



Systems Thinking Leadership

There are many views of "leadership" ... how do we make sense of them?

Here's the systems perspective.



"Systems leadership"?

There are many valid perspectives on "leadership." The systems approach to leadership is unique in that it integrates many aspects of these views.

To illustrate leadership Jay Forrester, the founder of the field of system dynamics, asks, "For an airplane, who is the leader? The pilot, navigator, steward, or mechanic?" Indeed, one can make a case for each of these being "the leader."

One role generally not suggested is that of "leader as designer." But it is the designer whose efforts are directed at creating a plane that can survive under turbulent conditions and that has sufficient redundancy to prevent failures from becoming catastrophic. When things get rough, the plane had better be stable or it will crash.

The designer must consult with the pilot, navigator, etc. to assure that the required functions can be performed efficiently and effectively ... even under extreme conditions. The designer also envisions, and brings people together to envision, designs that bring new levels of performance.

Leader as designer

Similarly, the organizational counterpart is leader as visionary designer of the Structures that efficiently & effectively perform the functions required to achieve an organization's Vision while fulfilling its Purpose and being consistent with its Values.

Structure in this context means

What is systems thinking?
Seeking to understand system behavior by examining "the whole" ... instead of by analyzing the parts.

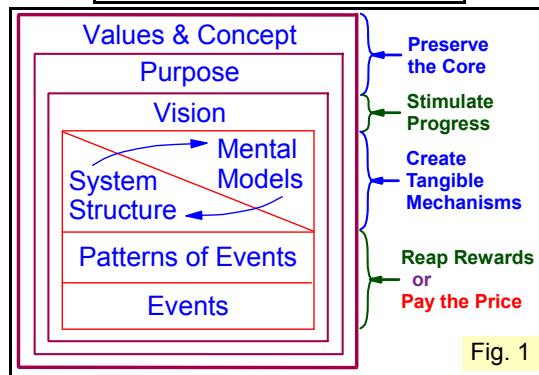


Fig. 1
To experience the events we desire, we must have Structures that achieve our Vision while fulfilling our Purpose and living according to our Values.

the influences and interdependencies in the system. Figure 1 shows define the hierarchy from Values to Events. Figure 2 provides definitions.

Balancing Stability and Change

In *Built to Last* Collins and Porras observe that Core Values and Purpose should be enduring ... a "core" that is preserved over time. This core complements an inspiring Vision that stimulates progress. To do so Vision must change more often than the core (Figure 3).

They distinguish "telling the time," which represents achieving one-time success, from "clock building," creating tangible mechanisms that produce recurring successes.

Organic processes

While Collins and Porras stress the importance of "creating tangible mechanisms aligned to preserve the core and stimulate progress," these "mechanisms" can be better understood as "organic processes" ... the structures and mental models that create the behaviors we experience.

Mental models are our assumptions and beliefs about the world. Because we humans act in systems based on our mental models, we are part of the system, and mental models are a kind of system structure.

Our thoughts and beliefs create, and interact with, external structures. Winston Churchill illustrated this when he said, "We shape our buildings; thereafter, our buildings shape us."

Values: What do we value? Fig. 2
Concept: Who are we? If this is our value, how do we act? It informs our "winning strategy," our mental model of how we must act in pursuing safety & success.
Purpose: Why do we exist?
Vision: What do we want? The two Vision components:
• **Outcome:** What outcome do we desire?
• **Vehicle:** What will our organization to look like?
Structure/Mental Models: The structures (interdependencies and policies) and beliefs that support us in acting in a way consistent with our Values in pursuing our Purpose on the way to our Vision.

Definitions: Values, Purpose, Vision, & Structure/Mental Models.

