



Human Systems

Build people potential. Improve organizational outcomes.

A Synopsis of Systemic Leadership

Adapted from the article by William Tate, Director, Institute of Systemic Leadership, www.systemicleadershipinstitute.org

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Everything – and everybody – is connected

As social workers and human service workers, we investigate the conditions of our clients' environments and use that knowledge to facilitate the best outcomes possible for our clients. We can use a very similar process inside of our organizations when we engage in *systemic leadership*. Systemic leadership is just a term for the process of making decisions that are informed by comprehensive knowledge of our working environments, including elements such as **organizational culture**, the **amount and nature of conflict**, and **how processes and policies work**. As we already know, a good working knowledge of how the system – our environment – works, the better-informed decisions we make in service of our clients, ourselves, and our organization.

Everybody leads

Leadership and management are different processes that depend on each other for successful outcomes. If we think of leadership as a set of actions or behaviors that make **change**, we can think of management as behavior that keeps things **stable**. You need both for a healthy organization. All change needs to be managed well, and management processes periodically need to be assessed and changed.

We tend to think of leaders as the embodiment of upper-level administrative positions, and leadership as something that only the individuals at the "top" of the organization can provide. We place the burden of organizational change on these individuals, and we hope that they will choose to go against the organizational status quo when necessary. **Even for individuals who have a lot of power, it is extremely difficult for one or two people to change the way a large group of people work together.**

Instead of thinking about leadership as something that only individual upper-level managers possess, we could think of leadership as a property of the entire organization, shared by all individuals in the organization. The organization itself, rather than a group of just a few individual employees, holds the potential to change - this is *systemic leadership*. The organization is the system; everybody leads.

In your own words, what is systemic leadership?



Stop cleaning the fish

Let's compare an organization experiencing dysfunction to a dirty fish tank. We want our fish to be clean and shiny, so how do we make that happen? We would most likely **not** remove each individual fish, polish it, and then drop it back into the same dirty water. Instead, we would change the water.

We tend to notice the actions of individual employees – the “fish” – instead of noticing the environmental challenges – the “water”. Conscientious fish owners take responsibility for providing their fish with a high-quality environment, but who should be responsible for doing this in an organization? The employees must work together to change and manage the organizational environment, because organizations do not have the equivalent of a fish owner who can come and change things for us.

If an organization is not successfully meeting its goals and is experiencing high turnover and burnout rates, we can look at the organizational environment – the water in the fish tank – to find both the problem and the solution. Are we communicating well with each other? Are we resolving our conflicts effectively? Do we understand our role in the organization and how it fits with others' roles? Do we treat each other with respect? Does the way we spend our time match our priorities? These systems challenges are best met by systemic leadership, rather than individual leadership, **because the organization needs everybody's perspective and experience to find the best possible solution.**

Describe the fish tank metaphor and how it relates to systemic leadership.

How can employees be systems leaders?

We have often heard the phrase “blame the system” when we complain about the challenges we face at work and in our personal lives. The system affects our performance



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and can cause a lot of frustration. We can think of the *system* as everything that is going on around and between people in their environment that impacts their ability to do their job. These factors can include unspoken realities such as power differentials, conflict, how people are held accountable, and types of incentives and punishments.

Employees' daily encounters and frustrations can provide them with insights about how the system could be improved. Any employee can take a leadership role to change the system, but to do this, they need to be able to 'see' the system, understand their role in it, and have the support to exercise leadership. **The organization needs every employee's experience, perspective, and leadership to realize its full potential.**

In your own words, what do employees need to be systems leaders?

A new leadership agenda

Systems leadership is needed to maintain a healthy organization that can successfully achieve its goals and reach its full potential. Instead of a just a few people with limited perspective attempting to change a large group of people, we can take advantage of the perspectives and experiences of all employees when we distribute the power to make positive change. When we combine our knowledge of can be improved in the environment with everybody's experiences, we better enable the organization to reach its full potential.

*Adapted from the Institute of Systemic Leadership at
<http://www.systemicleadershipinstitute.org/systemic-leadership/theories/a-synopsis-of-systemic-leadership-2/>*