

# Systemic Leadership

*Widening Awareness. Integrating Perspectives.*



Image by: Kazuko Nomoto (nomoco), from [kissmylala.wordpress.com](http://kissmylala.wordpress.com)

## Introduction

Organisational leaders face immense tensions as they attempt to navigate themselves, their teams and the systems they are part of through the turbulence of everyday life. The expectations put onto them by themselves and others to be clear, calm and in control can generate huge waves of anxiety and overwhelm leading to poor decision making and actions. This results in worse outcomes across the system which can easily create a vicious and depreciative cycle.

Supporting leaders to productively shift the outcomes of an uncertain, volatile and complex system requires a developmental approach that pays attention to the needs of the individual and the system. For example, in many organisations, it is recognised how important it is that levels of trust *as a whole* are improved, and many individuals see a need to be *personally* different

in the way they connect with colleagues.

One of the challenges of embracing this broader, more inclusive approach, is that our binary minds once again become overwhelmed and resort to their habitual process of creating an either ... or duality:

**either** we focus on intervening at the individual level **or** we attempt to make changes to the entire system.

## A different level of thinking

This tendency we have to split problems into different parts and to attempt to resolve the parts separately is a very strong habit that we have engrained through our western rationalist ways of thinking and acting. It is also singularly unhelpful when we attempt to engage with the complexity of the challenges that systemic work

brings to us.

Resisting this habit of 'either . . . or' thinking is difficult and will require some effort to avoid the repetitive problem 'solving' cycles where people engage in lots of 'change' activity but the systemic patterns stay in place. Einstein had a phrase for this:

*"You can't solve a problem from the same level of thinking that created it."*

The challenges many organisations face require a different level of thinking and acting – ones that are more holistic, more integrated. An approach that seeks both to help *individuals* to better understand themselves and finds ways to *collectively* shift the system.

### Integrating self and system change

A Systemic Leadership Programme is intentionally designed as an integrating space to help the organisation unpack this huge inquiry around self and system. It aims to support leaders to accept and explore the *autopoietic* nature of reality:

how the self and the system are *continuously* and *simultaneously* influencing and changing each other, moment by moment.

One metaphor we can use for the autopoietic process of how the self and system influence each other is of fish swimming in water. The usual individualistic leadership lens focuses our attention on the **fish**: how can we make them bigger, stronger, faster, more colourful . . . If we take a more systemic lens, we begin to notice the **water**: how deep it is, how clean, how warm, how strong the currents are. Only if we include both of these perspectives can we see the impacts each person has on the conditions they work within and vice versa:

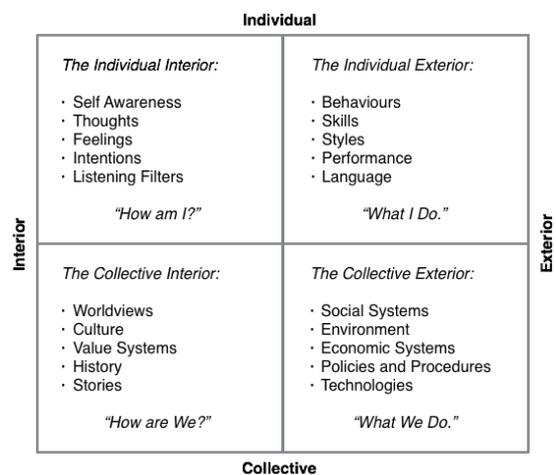
When the fish are polluting the water, then the water pollutes the fish.

### Supporting the self

As leaders engage in their daily work, it can be helpful to create some reminders to keep *shifting perspective* between the individual view and the systemic. The creation of cycles of *action* and *inquiry* around how an individual sees themselves shifting and how they see the system changing can help them more safely navigate this uncertain development journey. They could focus attention on how they stay *grounded* and continue to productively function in the midst of all the anxiety-provoking turbulence that this work reveals.

One of the intentions of a Systemic Leadership Programme is to offer new maps and tools that provide support as leaders engage in the self and systemic development work. The maps are not about replacing the actual terrain leaders traverse, and they may offer a different, more integrating perspective on the work people are already engaged in. These maps can only become useful when people apply them to their everyday lives.

One of the maps we work with comes from the work of the philosopher Ken Wilber and is an integrating frame that can help leaders to move between their inner inquiries and outer actions, as individual selves and as a collective system. This map is called *AQAL* as it claims to cover all quadrants and all levels of human endeavour:<sup>1</sup>



Some questions that leaders can use to navigate around this map include:

Quadrant 1 – the Individual Interior:

- How I am right now?
- What am I thinking?
- How am I feeling?

Quadrant 2 – the Individual Exterior:

- What do I want to do right now?
- What impulses, urges do I have?

Quadrant 3 – the Collective Interior:

- How are We right now?
- What beliefs, values do we share as a collective?
- What is it ok to speak about and what's taboo?

Quadrant 4 – Collective Exterior:

- What do We want to do right now?
- What are our collective patterns of behaviour?

## **Integrating perspectives**

Most people find that they are naturally drawn to or habitually occupy one or two of the quadrants. Being able to stretch one's awareness so that we become more and more aware of how all four quadrants are acting and interacting in any given moment is a developmental challenge for any leader wanting to take a more integrated perspective.

An interim step is for people to be aware that these four different perspectives exist and that they can constrain themselves if they only look at the world through one or two of them. Some teams and organisations find ways to deliberately move around all of these territories of experience when they are considering complex changes and decisions.

The overarching architecture of a Systemic Leadership Programme offers spaces for participants to explore these different quadrants. For example:

- Large group collective sessions (3 & 4),
- Team development work (2, 3, 4),
- Action Learning sets (1, 2, 3)
- Individual reflections & coaching (1, 2)
- Various inputs to support intellectual learning (1, 2, 3, 4)

We also view the programme architecture as being open so that additional components can be included if our work together demands it.

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<sup>i</sup> An overview of AQAL and Ken Wilber's Integral Theory can be accessed here: [www.integralsocialwork.com/wp-content/uploads/integraltheory\\_3-2-2009.pdf](http://www.integralsocialwork.com/wp-content/uploads/integraltheory_3-2-2009.pdf)