THE WATER OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Action Learning Exercise

INTRODUCTION

This activity is designed to help individuals think systemically about social change, explore what is happening below the surface, and determine how they and their organizations can pursue large-scale change in a disciplined and holistic manner. We suggest that, prior to engaging in this exercise, all participants read the article *The Water of Systems Change* by John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge.

THE EXERCISE

The exercise is divided into three parts:

Part I uses the "inverted pyramid" introduced in *The Water of Systems Change* (see page 2) to perform an **external assessment** of opportunities to make progress on the social or environmental issue you are focused on.
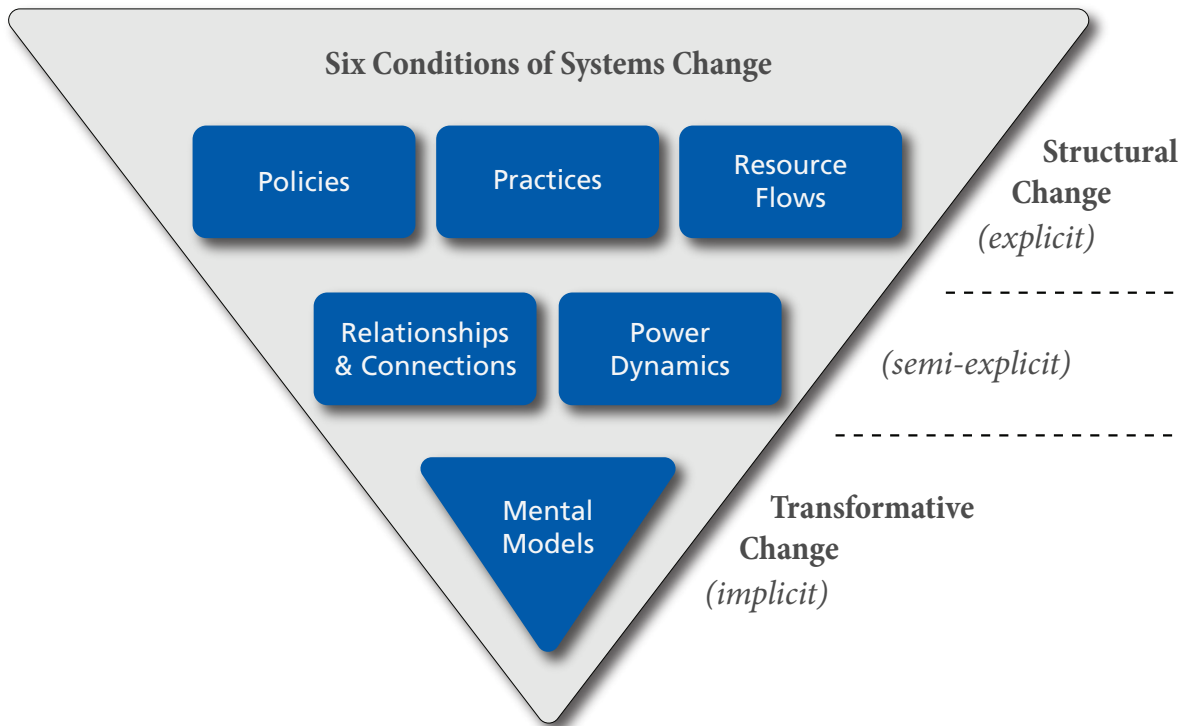
Part II uses the same framework to consider **internal conditions** within yourself and your organization that should change in order for you to better support progress on your issue.

Part III takes what was developed in Parts I and II and asks **"What to do next?"**

SUGGESTED METHOD

Please allow 3-4 hours for the exercise. The best results will come not from doing this alone but from working with others who are also focused on the issue. The greater the number of vantage points you can include, the better the insights from the exercise will be. In addition, a facilitator may be a useful addition to the group to optimize for balance and reflection in the conversation.

The Six Conditions of Systems Change

Six Conditions of Systems Change

| Policies | Practices | Resource Flows |

| Relationships & Connections | Power Dynamics |

Mental Models

Structural Change *(explicit)*

(semi-explicit)

Transformative Change *(implicit)*

DEFINITIONS

Policies: Rules, regulations and priorities (formal and informal).

Practices: Organizational and practitioner activities targeted to addressing and making progress.

Resource Flows: How money, people, knowledge, and information are allocated and distributed.

Relationships & Connections: Quality of connections and communication occurring between actors.

Power Dynamics: Which individuals and organizations hold decision-making power, authority, and influence (both formal and informal).

Mental Models: Deeply held beliefs and assumptions that influence one's actions.

Part I: External Assessment

Part I unfolds in three steps:

1. Identify a social problem or challenge you are passionate about making progress on.

2. Assess how the systems change conditions on page 2 might be holding the problem in place.

3. Identify potential strategies and who should be involved to address the desired change.

ISSUE SELECTION AND IDENTIFYING ASPIRATIONS

Question 1. Think about an issue you are passionate about or working to improve (e.g., disparities in educational outcomes, mass incarceration). This is the issue you will be working with throughout this exercise.

