

A full-page background image of a calm blue ocean under a clear sky. A small white sailboat is visible on the horizon line. The text is overlaid in the lower right quadrant.

A WAYFINDER'S GUIDE TO SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

18 insights for catalysts and convenors

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INTRODUCTION

On 30-31 August 2017 in London, 14 participants from around the world met to explore the question of 'how might we approach transformational change for complex challenges in the future?' The workshop was convened by the Australian Futures Project, a not-for-profit that seeks to create the enabling conditions for long-termism including the space for new insights, networks, capabilities, and transformation. The workshop was co-facilitated by Fiona McKenzie and Megan Seneque. Participants were:

- Dr Yannick Beaudoin, Chief Scientist, GRID-Arendal
- Julie Birtles, Founder, Beyond Excellence
- Paul Chatterton, Founder and lead, WWF Landscape Finance Lab
- Sarah Gillinson, Chief Executive, Innovation Unit
- Sandy Killick, Managing Director, Focused Facilitation
- Dr Adrienne Mannov, Social Anthropologist, World Maritime University
- Dr Fiona McKenzie, Co-Founder & Director of Strategy, Australian Futures Project
- Julie Munk, Network & Project Manager, Social Innovation Exchange
- Alex Roberts, Innovation Specialist, Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, OECD
- Valmae Rose, Director, Future By Design Australia
- Megan Seneque, International Development Advisor, Co-Facilitator, WE-Africa Lab
- Dr Andrea Siodmok, Head of the Policy Lab; Deputy Director, (UK) Cabinet Office
- Dr Katherine Trebeck, Global Research Policy Advisor, Oxfam
- Dieter Van den Broeck, Landscape orchestrator and science/education, Commonland

We (the participants) include a mix of practitioners and academics in systems and design thinking, innovation, and the social and physical sciences. We represent a diversity of sectors, disciplines, and geographies. We share a common commitment to achieving genuine systems transformation and, cumulatively, possess a wealth of experience in empowering such change - and change makers - in complex contexts. We also share an interest in honing and refining our practice through continuous learning.

With this spirit, the workshop involved two days of discussions that featured case studies of participant projects, reflections on lessons learnt, and insights into approaches for creating transformational change. Despite the diversity of our work, we found we had common experiences of the joys and frustrations of systems change. We had all been through times of professional loneliness and impatience, times of the exhilaration witnessing a 'window open' or minds changed, and we all shared the sense that this work is vital if the future is going to be one of human and ecological wellbeing.

The workshop was a wonderful opportunity to create and collaborate and, as an outcome, we thought it would be worthwhile to share our discussion. The result is *A wayfinder's guide to systems transformation: 18 insights for catalysts and convenors*.



Why a wayfinder's guide?

Human minds are full of concepts and constructs that have been developed and passed down over millennia to make sense of the world around us. The problem is that our world today is full of challenges that have reached unsurpassed levels of complexity and uncertainty, and full of complex systems that are increasingly connected and interdependent. Complex food, financial, energy, government and administration systems all provide tangible examples. In each case (e.g. grains, money, electricity, political and policy), systems are so extended and intertwined that it is not possible for any single person to have a complete understanding of the system as a whole. These systems still function despite our inability to understand them, for they are self-organising. Each of us who participated in the workshop have operated in complex systems. Never fear - this is not a report on systems theory². Suffice it to say, complex adaptive systems have unique characteristics. They are dynamic and driven by interactions between system components. Only when the system is viewed as a whole does the behaviour exist or emerge. Changes in one part of the system can cause changes in other parts of the system, often in nonlinear and unpredictable ways³.

The implications of these characteristics are that those that wish to intervene or create change in these systems need to be able to: identify the interconnected causes of issues and events; have the humility to acknowledge that a perfect solution (however that may be defined) may not be available; and be committed to creating space for dialogue amongst actors in the system so that new understanding and insights can be collectively developed. Perhaps uniquely, it requires collective organisation and coordination of knowledge and action.

