

Systems Leadership: Pitfalls and possibilities

[Professor Richard Bolden](#)

University of the West of England, Bristol

Systems leadership is heralded as a means for improving collaboration and alignment between those commissioning, providing and using public services. Despite the clamour, however, little attention has been paid to the challenges of such an approach or the potential for unintended consequences. A closer look at theory and practice reveals several reasons for taking a systems leadership approach, including effectiveness, efficiency, engagement and equity. There are tensions and inconsistencies between these aims, however, and in order to realise the benefits it is important to consider systems leadership as a collective and contextualised process, rather than as something done by individual leaders.

From leaders to leadership

The history of leadership and management is littered with suggestions on how to mobilise effective change. Throughout the early 20th Century the focus was on centralisation, with the 'leader' directing and coordinating activities; the human relations movement of the 1960s shifted the emphasis to winning the hearts and minds of workers; whilst the rise of transformational and charismatic leadership through the 1980s and 1990s stressed the need to build commitment to an inspiring vision and purpose.¹ Each of these

approaches has left a lasting legacy, not least the enduring belief that individual 'leaders' are the primary drivers of organisational performance and change.

Recent theories are more collective, and present leadership as a shared process to which many people contribute.² They shift attention from individual leaders to shared processes and the contribution of many actors to achieving leadership outcomes. Distributed leadership, one such influential concept, is now embedded in teacher training and the Ofsted inspection regime in British schools.

Systems leadership emerged from these ideas³. It is "a collective form of leadership" drawing on "the concerted effort of many people working together at different places in the system and at different levels", which "crosses boundaries, both physical and virtual".⁴ The emphasis on working across boundaries most clearly differentiates systems leadership from earlier concepts and makes it particularly well suited to complex, multi-stakeholder environments, such as public services.

Why systems leadership?

There are four main arguments in favour of a systems leadership approach.

First, *effectiveness*. Hierarchical and siloed ways of leading and managing simply do

² Ospina, S. et al. (2020). [Collective dimensions of leadership: Connecting theory and method](#).

³ Whilst the terms 'system' and 'systems' leadership are often used interchangeably, I use the plural to highlight that public service leadership does not fall within a single, neatly bounded system but rather across multiple, interconnected systems.

⁴ See Ghate, D. et al. (2013), '[Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times](#)'.

¹ See Western, S. (2019) '[Leadership: A critical text](#)'.

not work well in complex, cross-boundary environments, or for tackling ‘wicked’ problems.⁵ An example of this would be the work of [Bristol Golden Key](#), which seeks to improve outcomes for clients with complex multiple needs (including homelessness, substance use, mental health and criminal offending) through partnership working and systems change.

Second, *efficiency*. The past decade has seen a reduction in public spending at the same time as service demand and delivery costs have increased. Systems leadership, by encouraging public service agencies and organisations to collaborate and share resources, could be a powerful way to create efficiencies and eliminate duplication. This is a key principle underpinning the move towards [integrated health and social care](#) in the UK.

Third, *engagement*. Emphasis on configuring services around the needs of users, rather than the convenience of providers, is growing. This requires providers to open up mechanisms for consultation and co-production, to ensure seamless links between agencies, and to monitor and enhance performance according to community aspirations. The [Bristol One City Approach](#) is a good example of where public, private, voluntary and third sector partners have come together to set out and deliver a shared vision for the city.

⁵ A wicked problem is complex and intractable, with no clear relationship between cause and effect nor a ‘solution’ that can be identified and applied (Grint, K. (2008), ‘[Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: the Role of Leadership](#)’).

Fourth, *equity*. There is a moral and legal case for promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in public services. By embracing multiple voices and perspectives, systems leadership can act as a means for bringing marginalised groups into the design and delivery of services, and for tackling systemic barriers to progression for staff with protected characteristics.⁶ This approach has been deployed by the NHS Leadership Academy in their [Building Leadership for Inclusion](#) work, which aims to increase the level of ambition and pace of change on inclusion in order to meet the commitments of the NHS Long Term Plan.

These four arguments are not exclusive and, when combined, may raise tensions and contradictions that are not easily resolved.⁷ Increasing engagement and/or equity, for example, can be quite resource intensive and hence may be experienced as conflicting with an efficiency agenda (in the short-term at least).

Leading change in complex systems

Leadership is often presented as a objective process, designed to achieve planned outcomes in a rational manner. Whilst a systems approach can demonstrate the limits of such thinking within contemporary organisations, it depends on how concepts are used. Ideas such as systems thinking and complexity, for example, were imported from biology, ecology, engineering, mathematics and computer science, often with insufficient consideration of the

⁶ Including BME, female, disabled and LGBT+.

⁷ There is a growing body of work that highlights the inherently paradoxical nature of leadership in complex systems - see, for example, Bolden, R. et al. (2017) [Leadership Paradoxes: Rethinking leadership for an uncertain world](#).

differences between physical, natural and social worlds.

This leads to a situation where a 'system' may be defined as anything from a clearly identifiable set of parts to a fluid and emergent pattern of interactions. There are profoundly different implications for policy and practice depending on which perspective is taken. Those that take a *living systems approach* are particularly well-suited to complex problems, where leaders and organisations need to navigate a path through conflict, paradox and uncertainty.⁸

Despite the nuances in the literature, however, there remains a worrying tendency to present 'systems leadership' as something done by 'system leaders'. For systems leadership to deliver on its promise, we must abandon this illusion and focus on the '-ship' rather than just the 'leader-'. This requires a broadening of our perspective, from leadership as a property of individuals to leadership as a collective process; from providing solutions to articulating the questions that need to be asked and convening groups to explore them.

To deliver high-quality services that meet the changing needs of a diverse population, public organisations need to support and encourage people at all levels to develop the necessary identity, resilience and mindsets to adapt and respond to shifting contexts.⁹ By developing and embedding a collective and contextualised understanding of systems leadership public services will be

better placed to deliver public value through the inevitably turbulent years ahead.¹⁰

Richard Bolden is Professor of Leadership and Management and Director of Bristol Leadership and Change Centre at the University of the West of England. His teaching and research explores the interface between individual and collective approaches to leadership and leadership development, with a particular focus on issues of identity, culture and collaboration. He has published widely on topics including distributed leadership, systems leadership, leadership in higher education, worldly leadership and leadership development evaluation.

⁸ A useful compendium of tools and techniques has been compiled by the Leadership Centre's [The Art of Change Making](#).

⁹ For further details see Bolden, R. et al. (2019). '[Inclusion: The DNA of leadership and change](#)'.

¹⁰ Hartley, J. et al. (2019) [Leadership for public value: Political astuteness as a conceptual link](#).