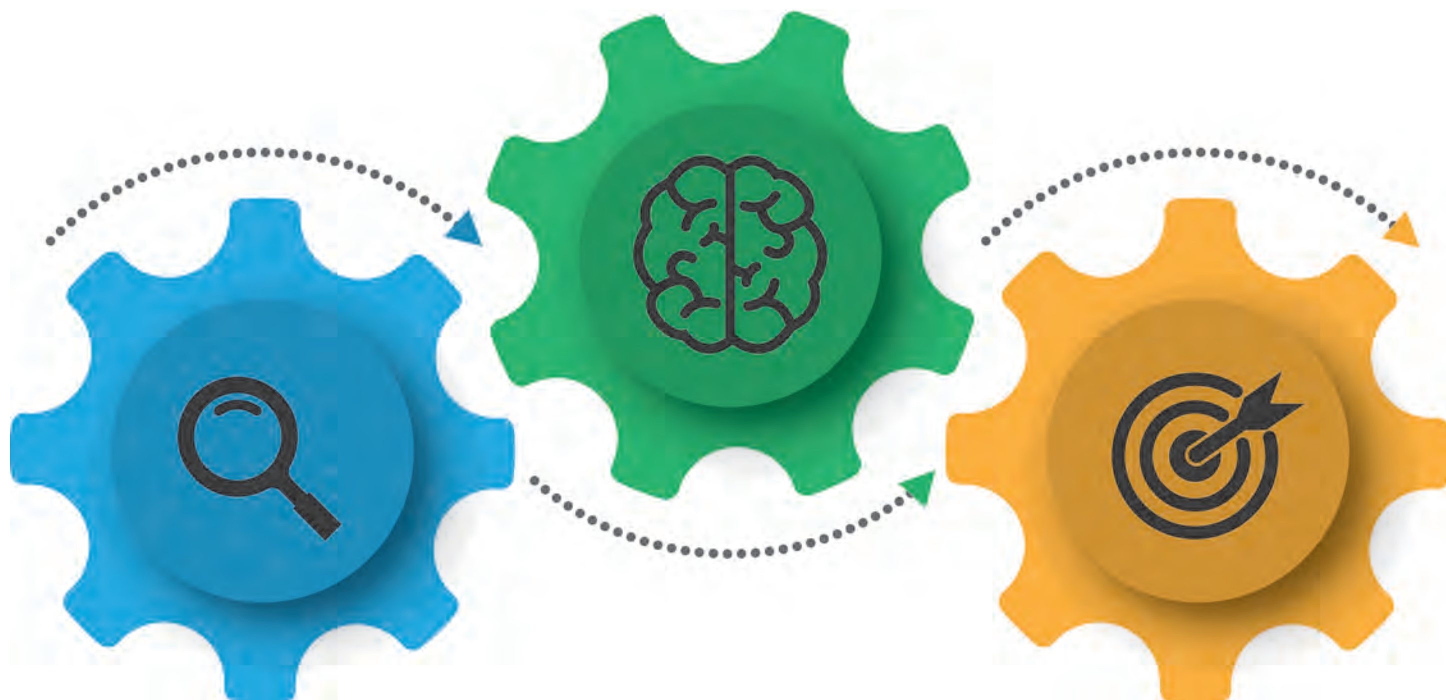
SYSTEMS CHANGE IS HARD WORK.



3 ELEMENTS CAN HELP

BY JAMES HILTON HARRELL

The first three years in my California district were marked with transition. Three different superintendents came and went, tipping off corresponding waves of senior leadership departures.

By fall 2016, things finally felt stable. I accepted the role of chief of staff for a network superintendent and deputy superintendent. My plan was to grow my leadership capabilities over the coming years. But by that winter, the district was facing a $30 million deficit and another superintendent resigned.

I was abruptly moved into a much more senior role as a principal supervisor — a move that came without the level of support I needed. I went from *learning* systems to *leading* systems within the span of a one-hour conversation.

My first role as a systems leader was trial by fire. I was often overwhelmed by the magnitude of challenges that come with running a cohort of 15 elementary schools. Despite the odds, our underresourced team got great results for students and showed me that real change can happen quickly.

There was a kind of alchemy in this position that I hoped to replicate going forward. Yet, in succeeding

roles, I couldn't always duplicate the magic. I fumbled by mandating the same techniques in new places or not spending enough time to see the challenges.