It is with this in mind that we (the workshop participants) recognise that it is not only hard to know ahead of time what the right pathway or outcomes will be, it is also undesirable to presuppose an abstract direction. Context is crucial and recipes and formulas won't always apply. And this is ok. It is important not to 'fall in love' with just one method or approach. This is why we have collated insights to help others navigate their own journeys towards transformative systems change. We offer these insights in raw form. We have not created an academic paper or technical detailed report - there are already a lot of those out there. Rather, we have distilled two days of conversation into 18 insights. They have been harvested from our experience and the knowledge in the room. They are drawn from many examples where workshop participants have sought to intervene in complex systems. Just a few of these examples include addressing climate change and deforestation through one of the world's largest landscape financing projects, through to improving mental health outcomes with services co-designed by end-users, regearing democracy for the 21st century through a parliamentary leader's program, and transforming economic and development paradigms through a focus on wellbeing.

² If you'd like to read more on systems, see: McKenzie, F., 2014. Complex Adaptive Systems: Implications for Leaders, Organisations, Government, and Citizens. Australian Futures Project.

³ Take for example a well-meaning government attempt to increase food security by providing free fertiliser to farmers to increase production. Due to the lack of infrastructure to trade or store the produce, surpluses led to price decreases which led to reduced income for those farmers the initiative was supposed to help. Or another well-meaning government attempt to increase home ownership rates by providing grants for 'first home' buyers, which drove up demand and price, while home ownership rates continued to decline (there are many other examples - complexity is not just the realm of government!).

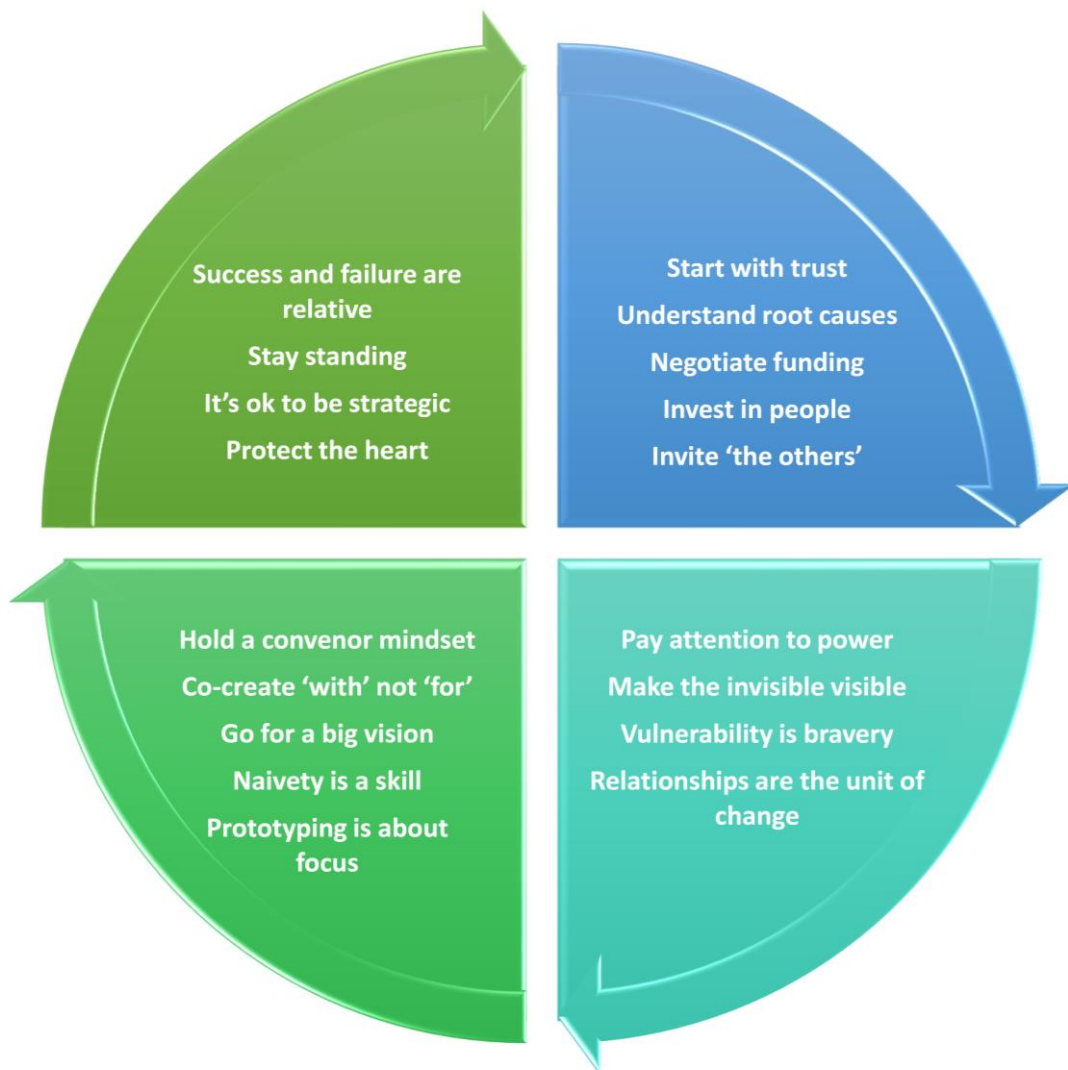
With great respect, we have used the analogy of Polynesian wayfinding. Traditional Polynesian navigation has been used for thousands of years to make long voyages across thousands of miles of the open Pacific Ocean. Involving navigational instruments such the Mau Piailug star compass (pictured⁴), wayfinders also rely on the careful observation of waves and currents. They embody a powerful combination of vision, deep understanding of the natural world, and a lifetime of learning and practice.



