

SYSTEMS ORIENTED LEADERSHIP

**16 CRUCIAL SKILLS
FOR LEADERS WHO
PUT THE SYSTEM FIRST**

JENNIFER W. CAMPBELL



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Jennifer Campbell is a Managing Director, Senior Change & Transformation Manager, Leadership & Organization Development Professional, and an Executive & Relationship Systems Coach with over 20 years of worldwide professional experience.

Jennifer's mission is to help leaders, teams, and organizations change and transform, ultimately leading to growth, success, happiness, and the ability to do business in an increasingly complex international context. In this eBook, she shares her view on systems oriented leadership. Jennifer believes that a systemic approach to leadership will help you to transform yourself, your team, and your organization, and guarantees that you'll see results.

A CASE FOR SYSTEMS ORIENTED LEADERSHIP

When we look at the current status of leadership on our planet, we hear, all over the world, a cry for a different type of leadership. People are searching for a type of leadership that moves away from a control based paradigm and focuses on solutions for today's problems, and has a forward-thinking passion for mankind's evolution.

What if we look at leadership from a systemic perspective? Systems are networks of relationship between individuals that move and interact together, just like cells in a living organisms. These systems complete the most complex tasks every single day. To do so, the individuals in the system focus on the system as a whole, not on the individual units, all the while contributing to their common purpose.

Now what does that mean for leadership? Leadership, from a systemic perspective, is a role that belongs to the entire team. It is not just a job description for the leader. Systems oriented leadership helps the team to achieve their common vision by sharing power and ownership. It forges alliances across boundaries. It is holistic, inclusive, and sustainable. I challenge you to see and shape your own leadership from a this new systemic perspective.

1

SEE THE SYSTEM FIRST

You're probably familiar with the story of the blind men and the elephant. In this tale, six blind men touch an elephant to learn what defines an elephant. Each man feels a unique part of the animal, such as the tusk, side, or tail. When they compare experiences, the men completely disagree. In some versions of this tale, they stop talking, start listening, and collaborate to "see" the full elephant. When a sighted man walks by and sees the entire elephant all at once, the blind men then learn that they are all blind. The theme of this parable is that, though one's subjective experience can be true, that such experience is inherently limited by its failure to account for other truths or the totality of truth. Furthermore, 'seeing is believing' is true for many, especially when presented with something new.

The lesson of this parable is also true in a business context. Imagine that the elephant represents a system: an invisible web of relationships between interdependent people in your team or organization who work together for a common purpose. On a day-to-day basis, we deal with many complex 'elephants' and too often find ourselves to be blind men, perceiving only pieces of the whole.

Leading from a systemic perspective requires that you are willing and able to see the system first.



ACCEPT THAT IT'S ALIVE!

2



When I read *Images of Organization* as a student, I was surprised that organizations are often viewed as machines. Machines cannot grow and evolve, they can only follow the instructions, and they operate according to their programming. Machines are not able to adapt to their environment and are not flexible to changed. Living organisms, on the other hand, do change and adapt. As we know, people are far more complex than machines and have many capabilities to address organizational needs. Strikingly, in many cases, both organizations and the people in them are still viewed as machines. Because of this, today's major leadership paradigm is still based on control, predictability, and telling the machines what to do.

It is much easier see organizations as living systems, as networks of relationship between people that grow, learn, self-organize, develop, and transform. These networks have the ability to deal with new information, adapt to their environment, integrate differences, and have an innate motivation to evolve, contribute to a common purpose (deliver results!), and renew themselves.

In our world of complex problems and constant change, we need to find sustainable solutions. Nature sets the example, as organisms perform this ongoing dance both within themselves and their ecosystems on a daily basis. We can harness this ability, this intelligence, when we understand and accept that our systems are alive.

3

FOCUS ON THE SYSTEM

As human beings, we need to be a part of living systems. We want to belong and relate. Further, we know that systems are much more than the sum of their parts. The popular saying about teams, “together everyone achieves more,” is an illustration of our inner sense that relationships between people create a synergy that is more than the efforts of all individuals combined.

This type of systems thinking is valuable for organizations. Parts of a system are best understood in the context of their relationships with each other and with other systems rather than in isolation. Moreover, seeing problems as part of an overall system, rather than reacting to specific parts, outcomes, or events, prevents unintended consequences.