Issue:

_____

Question 2. Consider your aspirations for outcomes you would hope to see with this issue 5 years from now. Ideally, think about improvements in outcomes that are commensurate with the scale of the problem (e.g., are related to changing the whole system or a key subset of the system). It is likely that improvements of this magnitude would require something more than expanding an individual program.

Aspirational Outcomes:

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ASSESS EXTERNAL CONDITIONS

Question 3. Based on the aspirations you identified, **what existing elements are reinforcing current conditions** holding the problem in place? Use the template below to detail your ideas.

DIAGNOSIS: ASSESSING SYSTEMS CONDITIONS		
Systems Change Condition	Example (using education)	What existing elements are reinforcing the current conditions and hindering our progress?
Policies	*School disciplinary protocols*	
Practices	*Teachers underprepared for diverse classrooms*	
Resource Flows	*Grassroots organizations starved for resources*	
Relationships & Connections	*Parent/teacher relationships are contentious*	
Power Dynamics	*Students have no voice in school district decision-making*	
Mental Models	*Administrator and teacher assumptions that certain students can't learn*	

IDENTIFY STRATEGIES

Question 4. Given what you articulated on the previous page, **what strategies can help advance systems change efforts?** Who needs to be involved?

TAKING ACTION: ACTIVATING LEVERAGE POINTS AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS	
Systems Change Condition	What strategies can help advance our systems change efforts? Who would need to be involved?
Policies	
Practices	
Resource Flows	
Relationships & Connections	
Power Dynamics	
Mental Models	

Part II: Internal Assessment

We all contribute in some way, shape, or form to the problems we are attempting to solve. As said by Bill O'Brien, "The success of the intervention is based on the interior condition of the intervener."

This section provides an opportunity to think about dimensions that may need to change in your and your organization's orientation for you to better support progress against the issue that you are trying to solve.

Part II unfolds in two steps:

1. Assess how internal conditions might be hindering your ability to achieve your external aspirations. You will consider this in two ways:

   - To what extent have your personal actions contributed to the conditions holding the problem in place?

   - To what extent are your organization's actions contributing to the conditions holding the problem in place?

2. Identify potential strategies and who should be involved to address the desired change.

ASSESS INTERNAL CONDITIONS

Question 5: Thinking again about the aspirations you have for change and the strategies you devised in Part I of this exercise, **to what extent have your personal actions contributed to the conditions** holding the problem in place? **To what extent are your organization's actions contributing to the conditions** that are holding the problem in place? Use the template on the next page to record your responses.
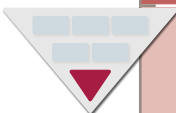
For foundations conducting this exercise, a useful background primer is FSG's report *Being the Change*, which highlights 12 internal practices that foundations are using to transform their impact.

DIAGNOSIS: ASSESSING INTERNAL SYSTEMS CONDITIONS

Systems Change Condition	Example (for foundations)	To what extent have your personal actions contributed to the conditions holding the problem in place? To what extent are your organization's actions contributing to the conditions that are holding the problem in place?
Policies	*Grant cycles not aligned with rate of change*	
Practices	*RFP processes that favor certain organizations*	
Resource Flows	*Insufficient allocation of resources to learning and evaluation*	
Relationships & Connections	*Siloed programmatic departments*	
Power Dynamics	*Lack of candor in dialogue between board and staff*	
Mental Models	*Evaluation orientation does not account for systems change complexity*	

IDENTIFY STRATEGIES

Question 6. Given what you articulated on the previous page, **what strategies can help advance your systems change efforts?** Who needs to be involved to affect the internal change that is necessary?

TAKING ACTION: ACTIVATING LEVERAGE POINTS AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS	
Systems Change Condition	**What actions and strategies could you and your organization take to help advance your systems change efforts?** **Who needs to be involved to implement these strategies?**
Policies	
Practices	
Resource Flows	
Relationships & Connections	
Power Dynamics	
Mental Models	

Part III: What To Do Next

If you've completed Parts I and II of this exercise, you should likely have the following output:

- An assessment of elements within the six conditions for systems change that may be holding the problem in place and hindering the impact of your work.

- Perspective on strategies that might address those elements and some thoughts on people within the system who are and who might be engaged in changing those conditions.

- An assessment of the extent to which you and your organization might be contributing to the problem you are attempting to solve.

- Perspective on strategies you might take to address your and your organization's contributions to the problem.

With this information in hand, here are a few thoughts on what you might do next:

1. At this point you are operating with hypotheses. The first step you might take would be to investigate and research the most important hypotheses you've developed to determine their validity.

2. If you already have a strategy, a good next step would be to map your findings from this exercise to the strategy you have developed. What is missing from your current strategy that you might add based on this assessment?

3. If you have yet to develop a strategy, you could consider this work to be a good starting place for your strategy. You would likely want to do additional research and analysis to validate your hypotheses before proceeding with them.

4. You might find it useful to share what you developed with a larger set of stakeholders involved with your issue. Or repeat the exercise with a different/larger group.

5. As you consider other conditions that may need to be addressed, your assessment may surface potential partners with whom you should be more connected to advance your respective goals.

6. If you are part of the staff of an organization, you could utilize the article *The Water of Systems Change*, along with the output you developed from this exercise, as a basis for a dialogue with your board about systems change.

> Learn more at www.fsg.org/systems-thinking

Notes:

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