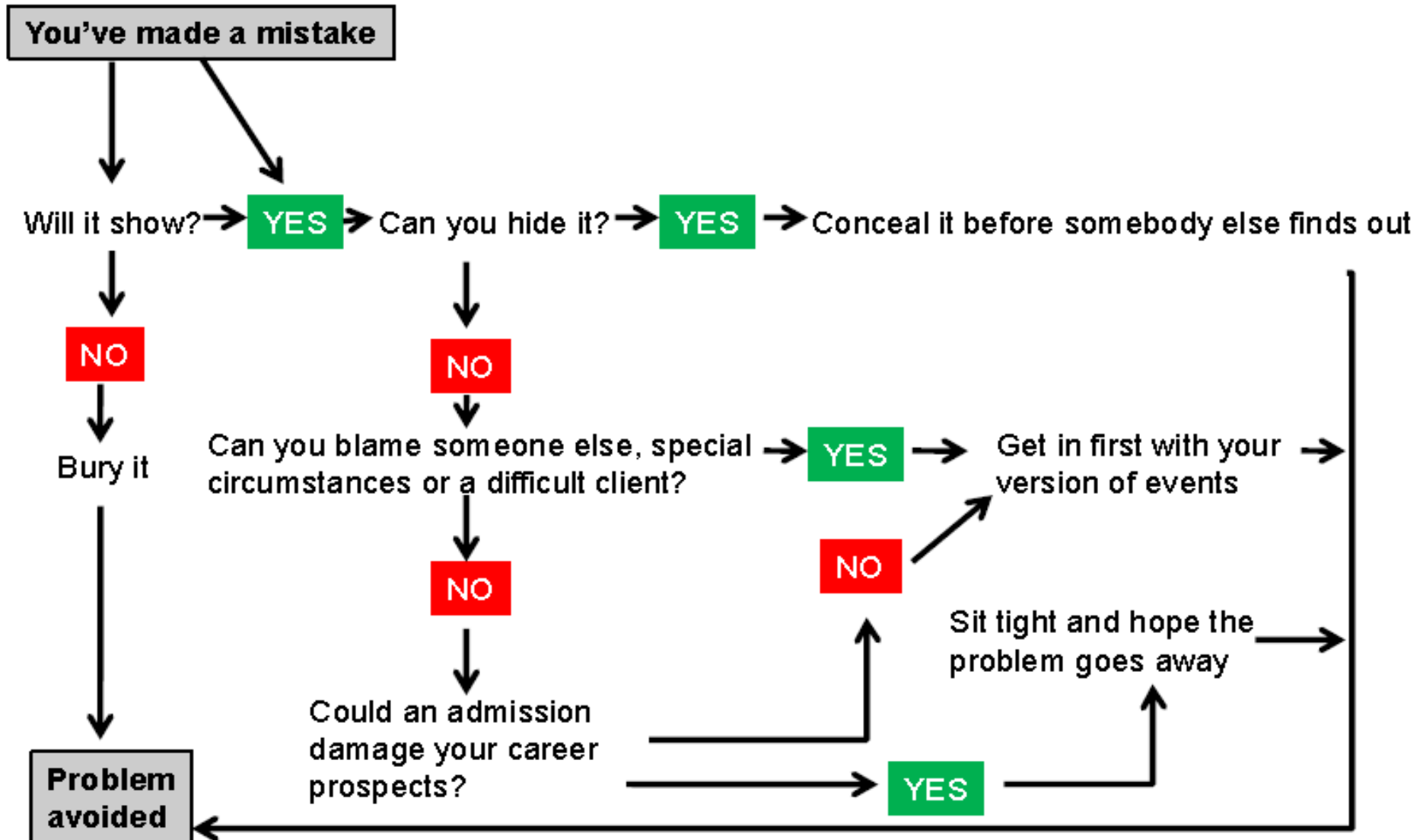
**Clare Fallon (reporter) at Haringey Council, post-Baby P/Victoria Climbie**

***“We were told by Haringey Council that things would change, that systems would be put in place to stop this kind of thing happening again and yet here we are this evening talking about another child who has been failed by the system.”***

