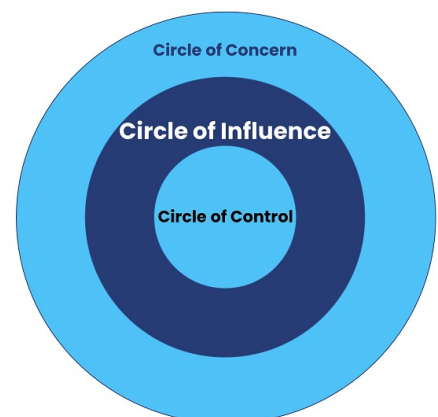


# Quarterly Reflections on Leadership

April – June 2025

## Developing the capacity to influence



## Introduction

In the last QRL we explored the relationship between how we think about systems and adult development. We suggested that only the self-transforming mind, the final stage of adult development according to Robert Kegan<sup>i</sup>, may be able to relate to the world through three of the five ways of thinking about systems and change as described in *The Wise Leader*<sup>ii</sup> and *Coaching Systemically*<sup>iii</sup> – collaborative, complex, and meta.

Self-sovereign	Linear
Socialised	Linear
	Non-linear
Self-authored	Linear
	Non-linear
Self-transforming	Collaborative
	Complex
	Meta

Figure 1: Adult development & systems

In *Changing on the Job*<sup>iv</sup> Jennifer 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. This suggests that these last three ways of thinking about systems may be required in leading complex change.

The challenge for us all is that there is a difference between being able to make intellectual sense of the five ways of thinking about systems and change – and making meaning in the moment through those lenses. Kegan's narrative around subject-object suggests it is impossible to conceive what it might be like to think through these lenses without actually experiencing that way of thinking. This leaves us with a potential language gap between those attempting to explain what it means to make sense of the world through a particular lens, and those who are making sense of that narrative through a different lens.

In this QRL we will talk about influence. What might it feel and look like in practice to be influencing through each of these five systemic lenses? And how might we facilitate our own journey, and the journeys of others, towards accessing those ways of thinking?

## Circles of influence

More than 30 years ago Stephen Covey popularised the Circles of Influence & Concern<sup>y</sup>, which evolved into the Circles of Control, Influence & Concern.

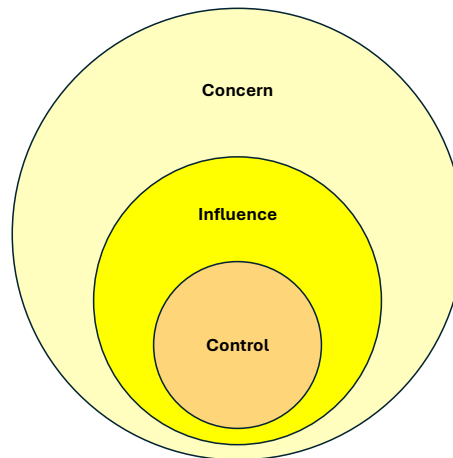


Figure 2: Circles of Concern, Influence & Control

According to Covey, our circle of control refers to issues regarding our own behavior. Our circle of influence refers to issues involving other people's behaviour. Our circle of concern represents issues we can do nothing about, such as our "past or situational realities". Covey suggests that we solve issues of indirect control by changing our methods of influence. Many of us, he says, have only a few methods in our repertoire.

## The five ways of thinking about systems & change (again)

Before proceeding let us quickly remind ourselves once more of the five ways of thinking about systems and change.

