LEADERSHIP IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS

The Cynefin Framework breaks real-world situations into 5 domains - Simple, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic, and Disorder - to help leaders understand the type of system within which they operate. Understanding the system around you helps you to better analyze challenges and opportunities, and make better decisions in response.

SIMPLE

Characterized by stability and clear cause-and-effect relationships.
A car key is simple.

COMPLICATED

Characterized by multiple right answers and relationships between cause and effect that may not be clear to everyone.
A car is complicated.

COMPLEX

Characterized by turbulence and constant flux.
Traffic is complex.

CHAOTIC

Characterized by turbulence and indeterminable cause and effect relationships.
Traffic during a blizzard is chaotic.

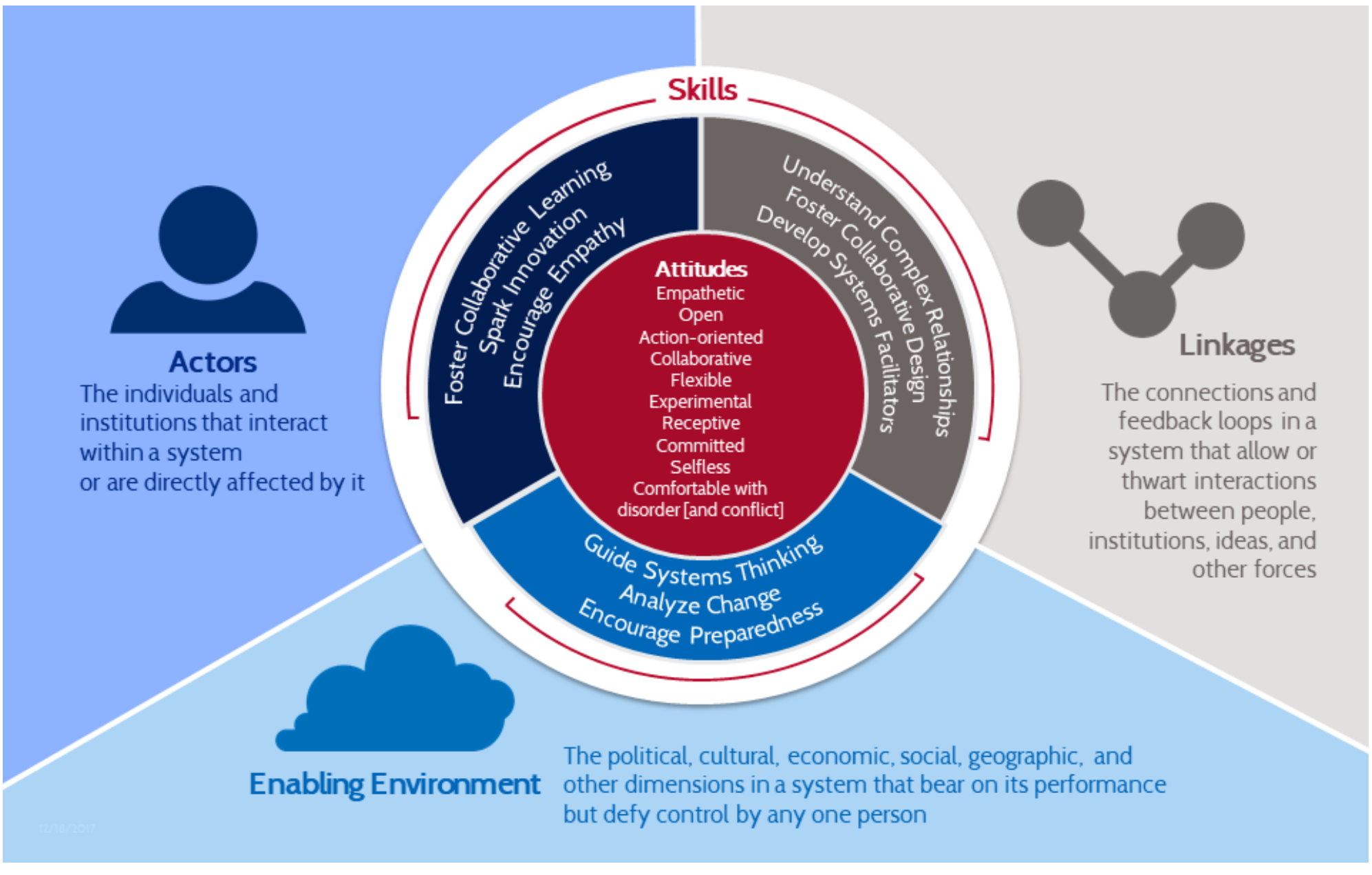
DISORDER Unclear which of the other four domains is predominant.

