WE SEE YOU.

Reflections from The Systems Sanctuary's, *In the Thick of it*

Systems Leaders: What kind of questions are they holding? What challenges do they face? What lessons have they learnt from their work and what do they think about power? These are some of the questions we explore in this publication, a summary of some of the key patterns and themes that emerged during *In the Thick of It* a peer learning platform for systems leaders launched in March 2018 by The Systems Sanctuary.

In the Thick of it was launched in March 2018, the first program from our new platform The Systems Sanctuary, a peer learning platform for systems leaders designed and facilitated by Tatiana Fraser (Meta Lab) and Rachel Sinha (The Systems Studio). Our goals were to connect systems leaders internationally, create community and collectively emerge new insights about systems change practice.

When selecting participants, we were looking for people who were leading an initiative designed to bring about a systemic change and who had been working with a systems change ambition for at least two years, whether or not this was with their current organization. They had to be somewhat seasoned practitioners, with time and experience under their belt and the invitation was for international participants.

Twenty participants joined us for the inaugural group from countries including Canada, the US, the UK, Australia, Ethiopia and New Zealand. We met virtually by video conference once per month, in groups of five to six people. We used peer learning methods to identify strategic challenges, surface the collective wisdom of the group, and gather emergent themes through direct inquiry and exchange.

The program ran for seven months, concluding in August 2018.

We wanted to mark the conclusion of our first group with a summary of some of the most interesting patterns and insights that emerged from our discussions. We recorded and transcribed all of our Cohort sessions as we went along, noting patterns, pulling out pertinent quotes, reflections and insights. We organized all of this learning into themes, culminating in this document.

This reflective article is designed to be an offering to the participants themselves, who took a leap of faith in us and brought an openness and good natured curiosity that we could not have predicted. We also offer this to the wider field of systems change practice. In summer 2018, we attended a retreat on Wasan Island, Canada, convened by McConnell Foundation and The School for Systems Change, designed to connect the field builders for systems change. One of the clear calls that emerged from that gathering was the need to illuminate in more detail the work, the struggles and the successes of systems leaders, who represent a beacon of hope for addressing our many interconnected challenges at this point in history. We hope this document will contribute to this body of work and provide a jumping off point for others to build upon.
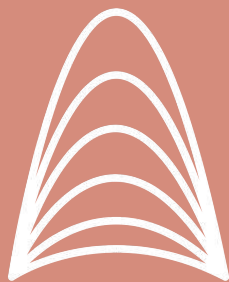
QUESTIONS

Much of what emerged during our *In the Thick of It* sessions confirmed what we are already collectively starting to understand about these kind of leaders: that there are some established practices, that systems change is hard to explain, hard to measure and hard to fund. We learned that as a result, most people working in systems change have a major sense of impostor syndrome no matter how much experience they have. The inquiries of this pioneering group covered a breadth of issues, shared below.

Strategy

- How do I turn my organization into one that has real systemic impact?
- How can I build experimentation into my strategy while at the same time build the trust and resources required for deep change?
- What is my first step and what is the long term strategy?
- How do I reconcile the macro and the micro?
- What am I not seeing?
- Is it easier to move a system from the inside or from the margins?
- Knowing that internal change is part of the work, how do we shift hearts and mindsets?
- How do I engage marginalized voices in a way to shift power structures?
- Am I doing enough? How can I speed this up?
- How do I create the conditions to work across difference?

Operations

- How can I support systems change efforts and more systemic ways of working, in a context when we are institutionally very far away from those things?
- What organizational structure should my systems change project take or live within?
- How do I grow capacity to respond to growing projects in my team?

QUESTIONS

Influencing others

- How do I evoke a sense of urgency in others?
- How do we keep on building the public intolerance of the status quo?
- How do I convince the people around me that the work we're doing is valuable, when the results will take years to emerge?
- How do I influence people in my ecosystem to share messaging we know the system needs to hear?
- How can I influence others to do what I can see needs to happen? Should I take the lead myself?
- How do I explain what a systemic approach adds, over and above what we had before?

Funding

- Who is interested in funding systems change programs right now?
- We've been asked to work together with another organization by a funder. Should we collaborate?
- How do we create the most value with the resources I'm responsible for deploying?