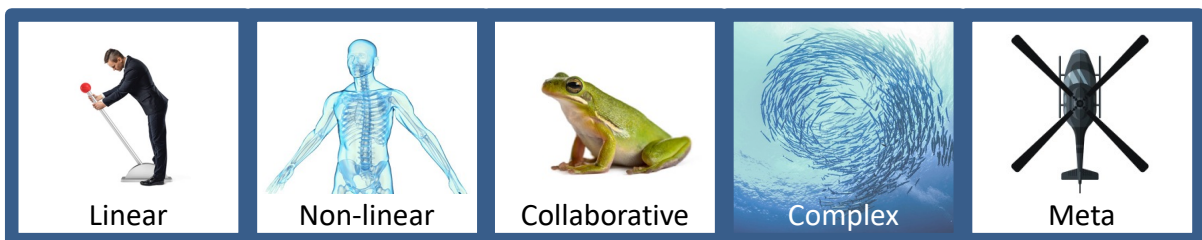


Figure 3: Five ways of thinking about systems

### *Linear*

Through this lens the leader interprets events in terms of simple cause and effect. 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. 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 leader recognises he doesn't get to control outcomes. He knows he cannot stand outside the system and diagnose it. He recognises that every conversation he has takes place *within* 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 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.

## Circles of influence revisited

In listening to people talk about circles of influence, I often hear the influence piece often go missing. People talk about the wisdom of differentiating between what they can and cannot control. The word 'influence' may not show up in the conversation, or else influence is spoken about in terms of the exercising of **positional power**, really not very different in practical terms from attempts to control. We might expect to hear this narrative from someone looking at the world through a linear lens. The influencing process consists of presenting compelling arguments, preparing slide-packs and brochures, creating systems of recognition and reward. The emphasis is on best articulating what others need to know, drawing on the insights and evidence that persuaded you, so that the same insights and evidence will persuade others. The leader does his/her utmost to explain what needs to happen, to the broader organisation, but if ultimately the rest of the organisation doesn't get it, the leader will exercise their positional power to try and make sure people comply with their instructions.

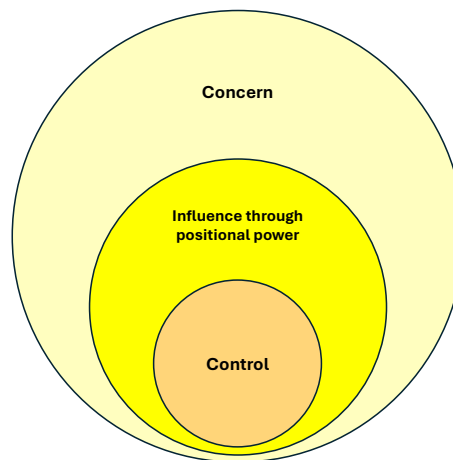


Figure 4: Circles of Concern, Influence & Control – positional power

Through the non-linear lens we will expect again to hear a narrative rich in control, but the narrative may reflect a more considered and thoughtful approach to the exercising of positional power. This leader will have gone the extra mile in collating data to feed their decision-making process and the decision-making process of the senior team. They will have considered every angle and played out every scenario. The leader is therefore extremely confident in their proposed solution, not least because they believe they were chosen for their role at least in part because of their outstanding intellect.

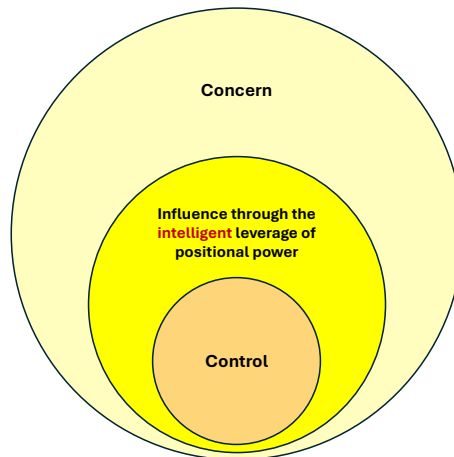


Figure 5: Circles of Concern, Influence & Control – intelligent positional

Through the collaborative lens the leader is less committed to their own personal intelligence. They know that many of the problems the organisations needs to face are complex, too complex for one brain to understand. The leader might have all the data in the world, but he/she knows that there is no complete data set, and all data anyway must be interpreted and there are multiple ways to interpret a particular data set. This leader is genuinely humble. He/she seeks out the perspectives of others not to validate or test their own assumptions, but to gather perspectives they simply don't have access to. This leader really wants to know what others think and is open to some degree of co-creation when it comes to making decisions. The leader may nevertheless source positional power in making a final decision, confident that the final decision is the best decision that can possibly be reached.