**Martin Stanford, in the studio: *“And anyone offering their resignation at all, Clare?”***

---

# How NOT to deal with wicked issues: go for blame



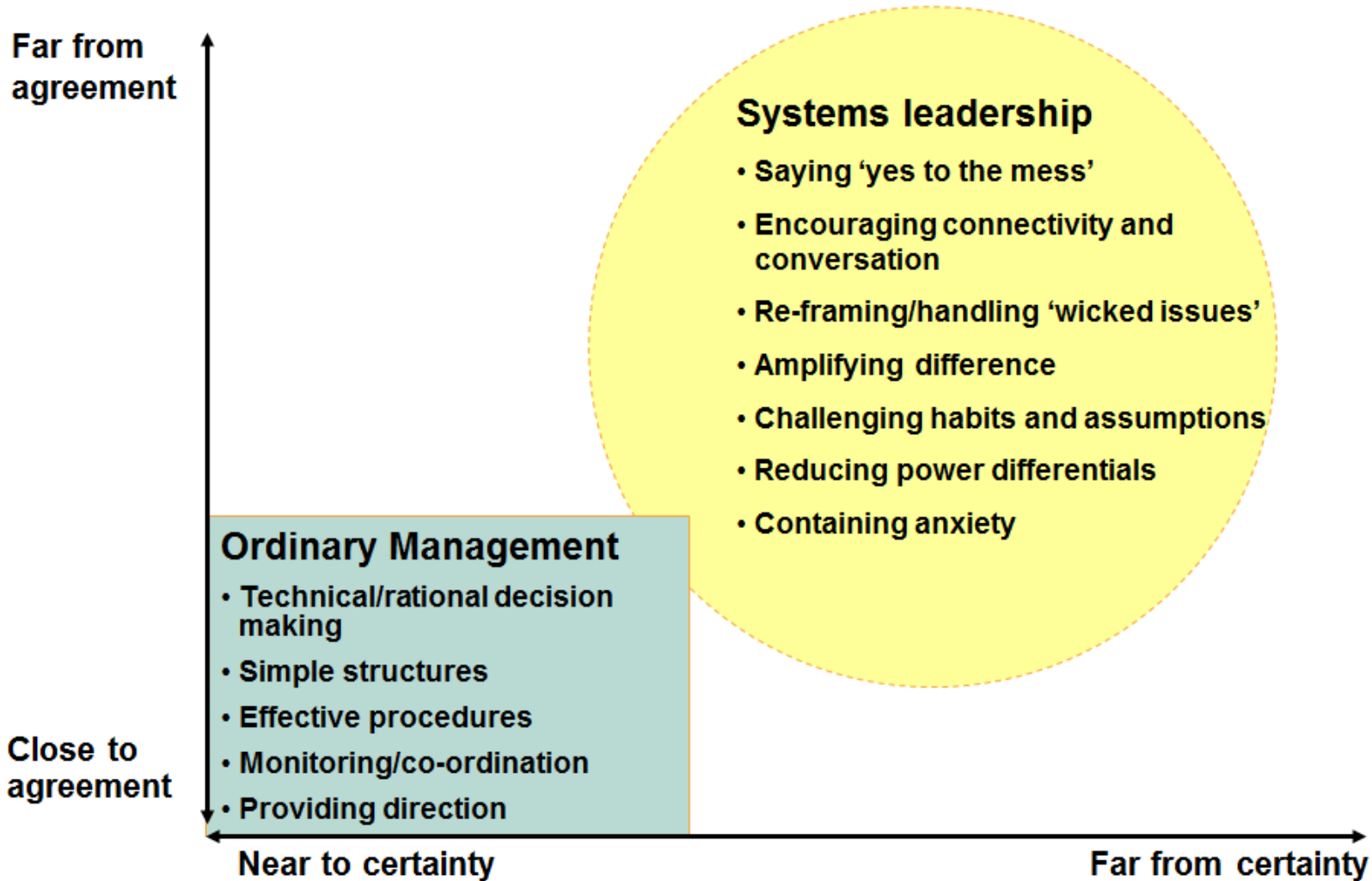
## How NOT to deal with wicked issues: go along with pretending everything's fine - Prozac leadership