QUESTIONS

Transitions

- How do I create closure and let go of an initiative I have lead and cared about for many years?
- How can I best navigate what do I do next? I'm leaving my current role, now what?
- How do I move on gracefully?
- How do I do this work without getting completely overwhelmed?
- How do I navigate for the marathon, not the sprint when all the pressure is now?
- How do we create a sustainable systems change initiative over the long term where the leadership successfully shifts to the community?
- What are the pros and cons of working from different vantage points in the system?

"How do I do this work without getting completely overwhelmed?"

Participant, In the Thick of It

OVERALL

We are thrilled to share some of the most striking themes that stood out to us during the course of In the Thick of It. These explorations of systems leadership build on the questions above and many were gathered by reading between the lines and seeing patterns across our Cohorts. These themes are explored in no particular order below.

In the Thick of It was an experiment, albeit a measured one given our collective experience in the field to date. We know of nothing quite like it, a virtual peer learning program designed to support systems leaders internationally and we were very curious to see who might respond to the call. On our website we spoke directly from our own experience to call participants in with messages like these:

"You are not just thinking about it, you are doing it. Or at least you are trying really hard."

"You're tired and inspired in equal measure. Your work is messy, unfinished, and hard to explain."

We were deliberately niche and deliberately honest about the leadership challenges we had both experienced when we were leading systems change projects.

If no one applied, we thought, this is useful information for the field of systems change practice. But we had a hunch that we were not the only ones who found this work challenging.

We felt validated as the applications came in. There was clearly a growing number of people, particularly in the UK, US, Canada and New Zealand, who identified as systems leaders and were in need of support. Applicants told their friends and we had a rush that filled up the 20 places we had allocated, at the deadline. We asked applicants to answer questions describing why they were applying and then interviewed each one to make sure they were a good fit. The message that stood out most to us from applicants was this:

"This is really hard, I don't know exactly what I'm doing and I feel isolated."

WHO SHOWED UP?

We intentionally set out to engage participants across diverse communities. Participants were working across a variety of issues including child poverty, renewable energy, food, agriculture, environment and economic development. While our intention is to engage change leaders across sectors, the group was also predominantly practitioners in the social change sectors including a few funders. This created a really interesting opportunity for the funders who did participate to access feedback on the challenges they faced from participants who had nothing at stake in these relationships. They were among practitioners they could not possibly fund because the regions or sector or challenge they represented did not match those they were in a Cohort with. This led to an equality between practitioners and funders that is unusual and the often unnamed tensions and power dynamics created by funding relationships were explored with honest and constructive advice.

We know that change efforts must have leadership by people with lived experience. The perspectives and ideas generated by communities most impacted by systemic barriers need to guide collective system change efforts.

If we are serious about creating the conditions for systems to change, we need to think critically about who is leading in this field and how systems change practice engages or alienates different communities. One of our goals in this program was to prioritize participation in our programs from diverse contexts, cultures and backgrounds so we integrated this into our outreach and selection process. While we had participants from diverse backgrounds including socio-economic, race, gender, age, geographic location and sexual identity, almost 70% of participants were white. Moving forward, we are committed to asking questions, challenging the status quo and engaging diverse communities in The System Sanctuary and to being responsive in our programming, outreach strategies and learning. These are reflections on our minds as we design the next iteration of the program, making sure we are supporting a diversity of people to lead change across the world.

The first cohort of In the Thick of It clearly demonstrated that there is a need for peer learning for systems leaders and that they need safe places to explore their emerging, interconnected challenges with people who genuinely understand.

TIME FRAMES NEED A REFRAME

Time was a recurrent theme on our discussions. What emerged was a clear story of how unfinished systems change work always felt and just how frustrating that could be. Systems leaders have to get used to the idea that they are not going to transform something overnight, but simply improve the health of the system, nudge it in a better direction, over the long-term. As one participant said: "You start to realize that taking a systemic perspective sometimes means you don't have a short term 'win.' You are simply doing the groundwork for long-term change." Participants shared feelings of being disheartened by the nature of change, which rarely feels fast enough. There was a struggle with the paradox to 'solve' the problem quickly, and the humble acceptance that this was usually a lifetime's work and much of the time is spent trying to stay on the right track. It's a daily practice and it is never perfect.

This is a much different narrative to the "acceleration" story promoted by the wider social impact field, inspired by Silicon Valley. The idea of the silver bullet that will change the game, working quickly to deliver impact, just doesn't fit when you are working on systemic goals. And yet in systems change we are trying to address complex problems that are urgent.

There is always a pressure felt from funders and stakeholders to demonstrate success and measurable impact.

