

# A Brief Introduction to Systems Leadership

## Context

Systems Leadership Theory (SLT) is a body of work that provides a coherent set of models to help leaders create conditions that actively encourage people to use their capabilities in achieving goals. Drawn in part from the concepts of Stratified Systems Theory (Elliot Jacques), through the work of Ian Macdonald, Catherine Burke and Karl Stewart (among many others) SLT has been developed and modified through application since the 1980's. It provides a coherent overall, conceptual framework from which a set of tools can be fashioned to create, improve and sustain positive organisations.

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the core concepts and connections within SLT.

## Core Concepts

For any society, organisation or group to prosper there must be social cohesion – agreed arrangements about what is acceptable and / or productive behaviour. SLT proposes 6 principles of human behaviour that underpin all social interaction and influence all that we do and say in creating social cohesion.

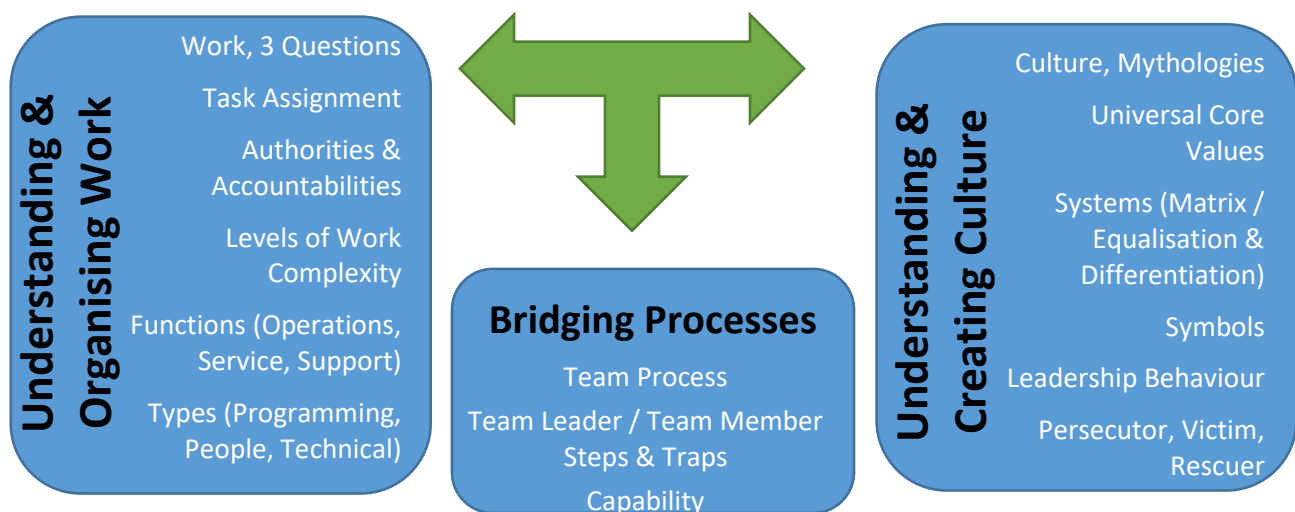
1. **People need to be able to predict their environments.** From virtually the moment we are born we begin a quest of observing and classifying behaviour so that we may understand and predict it. We are intrinsically motivated to explain human behaviour and the material world to create a sense of security.
2. **People are not machines.** We can control objects, but can only influence people. In people-to-people interactions, two wills are at play, and the context as well as intention, influence behaviour.
3. **People's behaviour is based on Six Universal Values.** These values are essential properties of constructive, social relationships that result in productive social cohesion: Trust, Love, Honesty, , Courage and Fairness and Respect for Human Dignity. They are the criteria against which we assess our own worth and the worth of others. As we do this from our own perspective, depending on the culture, the expression of these values will change. To stay together and be productive, group members must behave in a way That the rest of the group will consistently judge positively.
4. **People form cultures based upon mythologies.** Mythologies are the underlying assumptions or current beliefs as to what is positively (or negatively) valued behaviour and why that is so. They are the practically learnt rules by which we judge situations and behaviour. Groups who agree on these rules will become cohesive, forming a culture.

5. **Change is a result of dissonance.** When we observe behaviour that challenges our predictions, we experience dissonance. When this happens, we can ignore the data or explain it away as the “exception that proves the rule”. When we continue to experience dissonance (unpredicted behaviour now becomes predictable) we need to form new mythologies to resolve the dissonance.
6. **It is better to build relationships on the basis of authority rather than power.** Both Authority and Power are concerned with changing behaviour. If a person uses authority, they act within limits known and agreed by the other person. The use of power will breach one or more of these limits. While not inherently negative of itself, power is less predictable for us and because it’s not a shared basis for relating can be viewed negatively in terms of values.

## Discussion

### Systems Leadership Theory

Systems Leadership Theory (SLT) is a cohesive set of models that analyses and explains behaviours.



**How I do my Work is the Work.**

### Understanding and Organising Work

Work is defined as turning intention into reality. That is, the development and selection of a pathway that moves us towards a goal. In this way, work is an expression of our unique individuality through the choices we make to achieve our purpose – it is a fundamental part of our identity.

In employment work, we apply our individual creativity towards the goals defined by the organisation we have agreed to work for. Our desire and ability to do this is influenced by a number of factors.

