Quarterly Reflections on Leadership

January – March 2025

Developing the capacity to lead change

Introduction

In *The Wise Leader[i],* Dr Suzi Skinner and I suggest five tasks for the leader to consider in seeking to better manage the complexities of today's world (figure 1). We talk about:

- A commitment to reflective learning
- Selves awareness, and achieving a deep understanding of different aspects of self
- Self-transcendence, and developing the capacity to see ourselves from afar in relationship with others
- Thinking meta! – understanding the way change really works
- Doing dialogue, and the capacity to influence

If you're not already familiar with these ideas, then you may want to check out some of our previous QRLs before reading on.

Figure 1: The Wise Leader model

The wise leader is able to navigate uncertainty and chaos in service of leading change. Through her commitment to reflective learning, she develops a deep sense of selves-awareness, and the capacity to see herself evolve and change through her relationships with others. She understands the limitations of authoritative power and knows she cannot control change outcomes. Instead, she seeks to influence others through an enhanced capacity to listen and learn, and to voice her own perspective with confidence and humility.

In *The Wise Leader* we suggest practical exercises for each of the five dimensions. We remain curious however around one particular dimension of becoming wiser. The capacity to *Think Meta!* – to access different perspectives on the functioning of an organisation – to what extent is that intellectual, something to be learned in the classroom? And to what extent is it (adult) developmental, something that requires a fundamental mind-shift that is only achieved through experience and reflection?

Through our experiences teaching these materials in organisations across the world, we suspect the process is developmental, at least to an extent. We regularly come across leaders who claim they understand the five different ways of thinking about systems and change, yet we don't

always see evidence of that understanding when we ask them to apply their thinking to real-world scenarios.

Over the Xmas and New Year break, we explored the new edition of *Changing on the Job[ii]*, Jennifer Garvey's book on how to work with adult development in the workplace. We looked for fresh insights as to the links between adult development and the capacity to lead change.

In the rest of this paper, we will:

- Remind you what it means to *Think Meta!*
- Remind you of the five stages of adult development, as defined by Robert Kegan
- Share some of the insights we gained through reading again *Changing on the Job*
- Consider implications for leadership development

This is important stuff. In *Changing on the Job* Garvey Berger cites a study by Bill Torbert and colleagues, who tracked the careers of ten CEOs. They found that the CEOs with self-transforming minds led 15 successful organisation transformations between them. The other CEOs didn't lead any.

Five ways of thinking about systems & change

In *The Wise Leader* & in *Coaching Systemically[iii]*, we distinguish between five ways of thinking about systems and change (figure 2). The more ways of thinking leaders have access to, we argue, the more likely they are to make good decisions in the face of complexity.

| Linear | Non-linear | Collaborative | Complex | Meta |

Figure 2: Five ways of thinking about systems

Linear
Through this lens the leader interprets events in terms of simple cause and effect. The 'system' in this case might be a hot water system, where the temperature of the water depends only the functioning of a thermostat, switching the heater on and off. How might this way of thinking show up in an organisational environment? Consider a fictional leader, Juan. Juan is the CEO of an organisation whose market share is falling. Juan is determined to find out what the problem is. He looks for the single lever to pull which will result in market share returning to previous levels. For example, lowering prices, or investing in a new product feature. Juan tends to think in terms of polarities. There is always one solution to a problem, and the world is much simpler than many people say it is.

Non-linear
The leader looking at the world through this lens recognises that events may be more complex than they initially appear. This leader values intelligence and looks to his problem-solving capacities to unravel a complicated web of inter-causality. The system in this case is comparable to an aircraft engine, for example, interminably complex, but ultimately understandable. Through this lens, Juan explores the fall in market share more carefully. He discovers a circular

relationship between the company's advertising messages and brand perception. Customers seem to think that the company's advertising messages are fundamentally similar to those of lower price competitors. So, the more the company advertises, the less inclined customers are to pay full price for the product. The company has responded to stagnant market share by reinforcing the same message and buying more advertising time. Juan asks the marketing department to further explore customer perceptions and to experiment with different messages, in service of developing a deeper understanding of brand perceptions and buying behaviours.

Collaborative
The leader looking at the world through this lens recognises that the system is so complex that he cannot hope to understand its functioning by himself. He seeks out other's perspectives, respecting those perspectives as he respects his own, and sponsors a process whereby a meeting of minds generates a collective hypothesis of what's going on and what to do next. Juan doesn't attempt to explore the fall in market share by himself. He brings together people from different parts of the organisation, even some people outside the organisation, and asks them to share their views. He recognises the limitations of his own understanding of the issues and is genuinely curious as to what other people think.

