



INNOVATIONS IN PUBLIC POLICY

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From System Leadership to System Diplomacy

- Complex public service systems can't be led, and we risk setting leaders up to fail if we focus too much on system leadership.
- System stewardship is an alternative approach, but doesn't give enough attention to pluralistic, diverse and competing agendas.
- We advocate system diplomacy to reflect people's ability to work for common goals without losing their own vantage point, and to give us a way to understand micro politics and soft power.

Introduction

Complex public service systems are not amenable to being led. Complex systems thinking draws attention to the lack of cause and effect linearity in many public service interventions. Government makes a change – for example, the decision to [abolish NHS England](#) – and hopes this will streamline NHS management structures and focus attention on delivery targets. But such change, particularly in an organisation as big as the NHS, is just as likely to unsettle staff and distract attention from delivery, and to have myriad other emergent and unintended consequences (some good, some bad). Similarly, the recently announced [cuts and mergers in Integrated Care Boards](#) will have consequences for closer working between the

NHS and local authorities, particularly as the local authorities themselves reorganise in response to the [English devolution white paper](#). These reforms – in the short to medium term – do not seem to make it more likely that the NHS and local authorities will be able to work more closely together to integrate health and social care within localities. It is well documented that reorganisations are often disruptive for minimal gain (Smith et al, 2001). But the exact ways in which this throwing up of the cards will land is very difficult to predict in complex systems.

Those working in or studying public services will know this already. Greater understanding that public services sit within complex systems means lots of energy and money goes into training people to be system leaders, and much of this is beneficial. It helps

people to become aware of the need to take systemic approaches to tackling the sorts of wicked issues that public services address. It requires people to work on themselves, their teams and their organisations to equip them to develop systemic responses to complex issue.

System leaders and stewards

However, writing in [Public Money and Management](#), we have argued that training individuals to be system leaders can only take us so far. The complex systems message risks pulling leaders onto the rocks of either fatalism or hubris. There is a risk that leaders take the complex systems message to indicate that nothing much can be done (fatalism) Alternatively, it could encourage them to take risks with the kinds of experimentation and 'fail fast' messages that complex systems need, but many organisational – and political – bosses won't tolerate (hubris).

Stewardship offers an alternative metaphor to system leadership, bringing implications of a benign overseer with the ability to lift themselves out of the grubby realities of organisational bunfights. But there is a risk that it overstates the capacity of people based in organisations to discard those organisational identities and get on with the virtuous work of thinking 'whole system'. We do not find this plausible, not because bureaucrats are feathering their nests or lining their pockets, but because people come to the challenge of systems thinking and system change from different organisational, professional and sectoral perspectives.

The past, present and future will feel different for a chief executive of an acute hospital compared to a local authority social care manager or a homelessness charity leader. When thinking about the introduction of Integrated Care Systems, for example, it is startling how little dialogue or agreement there is about the purpose of 'integration', the philosophy of 'care' or the meaning of the 'system'.

System diplomats

System diplomacy provides an alternative language to reflect people's ability to work for common goals without losing their own vantage point. The international relations literature on diplomacy helps us understand the processes of negotiation and dialogue in which people are able to find ways to work together. Diplomacy pays particular attention to micro-politics and soft power. Within complex social systems, a system diplomat requires skills that are expressly concerned with recognising and dealing with pluralistic, diverse and competing agendas.

Training and development is needed to support people to be system diplomats. This might involve

being willing to talk more openly about how much diplomatic work already happens through channels such as WhatsApp and private meetings. Waring et al.'s work (2022) brings to light the complex range of political or diplomatic skills, capabilities and resources involved in leading strategic change. These are expressly directed at identifying, understanding and mediating the conflicting agendas and interests that too often emerge around change processes. These qualities can, to some extent, be taught as rules of thumb or negotiation tactics, but more often, leaders acquire and hone these qualities over time in the trial-and-error 'trenches' of strategic change. This can often come at much personal and professional expense, and so more direct attention needs to be given to recognising, valuing and fostering these qualities, whilst minimising the psychological demands on leaders.

Moving forward with this work we are exploring other elements of system diplomacy. These include the contribution of elected officials. Public services gain their mandate from political organisations, and local and national political leaders make decisions within complex systems. Needham et al. (2024) and Mangan et al. (2025) bring together work on the 21st Century Public Servant and the 21st Century Councillor, highlighting the need for elected politicians to be part of debates about complex system change.

We also need to consider how the street-level diplomacy done by frontline workers – as they work across cultural and organisational boundaries in their day-to-day roles – intersects with the system diplomacy undertaken by organisational leaders (Gale et al., 2017). Whilst senior leaders may feel they are designing systems through structural reform or policy change, it is just as much the multiple street-level interactions that shape a complex public service system.

References

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