These successes and failures led me to evolve my thinking over time and embrace a systems-thinking perspective that also recognizes context. Now a senior leader, I am committed to developing systems thinking within my team.

Systems thinking is a global approach to understanding problems by noticing patterns, dynamics, and relationships while simultaneously looking at individual people and parts (Sweeney, 2001). It takes practice and time to learn, and it must be adapted because every setting is unique.

This article focuses on how to build leadership capacity for developing systems leaders in all contexts. By concentrating on three key elements — competence, care, and coherence — emerging systems leaders can better lead toward equity.

COMPETENCE

There is no "right way" in work, but people often have very strongly held beliefs about what constitutes right. New systems leaders' mental models may default into one of two camps: the know-it-all who is unwilling to ask for help or the self-proclaimed imposter who doesn't know how they got the job.

Both camps represent deeply held assumptions on what it means to lead and how an individual can influence change. As a systems leader, there is a delicate balance between knowing that no one has all the answers while also drawing from one's own expertise.

When I transitioned from the role of chief of staff to principal supervisor, I had never been a principal. I suddenly had formal authority over a group that I had only previously influenced and coached. At the time, I had deep knowledge about the district's collective bargaining agreements and content standards from previous roles, but I didn't know much about budgets, risk management, or how to get a broken toilet fixed.

To avoid falling into one of the aforementioned camps, I gave myself an honest self-assessment. I tapped into my own strengths and previous experiences while I also sought resources to help me identify what I didn't know and fill in my new learning.

Context is a key player alongside competence. When entering a new organization, an employee sometimes brings norms from their past work to the new organization. If a principal moves from a large urban district to a rural one, a hiring committee might worry that they won't be able to adjust to the new environment.

But people can be effective in many different contexts if they know who they are, what matters to them, and how their thinking has evolved throughout their career path. New systems leaders each have different personal and professional experiences to draw from. For example, how I lead in Texas is different than how I led in California. However, my core values remain constant, my quirks remain, but the organization and team inform how I lead and manage day to day.

Leaning into lessons learned, while realizing that every experience represents a moment in time and particular context, is crucial. Leaders need to determine the best way to leverage their strengths within their specific settings to drive meaningful change.

To be successful, a systems leader must build empathy for the people served. Instead of framing the fact of never serving as a principal as a deficit, I saw it as the unique advantage of not thinking that I knew the "right" way to do the job. To fill in my knowledge gaps, I conducted formal empathy interviews as well as job shadowing. This allowed me to understand the unique aspects and pressures of the role.

And, while I was gaining an understanding of my position, I also listened closely to what principals needed and worked to get them results. I designed professional learning that focused on the instructional core and content standards, helped review and

think through progressive discipline, and asked many questions about how to get work done.

I helped design systems to meet principals' actual needs, not the needs that I thought they should have. Rather than assume that one understands the challenges of all employees, it is crucial to listen deeply to understand how the system presents challenges.

CARE

Systems leadership requires care because systems rely on people. Change requires vulnerability and courage, as it often requires the abandoning of previously held beliefs or workstreams. During times of organizational strife or crisis, leaders not only have to process, regulate, and express their own emotions but also help teams understand their individual and collective emotions.

This adds another layer to already challenging work and therefore might be avoided by leaders, especially if they don't feel adept with those kinds of tasks. Yet, as adrienne maree brown reminds us, "What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system" (2017, p. 53). Care work is core work; care routines support the people in a system and have spillover effects for the bottom line.

In shifting my leadership role from California to Texas, community care looked very different across these geographies. In California, it was common practice to have relationship-building times to start and end each meeting. In Texas, holiday celebrations and community gatherings were more common ways to build teams, occurring separately from "the work." As a leader, I had to pay attention to the characteristics of the settings and then identify the types of care work that resonated with me in each context.

Care work doesn't rely on one person — even if that person has the role with the most formal authority. A systems leader can routinize care and flag it as an important priority for the team. In fact, adding small routines of care into daily ways of work pays dividends across the organizational culture.

One practice I use today is starting meetings with relationship check-in questions connected to the meeting topic. For example, when launching cross-departmental working teams, I like to ask everyone to tell the team about a time when collaboration was successful.

As they talk, I listen for trends and then reference these throughout the meeting. This helps reinforce the lessons learned and identify red flags that might exist in our work together. These quick check-ins can build relationships and help document relevant learnings to drive improvement.