Complex
This perspective is different, in that the leader recognises he doesn't get to control outcomes. The idea of pulling levers and expecting those levers to lead to predictable outcomes sounds quaint and simplistic. He knows he cannot stand outside the system and diagnose it. He recognises that every conversation he has takes place *within* the system. He is part of the system. He doesn't get to control outcomes, but he does influence outcomes through his interactions with others. He knows that people are not compliant, and that the power of hierarchy should not be overestimated. To influence the system requires participating in conversations across the system, listening to understand the complex machinations of a vast network of conversations, and voicing, thereby influencing the direction of those conversations. Juan thinks of his organisation as part of a big weather system, with rains, storms, and periods of bright sunshine. The workings of the market, like the weather, cannot be predicted beyond a few days. He knows he cannot control the 'weather', but he can influence it. In addressing his market share challenge, Juan wants to understand what everyone is thinking and saying, and who is talking to who, so he can engage most effectively, forming and testing hypotheses as he goes.

Meta
Juan knows that organisations are not systems. The boundaries we create between organisation and external environment are not real – they are mental constructs we deploy in order to make things easier to understand. This is not a bad thing, so long as we recognise what we are up to. If we fail to recognise that our systems analogies are not real however, then we pay too much attention to those boundaries. Juan recognises that you cannot put employees, customers, suppliers etc … into boxes, as if the people inside those boxes talk only with each other and with people outside their box only on specific occasions, when those interactions can be carefully studied and managed. This leader recognises that employees are also customers, that employees spend time with other customers all day and every day, including friends (some of whom may work for competitor organisations or suppliers), family, bus drivers and baristas. Juan knows he needs to put aside notions of boundaries sometimes if he is to gain the best understanding of how the market works and how his 'organisation' can best be successful.

These are the five ways of thinking about systems, each of which informs a different way of thinking about leading change. We want to explore the connection between these five ways of thinking about change, and adult development. So let us turn now to Robert Kegan's theories of adult development.

Five stages of adult development

There are lots of adult development theories. Kegan's theory is a constructive-developmental theory, in that that it positions development as something we actively pursue, if not consciously. He describes five stages of adult development (figure 3).
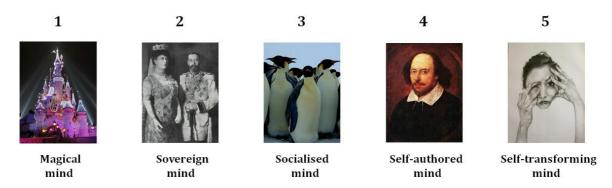

Figure 3: Five stages of adult development

Magical mind
This stage of development is characteristic of very young children, so we need not worry about it here. Basically, there are no rules and no state of permanence in the world. The world is constantly magical and mysterious.

Sovereign mind
Characteristic of a small population of adults. People making sense of the world in this way are distanced from others and so cannot empathise with others. The decisions they make may therefore come across as selfish. They may come across as wholly self-interested, even narcissistic. There is no point chastising this person for being selfish though – the desired mindset you describe to them, be it socialised or self-authored, is not one they have any experience of. It makes no sense.

Socialised mind
Garvey Berger suggests this way of thinking characterises the majority of adults. At this stage the individual *is* able to empathise, indeed has learned to subordinate their desires to the desires of others. The right thing to do is the thing that will win the approval of significant others. Through this lens I function very happily when all the significant others in my life ask the same thing of me. Life becomes more stressful when significant others are pulling me in different directions. This is the way of making meaning that might best be described as 'people pleaser'.

Self-authored mind
Through this lens I am better able to respond to people pulling me in different directions, because I have somewhere internal to go to resolve those differences. I am not only able to articulate my own values and beliefs, but those values and beliefs are solidly integrated into who I am. In a conflict scenario I have an internal reference point to decide what I believe to be right. Quite a few adults make meaning of the world in this way. In an organisational

environment they may be the ones confident of expressing a view, comfortable in engaging in conflict, at the same time demonstrating an ability to empathise and connect with others.