There are clear tensions between the need for quick, iterative and low-cost innovations and the investment, time, and resource commitment required for deep systemic and durable change. We wondered, how might we interweave short iterative sprints with walking the long road of systems change?

The culture of this work, the slowness, the seriousness, the messiness of it, had an impact on our systems leaders themselves. We found that even when they had secured the money and had the plan in place, they were rarely celebrating success. Instead they were lamenting things that had not gone to plan and feeling overwhelmed by the immensity of the challenge ahead.

On the personal level, our participants reflected just how demanding systems change work is on their time. They talked about the tension between demands for high performance, efficiency and deadlines and the need for space, engagement, and reflection. They wanted time to make the wise choice, not just the solve the problem now. We discussed how busyness is rewarded and shared experiences about being totally overwhelmed with work, meetings, conferences and travel. We reflected together on how easy it is to get into a groove of moving fast and lose the ability to see how all the pieces of your work are connected. Ultimately, you become a less effective systems leader.

Participants reflected on their awareness that in order to transform systems, we have to transform ourselves, and that being busy is a barrier to the work of personal transformation. As one participant said, "There is a tension between 'the change in me' - and 'changing the system.' I am the system."

We shared questions about self care and work balance and changing a culture that still values dominance, competition and growth. Involvement in the community can mean less involvement at home with children and for our personal lives and wellness.

Many of our conversations centered around questions like, "What is my role in challenging ingrained culture and values? How do I not get too consumed? How do I continue to nurture a family, myself and my work?"

"You start to realize that taking a systemic perspective sometimes means you don't have a short term 'win.' You are simply doing the groundwork for long-term change."

Participant, In the Thick of It

DEEPENING RELATIONSHIPS

Systems change requires skill and experience to navigate relationships. Participants talked about their frustration that the systems change field focuses more on mapping and 'diagnosing the system', rather than building relationships as a core skill. As one said, "We've talked a lot about seeing the system, but being able to forge the right relationships is much more important. I'm interested in learning other techniques around building better relationships."

Relationships have the potential to shift realities, yet building relationships takes a long time. There is a call to integrate the values of deep relationship and trust building yet this is antithetical to the need to move quickly and demonstrate results.

"We know you can't just parachute someone in to do a project," one participant shared, "Rather, we need people who know the system very well to succeed. We need to go at the speed of trust." This is particularly important and challenging when trust has broken down between communities. Systems change initiatives working in multi-stakeholder collaborations aimed to address social inequities learn that marginalized people who have been excluded from centers of power for a long time are weary to participate in yet another initiative to solve problems in their community with people coming in from the outside. Though participants were working in very different contexts and locations, questions that emerged were, "how to shift power relations where lived experiences are informing, leading and centered in collaborations and strategy for change? How to build culture that values the time required for deep relationship and trust building?"

Much of this work is about bringing people along with you in different ways. Leading means our participants simply cannot please all the people all of the time. We also looked at failures in collaboration, which presented unique challenges for participants who were working on place-based systems change projects. In New Zealand for example where NGOs working on a common issue were well known to each other, it was feared that failed collaborations could create disruption in the system that would last for decades.
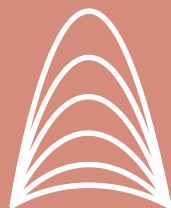
Working with people you don't totally align with or trying to influence people in power who don't get it, makes for hard, emotional work. As one participant put it, "In navigating external tensions, I lose myself." Managing collaborations requires looking out for the overall long term health of the partnerships. Participants reflected that collaborative work would not always be happy and cohesive, but that if others want to head in the same direction, it was sometimes better to do it together, even though it can be far easier to go it alone.

Influencing others was a key theme ever-present in our learning. We asked the questions, "What creates change? What creates heart change and mindset change?" One participant responded, "When we think of the scaling out, it often just doesn't work. It's the culture change that is important." The need to "take the time to build the relationships deeply" as one participant put it, was a common insight. The kind of relationships people sought ranged from "Find someone who wants the same thing you want, to walk alongside you." to "Try not to hold it all on your shoulders, but to share it all with other people."

We asked questions of ourselves like "How are we tracking the new relationships that are developed? How are we communicating the value of that to funders? Can we do this better?"

"We've talked a lot about seeing the system, but being able to forge the right relationships is much more important. I'm interested in learning other techniques around building better relationships."

Participant, In the Thick of It

WHAT IS THE POSITION OF THE SYSTEMS LEADER?