- **Prozac Leadership: David Collinson, 2011**
  - **Unremittingly positive approach**
  - **Encourages leaders to believe their own propaganda**
  - **Discourages people for raising problems, admitting mistakes, focusing on failure**
  - **The only people who believe the (corporate) messages are the (corporate) leaders**
  - **(Corporate) leaders constantly surprised when things go wrong given how well everything seemed to be going**
-



How NOT to deal with wicked issues:  
put things in the blue box (when they don't belong there):  
Ralph Stacey



**What are your wicked issues?**

**What are the behaviours that go with them?**

**Who around you puts things in the wrong box? How does this stop things moving/working?**

---

## Session 2

### How to deal with Wicked Issues

**Learning from Systems Leadership in places: what works  
(and what doesn't)**

---

# Working with complexity and wicked issues: Learning from the national Systems Leadership programme: research, joint leadership development and practice in places



**Leadership for Change Programme**  
**Cohort 3**  
A single National Programme for senior leaders in public services, rooted in Systems Leadership.

You'll work with other senior leaders, who will support you to develop your own leadership practice. You'll be part of a community of practice, where you'll share your own experiences and learn from others.

What are your goals for this year?  
What are your goals for next year?

Partners: NHS, Local Authorities, Fire, Police, and other public services.

**Future Directors Programme**  
A single National Programme for those who aspire to director-level roles in the provision of public services.

The Future Directors Programme is a leadership development programme for senior leaders who are serious about their professional and personal development. The programme is open to those who are currently in senior leadership roles, who will receive participants to a mix of 12-18 months of leadership development, understanding with the most significant skills and knowledge to be able to take on a significant role in the provision of public services. By the end of the programme, participants will be better able to lead, influence, and participate in the provision of public services, and will be able to take on a senior role in the provision of public services.

"I feel privileged to be part of a professional development opportunity of such high calibre."  
- Cohort 3 participant

- **Ways of feeling** - about strong, personal values
  - **Ways of perceiving** - about listening, observing and understanding
  - **Ways of thinking** – about intellectual rigour in analysis and synthesis
  - **Ways of relating** – the conditions that enable and support others
  - **Ways of being** – personal qualities that support distributed leadership
  - **Ways of doing** - behaving in ways that lead to change – includes narrative and reframing skills
-

Narrative and framing in practice:

Government proposals for reduction in tax credit thresholds,  
October 2015 . The evidence.



IFS Briefing Notes (BN175)

**An assessment of the potential compensation provided by the new 'National Living Wage' for the personal tax and benefit measures announced for implementation in the current parliament**

---



- The average losses from tax and benefit changes in deciles 2, 3 and 4 of the household income distribution are £1,340, £980 and £690 per year, respectively. These same groups are estimated to gain £90, £120 and £160 from the new NLW (again on a “better case” scenario). This suggests that a “better case” estimate of the compensation these groups are receiving is 7%, 13% and 24% respectively, on average.

## Baroness Hollis...

“went for the jugular in a way only a 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionary with God on her side possibly could...

...She borrowed a trick from Jeremy Corbyn in reading out letters from those who would be affected, such as the couple from Norwich – father in full-time work, mother caring for two disabled children – who would lose £3,120.”

“Think of the poor people getting Christmas letters from the Chancellor”, she repeated frequently, her voice getting softer by the second.

“The Christmas letters.”

*John Crace, The Guardian, 27<sup>th</sup> October 2015*

---



# Learning from research: when Systems Leadership flourishes: behaviours to look for and develop in people



Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times

## Synthesis Paper Executive Summary

Resource October 2013

Deborah Ghate, Jane Lewis

Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation

David Wellbourn

Centre for Health Enterprise,  
Cass Business School, City University, London



The Colebrooke Centre  
for Evidence and Implementation



Cass Business School  
CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

- **Willingness to align around a shared purpose or ambition**
- **Able to build engagement/relationships and really listen: able to reframe/influence**
- **Preference for outcomes over processes**
- **Not being bound up with role and with a willingness to take risks**
- **Able to work reasonably well with conflict and uncertainty**
- **Having a strong commitment to a service in a particular place**

# Learning from practice: *Systems Leadership – Local Vision, Leadership for Change* and Integration Pioneers



- Citizens, patients/service users and carers are the centre
- Focus on relationships, broader connections/ networks and shared purpose
- It requires a combination of purpose + flexibility
- Start small: with a coalition of the willing - but get political/senior air cover where you can
- Engage with other sectors beyond the obvious (e.g. public health and planning in Solihull)
- Be willing to cede leadership
- Public health can be your friend
- It may take time, but you can make rapid progress if you engage in real work

So what have we learned?