A primary charge of a systems leader is to develop their team to enact their vision. One technique that I have developed over time is to think of my feedback in terms of a process I designed called the CAVE method. This method has four elements: coaching, appreciation, validation, and evaluation. It is based on the ACE framework that includes appreciation, coaching, and evaluation (Stone & Heen, 2014).

Coaching is feedback designed to help you grow in your effectiveness and cohesiveness to the vision. **Appreciation** is feedback that says, "I see you and your efforts." **Validations** are observations around the external conditions in which individual employees find themselves. **Evaluations** rank employees against expectations and deadlines.

I used the CAVE method when building my department in Texas, beginning with coaching to help ensure vision alignment and organizational coherence. As this vision became reality, I offered appreciation for staff members' efforts.

My new department had four subdepartments that had never been housed together before. Each faced a unique challenge and had different resources and attention from the board. One was a start-up that provided surge capacity with one-time federal funds, two were experiencing rapid growth because of newly named district priorities, and the fourth was a legacy program. Validating that each leadership context was different allowed members to focus on their challenges and not worry about having to compete with peers.

Finally, to round out the CAVE framework, my team and I held quarterly evaluations of the effectiveness of each program, team, and personal leadership. These quarterly evaluations allowed my team to reinforce expectations and determine the best strategy to move the system forward.

Though the example provided describes a linear process following the CAVE method, it's important to remember that a systems leader must deploy different techniques for growth and development. An effective coach or manager also recognizes what an employee needs at any given moment and differentiates support for them. For example, the same words as feedback, such as, "Prioritize scheduling this meeting," can be received as evaluation or as coaching. The primary interpretation by the individual receiving the feedback depends on the relationship between the two individuals. Building systems to honor the people helps prime conditions for growth.

COHERENCE

Education is made up of nested systems that extend from the federal government to the classroom and operate interdependently. Practically, this means that a new law, board

directive, or superintendent mandate can dramatically shift day-to-day work. Because of this, it is important to identify two important skills: knowing your locus of control and focusing on what Fullan (2021) calls connected autonomy to collaborate together.

The challenges that we have within our school systems will not be solved by one person or in one school year (Gutierrez, 2021). Rather, it will take a group of people working together to create and maintain the systems our young people need. To create systems change, leaders need to build on connected autonomy, which suggests that each system is simultaneously connected and autonomous (Fullan, 2021).

Think of a school operating in a district. The school relies on and is connected to the central office for services like curriculum or facilities. Simultaneously, it also has autonomy, especially over day-to-day operations. The principal must balance these elements of connection and autonomy to be effective.

In Texas, I launched a cross-functional working group between the offices of schools, academics, and talent. Our goal was to establish a teacher performance pay system, which would reward our highly effective teachers in an attempt to strengthen retention and build their capacity.

Each of our departments had crucial roles to play in teacher development, but, like many districts, we operated in silos. By intentionally building a shared vision together, defining our interdependencies, and committing to dialogue for improvement, separate departments were able to learn the ways in which we were connected and separate.

In practice, systems leaders need to understand what they can and cannot control. I entered my role as a principal supervisor during a $30 million structural deficit. The district made rapid budget decisions, such as a hiring and spending freeze, which significantly impacted the schools I served. I couldn't control that these choices were made, but I could help my principals process their emotions, collect the impact of these choices for the budget office, and help pool resources across our cohort of schools.

Despite being a principal supervisor, I was ultimately a midlevel manager who faced unprecedented challenges without complete information. I didn't know everything that went into the call for the budget freeze and was not held accountable by the superintendent or board for these decisions.

At the time, many of my principals and I felt frustrated. Staying in a space of frustration would prohibit our overall effectiveness. To move into a more productive emotional space, one practice that I used to help identify my and my leaders' scope of control was to name the decision, identify and label the emotions that the decision caused, and then help leaders plan what decisions they needed to make for their work. The interdependent work of systems leadership ensures that we have choices to make, even if they are facilitating how staff can express and communicate their feelings and ideas.

Systems change is hard work and requires intentional learning to be effective. In coaching new systems leaders, there should be a focus on building solutions that are fully within one's locus of control and connected to those who are impacted by them.

New systems leaders enter their roles with a wealth of knowledge, practices, and experience to draw from. Yet most will need to build new knowledge and skills to transform systems. Transformation occurs through people — ensuring that mental models are aligned to meet the demands of the situation at hand and not pre-existing ideas.

To help new systems leaders develop, managers and coaches should focus on deepening the new systems leaders' competence, care, and coherence.

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