

The Whole Picture: Systems Thinking for Collective Impact

TCDEIR + IDEAL Center @ SMM

October 16, 2025

AGENDA

8:30 AM Refreshments and Socializing

9:00 AM Welcome & TCDEIR Intro

9:10 AM SMM, CFESC, & the IDEAL Center

Systems & Hula Hoops

Introduction to Systems Language

Systems Change

Elements of Organizational Capacity
for Equity

Closing

10:30 AM Adjourn

1.0a: IDEAL Center Community Norms

Listen with the possibility of being changed. Speak with the promise of being heard.

Be present, and be your best self.

We will care for our bodies and move when we need to.

Everyone has something to learn. No one person is good at everything or has all the skills to complete a group-worthy task.

Everyone has expertise to offer. Every person has relevant strengths to bring to each group-worthy task.

We need each and every person in this group.

You have the right to ask for help, and the duty to assist.

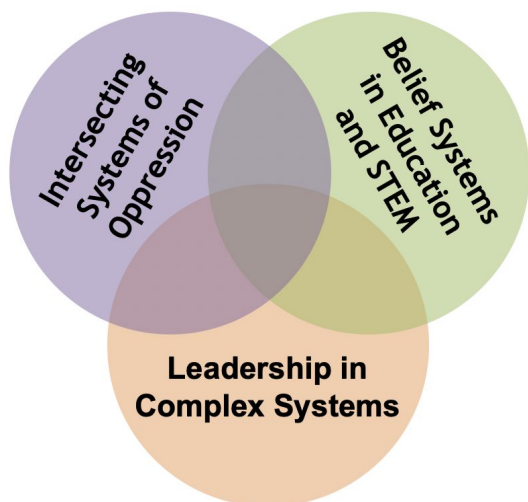
Be willing to experience the discomfort of learning.

Expect and accept non-closure.

What's said here stays here; what's learned here leaves here.



1.0b: The IDEAL Center Framework



Intersecting Systems of Oppression

- This focuses us on resources that help us understand more deeply how systems of oppression
 - (a) are produced by and work together to maintain power and status hierarchies, and
 - (b) function across different levels, from the individual to the socio-cultural.
- We take an intersectional approach in which each of us has been called on to
 - explore our own experiences living within oppressive systems such as racism/white supremacy, patriarchy, and classism;
 - develop a critical awareness to see the systems operating in mutually supportive ways within our organizations and communities; and
 - practice engaging in complex conversations across differences.

Belief Systems in Education and STEM

- This focuses us on beliefs, values, and norms in Education, Academia, and STEM, and their impacts on access, engagement, and participation.
- Like all human pursuits, STEM is inherently cultural, and reflects the beliefs, values, and norms of the people who do it.
- When the dominant cultural values and norms in STEM or in education at large are a mismatch with the values and norms of minoritized groups, STEM and formal learning environments may be experienced as alienating, hostile, and unwelcoming.

Leadership in Complex Systems

- Our work is to transform our communities and institutions from within to be more inclusive, equitable, and accessible — places where each person in all their diversity, and regardless of their role, can thrive.
- The work of transformative change happens through relationships — it happens between us and among us. It is dynamic, interactive.
- In systems language, we would say that transformative change in complex systems is emergent.
 - While we can envision having socially just learning communities, we cannot predict in detail how they will come into being, and how they will function across our varied contexts.
 - So we have to gather perspectives from many standpoints as part of our work.
 - We need to build collaborative, equitable communities in which we can learn together, teach each other, and strategize about — and take — action.

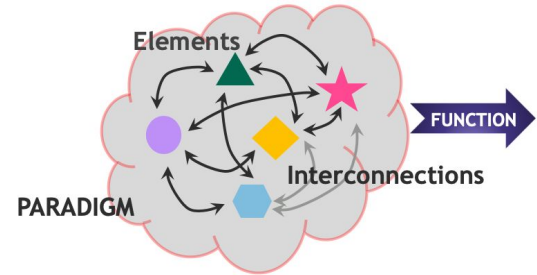
1.0c: Aspects of a System

Elements are the parts of the system. They are the aspects of a system we are most likely to notice and learn about because many of them are visible, tangible things. Intangibles, such as institutional pride, are also elements. Changing elements has limited efficacy, unless those elements impact other parts of the system (interconnections, function, etc). (pp 12–13, 16)

Interconnections are the relationships that hold the elements together. They are harder to learn about than elements and no one person is likely to understand all of the relationships that allow a complex system to do what it does. They often take the form of flows of information or materials. These flows can be strong or weak. Changing interconnections in a system, including the addition of new interconnections, can change the system dramatically. (pp 13–14, 16)

The Function of a system is what the system actually does. They are the most difficult aspect of a system to see. A system's function is not necessarily spoken, written, or expressed explicitly. The best way to deduce a system's function is to watch for a while to see how the system behaves. Functions are deduced from behavior, not from rhetoric or stated goals. (pp 14, 16–17)

A Paradigm is the mind-set out of which a system arises. A society's paradigm consists of the society's deepest set of beliefs about how the world works. These beliefs exist as a society's shared ideas or great big unstated assumptions. (p 162)



Example System: Theater group

Elements: actors, director, script, costumes, props, set, lighting, stage, stage crew, costume designer, props master, stage manager, lighting designer, sound designer, ushers, audience members, playwright

Interconnections: actors are connected to each other through the script; director to actors through stage direction and feedback; props, costumes, set must align with script and fit the actors; type of stage is connected to audience experience; etc.