It's not a silver bullet (NB: there *is* no silver bullet):  
'stuff' will get in the way



- **Culture and history** are key
  - **Geography** really does make a difference
  - It takes **time** and feels **messy** – and so it can go against cultural grain, external initiatives and financial exigencies
  - Powerful **organisational imperatives** can and will trump a broader vision
  - Places find it hard to shift from a shared purpose/high-level vision to a more detailed version – **there comes a point where you need to put cards on the table**
  - The key is to **hold fast to the shared endeavour** and to **see yourselves and what you offer as being central enablers** of system transformation – active engagement and helping others see themselves as more than passive recipients of policy initiatives
  - **And hence there's value in having an (internal) Enabler to hold people to the work**
-

That said, it can really work: places around the country are using Systems Leadership to work in partnership and do things differently - including through putting citizens at the centre of the work



### Calderdale: increasing physical activity

Health & Wellbeing Board worked closely with local authority, schools and the community: programme included training girls in schools in research methods so they could find out what would help/hinder increasing sports participation – aim to build social movement.

### Wirral: tackling food poverty

Public Health team started “Better Food Wirral” food movement, shifting narrative and ceding leadership, asking question: how can we change the local food systems for a happier, fairer and healthier Wirral? Included community cafés, HAs, schools, other VCS.

### Cheshire West and Chester: reducing social isolation

Getting away from council-based solutions: identified different cohorts of people suffering social isolation; developed community-led approaches including emergency services, schools, housing associations, faith groups.

### LB Waltham Forest: data-sharing

Developed shared care record now used across primary and secondary care, social care and other public services.

---

**Independent evaluation: Systems Leadership works**  
It can change cultures, behaviours, ways of working and outcomes



**“There is no doubt that Local Vision has enabled some significant shift in mindset and resulting behaviours for some, which has led to new, more inclusive ways of working within the community.”**

**“...with realisation among many of the potential for collective leadership as part of a wider system and accompanying intent for new ways of working...working in non-hierarchical ways, building links and partnerships across organisations.”**

**“Local Vision has produced benefits and value for a diversity of stakeholders, such as influencing strategy, generating income and opportunities...and improving services and client outcomes.”**

*Interim and Final Evaluations of the first place-based programmes for Systems Leadership  
– Local Vision, University of the West of England, June/Oct 2015*

---

## Summary: What this might mean for you



- See yourselves and your teams as **systems leaders and enablers - part of a wider system**
  - Start with leadership **behaviours, values and shared ambition** - what do we want services to be like for people in a place
  - Start from where you are, use what you have, start small
  - Make connections and **build relationships**, especially with the real leaders who are making change happen (or who could do so): **keep patients, service users and citizens at the centre**
  - Build alliances and networks - **a coalition of the willing** – and meet offline
  - If you're trying to make change happen, recognise that **it takes time and the system may see you as a threat rather than as a help**
  - Sometimes **stuff gets in the way** – wrong time/place/people
  - **Keep going**: take the scenic route, allow for setbacks, look for progress rather than solutions: **it really is possible to see change in your place**
-

## Some potential areas:

**Are Systems Leadership approaches striking a chord with you?  
Why is this, do you think?**

**Where are you already using Systems Leadership?  
Where else might you apply it?  
Who else should know about it?**

---

## **Session 3**

### **Getting started and trying it out**

#### **Framing and reframing**

---



### Work Avoidance!

- Defining the problem as technical and applying a technical fix
- 'Turning down the heat' – denying a problem exists, Prozac leadership
- Taking options off the table
- Shooting the messenger
- Delegating the work to people who can't do anything about it – consultants, committees, juniors
- Creating a proxy fight to avoid grappling with the real issue

