

Plenary Presentation Abstract

INNOVATING APPLIED SYSTEMIC LEADERSHIP THEORY AND PRACTICE THROUGH A PRACTITIONER-BASED MSC PROGRAMME.

Dr Rachel Lilley, Dr Juanita Bernal-Alvarado
University of Birmingham (for both authors)
r.lilley@bham.ac.uk, j.bernalalvarado@bham.ac.uk

In recent years, the utility of Systems Thinking has faced increasing scrutiny. Despite a long history of theoretical and practical development, its adoption has been slow and limited. Critics argue it falls short in effectively addressing complex issues and facilitating organisational change in contemporary contexts. It is often perceived as too abstract, with an excessive number of tools and methodologies, overly focusing on refining existing methods rather than identifying and evolving new approaches which work. It doesn't effectively address high levels of conflict, anxiety, and significant differences in perspectives, nor does it fully acknowledge the limitations of modern and fragmented working, such as lack of time, hybrid arrangements, and limited resources.

Many practitioners believe that current approaches were designed for work environments that have changed significantly. The abstract language used, can make it inaccessible, with an overwhelming array of overly involved technical methods and tools. Furthermore, there is a lack of practical skill development in the field, needed to navigate conflict, power dynamics, and facilitation challenges common in today's systemic interventions.

One way to advance systems thinking is to explore the role of leadership in supporting its application. Various literatures have attempted to define systems leadership, including the capabilities and traits it requires. However, there is still no clear consensus, and the concept continues to evolve. Over the past three years, the Birmingham Leadership Institute has been working to address these issues through a practitioner-based, master's-level programme that integrates traditional systems thinking, contemporary theories of human perception, and adaptive leadership. Spanning the public, third, and private sectors, over 60 students have participated. It is generating case studies based on their applied learning, which are evolving both practice and theory, and identifying what works and what needs further development, in today's contexts. These include challenging settings such as public health, the NHS, local government strategy, and social services.

This is not a conventional systems thinking course. It begins with the fundamental question of how humans make sense of the world, drawing from paradigm shifts in contemporary neuroscience, adaptive leadership, and theories of adult development. Students are challenged from the outset to explore their sensemaking and partiality, and to develop embodied capabilities to work with conflict and uncertainty. They are taught contemporary theories of cognition (including the role of emotion in cognition) that inform their understanding of their own perceptual constraints, those of their stakeholders, and how that impacts the application of systems methodologies. They are

encouraged not only to mix methods but to critique and adapt them to suit their contexts. In this plenary, we will share the journey so far. Feedback suggests that the programme is a powerful learning experience and is creating demonstrable impact, it is also a form of action research, constantly evolving based on students' contexts, reflections, and challenges. This mutual learning loop has reimagined what systems thinking and systemic leadership are, what disciplines they draw from and how it looks in practice, it also offers a practical demonstration of how systems thinking education can be redesigned.

Keywords

Systemic Leadership, Systems Thinking, Systems Practice, Education, Action-research