Potential Functions: entertain, provoke thought, create social change, make money — one, some, all, and possibly something completely unpredicted.

Paradigm: A theater group's functions will largely be determined their underlying paradigm. "Theater is an entertainment business" will produce a different set of functions than "theater is a tool for social change."

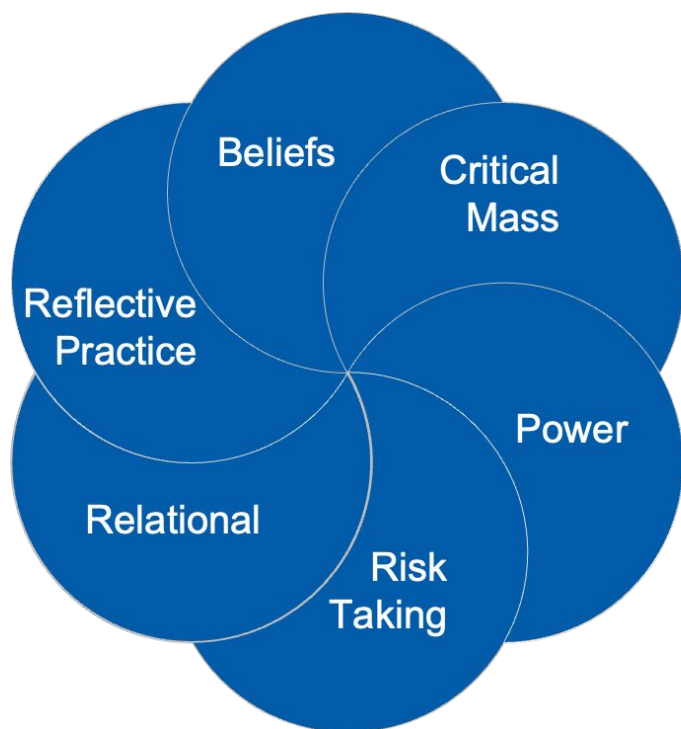
— adapted from Donella Meadows (2008),
Thinking in Systems

1.0d: Systems Lessons

- To understand a system, we need to step back and watch how the system behaves.
- Systems behavior is different from the sum of its parts. It is not determined by the intentions of the parts or people within the system.
- Systems behavior is determined by how the parts of or people within the system interact with each other within the system structure.
- All systems have a structure, and those structures matter.
- System structures shape (constrain or enhance) our choices, producing system behavior.
- Patterns of behavior that emerge are often very different from the intentions or the behavior of the individual parts.

— adapted from Menendian & Watt (2008), *Systems Primer*

1.0e: The IDEAL Center's Research Reveals These Factors of an Organization's Capacity Towards Equity



Believing in possibility for change: Belief that change is possible within one's organization can affect both motivation and feeling one can "stick with it" in the midst of changing environments and/or setbacks.

Fostering relationships to provide support and build a sense of connectedness: Organizational capacity for change requires a team of individuals not only to carry out activities, but more importantly, to create a positive environment where staff feel supported and experience a sense of connectedness.

Critical mass of individuals to hold vision and institutional memory: One condition for capacity for change resides in institutional memory and having enough of a critical mass of people who can hold the equity vision (and continue change efforts) even in the midst of staff turnover.

Reflection for shared learning, the ability to be responsive, and to effectively mobilize: Creating robust structures for reflective practice is an important condition to support change. When individuals have the space to slow down and reflect on their work, they can feel more grounded and able to more effectively mobilize toward change.

Risk-taking and experimentation that can inform and support shifts in practice: An environment where risk is possible and making mistakes along the way is permissible is yet another condition for change. Risk-taking, of course, also requires that we accept the possibility that we might fail. We often see failure as a negative, but perhaps is better seen as neutral and important to our learning and change process.

Acknowledging and leveraging one's sphere of influence and power: Power emerges as another consideration toward transformative change. When thinking about power, it may be useful to consider one's circle of control (the things we can actually directly do something about) and one's circle of influence (things we can do something about where we do not have direct control, but can influence). Like fractals or ripples in a pond, over time, these influences can have wider effects even outside the original sphere of influence.

“Dead Stars”

Out here, there’s a bowing even the trees are doing.

Winter’s icy hand at the back of all of us.

Black bark, slick yellow leaves, a kind of stillness that feels
so mute it’s almost in another year.

I am a hearth of spiders these days: a nest of trying.

We point out the stars that make Orion as we take out
the trash, the rolling containers a song of suburban
thunder.

It’s almost romantic as we adjust the waxy blue
recycling bin until you say, *Man, we should really learn
some new constellations.*

And it’s true. We keep forgetting about Antlia, Centaurus,
Draco, Lacerta, Hydra, Lyra, Lynx.

But mostly we’re forgetting we’re dead stars too, my mouth
is full
of dust and I wish to reclaim the rising—

to lean in the spotlight of streetlight with you, toward
what’s larger within us, toward how we were born.

Look, we are not unspectacular things.
We’ve come this far, survived this much. What

would happen if we decided to survive more? To love
harder?

What if we stood up with our synapses and flesh and said,
No.
No, to the rising tides.

Stood for the many mute mouths of the sea, of the land?

What would happen if we used our bodies to bargain

for the safety of others, for earth,
if we declared a clean night, if we stopped being
terrified,

if we launched our demands into the sky, made ourselves so
big
people could point to us with the arrows they make in their
minds,

rolling their trash bins out, after all of this is over?

– Ada Limón, “Dead Stars”