To translate this to a work context, we say that, if something is not working well in your team, shift your focus from the individual people to the entire team. This will prevent linear cause and effect thinking (it’s his fault!), help you and the team as a whole to find solutions (‘how do we deal with this?’), and create more overall ownership. This benefits your team and other teams within your organization. Especially in complex situations with many interdependent relationships, changing one part in a system impacts all of the other parts. Therefore, a holistic approach is much more effective.



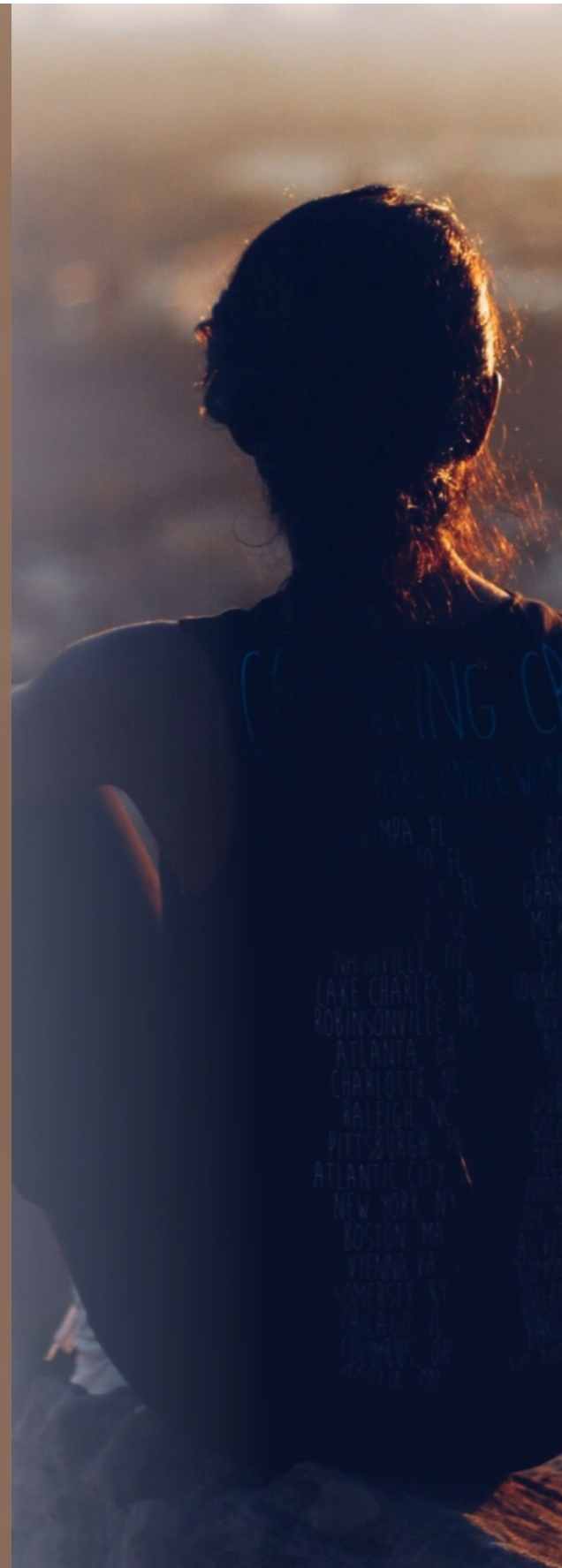
4

PERSONAL OR NOT PERSONAL

As social beings, we often define ourselves by our relationships. We give meaning to the world while interacting with others. The knowledge, concepts, opinions, and beliefs that we build in our minds about everything and everyone, ourselves included, are subjective; they are filtered and communicated through our own and other people's frames of reference. Even though information is subjective, we tend to see how we experience the world as the whole truth and this is a substantial part of our identities. Simply put, we take things personally, and we have personal agendas.

In organizations, sticking to our own views and taking things personally every time someone has a different opinion or experience doesn't help the team's purpose, and neither does withholding our own input. The personal and the non-personal need aligning to get things done.