Our systems leaders work in different ways. Some leaders had moved countries every three years, others were deeply rooted in a local area and had been working on the complex challenges in that region for decades. Some were part of platforms, some were part of collaborations, or organizations that had spun off from incubated systems innovations, others were independent consultants. Participants were working at different scales; small and local, networked across regions, or leading projects that were global in ambition. We contrasted experiences working to move a system from within institutional structures as well as from the outside, the interstitial spaces. We explored working on the front lines versus creating platforms to help people do their best systems change work. There was an interesting discussion about portfolio careers as a means to financially sustain the risk inherent in entrepreneurial systems innovation.

Many participants were exploring not just how to shift systems strategically, but what legal structures are best suited to do the work from. Systems leaders are challenged to innovate new structures that push the boundaries and limits of traditional ways of organizing and working together.

Context and stage of the initiative were important factors in considering what structure best suited the systems change work. How a systems leader aligns with existing structures often determines their credibility and access to resources and system actors. Many participants had experienced the challenges of trying to be agile while working in a very old system or established institution. This often created bureaucratic and administrative barriers to flexibility and efficiency and our leaders considered the benefits and limits of creating new, independent organizations.

Systems leadership requires a tolerance and willingness to take risks whether financial, reputational, relational or personal. We explored the different kind of risks people felt comfortable taking. Often this was based on their life conditions for example participants said to each other; "With kids, I don't think I could work like you."

When describing their role as a systems leader, our group used phrases like "weaving people together," "shepherding", "stewarding", "building bridges", "connecting". One participant said, "Being a bumble bee is very energizing and teaches me a lot." Finding the most effective way to lead was often about finding a setting that best suited their personality.

Our participants asked the interesting question: "Can a technical leader transition to become a systems leader?" They found that sometimes too much knowledge of a specific issue could lead to an inability to be open to change. We talked about the challenge for systems leaders to continuously develop their process design and facilitation skills.

Almost everyone touched on what it means personally to engage in risky, vast, expansive work that is never finished. There were people who became ill during the program because of workload, others who faced marital disruption.

The feeling of going it alone was prevalent among participants, even though most of their projects involved vast numbers of stakeholders. One participant shared his strategic, relational and personal challenges while working to support more systemic ways of working in a large institution, in a context when "we are very far away from those things." Another participant explained how he was resistant to take the next steps in his work; he had fallen ill and thought his work had caused it. Another systems leader replied "I had a similar experience a couple of years ago. I felt sick about it, in my stomach. I knew that when it started it would become a monster, creating something more the sum of its parts."

As facilitators, we were struck by hearing about the ingenuity it takes to be a catalyst, bring people in and create a safe space for collaboration. This is a unique, often unreported, skill set, crucial to the success of a project.
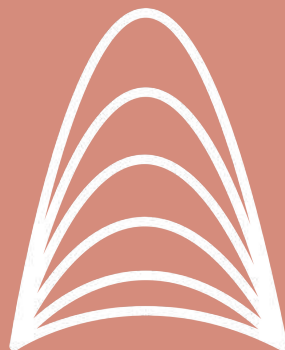
THIS WORK MAKES YOU HUMBLE

There is a humility in doing this kind of work, brought about by the level of responsibility leaders must take on to do systems change well and by its messy, unfinished nature.

Systems change requires uncovering the fundamental problems that exist within a system, looking in more detail at the root cause of systemic issues and exploring how negative patterns continue to be perpetuated. Seeing the world in this way creates a challenge for systems leaders, because once one begins to see the complexity of systems, it becomes impossible to 'unsee'. Understanding complexity tends to deepen over time and creates a commitment that drives leaders forward, even when the problem seems overwhelming and the work disheartening. Systems change inevitably involves finding alternatives that are designed from a different set of values or assumptions than the current system. These values became inspiring to our systems leaders, a reminder that it doesn't have to be the way it currently is.

A systems leader who spends time in the mainstream system and amid the alternatives will find themselves at odds, with a deep knowing, a strong commitment to act and a constant reminder of their own limits within the structures they are trying to influence.

The creative tension between where we are now and where we could be, fuels their fire and also leads to considerable humility.

This style of leadership looks different and challenges traditional notions of the "hero leader" who is charismatic and gets all the credit in a story of success. Systems leadership requires skills in thoughtful collaboration, self awareness, a willingness to let go of and adapt ideas and a capacity to sit in the discomfort of it all. This leadership can sometimes be read as reluctant and unsure, but when we take a closer look, these traits are rooted in deep self reflection, the ability to shift perception to other perspectives, and willingness to surrender ego.

