

Organizational Development

Three Keys to Unlocking Systems-Level Change

Developing a systems mindset, identifying the right tool for the job, and paying attention to human dynamics can help leaders move from theory to action when facing complex social problems.

By [Susan Misra & Jamaica Maxwell](#) | Apr. 29, 2016

The first step to solving an intractable social problem is to understand the system in which it sits. If you don't, you might find yourself investing in a solution that is ineffective, takes more time or resources to implement, or even makes a problem worse. To reduce the global incidence of HIV, for example, global health leaders must look beyond developing treatments for symptoms; they must address patients' access to health services, and how culture, economics, and politics affects who benefits in the current system. Taking in the bigger picture—what many of us in the social sector call systems thinking—requires that we understand a system's many stakeholders, how they interact, and what influences them. Systems thinking means understanding the web of interrelations that create complex problems and rethinking assumptions about how change happens.

This approach isn't new. Much has been written on [thinking systemically](#), [leading systemically](#), and [collaborating systemically](#). Yet the social sector leaders and grantmakers who are actively integrating the tools and practices of systems thinking into their day-to-day work are few and far between.

So what does it take to move from theory to practice when working on systems?

The [David & Lucile Packard Foundation](#) and [Management Assistance Group](#), a nonprofit that supports movement building, partnered together to answer this question. Given our organizations' history of influencing systems and commitment to impact, we embarked on a project to understand and overcome the barriers to creating system-level change that grantmakers and others in the social sector face. We reviewed more than 175 websites, articles, books, and videos; conducted more than 30 interviews with systems experts and philanthropic leaders; and ultimately identified three ingredients necessary for overcoming common barriers and positively influencing systems:

I. A systems mindset

Approaching challenges with a systems lens, as described above, is the necessary precursor to working at the systems level. We call this a systems mindset. Over time, nurturing a [systems](#)

mindset is critical for three reasons:

1. *Growing a systems mindset is a lifelong practice*, like progressing in martial arts from a white to black belt. We all hold common beliefs about what it means to think systemically—whether we think of it as “seeing root causes” or “understanding the big picture” or something else. These are good foundations for beginners, but we develop additional insight as time goes on—such as “finding universal solutions that recur throughout a system” that help people act in new ways.

2. *A systems mindset opens up a toolbox for solving issues at the systems level*. Consider a Swiss-Army-knife-style bike-repair tool. Anyone could probably figure out a way to use it, but a person adept at bike repair could quickly find and use the ideal tool for a specific type of repair. They could also adapt the tool for different situations, even beyond bike repair. Building a systems mindset gives you the same flexibility to optimize and adapt a range of tools to your situation.



(Image courtesy of Wikipedia)

3. *A systems mindset is more effective when shared broadly (across networks) and deeply (from the grassroots to systems leaders)*. Change efforts can stall when new leaders and frontline workers don’t understand what a systems approach is or why it makes a difference. Leaders need to develop a systems mindset intentionally—among all stakeholders and over time—to create continuous and consistent systems-level action.

2. The right tool for the job

Sometimes we rely too much on too few tools, but not every nail needs the same hammer; we need more tools to go in the toolbox described above. One of us recently used a **power analysis** (a tool that maps players on continuums of support to opposition, and more to less power) to identify ways to create more family-sustaining jobs. The tool didn’t help us achieve our goal, because participants struggled with stepping back to see the big picture without precise data. The gathering could have led to collective action, but the effort stalled. A better tool may have been **concept mapping**, which would have illustrated how different stakeholders perceive the problem and potential solutions, and sparked dialogue on how to reconcile differences.

Our research uncovered **more than 50 systems frameworks, processes, and tools** that communities, grassroots movements, academia, and government are using around the globe. These can help answer questions that emerge during a systems change process, for example:

- Who are the different players to include in systems change efforts, and what are their relationships and power dynamics?
- What are the reasons for the current status quo?

- What is the readiness or capacity for a system to change?
- What is the best strategy for influencing systems?
- What process should we use to implement a systems change initiative?
- How can we learn about what is working and not working to change the system?

([The Systems Grantmaking Resource Guide](#) provides a directory of these tools and guidance on how to select the right one.)

3. An understanding of human dynamics

Neglecting the “people” part of systems change can mire efforts in inaction. Worse, it can lead to false consensus that perpetuates the status quo or oppressive dynamics. One of us recently worked on a cross-sector financial security initiative for low-income citizens. We developed a plan for collective action, but the group lacked the level of shared trust needed to build deeper, systemic solutions. This dynamic unfortunately hinders many efforts. Focusing on human dynamics is critical when:

- *Defining boundaries.* It is an act of power to decide who or what belongs in a system, and this can create factions and feelings of marginalization. Working together to define system boundaries can build trust and the potential for future collective action. It also helps develop a common sense of identity and values.
- *Engaging beneficiaries.* It is important to take the time to incorporate feedback directly from participants in the system. This helps define and prioritize systemic solutions that are relevant and impactful.
- *Facing challenging conversations.* Most systems include power differentials and implicit biases that lead to imbalances in resources, influence, and credit. It is necessary to address these underlying issues to create a shared, multi-stakeholder space. Mediating conflicts among partners can be done through one-on-one conversations, educational workshops, and group discussions. Slowing down to build shared agreements helps people move faster later on.
- *Deepening systems capacity beyond the leaders.* Systems change requires participation of many implementers, not just executive directors or CEOs, and these players may not have had the same time and space to engage in a systems process. In addition to developing a systems mindset, it is important to strengthen people’s self-awareness and relationships, create space for dialogue and inquiry, ensure honest and transparent communication, and develop a shared understanding and practice of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The promise of a systems approach is finding solutions that match the scale of complex problems. Our hope is that more social sector actors feel empowered to experiment with a broader range of systems tools and integrate them into their daily work.



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