

Human Learning Systems: Systems Leadership

This Resource Deck is designed for those interested in the kinds of systems leadership needed to support HLS approaches



Introduction

This resource is part of a series of slide decks of resources to support HLS practice to become established and be sustained.

This deck focuses on systems leadership. It is largely based on Chapter 18 of the HLS e-book, 'Systems leadership in HLS' (p363 - p373) by Jeff Masters.

[Find the chapter here](#)



Outcomes of a system are shaped by the conditions of that system, including the types of practice supported by those conditions. Changing the system outcomes requires changing the system conditions.

This needs people to lead and sustain the change. But who are they, and what is the nature of the leadership they will need to exercise?

Leadership (1/2)

Some times change within a local system will be driven by those in positions of authority, such as those running big organisations. But it doesn't have to. In complex systems, leadership for change can come from anywhere.

What is authority?

Power based on position or influence – what a person has (or has not) including the informal authority they have developed.

What is leadership?

The activity of mobilising for change – what a person does (or does not do) and how they do this.

Systems change is best understood as a collective endeavour, with multiple actors from all levels and parts of the system partnering to play complementary roles.

For new models of practice like HLS to take root and thrive in healthy local systems it will require brave and generous collaborative leadership, often exercised beyond a person's positional authority. This kind of leadership is needed both within organisations which are part of a local system, and right across the system.



Leadership (2/2)

For those with more authority within organisations or local systems, the challenge use this authority to create space for emergent HLS practice, protecting and nurturing it. Managing this process of change requires balancing expectations others have of those in authority – for direction, protection and order – while maintaining a pressure and pace for change compatible with these goals.

For those with less authority within organisations or local system, there is still plenty of opportunity for leadership. The task is to use any new freedom created by disruption to order, for experimentation and to agitate for further change. It is to find opportunities to connect with others within and beyond the organisation to strengthen relationships, develop practice, and share learning.

“Our purpose is to use the principles of Human Learning Systems to radically change the way we do things, to be a living example of what can be done when we accept that being human is messy, we are making mistakes and learning from them continually and that our organisational system has to reflect that, rather than seeking to control what it can’t really control anyway.”

[Mike Crowther \(Empowerment Case Study\)](#)

In the matrix on the following slides, we set out different roles people with different levels of authority might play to develop and embed HLS practice within their organisations and local systems. These are not fixed roles, or as discrete as the matrix might suggest. And whatever role is played, it will always be more effective when part of a collective effort involving people from across the system and at all levels of authority.

Matrix (1/2)

Organisational and systems leadership roles to support and embed HLS practice for those with more authority

Shape strategic direction:

- Commit to HLS as a way of working, within the organisation and with partners and stakeholders
- Legitimise a different way of 'being' at work
- Listen and give focus and meaning to the work
- Be willing to give up control, while retaining responsibility
- Weave evidence of progress into a clear narrative of change

Hold space for learning:

- Create space for human and learning behaviours
- Hold nerve, allowing time to learn from failure
- Partner with lower authority actors for insights and to give back the work
- Remove obstacles to change
- Capture evidence of progress in a wide variety of ways.

Pace the change:

- Balance expectations of the old order with the need to transition to the new
- Allow deviance and promote culture of positive error
- Model HLS behaviours internally and through e.g. approach to commissioning
- Celebrate and reward progress
- Seek perspective and support from outside the organisation

System stewardship roles:

- Share strategic direction
- Strengthen relationships/system conditions;
- Identify shared purpose(s)
- Increase the diversity of voices, perspectives and actors
- Listen and value difference
- Convene and give meaning to the work

Create infrastructure for collaboration and learning:

- Create and sustain shared space
- Develop common norms, practices, and behaviours
- Learn and reflect together
- Lead by example on e.g. collaborative working, shared budgets, joint commissioning
- Commission in ways that promote HLS practice
- Partner with organisations with less authority to shape the systemic environment

Pace the change:

- Prioritise trust and relationships
- Tolerate uncertainty and not knowing
- Protect vulnerable voices in the system, embrace challenge but keep focused on the problem
- Respond to the needs of the system
- Share and celebrate successes
- Seek allies, advocates, and advisors outside the system and partners within it to create a sense of collective bravery

Matrix (2/2)

Organisational and systems leadership roles to support and embed HLS practice for those with less authority

Direct attention to the work:

- Use evidence to create urgency
- Agitate and advocate for change
- Understand how you contribute to the problem

Connect, experiment and learn:

- Safe-fail experimentation
- Partner with those in authority to understand their concerns and constraints
- Create networks and partners across organisations;
- Develop reflective practices and peer-learning networks
- Listen to people the organisation serves

Stay in the game:

- Continue to meet existing expectations
- Seek allies, confidants, and partners outside the organisation
- Remain positive, and recognise and celebrate progress

Direct attention to shared work:

- Increase variety (of interests, perspectives, ideas and practice innovations)
- Agitate for change/raise the temperature
- Look for evidence in new places

Connect, experiment and learn (system weaving):

- Show up & be brave, but open to possibilities
- Intervene creatively
- Share safe-fail experimentation
- Increase system connectivity and strengthen relationships
- Share learning with and from peers
- Partner with authority to bring in voices not being heard

Stay in the game:

- Seek allies, advocates and advisors outside the system
- Be optimistic about the possibility but realistic about the progress
- Celebrate small, shared successes

Resources

Books and Articles

- Ronald A. Heifetz. (1998). [Leadership Without Easy Answers](#)
- Senge, P. Hamilton, H. & Kania J. (2015). [The Dawn of System Leadership](#)
- Elle Dodd, Collaborate (2022). [From 'Me' to 'We' – Lessons on leading as a systems activist](#)

Case Studies

- [Francis, A. \(2021\). Neighbourhood Midwives](#)
- [Bell, M. \(2021\). Plymouth Octopus Project](#)
- [McCormack, P. \(2020\). Wallsend Children's Community](#)
- [Owen, K. \(2020\). Liverpool Combined Authority](#)