So, always keep the focus on doing real work

---

## You do real work as a Systems Leader by...



- Using your **personal values** when you act/lead
  - **Getting 'on the balcony'**: observing events and patterns
  - Understanding the **scope for changing** the system
  - **Choosing interventions** that will address the situation
  - Following **'Myron's Maxims'**
-

## Use your values and get 'on the balcony'



- Know your **loyalties** and **trigger points**.
  - Try to operate self-consciously through the six dimensions of Systems Leadership. Ask yourself:
    - **How am I feeling?** In what way are my values engaged?
    - **What am I – and others – thinking?** What is the analysis and the synthesis that needs to happen?
    - **How am I relating to, and supporting, others?** What are my actions? Am I behaving in ways that lead to change?
    - **How am I being?** What am I bringing and contributing to the leadership effort by the way I am? What stories am I telling and what frames am I using?
-

## Understand the scope for action and choose your interventions

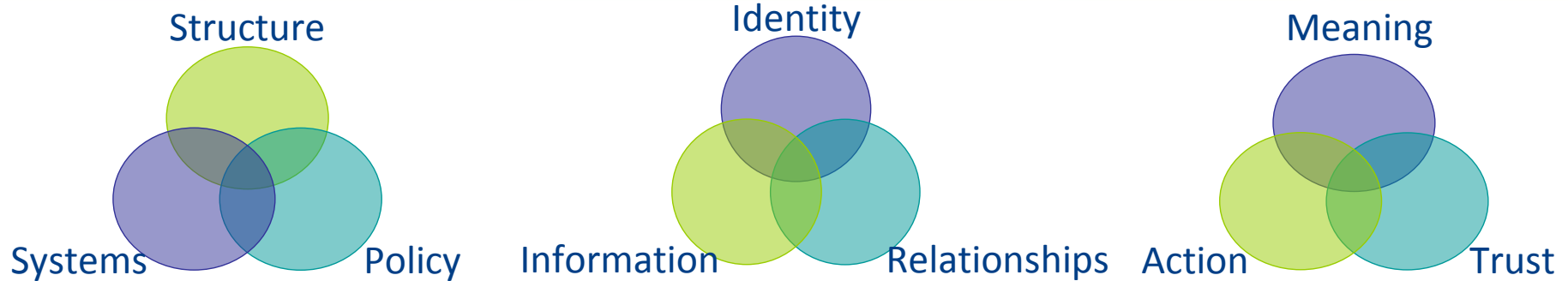


- Identify the issue and **do real work**
- Create a **holding environment** – bring the right people together, have honest conversations
- Build a long-term sense of **shared endeavour**
- **Only have a meeting if it's useful**, i.e. if it changes something
- Disclose threats – **'if we don't change...'**
- Disorientate rules, i.e. find **new ways to do things** - disturbance is important and difference is more interesting than consensus: cherish the outliers/difficult questions
- Expose the **conflict**
- Challenge norms – **'why don't we...'**

From Heifetz and Linsky, 'A survival guide for leaders', and OPM

---

And paste to the wall:  
Myron Rogers' "Working with Living Systems"  
Myron's Maxims



**Myron's Maxims:**

- **People own what they create**
  - **Real change takes place in real work**
  - **The people that do the work do the change**
  - **Start anywhere but follow it everywhere**
  - **Keep connecting the system to itself**
-

- **Follow the energy**
  - **Create 'clarity for now'**
  - **Change by doing**
  - **Link 'big picture thinkers' and doers through a coalition of the willing**
  - **Understand that other people have different ways of leading: empathise**
  - **Find space for an observing eye**
  - **Frame the key questions and issues and use narrative to change perspectives**
-

**“A frame is a set of internalised concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information.”**

*Chris Lawrence-Pietroni, Systems Leadership Enabler*

- **Based in metaphor and how frames affect the way we think/make assumptions**
  - **Frames are mental shortcuts to images and associations**
  - **So reframing is one way of giving ourselves – and others – alternative options**
-

