Systems Leadership:

expanding understanding of leadership drivers in whole systems

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ADCS *virtual*
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The research on systems leadership

2012-2013   Deborah Ghate, Jane Lewis (Colebrooke Centre)
David Welbourn (Cass Business School)

- **Commissioned by the Virtual Staff College, government-funded intermediary body charged with leadership development for children's services in England**

- **Building on and extending current thinking about leadership challenges in public services**

- **Starting definition of systems (whole-system) leadership:**

…leadership across organisational and geopolitical boundaries, beyond individual professional disciplines, within diverse organisational and stakeholder cultures, often without direct managerial control…. In order to effect change for positive social benefit across multiple and intersecting systems

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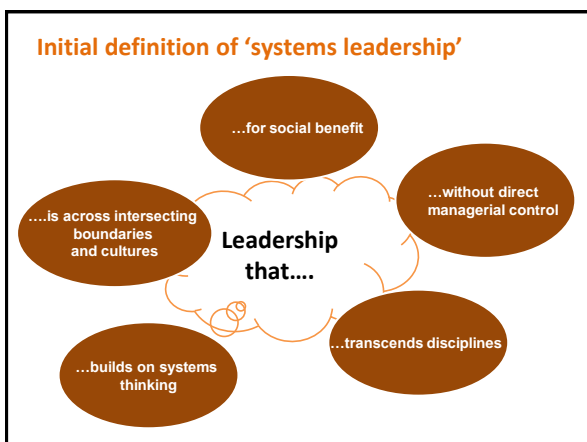**Initial definition of 'systems leadership'**

…for social benefit

…without direct managerial control

….is across intersecting boundaries and cultures

Leadership that….

…transcends disciplines

…builds on systems thinking

The research on systems leadership – background to commissioning (1)

Complexity is the new normal

- Austerity context: (do more for less, reduce demand) requires new ways of achieving goals
- Changing boundaries: of authority, influence and action (new structures, new geographies, new players, overlapping remits)
- Turbulence: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in the background context
- Complex adaptive systems are increasingly the norm

The research on systems leadership – background to commissioning (1)

Complex systems:

- Heterogeneous
- Interdependent & dynamic
- Non-linear
- Self-organising/adaptive/sensitive to feedback
- Emergent/collective behaviour cannot be inferred from components
- Unpredictable/subject to random influences
- NOT a machine

(Finegood 2011; Chapman 2004, Welbourn et al, 2012)

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The research on systems leadership – background to commissioning (2)

'Wicked' or 'messy' problems need multi-systemic strategies

- Wicked problems are multiply determined & improving outcomes from services in the context of complex need requires harnessing multiple systems
- The change we need is too big and too complex to be delivered without collaboration across systems
- We may have reached the limits of what can be achieved by silo-ed working
- We need to rethink our expectations about where 'leadership' arises from or is located

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The research on systems leadership – background through an implementation lens (3)

Significance of 'leadership' to implementation theory and frameworks

- Strongly emphasised in literature and leading overarching frameworks & taxonomies (NIRN, CFIR, QIF)
- Construct of systems leadership challenges us to think about intersections between 'inner' and 'outer' context
- Gives new prominence to 'outer' context: whole systems as *determining* factors in implementation success or failure
- Implementation frameworks acknowledge systems (outer) context but focus mainly on leadership as an organisational (inner system) function, or use constructs rooted in leading agencies/teams, not systems (Aarons et al 2014, ILS)
- Implementation field has not yet engaged closely with how leadership at system level may drive implementation outcomes
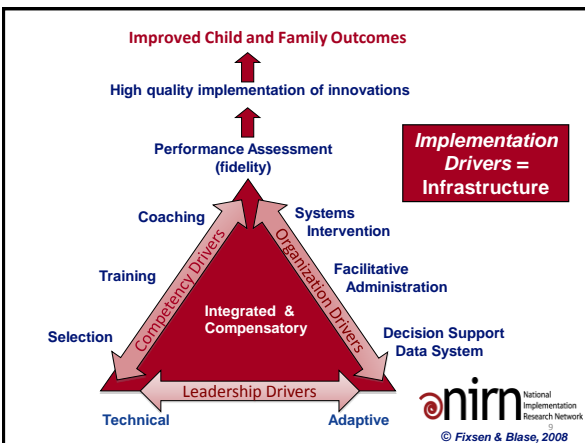