Self-transforming/self-transcending
Relatively few leaders are at this stage. Garvey Berger calls this the self-transforming stage, and we call it the self-transcending stage. The person can see the process through which they have evolved to hold certain values and beliefs, and they recognise that process is social. They experience themselves simultaneously in the moment and on the balcony, observing themselves in relationship with others. A personality clash is more likely to be seen as a coming together of two belief systems, each socially created and continuing to evolve. This person is curious to understand her own evolution, past, present and future, and sees herself functioning as an integral part of a vast social network, constantly evolving and changing through her interaction with others in that network.

So, we have refreshed our understanding of what it means to *Think Meta!* and of adult development theory, a key as aspect of *Transcend Yourselves*. To what extent are the two ideas connected? If they are connected, then this implies that to *Think Meta!* is a developmental task, something that can be achieved only over time through experience and reflection on that experience.

Connections

Reading *Changing on the Job* we looked specifically for references to systems. In table 1 we share some of those references.

Stage of development	References to thinking about systems
Self-sovereign	Complex social problems require cut through with simple, straightforward black-and-white decisions. There is a right or wrong solution to every problem (p.89).
	Hears that others see the world as complex, but she has no sense of that herself (p.90).
Socialised	An enhanced ability to see connections between things that used to look unrelated (p.215).
	Not everything is black and white (p. 216).
	Constantly refers to other's perspectives in deciding what is going on and what needs to happen next.
Self-authored	Looks at the world through a set of strong internal principles (p.216).
	Open to learning from others (p.217) though still primarily driven by own viewpoint.
	Understands that listening to others means others more likely to seek your advice (p.217).
	Able to get in the balcony (p.217) and see who she is likely to get in well with and who not. Some problems are relational.

	More grey areas, with polarities still existing based on individual values and principles (p.218).
Self-transforming	Questions the fallibility of her own internally driven self-authoring system (p.25).
	Strengths include being open to new perspectives and a constant interest in learning (p.28).
	Lets go of the need for control, and creates conditions for others to take action, without being afraid to take action herself (p.34). May however appear indecisive to others (p.31).
	Control seems over-rated (p35).
	Notices in-the-moment when feeling opposed to someone else's opinion (p.38/39).
	Sees large scales of patterns, seeing the overall impact of change on the group system and the thinking of the individuals (p.218).

Table 1: Observations on systems thinking in Changing on the Job 2nd edition.

In figure 4 we seek to map the five ways of thinking about change and systems against the latter four stages of adult development theory.

Figure 4: Adult development & systems

In describing the **self-sovereign** mind, Garvey Berger describes a highly linear way of thinking, with an emphasis on simple causality and a strong propensity to think in terms of polarities. The world is not as complex as people say it is. You just need to work out what levers to pull. This

sounds very much like *linear systemic*, a simplistic approach to leading change that is likely to be effective working only with the most simple problems.

The **socialised** mind has an enhanced ability to see connections between things that used to look unrelated and recognises the limitations of black-and-white thinking. This sounds more like a *non-linear systemic* way of things. It's very tempting to connect the socialised mind with the collaborative systemic way of thinking, but that might be to misinterpret the nature of collaborative systemic. The socialised mind is likely to be highly collaborative, but the dynamic is one in which the individual is looking to others to decide the best interpretation of events and to make decisions. Through a *collaborative systemic* mindset, tall perspectives have value and to are to be respected, including one's own. The socialised mind is more likely to defer.

The **self-authored** mind, on the other hand, is likely to privilege her own perspective. She may be prepared to 'tweak' her thinking through engaging with others, but ultimately she relies on her own sense of the world. She is able to stand on the balcony but is making sense of what she sees through her own internal system of values and beliefs. She is learning the value of listening, but as described by Garvey Berger, it sounds like the primary value of listening lies in progressing her own agenda. So this again doesn't suggest that the self-authored mind has access to the collaborative systemic way of thinking, as defined. The collaborative systemic way of thinking is based on a recognition that one's own perception of events is incomplete and subjective. The self-authored mind may be playing in the fringes of collaborative systemic, but their receptivity to other's ideas is limited.

It is only with the **self-transforming** mind that the leader appears to access the last three ways of thinking about systems and change. The self-transforming mind questions the fallibility of her own internally driven self-authoring system, which means she is more likely to enter into a collaborative relationship with an authentic respect for the view of others. She understands the limitations of control and notices the impact of change on the group system and the thinking of individuals within that system. This suggests she has access to a *complex systemic* way of thinking. She notices in-the-moment when she feels in conflict with others and is able to manage feelings of defensiveness, staying curious. This reminds us of the 'acid test' as defined in *The Wise Leader* – an ability to be curious in the moment when confronted and thereby less likely to react.