LESS FRAMEWORKS,
MORE TIME TO CONNECT

When we launched The Sanctuary, we said we would support participants to "find tools and frameworks to help with your work". But tools and frameworks turned out to be an aside to the In the Thick of It program. As one participant noted, "You can have all the frameworks and tools, but once you are actually in the practice, you may realize this is not what we need." The main event, the core of the program, was the sense of support participants experience from witnessing and being witnessed by their peers.

There was a general frustration with just how hard it was to describe this kind of work. This difficulty, paired with the many critics our leaders encountered, made it all the more special to be among a group of people with whom you could dive right into the "thick of it" - the deep questions and challenges of systems leadership - straight away.

When we did share resources and frameworks, participants complemented these exchanges by sharing what they had learned about applying various tools in different contexts. Resources and ideas shared also went beyond the emerging field of systems change into other practice areas such as community development and psychology.

"You can have all the frameworks and tools, but once you are actually in the practice, you may realize this is not what we need."

Participant, In the Thick of It

INTERSECTIONS AND BOUNDING THE SYSTEM

Practitioners are grappling with how to bound systems change initiatives when they take an interconnected approach. In one case, the focus of an initiative was the food system, but when the participant laid out the context, it quickly highlighted overlapping issues including human rights, poverty, gender, and health and well-being. When she explored this with an intersectional len, she found the root causes to be gender inequity and poverty. She knew that by not dealing with gender, race and poverty, that the initiative was not dealing with underlying causes of food insecurity.

Such a finding can be a challenging truth, especially when an initiative is geared up to work on one issue and instead illuminates a series of others which the team may or may not be ready to tackle. Understanding intersections leads to reframing the problem domain and sometimes this is not altogether welcome.

This highlights a difference in approach to systemic analysis. One approach is to identify an issue, convene a representative group and map in some details about the root causes of that issue. Another is when a community acts systemically, mapping out the interconnected challenges that touch multiple systems within their community.

The latter will inevitably look more messy, but can be potentially a lot more powerful.

As the participant above elaborated, "It's almost right in front of me. I can't understand why people can't see what I am seeing. Here are the facts: it is women who are bearing the burden of poverty. I don't understand in the face of overwhelmingly clear evidence that this is where we are. The pain of that moves me."

We shared concern about the impact of single issue-based systems change initiatives and how this can undermine other issues. Working to solve one systemic issue can ultimately exacerbate another. We noted that when we are working with multiple layers of a system, it requires us to slow down and to sit deeply in the work.

Questions we asked included: "What are the patterns we see across multiple issues?" "What does bounding the system - for example food and hunger, say about what we are valuing?" "How much does bounding that issue limit your ability to see the interconnected nature of your work?" "What are the collective decisions we make with more awareness of the wider system."

QUESTIONS OF POWER

Another theme that showed up throughout our discussions was that of power. Unsurprising, perhaps, as systems change work usually involves disrupting current power structures in some way. The theme of power at all levels, including the systemic, the structural and the personal, wove through the peer input sessions.

At a landscape level, the political environment in which each systems leader was operating was very different. New Zealand has a very progressive Prime Minister. Canada is increasingly polarized by extreme right wing discourse along with the US with particularly toxic politics from the top about race and gender. The UK is still reeling from major public sector cuts and fear about what will come in light of the Brexit vote. Ethiopia has an authoritarian government which has outlawed NGOs advocating for human rights, with people who violate these terms likely to be killed.

We informally tracked as these dynamics provided the backdrop to each of our monthly sessions, with the Prime Minister of New Zealand visiting some participants' projects one month, the NFL banning football players from taking the knee in the US another month, and a right wing government elected in Ontario, Canada, during another.

As one participant said, "There will be power politics, even at local community level." Our group touched on the dark side of political interest: issues ripe with political interest often create a situation where there is "very little interest in reframing what the problem really is."

Systems leaders are asking themselves questions about power, whether they are working in large institutions, in the social change sector as innovators or entrepreneurs, or as weavers in multi level collaborations. "How much power do I have? What role can I really play? How can I leverage existing resources to have a real and lasting impact?"

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We touched on how often the tendency to develop policy from centralized power has led to unequal power dynamics and a breakdown in trust in the system. When we start to pull apart different aspects of power, the back-story around power that just doesn't show up very often, is urgent.