Improved Child and Family Outcomes

High quality implementation of innovations

Performance Assessment (fidelity)

Implementation Drivers = **Infrastructure**

Coaching

Systems Intervention

Training

Facilitative Administration

Selection

Integrated & Compensatory

Decision Support Data System

Competency Drivers

Organization Drivers

Leadership Drivers

Technical

Adaptive

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The research on systems leadership – objectives

- to understand how existing literature and practicing systems leaders describe systems leadership in public services:
  - What's the issue
  - How is systems leadership defined in theory
  - How defined by those doing systems leadership
  - Features of systems leadership in practice
  - What conditions favour or hinder effective systems leadership

- to develop foundations for frameworks and tools to support systems leaders and build capacity
- to consider how systems leadership construct may add to thinking about key drivers of effective implementation

Methods

- secondary analysis of existing theory and evidence: selective literature review n300+ papers (Welbourn, Ghate and Lewis 2013) from lit on complex systems, systems thinking, leadership of whole systems, leadership in public services
- new empirical data: strategic depth interviews (n29) with systems leaders in public services, major voluntaries, and intermediary bodies (Lewis, Ghate & Welbourn 2013)
- case studies of 'systems leadership scenarios' (n4) in health and social care in England
- International contributions: reviews and illustrative case studies USA, Scandinavia, Canada, Australia, (Van Dyke; Albers; Moody, Shlonsky & Goodman; Katz)
- Co-production group of 14 senior children's services leaders in England
- Synthesis paper for policy/practice readership (Ghate, Lewis and Welbourn, 2013) now used in VSC leadership development programme

Describing systems leadership: what the literature told us

- Not much! (although several highly relevant papers published in last 12 months, *eg; Senge et al, 2015; Timmins, 2015*)
- Key emphases in the literature:
  - operating in complex adaptive systems (CAS)
  - similarities to living systems (responsive, self-organising, homeostatic, mutual consequences, unpredictable)
  - Systems leadership more relational and less about exercise of power
- Most relevant literatures:
  - adaptive leadership (see Heifetz & colleagues)
  - discussions of collaborative governance, leadership of emergence, collective/collaborative leadership, leadership for the common good, servant leadership, leadership of community collaboratives (*see Van Dyke 2013, and Welbourn et al 2013*), soft systems methodology, co-creation

Describing systems leadership: what the practitioners told us (1)

Attributes of systems leadership:

- More than joint working or collaboration – a co-created agenda, not just co-operation for mutual benefit
- Service users at core - nothing else
- Collective - done with others not alone
- Distributed (leadership arises throughout the system *& at all levels*)
- Empowering & enabling, not heroic
- Ceding not grabbing power
- Using influence and credibility, not power or 'command & control'
- More a 'long game' than quick wins

Describing systems leadership: what the practitioners told us (2)

Attributes of systems leaders

- A focus on *qualities and skills* rather than competencies or techniques
- Values-driven: *"what gets you up in the morning"*
- Reflective and reflexive: requires self-knowledge and self-awareness on part of leader
- Analytic first, then synthetic
- A role that people move in and out of depending on context
- Hard and demanding work, requiring reserves of patience and confidence

Describing systems leadership: what the practitioners told us Qualities

Challenging	Self awareness
Relentless	Authenticity
Tactical	Integrity
Focused	Moral compass
Brave	Ability to build relationships
Resilient	Humility
	Magnanimity