Interestingly, as we will see later on, systems have isomorphic traits. You'll find that what you experience as an individual is usually also experienced in the larger system of your team and organization. Your ability to see your 'personal' experience as an expression of system dynamics will help you to make sense of the system. Your experience is a your awareness of what is present in the system. All of a sudden, miraculously, things turn out much less personal.



DEVELOP YOUR SYSQ

5

How do we function in systems? Let's look at three types of intelligence that help us to act and interact in systems of relationships.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the ability to recognize one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different feelings, to label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior.

Social intelligence (SQ), or interpersonal intelligence, is the capacity to effectively communicate in social relationships and environments. This involves knowing how to act wisely in human relations and social situations.

Systems intelligence (SysQ) is the understanding of yourself and others through your experience the system of which you are a part. It's the ability to see your experience as not just your own, but also as a part of the system as a whole.

This is also called the meta or systems perspective. SysQ also consists of the ability to read the space ('there's a lot of tension in the room'), to understand the group dynamics at the organizational or societal system level, and to grow and maintain relationship systems.

SysQ is closely related to collective intelligence, which strongly shifts knowledge and power from the individual to the collective.

6

LET GO OF AUTHORITY ISSUES

Authority issues are responses that we have towards authority figures, regardless the actual person. Mostly, these responses emerge from ingrained conditioning. While growing up, our parents have this authority role, and we often feel powerless against them. During this time, we develop different ways of dealing with being overwhelmed by the authority figure. As adults, we often continue to use these strategies, even though they are no longer effective or appropriate.

In business we quite often use these behaviors to undermine the authority of a leader, or even our own authority, by making it much harder to achieve goals or to reach a common purpose. Usually this is an unconscious process that we act upon in various different ways. We may collude against a leader and display rebellious, submissive, or passive aggressive behavior. These ineffective strategies keep us away from healthy, purposeful collaboration with others.

Let go of your authority issues by becoming aware of them and by looking at how you respond when there is an authority figure in your work situation. Once you see authority roles for what they really are, you can let go of those old strategies and focus more on making valuable contributions to the system's goals.



7

UNDERSTAND ISOMORPHY

Systems always have a context, their environment, and this is yet another larger system. Understanding Isomorphy is knowing that characteristics, phenomenon, and events in subsystems are also present in the bigger system that contain them, and vice versa. For example, dynamics in a department are visible in the organization as well as in a team within the department.

Dynamics in a team may not necessarily be caused by the team, but may simply be present because the team is part of an organization. So, trying to change team dynamics without addressing its context is a tough task. At the same time, the team can also help the entire organizational system by setting an example. When forging a new reality, the team can find ways to work and be productive in that new reality.

The ability to shift your attention from what's happening in subsystems to the larger system will help you to understand why, for example, it's difficult to change a culture. The entire system needs to adapt and move away from old behavior that is deeply ingrained in its DNA towards new behavior. On the other hand, if a subsystem is able to change, it holds information that is vital to the system's innovating capacities and possibilities to reinvent itself.



MANAGE CHANGE OR LEAD TRANSFORMATION?

In our organizations, complexity and constant change have become the new normal. Over the last few decades, we have developed a stronger understanding of how to execute and manage defined change, and we've become more successful at it.

Transformation is altogether another story. Approaching transformation in the same way as we do defined change often leads to failure. Unlike with change management, we can't afford to focus on a few discrete, well-defined shifts. Transformation can't be tackled by just mapping out a route from A to B, but requires a focus on a portfolio of interdependent and intersecting initiatives.

Even more important, the overall goal of transformation is not just to execute a defined change, but to reinvent the organization and discover a new or revised business model based on a vision for the future. Leading transformations and managing changes, therefore, requires a fundamentally different approach.

8

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Now that we have decided to look at systems as living creatures, let's see how they actually live. In nature, the materials needed by all organisms in an ecosystem are reused or recycled. Nitrogen, carbon, oxygen, and other nutrients move through ecosystems in a predictable pattern or cycle. The boundaries of these organisms need to be permeable to allow energy to flow in and out. We can tell if a person is alive or dead, by checking their oxygen flow, whether or not they are taking in and emitting material in the system.