One of the signs of a healthy organisation is the clarity with which members can answer the following **3 Questions**:

1. What am I meant to be doing?
2. How am I doing?
3. What is my future?

The **Task Assignment** model can be used to support clarity around the first question. Tasks are first formulated in the mind of the assigner before the two-way process of task assignment. The task should be articulated in terms of: **Context**, **Purpose**, **Output** (described in terms of **Quality & Quantity**) **Resources** and **Time**. This process is fundamental to people understanding their work and being able to receive useful feedback on their performance (Question 2). Team members will be able to answer the final question through career review / assessment with their manager once removed, development plans, business information systems, long-term business plans.

An organisational structure is the framework for the distribution of authority and work. Within a managerial hierarchy, a cluster of tasks focused on a particular purpose is combined into a Role. Roles can be defined in terms of the **Level of Work Complexity** (qualitatively different types of complexity of tasks and mental processing ability), **Dimensions** of work (People, Programming and Technical) and work **Function** (Operations, Service, Support) as well as the authority required to perform the work well.

The modelling around authority and accountability supports the establishment and maintenance of the primary, direct relationships within the organisation – the ‘reporting’ relationships between a person and his / her manager and manager-once-removed. The purpose of **Accountability** is to inform the manager about the performance of work, so he or she can make a judgement about how well it’s being performed as well as the capability of the person who did it, given the context in which the task was performed. **Authority** (to spend money, use resources, assign and review tasks, access information and people) is the ability to take certain decisions in order to do the work within the context of the mutual acceptance of agreed limits. The authorities for managerial relationships allow for both parties to be clear about the nature and boundaries of the relationship – a minimum basis for any effective relationship.

These concepts also apply to non-reporting / cross functional role relationships. Specifying the work, and necessary authorities for accountability allows clarity where decisions need to be made and agreement cannot be reached. In this context formal authority may be rarely used. However, it is constructive to know whose ‘call’ it is if agreement can’t be reached. These principles are particularly important in ensuring that relationships remain direct and do not involve a ‘**Rescuer**’ (therein creating a **Persecutor** and **Victim** – see end note). In this situation a third party has authority beyond their accountability and becomes the preferred mode of communication outside the direct relationship.

Lack of clarity and misunderstanding is a prime source of destructive cultural beliefs. Application of the above models supports the creation of a constructive culture.

## **Understanding and Creating Culture**

To effectively undertake the work of creating a constructive culture we need a model to analyse the basis of culture and predict the cultural impact of decisions and actions. As described in principle 3 and 4 above, people share a culture when they share **Mythologies** - beliefs and assumptions that specific behaviours demonstrate positive or negative value. All people, and therefore all cultures, rate their observations of the world against the **6 Universal Values** identified above (Love, Honesty, Trust, Respect for Human Dignity, Courage and Fairness).

Groups that share mythologies see the world in a similar way. The presence of these mythologies facilitates the cohesion, alignment and decision-making.

The work of a leader is to create, maintain and improve the culture of people so that they achieve an objective and continue to do so overtime. For a leader to proactively work with the culture of their team it is essential they understand the mythologies of their team. This links directly to the People (as opposed to Technical or Programming) in the Understanding and Organising Work section above. Leaders have three tools at their disposal when working to influence the mythologies and culture of their teams: Systems, Symbols and (Leadership) Behaviours.

In organisations, because they drive behaviour, **Systems** (processes) are the equivalent of non-verbal behaviour in human interaction. They are the means by which policy becomes reality. All systems (not just HR systems) should be designed to be productive, to achieve a purpose and in doing so encourage positive behaviour. There are two primary models for system analysis – the **Systems Matrix and Differentiation & Equalisation**. SL provides an integrated approach to systems design that considers both the cultural, social implications and the complexity of the work.

**Symbols** can include physical things and objects as well as ritualised behaviours or objects associated with systems. Behaviour itself is highly symbolic as is language. Other examples of symbols include uniforms, titles, flags, logos, office size and placement, carparking, housekeeping. Symbols can be used by all leaders but become more significant as the organisational distance increases between the leader and team members.

**Leadership Behaviours** are highly significant, and their consistency is scrutinised. This gives rise to phrases such as 'walk the talk' and 'practice what you preach'. It is difficult for a leader to counter bad systems and the behaviour of others by her or his behaviour alone. Behaviour will revert unless reinforced by systems and symbols. For culture change to be effective, all three must be consistent and deliver the same message. The behaviour a leader tolerates in others is also significant as it can set a minimum standard for people.

## Social Processes

The key to good organisation is managing the social process so individuals are encouraged and allowed to use their capability to achieve the overall purpose of the group. This occurs with clarity of roles, authorities and task assignments as well as recognition for both individual and team performance. SL proposes a **Team Process**; a methodology that focusses on constructive social process in a team. **Team Leaders** and **Team Members** have specific and distinct work in achievement of the overall goal.

The development of appropriate skills and knowledge around social process is necessary for leaders to undertake their work of managing the process and making effective behavioural decisions. Leaders require self-awareness and the ability to reflect on their own behaviour and its impact. These social process skills are one element of the **Capability** model. Other elements include Knowledge, Technical Skills, Mental Processing Ability and Application.

From this the way I chose to perform my work as a leader is at least as important as the work itself as this is what creates, reinforces or challenges culture and is then the basis of the future behaviour needed to be successful as an organisation – “how I do the work is the work”.

## Linkages

A way to visualise the primary linkages is to see the three areas mentioned above as corners of a triangle supporting a centre of sustainable outcomes. The individual pieces of modelling all link to each other, as they are all focused around promoting effective social process in getting work done. At core it's about clarity of the work and capability of the individuals.

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*Drawn from the work of Ian Macdonald, Catherine Burke and Karl Stewart (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition below).*

*Persecutor-Victim-Rescuer model based on Karpman's Drama Triangle*