There was an acknowledgement of the shadow side of our own power, when we are unaware of the power and position we actually have within the institutions and systems we are working to change. This can lead to blind spots and difficulty in relationships. On the personal level, we asked many questions about how one is best positioned to influence systems change, including such as, "How do we approach and support in the right way? How do we share power so all the responsibility is not on me or the initiative I am leading?"

As noted, systems leaders may work in highly structured organizations as well as in interstitial spaces and collaborations. In every case, power dynamics are both highly challenging and an important element of strategy. The micro level of relationships and institutionalized hierarchies are part of the everyday negotiations alongside the macro level complex systemic challenges.

There is a language and approach in the growing field of systems change that increases the gap between communities with lived experience of systemic barriers, and the 'systems changers.' Those who identify their work as systems change are often privileged, including being white and educated, and frequently they have theories about how to change communities.

The phrase "nothing about us, without us" encapsulates the critical importance of community-led and -informed change strategies, however it takes intention for people leading systems change to put this into practice. The complicated vocabulary of the field does not help. As one participant said, "The language of systems change may be a distraction for community groups."

In one session we explored and compared the context and histories of colonization and institutional racism in Canada and New Zealand. Poverty, violence and criminalization are disproportionately represented in Indigenous and racialized communities in both countries. We talked honestly about how funders and collaboratives are exploring new ways to frame and redefine power. These initiatives require analysis and tools to address structural barriers in new ways.

There are serious risks of perpetuating harm when a systems change initiative does not center the realities and solutions of people with lived experience in the strategy and work. We also shared that Indigenous communities are leading cultural renewal and resurgence movements that are transforming the landscape of social change.

We discovered that, to address these challenging issues of power, many systems leaders revert back to existing community development tools. We were reminded many times that while systems leadership is an emerging field, it actually draws on practices and historical roots across many change fields.

TRANSITIONS

In summer 2018 we launched a new Systems Sanctuary program, The Systems Sisterhood. It was designed for 'women of systems change who are amid a life transition.'

At first, we thought this would be a niche, appealing only to a very small group of people, but in fact spaces filled up very quickly and there is a waiting list for the program. The first cohort of The Systems Sisterhood began in September this year.

The theme of transitions has been ever present in each of our Cohorts. Just like power is a part of systemic transformations, so is change, and our systems leaders were going through lots of change. Participants were leaving their organizations they founded and other big projects, dealing with the operational side of setting strategy or closing things down. They were navigating the emotional side of letting go of their work and the network of relationships that surrounded them. They were winning big funding bids and dealing with the transition from 'I have an idea that no one understands', to 'I have so much work to do, I can't cope.' They were being held up as 'leaders' for the first time, feeling like their work was not ready to showcase, but having to do it anyway, polishing the mess for new stakeholders to see. They were reaching burnout and making time to prioritize home, health and family. Our participants felt all of these experiences of transition in their bodies; they got ill, they grieved, they felt elated.

They needed reflective space to make sense of it all. As one participant said, "Maybe I just need distance. It's like going to the opthamologist, if you look too close or too far you don't see the letters. I'm trying to find the right distance."

If transitions are everywhere in systems change work, we wondered what does it take to do transition well? How can systems leaders conserve energy, keep balance, remain focused when their work has created a disruption in the world around them? How can we end things strong, how can we begin things with boundaries, not be buffeted by politics? How do we manage the expectation of others? If we do such deep work with people and yet have not solved the problem by the time we leave an initiative, how do we manage this?

The spiritual and emotional dimensions of this work always seemed to emerge when we touched on transitions, including the challenge of letting go of a project or organization as well as navigating the unknown. Many times, this was brought about by an inner gut feeling, or an awareness that the initiative required new leadership to carry it forward. It is important to create conscious closure as well as the space for processing the transition, both on a personal and collective level.

We reflected together on the importance of honouring endings and letting go, and doing this while managing the expectations of others. Grief has its own process that requires space and time for us as individuals as well as collectively. These are important moments to draw on the wise elders in our communities to support and be present.

RESOURCES FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Participants were curious to hear from others about how they managed to finance their systems change work. We talked a lot about the role of foundations and funding in systems change and the balance between the ambitious long-term goals of systems change, the goals of practitioners to become better at their craft through iteration and learning, and the need of most funders to show impact in the short and medium term. Some said, "People don't fund the process." Others reflected that they worked best with "funders who fund outcomes without being too prescriptive on outputs." Another participant said, "One of the things I see in working with foundations is that a lot people aren't willing to give negative feedback and be critical."