Garvey Berger doesn't talk about the limitations of the systems metaphor, but she does suggest that the self-transforming mind may question the reality of boundaries (p.111), perhaps a nod to the *meta systemic* way of thinking.

Leader development

The five ways of thinking about systems do seem to map well against stages of adult development. Though she talks about systems in different terms, Garvey Berger is quite clear in suggesting people at different stages of development take different perspectives on the functioning of the worlds, and she uses the systems metaphor to describe that. That would then imply that the way we think about systems and change is indeed, at least to an extent, developmental. What guidance then does Garvey Berger offer us in terms of leadership development?

Coaching

In *The Wise Leader* we suggest that the primary task of the coach in helping a coachee access new ways of thinking is to ask challenging questions, questions framed through some of the more sophisticated systemic lenses. Those questions challenge the thinking of the leader and may facilitate a transition to new ways of thinking. Garvey Berger also emphasises the power of the question. She says:

> *"Asking different questions is perhaps the most underrated of all learning skills. What many people do not understand is that the questions we automatically ask are questions that keep us on the same path."*

To which we would add – those automatic questions are also likely to keep our coachees on the same path. To help our coachees discover new paths may require us to ask questions from a different way of thinking ourselves. This means that our own development as coaches needs to be framed as fundamentally developmental. To become a master coach (whatever that is) requires us to access new ways of making meaning and won't be achieved by continuing to polish and refine a generic set of coaching competencies.

Program design

This questioning of assumptions and the way we make meaning of the world underpins Garvey Berger's recommended approach to designing leadership development programs. She describes a five-stage process:

1. Bring to people's attention things they are subject to (e.g. ask challenging questions, invite people to surface assumptions etc …) in contemplating an issue.
2. Invite people to consider a variety of perspectives on the issue.
3. Invite people to invite others to share their perspectives.
4. Spend time in the issue – don't jump straight into action.
5. Stay attentive and reflective

Theis process aligns to some of our own thoughts, as expressed in *The Wise Leader*. At the heart of the *Wise Leader* model sits a commitment to reflective learning, together with an agenda around becoming more selves-aware and aware of the collaborative, social process through which our thinking has evolved and continues to evolve. The book contains practical suggestions as to how leader and leadership development professional go about the task, all drawing on notions of reflective practice and enhancing awareness of self in relation to others.

Conclusions

In *Changing on the Job* we found several explicit references to systems thinking which sounded much like the five ways of thinking of systems we describe in *The Wise Leader* & in *Coaching Systemically*. This suggests that to learn to think differently about systems and change may be a developmental task. Our capacity to *Think Meta!* in practice may be related to our capacity to *Transcend Ourselves*, which may be a function of where we are developmentally. We should say at this point, that in *The Wise Leader* we don't categorise *people* in terms of developmental stage. We think in terms of multiple-selves, our task being to help people further access new, nascent, ways of thinking that may already be present, in some contexts, through some aspects of ourselves.

We were fascinated to observe that the relationship between stages of adult development and the five ways of thinking about systems is complicated. Only people with access to a self-

transformed/self-transcendent way of thinking may have access to the third, fourth, and fifth way of thinking about systems. Upon reflection this makes sense. We see many organisations espouse the value of collaboration, yet few leaders seem to believe the *necessity* of thinking with others if they are to lead successfully through change. This belief in the value of working with others requires a different way of thinking about the world, a perspective which recognises the limitations of individual problem solving, indeed the whole individualistic narrative around leader-hero. The collaborative systemic mindset, coupled with the recognition that we can't control change enables us to segue into the other ways of thinking.

If this all be the case, then we must pay more attention to helping leaders access the self-transforming/self-transcending mindset, a more collective mindset. The industry currently seems more focussed on encouraging self-authorship, an important focus, but an insufficient focus if we are to help leaders successfully lead transformational change. This places the onus on us, as coaches or leadership development professionals, to work on ourselves, to attend to our own development, if we are to succeed in connecting leaders with new ways of thinking about change in a way that really makes a difference.

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Books

[i]   Lawrence, P. & Skinner, S. (2024). The Wise Leader. A Practical Guide for Thinking Differently About Leadership. Routledge

[ii] Garvey Berger, J. (2025). *Changing on the Job. 2nd edition*. Stanford Business Books

[iii] Lawrence, P. (2021). *Coaching Systemically. Five Ways of Thinking About Systems*. Routledge