Systems, where organizations, teams, or bodies, live by exchanging energy. An organization's energy, or oxygen, is information. The amount of information a system exchanges with its environment determines how alive the system is. If a system stops "breathing", i.e. exchanging energy with other systems, it eventually dies. Therefore, a system's boundaries need to be open to allow for information to go in and out.

Those same boundaries also define what differentiates the system from its environment. Certain information does not belong in the system and needs to be kept out, though sometimes it is hard to tell if information will help or hinder the system's functioning. A system's permeability determines what it will do with new, unfamiliar information. As human beings we can choose to be open, let ourselves be inspired by what's new, and see possibilities for growth.



9

HEAR ALL VOICES

Marginalizing is a common systemic phenomenon. It means that certain opinions, views, beliefs, interests, or 'voices' within a system are suppressed. These voices are denied and not considered part of the system's perspective on a particular issue. This indicates that the system is not ready to see or explore the possibilities these voices hold. Marginalizing is a very human tendency, and it is visible when people try to convince others to see reality as they see it and don't want to listen to what someone else has to say.

The disadvantage of marginalization, is that valuable information is ignored. Suppressed voices represent taboos; people are not ready for them or they are too different from the status quo. Often, marginalized voices are also indications of new realities, signs of what is about to happen next.

A willingness to hear all voices and to acknowledge them as part of the system, not as just personal opinions, frees up valuable information for the system. Once all voices are heard, the system can release the emotional tension that was built up; the voices get space and can move freely. This increased awareness within the newly informed system allows for new understanding and new actions, which often results in opportunities for growth, innovation, and transformation.



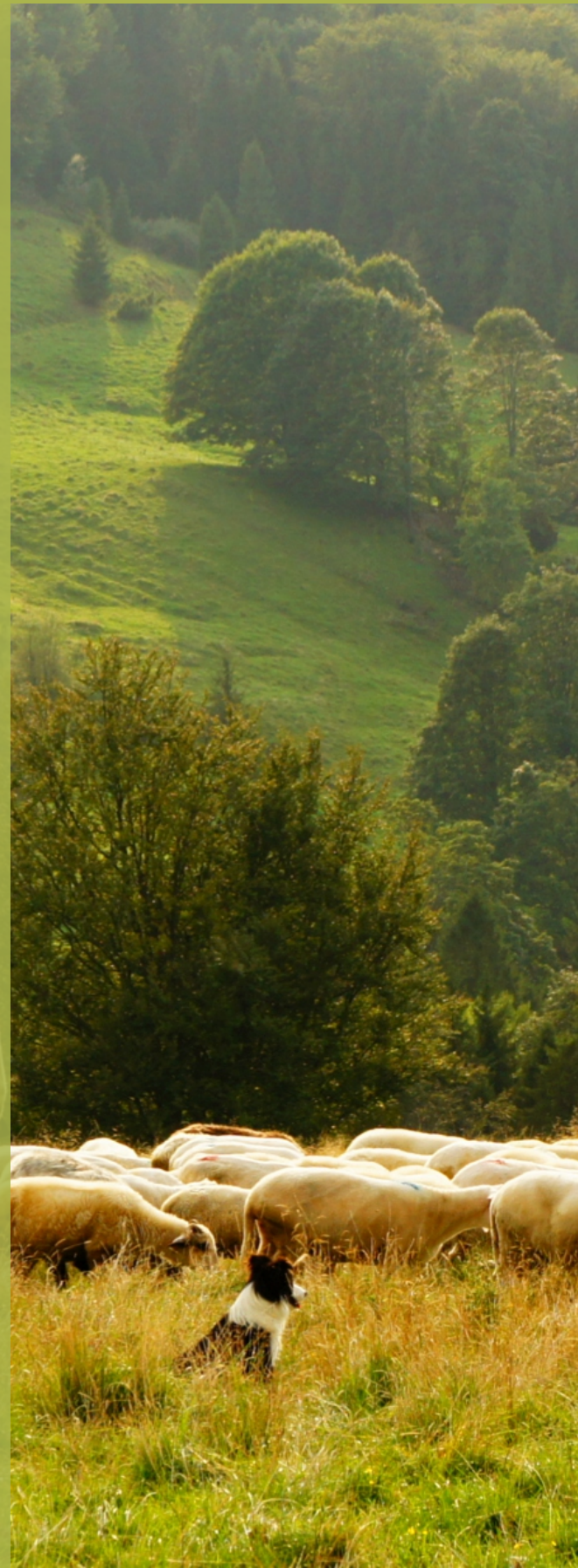
10

STOP HERDING SHEEP

Herding sheep is a type of leadership that comes from the leader-follower framework. The leader decides where to go and the followers must follow. This paradigm is about control over things, people, and processes, and involves working towards well-defined end results. Complexity theory teaches us this type of leadership when trying to solve ‘tame problems,’ which are linear and relatively easy to contain and control. As a leader, you can figure out what to do and where to go, relying on control based information.