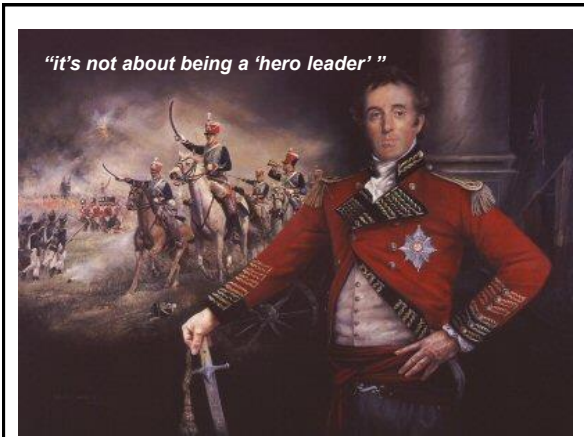*"(in systems leadership), to gain more, you have to let go"* [*Local Authority Chief Executive*]

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"it's not about being a 'hero leader' "

Describing systems leadership:
what the practitioners told us
Skills

- **Confronting and translating complexity**

- **Supplying the narrative ('sense making')**

- **Tolerance of ambiguity**

- **Deep listening (hearing diverse perspectives & challenge)**

- **Delegation with empowerment**

- **Using ('cooking') conflict**

Six ways of systems leadership:
how individual systems leaders practice

1. Ways of feeling
(personal core values)
-values and commitment

2. Ways of perceiving
(observations, and hearing)
-observing 'from the balcony' as well as 'from the dance floor'
-allowing for the unseen and unpredicted
-seeking and hearing diverse views
-sensitivity to other narratives

3. Ways of thinking
(intellectual and cognitive abilities)
-curiosity
-synthesising complexity
-sense-making

4. Ways of doing
(enabling and empowering)
-narrative and communication
-enabling and supporting others
-repurposing and reframing existing structures and resources

5. Ways of relating
(relationships and participation)
-mutuality and empathy
-honesty and authenticity
-reflection, self-awareness and empathy

6. Ways of being (personal qualities)
-bravery and courage to take risks
-resilience and patience
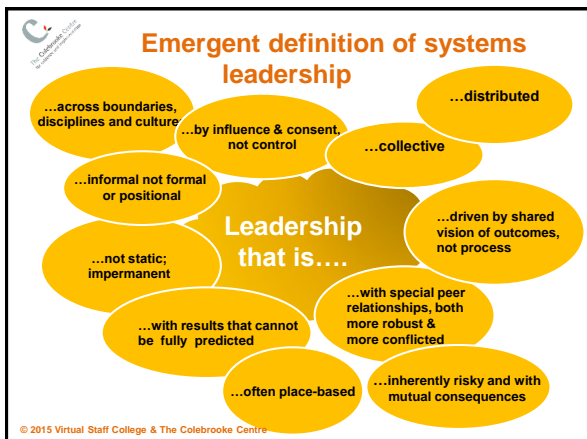-drive, energy and optimism
-humility and magnanimity

Emergent definition of systems leadership

...across boundaries, disciplines and culture

...distributed

...by influence & consent, not control

...collective

...informal not formal or positional

Leadership that is….

...driven by shared vision of outcomes, not process

...not static; impermanent

...with special peer relationships, both more robust & more conflicted

...with results that cannot be fully predicted

...often place-based

...inherently risky and with mutual consequences

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Enabling contexts for systems leadership

- **Turbulence (systems leadership thrives in conditions of flux)**

- **Financial constraint**

- **Distributed leadership**

- **Local accountability**

Inhibiting contexts for systems leadership

- **Poor organisational or 'system health'**

- **Poor organisational management (unsafe systems)**

- **Over-focus on targets and compliance**

- **Top-down/centralisation**

- **Blame-culture**

Authorising environments for systems leadership …

- **Accept collective responsibility**
- **Risk-tolerant**
- **Control 'organisational ego'**
- **Reward mutuality**
- **Allow alternative pathways**

No innovation without experimentation;

no experimentation without failure

Optimising the capacity
Nurturing a new leadership styles: What kinds of people are we looking for?