International development projects often operate in the land of the **COMPLEX**. *Leaders face systems rife with blindspots, intricately intertwined and interdependent relationships, and unpredictable actions and reactions. A skilled Systems Leader is adept at understanding and acting within this world of complexity.*

Common roadblocks that make a Complex System challenging to work in:

1. Pervasive silos within and across organizations and sectors
2. Conflicting processes and entrenched conventions that stifle innovation
3. Turbulence and constant flux
4. Actors with competing goals and dispersed ownership of resources
5. Underrepresentation or exclusion of the system's full diversity of fields, sectors, cultures, or social positions

THE SKILLS & ATTRIBUTES *A SYSTEMS LEADER NEEDS TO SUCCEED IN A COMPLEX SYSTEM*



SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP SKILL BUILDER

Are you interested in improving your Systems Leadership skills? Depending on the amount of time you have available to devote to skill building, and your desired pace, you may want to focus on different capacities. Using the modular options presented in the learning plan below, you can design a personalized learning pathway to increase your capacity to understand and navigate the complex systems around you and lead the co-creation of lasting solutions to complex challenges.

	1 MONTH	6 MONTHS	1 YEAR
Foster Collaborative Learning	• Participate in one or more multi-sectoral events to observe group dynamics and different facilitation techniques for fostering collaborative learning. • Appraise your team's, network's, or system's knowledge flows to identify preferences, gaps, silos, and opportunities using the Knowledge Management Assessment Tool or a similar diagnostic survey.	• Understand how adults learn best by reviewing Knowles' Adult Learning Theory. • Download the Actor Mapping & Challenge Mapping (pg. 5) tools and test drive them with your team. • Lead Actor Mapping & Challenge Mapping sessions with multi-stakeholder teams from your system.	• Practice storytelling to diverse audiences, learning from tools such as the University of Virginia's Design Thinking for Innovation Storytelling Tool. • Experiment with multimodal learning methods, such as Graphic Recording, for your multi-stakeholder events. Track participants' receptivity and engagement. • Form a new problem-solving network based on the results of previous Actor Mapping or Challenge Mapping sessions.
Spark Innovation	• Reserve this skill for more advanced skill-building.	• Read up on Lean Innovation and its fast fail philosophy. Orient yourself with Blank's HBR article. • Download, review, and practice tools to improve your innovation skills, such as the Improved Innovation Decision Making (IIDM) Toolset and DIY Toolkit. • Deepen your understanding of your organization's culture of innovation by running an Innovation Culture Assessment (pg. 43). Discuss the results with your team. • Attend a hackathon to observe innovation in action.	• Sign up for a short course on fostering innovation, such as INSEAD's Innovation by Design course or MIT's Mastering Innovation & Design-Thinking course. • Practice Lean Innovation approaches, such as rapid prototyping, with your team and other system stakeholders.
Encourage Empathy	• Check out Ashoka's Start Empathy project. • Take the Basadur Profile and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assessments to understand your problem-solving and decision-making styles. • Take a test for implicit biases, such as through Harvard's Project Implicit, and encourage your team to do the same.	• Explore new communication methods that improve your engagement, such as Nonviolent Communication. • Shadow a peer in another organization or role. Try to select a peer with an alternative viewpoint or someone whose position you're less familiar with. • Introduce empathy-building tools to your team, such as from UX Booth or The Center for Building Empathy and Compassion. Designate deliberate opportunities to put them into practice.	• Spend time performing Dialogue Interviews and Empathy Mapping with diverse stakeholders from your system. Track how your perception of system stakeholders changes as your empathy deepens over time.