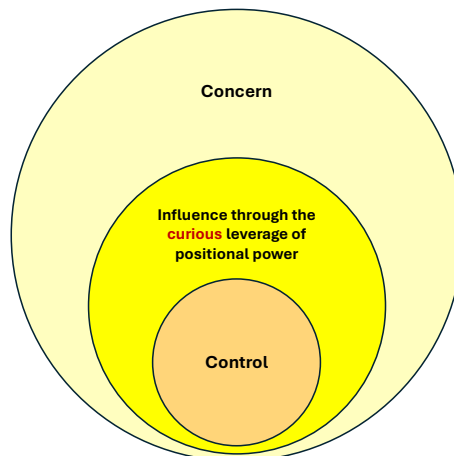


Figure 6: Circles of Concern, Influence & Control – curious positional

The complexity lens is quite different. This leader knows that they do not have control. They have positional power, but they are aware of the limitations of positional power. To have positional power is to have ultimate decision-making authority, but people don't always do what they are told, not unless someone is stood over them every minute of every day monitoring their actions. This leader seeks to influence quite differently. He/she spends significant time out in the broader organisation seeking to understand who is thinking and saying what. The leader engages in some of these forums, those which appear most significant, to test his/her own perspectives, hungry to see how people respond to those perspectives. There is an extent to which solutions *emerge*, from the conversations taking place across an

organisation, across social groupings and coalitions. This leader recognises that positional power is not the only source of power. Some people are powerful because others recognise their expertise. Or they are powerful because they have great networks inside or outside the organisation. Or because they own important client relationships, or because they are charismatic, or because they are known as thought leaders, or because they control resources and/or access to other people etc ...

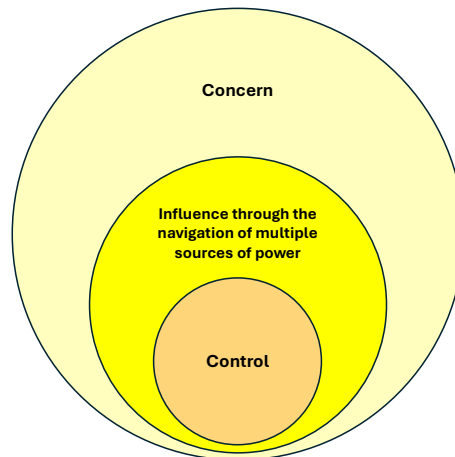


Figure 7: Circles of Concern, Influence & Control – multiple

The perspective through the meta-lens is broader. The fundamentals are not so different from the complex systemic lens, but the leader doesn't prioritise organisational boundaries. He/she looks for the influence of everyone on everyone, regardless of organisation, and recognises when he/she must engage with people from the 'outside'.

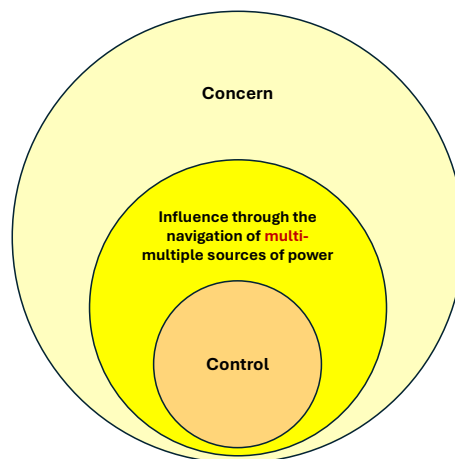


Figure 8: Circles of Concern, Influence & Control – multi-multiple

As we gain access to more ways of thinking about systems, so we may experience ourselves feeling more influential, expanding our fields of influence.