- **Flexibility and agility**
- **Facilitation of others**
- **Balancing co-operation & competition**
- **Curiosity**
- **Facilitating process not just performance**
- **Tolerating the long game**

- **Disturbing the system**
- **Creative use of conflict**
- **Willingness to think beyond 'the rules'**

Is systems leadership different?

≠ organisational leadership
- **not concerned with advancing a single agency agenda**
- **involves special types of peer relationships**
- **involves ceding, not holding onto, power**

≠ partnership or collaboration
- **more than combining for mutual benefit**
- **involves deeper level of co-production and creation of unifying agenda**
- **disturbs the system (goes against the grain)**

How to recognise systems leadership

Characteristics of Systems Leadership

- Outcome focused *not* process driven
- Exerting influence *not* commanding
- Ceding authority *not* boosting egos
- Embracing complexity *not* ignoring it
- Valuing diversity *not* similarity
- Cooking conflict *not* avoiding it
- Power follows respect *not* position
- Of the moment, *not* permanent
- Behaviours count *not* targets

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Systems Leadership - an integrated model

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How does Systems Leadership expand current implementation theory?
Drivers

- *Systems* leadership does not yet feature strongly in implementation frameworks or taxonomies , although leadership of innovation is increasingly a focus

- We think that systems leadership may be a special or distinctive form of 'driver' that is particularly relevant in implementation of complex change or improvement initiatives, or those that cross system or sectoral boundaries: if systems leadership is supportive, will innovation teams will gain traction more quickly? (*an empirical question*)
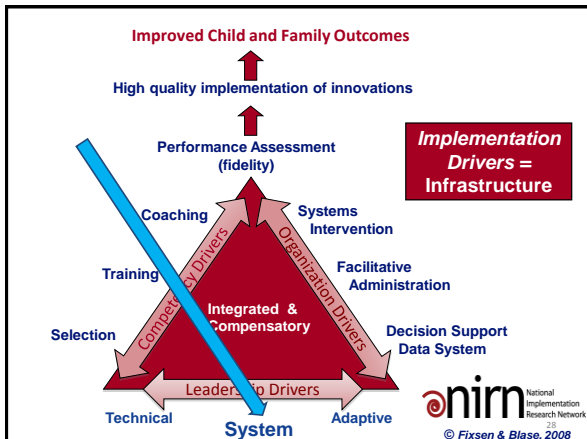
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How does Systems Leadership expand current implementation theory?
Co-creation

- **As described in the literature and in empirical research, systems leadership appears to be a particular form of co-creation:**

- *"deeply involving stakeholders in identifying all dimensions of the problem and designing and implementing solutions"* (*Pfitzer et al, 2013*)

- *"deeply involving a range of stakeholders across scientific, governance and local practice boundaries to create infrastructure and context that enables and sustains (evidence-based) practice"* (*Metz, 2015, GIC2015*)

Implications: building systems leadership & implementation capacity

- **Recognise** that systems leadership is a distinctive form of leadership relevant to specific circumstances and implementation challenges – esp. CCIs

- **Study** the systems leadership aspect of successful and unsuccessful initiatives more closely and theorise how it interfaces with implementation science theory

- **Seek** leaders (at all levels) with aptitude for systems leadership and skills/styles to do it: not everyone is suited to SL and usual 'traits' of successful leaders (power, force, driving passion etc) may not be helpful. System Leaders may be different to organisational leaders.

- **Co-Create** tools and frameworks to help 'do' systems leadership. What would a 'Systems Leadership Toolkit for better implementation' look like?

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THIS PRESENTATION IS BASED ON: Ghate D., Lewis J. and Welbourn D (2013**)** *Systems Leadership: exceptional leadership for exceptional times - Synthesis Paper* Nottingham: Virtual Staff College and London: the Colebrooke Centre
http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Systems_Leadership_Synthesis_Paper.pdf

Other resources from the *Systems Leadership* study (literature review Welbourn et al 2013; international papers by Van Dyke, Albers, Katz, and Moody et al 2013; executive summary etc)
http://www.cevi.org.uk/publications.html
(& scroll down to **New publication on systems leadership for public services)**

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Thank you

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