Understand Complex Relationships	• Download and complete an Influence & Incentives Matrix (pg. 50) to understand actors' different incentives and levels of influence within your system. • Play an agent-based modeling game to understand about the intricacies of interactions between actors in complex systems. • Attend a meeting with systems actors with whom you hadn't previously engaged.	• Learn about systems visualization and mapping tools. Kumu's data visualization platform provides a useful starting place. • Participate in a Learning Journey to experience the complex interactions, feedback loops, and alignment/misalignment between systems stakeholders.	• Create a learning journal to track your own evolving understanding of relationships between your system's actors, linkages, boundaries, and enabling environment. • Engage with teams that use Social Network Analysis (SNA) to learn how to integrate their insights into the evolving picture of the systems you seek to lead. • Practice creating Causal Loop Diagrams for different parts of your system. Fact-check them with several systems stakeholder groups.
Foster Collaborative Design	• Reserve this skill for more advanced skill-building.	• Read up on co-creation literature, such as this foundational piece by Prahalad and Ramaswamy. • Tour a local innovation hub or accelerator. • Attend a hackathon or design sprint. Note which design elements, tools, methods, and facilitation techniques best engage the group. • Join the Presencing Institute's u.lab, a network of practitioners dedicated to co-creation. Explore their online resources and enroll in any of their courses.	• Encourage your team to take the Basadur Profile assessment. Discuss the results in the context of appreciating different problem-solving approaches. • Lead a collaborative design event, such as a hackathon or design sprint. Work with your team to assure that feedback is integrated into future planning and design. • Design and establish a Community of Practice related to your work. FHI360's SCALE+ principles for system-wide collaborative action offer useful guidance.
Develop Systems Facilitators	• Reserve this skill for more advanced skill-building.	• Learn about Network Theory. • Learn about facilitation best practices. Hunter's The Art of Facilitation is a useful text. • Practice activities from the Kauffman Foundation's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Building Playbook. • Take a facilitation course for systems practitioners, such as the Collaborative Operating System's Advanced Course in Facilitation, to understand how a systems facilitator is unique from a traditional coalition-builder.	• Become a champion for nontraditional leaders: practice sharing leadership across your team. • Take a community mobilization course, such as Colorado State University's Community Mobilization 5-week course for political empowerment. • Develop your own "Top 10 toolkit" that you and your fellow Systems Leaders can reference as a sandbox from which to build your own facilitation plans.
Guide Systems Thinking	• Read Senge's formative article on Systems Leadership, The Dawn of System Leadership. • Read an introductory guide to Systems Thinking, such as Stroh's book Systems Thinking for Social Change. • Watch Oxfam's video on systems thinking for development.	• Download and learn about tools for understanding and assessing systems, such as the Assessing Innovation Potential for Social Impact toolset or the Systems Thinking Toolkit. • Take a Systems Thinking course, such as Acumen & Omidyar's Systems Practice course offered online. • Complete a Systemigram of your system of interest. Invite other actors to participate and/or review it.	• Apply learning from the above Systems Thinking courses and toolsets to analyze your system, find points of leverage, and adapt your programs and approaches to accommodate systems dynamics.
Analyze Change	• Sign up for newsletters on trends in your industry or sector of interest. • Read the Leadership Centre's The Art of Change Making guide.	• Learn about embracing change as a leader. Heifetz's book The Practice of Adaptive Leadership provides a helpful introduction. • Sign up for a Futures Foresight course, such as Stanford's Foresight and Innovation online course. • Attend a trends or Futures Foresight convening or workshop specific to your interests.	• Revamp your project's M&E framework to incorporate systems change. • Volunteer as a judge for an innovation challenge relevant to your industry, such as LAUNCH or OpenIDEO.
Encourage Preparedness	• Reserve this skill for more advanced skill-building.	• Learn about visioning tools, such Social Transformation Project's Visioning tool. • Review a current or previous strategy with your recently acquired systems perspective. Analyze the strategy for inclusiveness of actors and feedback loops between actors.	• Design a new project from the ground up using Futures Foresight tools and a Strategy Guide. • Challenge yourself to align your resources within systems, such as by using Geofunder's systems grantmaking tool.