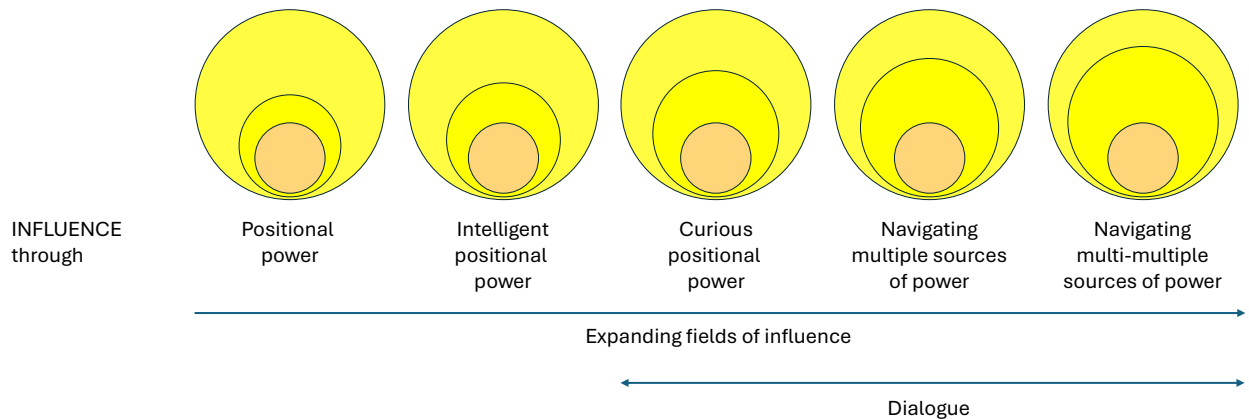


Figure 9: Expanding our fields of influence.

## Dialogue

We have suggested that some of the methods or mindsets of influence, require us to engage in dialogue. What do we mean by dialogue? When we engage in dialogue we come prepared to do two things:

1. Listen without prejudice to what others are saying, putting aside our fears and deeply held beliefs. We seek to (deeply) understand.
2. Say what needs to be said – respectfully.

William Isaacs defined the differences between dialogue and skilled conversation and debate<sup>vi</sup>. Dialogue is not the same as skilled conversation. In skilled conversation two people come together each with their own agenda. They are skilled and able to come to an agreement, an agreement that accommodates both their needs. This may be an entirely amicable process, but the protagonists stay true to their non-negotiables and are not predisposed to listening to suggestions that offend those non-negotiables. Nor is dialogue the same as debate, essentially an exchange of views without either side investing much energy to understand the opposing perspective. All three types of conversation have their place, but the effective influencer is good at dialogue and choiceful as to when they think dialogue will be the most effective form of conversation.

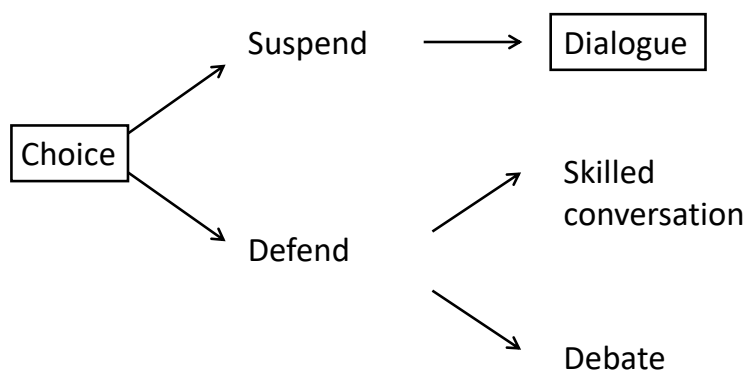


Figure 10: Dialogue – after William Isaacs



When we suspend, we are not *dismissing* our opinions, experiences and deeply held beliefs. Convictions cannot be dismissed. But we can suspend those beliefs. We can hang them out in front of us so that we can see them clearly, so that we can experience what the other person is saying independent of those beliefs. Our capacity to suspend depends therefore on our levels of self-awareness. We cannot suspend beliefs and values if we are not aware of them. Equally, when we say what needs to be said, we must do so respectfully if we don't want to elicit defensive behaviour. To achieve that again demands high levels of self-awareness; we need to understand why we are feeling judgmental. We must then suspend that judgment, so we can express ourselves free of judgment. These judgments are our 'noble certainties', according to Isaacs. Our noble certainties get in the way of great dialogue. Our noble certainties might include things as:

- You're as important as me
- I have more data than you do
- I'm smarter than you
- I'm the boss, so you need to do what I tell you to do
- You have to move fast
- You're resistant to change

## Leader development

How then do we gain access to these different methods of influence? If, as we suggested in the last QRL, this is fundamentally a question of how we *think*, rather than what models and frameworks we have access to, then we need to refer back again to the literature around adult development. How do we facilitate our growth in this dimension, and how do we create the space for others to accelerate their own path along the same journey?