The Sanctuary created a safe space for people to air some of their challenges around working with funders and possible solutions, and it also offered the opportunity to funders to participate as equals with practitioners. Those from funding organizations shared their challenges, which allowed for honest approaches to be surfaced to advance their work and side stepped the power dynamics that often stand in the way of meaningful conversation between funders and practitioners.

"People don't fund the process."

Participant, In the Thick of It

PEARLS OF WISDOM FROM OUR SYSTEMS LEADERS

There was so much wisdom shared during the peer learning sessions. Here are some of these gems, in the systems leaders' own words.

On the process of intervention

- Map out the status quo, then ask: what happens if we continue on this path?
- Are there any major forces in the wider ecosystem you could leverage to create change?
- Sometimes an ecosystem convening that includes the part of the incumbent system that is stuck, is a good tactical move.
- Create shorter term projects that show value quickly, that build buy-in. Prototype small, then scale it up to attract resources. Prove it in a pocket and expand.
- To build systems consciousness, create experiences.

On communications for systems change

- Meet people where they're at. Systems are made of people. You need to think who am I introducing this to next? Be nimble and flexible to meet different needs.
- Create narrative that re-frame the challenge from deficit to asset based framing.
- Manage expectations. Often you are creating the conditions for change; you may not be there when change actually happens.
- Stop and reflect, take the learnings, write up case studies, then ask for funding.
- Develop a toolkit for funders to help them sell the initiative internally.
- Sometimes you need to fake it til you make it. Tell a compelling story and that will attract key players in.

On getting perspective

- Sometimes it's important to get off the ground into the helicopter to see what's going on.
- It's important to be patient.
- Be ok with the messiness. It's not perfect, but it's pointing in the right direction.
- Be more gentle with yourself. The judgments we place on ourselves are so much worse than those we place on others.
- Slowing down has allowed me to be present and to really listen. It takes courage. Allow yourself some time to go deep.
- Is tension really a bad thing? It can be a source of creativity and learning. Integrate paradox. Take the emotion out of it, it's part of growing

On influencing others

- You need to understand the motivation of the people you're trying to influence.
- Do the research and sell that - make the case that's it worth listening to.
- A lot of effort goes into building the case and selling it. The latter part is out of the comfort zone. We're often trained to be academics, not sellers of ideas.
- Make it easy for people to take the action you want, solve a problem for them, give them the tools to do that.

On emergent strategy

- Take the time to do important things properly.
- Embrace emergent practice. The innovation curve is always ahead of evidence. You don't know it's going to work until you try it.
- Keep pushing, there is no map.
- What are some of the emergent pathways? Have there been some opportunities, relationships, projects in your life that you want to dive deeper into?
- Deepen connectedness to yourself and trust your instincts. There may be peace and calm in that amidst the uncertainty and unknowing.

On scaling

- Stop, slow down, say no and build capacity.
- To spread systems change thinking, you have to create training.
- Documentation is key to capturing institutional knowledge.
- Once you understand the issue, create organizing structures.
- Celebrate the small victories as a reminder of the impact you're having. Remind yourself that we think of impact on a micro scale, not the macro.

On funding systems change - tips for grantmakers

- Use your power to convene.
- Energize the funding community to bring other funders and collaborators to the work.
- Link local organizations with national groups.
- Lead by example by saying a systemic approach is a good one.
- Offer trust-based funding. Give promising practitioners a chunk of money and trust them to know how to spend that money wisely.
- Find ways of breaking down the power dynamics to broker open relationships, where iterative learning is of value.
- Fund the infrastructure for systems change rather than the sexy, bleeding heart stuff.
- Fund the core team to do the work, then fund the projects.
- Fund the core operating costs, rather than getting practitioners to do the whole dance of making people dress up and make a project something that it's not.
- Look for things that need doing that are less superficially attractive, but have more impact.
- Support the existing organisations that need help to continue.
- Fund adaptive strategy.
- Offer smaller grants for nimble ideas.

THE VALUE OF
PEER LEARNING

We surveyed participants as we went along as well as at the end of the program to get a gauge of what they valued most about The Systems Sanctuary. The following are highlights of the feedback we received, reinforcing the value of peer learning programs to support systems leaders.