As soon as we reach a particular level of complexity, however, herding sheep does not help us to get ahead or evolve.

Flocking birds represent a different leadership paradigm. Individuals in the system focus on the system’s purpose and take ownership of their contribution. Leaders learn how to leverage a system’s collective intelligence by finding patterns of behavior and algorithms and by discovering how their system can learn, grow, and evolve. They take on roles that serve the system while it moves and takes on new shapes, forms, and realities. By practicing systems oriented leadership, you will tap into the full potential of the collective as well as make space for the system when it flourishes. Only then can this type of innovation emerge, the type that changes the world as we know it.



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SPREAD LEADERSHIP

In order to tap into the collective intelligence of the system, we need to take a closer look at how we organize leadership. The old paradigm of heroic and control based leadership focuses on the leader as the hero, the charismatic person who will lead their followers wherever they want. This paradigm is no longer supported in the systemic point of view.

Systems oriented leadership holds leadership as a role that belongs to the entire system. This means that, depending on the need, capabilities, and competencies necessary to work on the system's task in a particular time, leadership will be shaped by various individuals or subsystems. Since collective intelligence implies that no individual is all knowing, leadership is fulfilled by those who are able to most purposefully lead the rest of the system in taking the next step towards the system's purpose.

Organizations that still have a hierarchy based structure can also begin to slowly start practicing this new type of leadership within their current structures. Network organizations have, at least partially, already implemented it. What we learn from flocking birds is that no single bird is the leader at any given time, but that there's definitely leadership in the sense that every bird takes ownership of their contribution to whole flock. Systems oriented leadership shows that the system taps into its self-organizing capabilities in order to develop and grow.



DETOX THE SYSTEM

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Kee the system healthy, clean and functioning, and be aware of behaviors that are toxic to relationships. These 'toxins,' also known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, are criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling. Toxins can become viral and seldom come alone.

Criticism is blaming or attacking a person rather than complaining about an issue. Defensiveness is an ineffective way to fire back blame when one feels attacked. Contempt includes cynicism, sarcasm, and belittling and can actually harm a person's physical health!. Stonewalling shows up as withdrawal, communication cuts, silent treatments, refusals to engage, or simply no direct expression of one's thoughts. It evokes other horsemen, especially contempt.

Learn about antidotes, raise awareness, and recognize the toxins in the system. Name the Horsemen in a neutral way when they appear: say, "We are getting defensive," or "We are being critical." Detoxing the system also involves discussing the toxins when they are absent. Be curious and ask, "When do we use these toxins in our team?" and "How could we deal with them in a more effective way?" As a system, find your own antidotes.

Last but not least, create overall positivity and articulate what you appreciate about others as this is the most powerful Horsemen antidote.

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GIVE CURIOSITY SPACE

In general, curiosity means the eager desire to learn or know about something. Children are naturally curious and creative; they play and experience every day as an adventure because they love to learn about new and exciting things. They are always open to absorbing new information and learning about the world we live in, and yet, unfortunately, once we are adults this natural curiosity decreases quite a bit, partially because we have built concepts, patterns, and beliefs to make sense of our environment and to function in the world. Of course, this is very useful: imagine having to learn everything that you know about life all over again, every time you wake up after a good night's sleep.

Teams and organizations can use curiosity to allow new information, organizational energy, to come in and learn about themselves and their business environment. Curiosity can help to give and build trust as well as bring positivity and flow back into the system. A tensed up system can relax and allow itself to breathe again, and team members get back in alignment after a conflict when they reopen the door to their curiosity and start asking questions. By naming what is happening in the system, people who are part of the system can also become curious and focus on what they want to happen or what lies ahead.