### Coaching

In the last QRL we suggested 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. This implies that we ourselves have access to those ways of thinking. If not, then our questions are likely to keep our coachees on the same path. This means that our own development as coaches requires us to access new ways of making meaning. This may require us to step outside our comfort zone, to take risks, to act in contexts where our current way of thinking is unlikely to serve us well, and to become more reflective.

### Leadership development

In the last QRL we referred to Garvey Berger's five-stage approach to designing leadership development programs.

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

We can build on this approach when it comes to influencing, since influencing is an ongoing activity of all leaders, at least those leaders leading big teams and/or seeking to engage whole organisations in new initiatives. Garvey Berger's five stages may then be applied to the daily life of the leader without any need to create leadership programs. In working with a particular influencing challenge we can invite the leader to contemplate the following questions:

1. What am I assuming here? What are my assumptions about this specific scenario, the people in this scenario, and about myself as leader? How do I assume change works and the best way to lead change and influence? Which of these assumptions may be flawed?
2. Whose perspectives might I usefully seek on this issue? Who do I know to have particularly different perspectives to mine? Who did I know to be a really effective influencer? Who do I know who seems to think through some of these different ways of thinking about systems, change, and influencing?
3. When will I go and invite those people to share their perspectives?
4. When will I make time to reflect more deeply on this issue, and who will I choose to reflect with?
5. How will I hold myself to account for staying attentive and reflective? Who might I engage in that process?

## Conclusions

We talk about leadership in terms of skills and competencies most of the time. But to develop our capacity to engage most effectively in those leadership tasks that entail working with other people, we must pay attention also to how we make sense of the world. This is more than an intellectual exercise. We can discern intellectually what people mean when they describe different ways of thinking about systems and change, but that is not the same of making sense of the world through that lens in some fundamental fashion. That sense of meaning may not be available to us - until it is.

We often talk about the task of influencing as if it was a straightforward skill, to be learned out of a textbook. And indeed we may find some useful tips and hints in such texts. But to influence through a truly collaborative lens, or a complex lens or meta lens, requires us to think differently. It requires us to have a genuine sense of our own fallibility, and an understanding that we will never know enough to know everything by ourselves. It requires us to let go of the notion of control and to engage joyfully in the task of engaging with a broad network of stakeholders, experiencing ourselves become more familiar with the experience of being in dialogue. And it requires us to see beyond the metaphors we build for ourselves around organisation as bounded system.

How do we achieve such a way of thinking about the world? The adult development literature would suggest that we can wittingly accelerate our progress along this journey by a commitment to new challenges, challenges that feel like we will need to think differently if we are to be successful. And a commitment to reflective practice, by ourselves and with others. By doing so we come to appreciate something that a Finnish leader said to me just last night in a leadership development forum – *“don't forget the full power of influence.”*

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### Books

- <sup>i</sup> Kegan, R. (1994). *In Over Our Heads. The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Harvard University Press
- <sup>ii</sup> Lawrence, P. & Skinner, S. (2024). *The Wise Leader. A Practical Guide for Thinking Differently About Leadership*. Routledge
- <sup>iii</sup> Lawrence, P. (2023). *Coaching Systemically. Five Ways of Thinking About Systems*. Routledge
- <sup>iv</sup> Garvey Berger, J. (2025). *Changing on the Job. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. Stanford Business Books
- <sup>v</sup> Covey, S. (1989). *The Seven habits of Effective People*. Free Press
- <sup>vi</sup> Isaacs, W. (1999). *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*. Crown