Participants valued the international mix: "It was great having the folks from New Zealand, and other Canadians, Americans. Having that diverse set of people was an immensely valuable experience. The facilitation was done well, the technology worked, and the design was useful."

They also talked about how useful their dedicated peer learning session was. We used a Peer Input Process, which creates a process for participants to share their most important challenges and to receive strategic coaching and insight from their peers in the group. "My mind is blown, that was awesome" said one participant when he came back to the group after hearing their input. Another said, "My Peer Input session was a highlight - it came at a time when I was second-guessing my approach to, and gut feelings about, collaboration for systems change. The support, practical advice and reassurance provided by a group of informed and experienced peers was invaluable for setting me on a solid course towards playing an impactful role in leading a systems change initiative." Another, "The most valuable thing has been my hotseat experience. I was needing some insight and some validation, but good to have interested with people with no vested interest in what you're doing."

The style in which the program was hosted was important to participants: "I really appreciate your warm and facilitative style. You clearly know heaps, but you hold it lightly - lovely.. " "One of the best things was the tone set by Rachel and Tatiana. Open, honest, compassionate. Very helpful given the difficulties people have working in this space."

Participants also valued the opportunity to be among peers and to be honest about where they were at in their work. "If you read the case studies, everything sounds sorted and ordered. It's quite daunting." "I appreciated most the honesty of participants, the flexible yet structured approach, and the safe space for exploring the emotional conflicts that come with systems work. I am still new to the field and greatly appreciated the opportunity to build connections with people who've been at it longer than I and gain the wisdom of their experiences." Finally, as one participant stated, "If we could have these kind of conversations more often, we could really tackle something!"

"I really appreciate your warm and facilitative style. You clearly know heaps, but you hold it lightly - lovely. Thanks very much."

Participant, *In the Thick of It*

THE TEAM

Tatiana Fraser

Tatiana has 20 years of experience leading and scaling systems innovations, creating strategic learning communities and movement building. Co-founder of Girls Action Foundation and co-author of Girl Positive (Random House 2016), she has worked to reframe the narrative around gender equality and to advance the empowerment of girls and women in Canada. As co-founder of Metalab - a platform designed to support systems change strategy, collaboration and learning, she has collaborated with Ashoka Global and Status of Women Canada to bridge resources and build ecosystem practice at the intersection of gender and innovation.

Tatiana is an Ashoka Fellow, recognized as one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women (Women's Executive Network), the recipient of the McGill Alumni James G Wright Award and the Champion of Lifelong Learning by the Quebec Association of Lifelong Learning. She has served on numerous boards and advisory committees including The UN Commission on the Status of Women, The Carold Institute, Community Knowledge Exchange, Food Secure Canada, Exeko, and Actua among others.

A mother of 2 kids and living in Montreal, she holds a Bachelor of Arts in Women Studies and MBA from McGill University.

Rachel Sinha

British award-winning social innovator, named by the Guardian newspaper one of 50 Radicals "changing the face of the UK". Rachel Sinha Co-founded The Finance Innovation Lab co-leading it for eight years.

Her work in The Lab, bringing together people post financial crisis to bring about positive change, involved launching a number of new organizations including The Natural Capital Coalition and AuditFutures. She was named Management Today/BskyB 'Future Leader of Sustainability' and sat on the European Commission Expert Panel on Social Business.

As a founder of The Systems Studio Rachel works on systemic change initiatives with everyone from WWF to the Young UN Agents for Change.

She has taught systems change at the US Federal Government, Yale and Harvard and she writes about it in HBR, Fast Company and in the book she co-authored (Labcraft: How Social Labs Cultivate Change Through Collaboration).

Rachel was a Scholar, at the Amsterdam School of Creative Leadership, has a MA in Marketing/CSR and a BA in Psychology. Rachel won a 'person of exceptional ability' Green Card to work in the US and now lives in San Francisco.

REFUGE FOR SYSTEMS LEADERS

The Systems Sanctuary offers peer-coaching programs designed to support a growing community of pioneers experimenting with systemic solutions to systemic social and environmental problems.

Our programs include:

In the Thick of It | for systems leaders at least two years into their initiatives

The Systems Sisterhood | for women of systems change amid life transition

Embed It | for systems leaders trying to embed systems practice within their organization
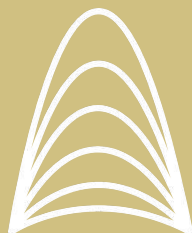
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