Make a conscious choice to keep the systems you are part of clean, fresh, and growing by bringing your curiosity as a resourceful attitude into the work place.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a lit sparkler. The hand is wearing a dark, textured sweater. The sparkler is bright and glowing, with many sparks flying out. The background is dark and out of focus.

LET NEW IDEAS SHINE

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Just like curiosity, our creativity also seems to decrease as we age. The more information we convert into knowledge, structures, systems, processes, and concepts, the higher our the tendency to rerun our tracks when we interact with the world. At some point, we hardly renew or evolve, and we get stuck in the realities that we create for ourselves.

Interestingly enough, we do strive for innovation and renewal. We want to do different and new things. We need variety, either to function better in our ever changing environments or because we want to experience our lives and businesses in completely new ways. Unfortunately, new ideas often don't make it. Besides the common 'yes, but...' and 'that won't work here' responses, ideas that challenge the status quo are often so threatening and revolutionizing that they usually do not enter the system or never even see the light of day. In this way, we choose certainty over variety.

What if you were able to enhance the creativity and innovation capacity within your organization? What if you didn't need expensive tools, systems, and facilities to harness that capacity? What would be possible then? Start dreaming, derail the fixed tracks in your mind, open up to new ideas, and invite your fellow team members to do the same. And, when new ideas come up, let them shine! Allow yourself to see their full potential before dismissing anything.

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DEVELOP SELF-ORGANIZATION

We have access to a massive amount of data about how systems develop. Many of us are familiar with the forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning or transforming stages of team development.

Still it is not always easy to develop teams to the stage where they thrive. Many difficulties have to do with the issues previously mentioned: the tendencies of individuals to take things personally and to have personal needs and agenda's, authority and role issues, and the toxins in relationships. These restraining forces stem from older leadership paradigms.

Driving forces that help the system are: focusing on the system and its purpose, using roles to focus individuals on their contribution to this purpose, approaching tensions and differences in the system with curiosity and exploration and detoxing the system to keep it healthy and clean. Systemic approaches have integrated these hindering and helping factors, converting the system development phases into flight, fight, collaboration and integration.

When letting the system grow, the system's self-awareness and its ability to relate and adapt to its context are key. A healthy living system organizes itself. It breathes by exchanging new information with its environment, it develops and grows by integrating what is new and diverse and it evolves and transforms to continue its existence in its ever-changing context until it fulfills its purpose.



A person is seen from behind, standing in a field of tall grass or wheat. Their arms are outstretched to the sides, and they are looking towards a sunset or sunrise on the horizon. The sky is filled with soft, golden light and some clouds. The overall mood is one of openness and looking towards the future.

LET THE FUTURE UNFOLD

16

Is there a way to lead your team or organization towards transformation? How does a system reinvent itself and transform?

There are no easy answers to these questions. There are no quick fixes or maps that lead to the transformation of your specific organization. How it exchanges information, integrates differences, and adapts to changes in its environment is a unique path. A journey that constantly changes shape. At some point, the system will leap into a new reality and completely alter its identity.

You can't will your system into transformation. At best, you plan for change or facilitate organizational development. What you can do, however, is trust the system and let its future unfold.

Systems Oriented Leadership helps you and your team to do just that. When you practice the skills, attitudes, and behaviors of this method, you will be open to what unfolds. You will witness how the system taps into its own intelligence, resourcefulness, and potential and you will see it grow, evolve, and transform.

I hope that you enjoyed this eBook. For more information about Systems Oriented Leadership, visit my website or join me in one of my webinars. Thank you.

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- Systems Oriented Leadership can help you with your transformation endeavors. The aim of this eBook is to give you an overview of the most important skills, qualities, and attitudes needed to lead transformation in your system.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES AND PERSONAL NOTES DURING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

- Tavistock Leicester Conferences on Authority, Leadership & Role, 2009 and 2013
- Organization and Relationship Systems Coaching Training and Certification Program, Center for Right Relationship (CRR), 2010 – 2012
- CTI Leadership Program, especially Retreat 3 'Creating from the space', 2012-2013
- Kunst van het Samenwerken I & II, Licht op de Zaak, 2013 – 2014