**Don't think of an elephant!**

---



- Frames will trump facts every time
  - They're often shielding unspoken emotions/deeply held values
  - Frames prime you for associations (e.g. You see one yellow car and suddenly you notice 15)
  - Frames are like prisms – and can be like prisons
  - So the thing to do is to reframe
  - Once you've established a new frame and it's become widely accepted, the previously unthinkable becomes "common sense"
  - And it gives you the chance to put across arguments or evidence in ways that change established thinking and underlying emotions
-

## Why Framing Matters (2)



*“When the facts met the myths they were as useless as bullets bouncing off the bodies of aliens in an HG Wells novel.”*  
*Reader’s comment in the Financial Times, 24/6/2016*



NB: The messenger often is the message



**Tom Pride**

@ThomasPride



Baroness Meacher's face says it all in reaction to Tory MP defending tax credit cuts: [pic.twitter.com/j7WcEFIEAy](https://pic.twitter.com/j7WcEFIEAy)

3:04 p.m. - 26 Oct 2015



## A practical framing and reframing exercise for you to carry out with your teams



- **Work in teams of 3**
  - **One person in the group: brief the others on your issue**
  - **Assign an identity/‘perceptual position’ to your partners – e.g. someone from a health system, or local government, or the private sector – doesn’t matter who they are as long as they’re important to you**
  - **Describe how you see the other players, how they see you and the effect on your plans**
  - **Partners listen for how the person is framing the issue and how you’re framing them – i.e. observe what’s going on**
  - **Partners feed back on the frames they’ve heard and opportunities for reframing**
  - **You all reflect on ways to frame things differently – what would it mean to reframe an issue, e.g. around the commissioning outcomes you’re looking for?**
-

# Using Systems Leadership to Shape Change: Introductory Masterclass

## Reprise: See yourselves as Systems Leaders: it really is possible to see change in your place



- See yourselves and your teams as **systems leaders and enablers - part of a wider system**
  - Start with leadership **behaviours, values and shared ambition** - what do we want services to be like for people in a place
  - Start from where you are, use what you have, start small
  - Make connections and **build relationships**, especially with the real leaders who are making change happen (or who could do so): **keep patients, service users and citizens at the centre**
  - Build alliances and networks - **a coalition of the willing** – and meet offline
  - If you're trying to make change happen, recognise that **it takes time and the system may see you as a threat rather than as a help**
  - Sometimes **stuff gets in the way** – wrong time/place/people
  - **Keep going**: take the scenic route, allow for setbacks, look for progress rather than solutions: **it really is possible to see change in your place**
-

Thank you.

Debbie.Sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk  
@DebbieSorkin2

THE FEELING THAT THE  
SYSTEM IS  
FAILING



I AM PART OF THE  
SYSTEM, I CAN  
CHANGE IT  
FROM  
WITHIN



NO LONGER WAITING  
FOR SOLUTIONS  
TO COME DOWN  
FROM ON HIGH...



NO MORE  
THEY SHOULD DO  
THIS...

NO MORE  
THEY SHOULD  
DO THAT....

RECOGNISE YOU HAVE  
POWER TO INFLUENCE



## Systems Leadership – more information



[www.leadershipcentre.org.uk](http://www.leadershipcentre.org.uk)

[Debbie.sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk](mailto:Debbie.sorkin@leadershipcentre.org.uk) [@DebbieSorkin2](https://twitter.com/DebbieSorkin2)

Systems Leadership website: [www.systemsleadership.org](http://www.systemsleadership.org)

The Revolution will be Improvised I & II - <http://tiny.cc/revolution> and <http://tinyurl.com/jhnlck>

Virtual Staff College research - <http://tinyurl.com/VSCSEC>

Pioneers One Year On report: <http://tinyurl.com/olfozgx> and Year 2 Annual Report: <http://tiny.cc/89ns9x>

Evaluations – <http://tiny.cc/LV-InterimEval> and via <http://tiny.cc/ebtjby>

Leadership for Change – [www.leadershipforchange.org.uk](http://www.leadershipforchange.org.uk)

Sue Goss, A View from the Bridge – <http://tinyurl.com/p9c4rv2>

The Art of Change-Making – <http://tiny.cc/TheArt>

The Leadership Qualities Framework – <http://tiny.cc/4vpt1x>

---