We don't pretend to have all the answers, nor is this an exhaustive list. We have created a working document - a prototype - that is an unapologetic blend of themes, questions, reflections and quotes. Intervening in a 'system' (which can mean everything from disrupting flows, to bending path dependencies, challenging paradigms and shifting behaviours) is neither easy nor for the faint hearted. It is hard. It's even harder to inspire people to do something about it. We invite you to consider these insights in light of your own work and context. We welcome feedback and suggestions for additional categories and content. It is our hope that this document provides a little guidance, encouragement and perhaps even reassurance on those tough days when it seems like there is no wind left in your sails. This is a guide for a different type of wayfinder - the enablers, catalysts and convenors of systems change.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mau_Piailug

18 INSIGHTS FOR CATALYSTS & CONVENORS



1. Start with trust

Trust seems such a fuzzy concept but is a crucial starting point for any human interaction. It is what generates connection, allows for co-creation, and creates the safe space for new understandings and meaning to emerge. This is not just about trust in each other but trust in 'the process' and in the 'safeness' of the space that has been created to convene different actors. No project starts with a blank canvas.

Participants enter the room with their past experiences shaping their future expectations. Many people have been burnt in well-meaning processes before that have promised much and delivered little. They can be reluctant to step up or stand out again when all they've gotten before is negative feedback. Trust may need to be rebuilt or regained. This can take time and careful nurturing.

'It is important to create a safe harbour for continued conversations'



'Enablers need strong personal relationships and trust in order to be effective and resilient'

We've listed trust first because it is linked to so many other factors including connection, relationships, vulnerability and commitment. There is no simple way of finding the right people and conditions to 'light the fire'. Not everyone will respond to the invitation but a small group of people can be a powerful force. More will be attracted to the space as it grows. This work is as much about understanding each other as it is about the topic. To this end, creating spaces where people can bring

their whole selves, not just their professional selves, into the room can unlock new levels of trust and commitment. This can reveal what is holding people back.

2. Understand root causes

Too often initiatives begin with a solution and an effort to 'lead stakeholders' to that solution. Starting with answers is not a pathway to transformative change. Commencing with an open-minded exploration of the challenge is crucial. This can require stepping back and reframing. The most visible symptoms or events can often be mistaken for the problem when in fact they are simply representations of something lying far deeper. We can be distracted by the actions that we see rather than the underlying patterns of behaviour, structures, processes and even mental models informing how we see the world. Immersion in the context and content will allow deeper causes and leverage points to emerge. At this stage, it may not even be clear what the question is. Or it may be that you discover a question beneath the question. This is ok as an approach that allows for coming at 'the problem' from different directions or even adjacent to the problem can work. This can create a greater space and invitation for participants to explore.

'It's good to collect data, but it can't just be data that confirms our own assumptions'

'Unfortunately, there can be lots of talking at this stage, but no real listening'

In this phase of exploration and immersion, it is important to be open to paradoxes and unexpected shifts in perspectives. Immersing can provide a powerful experience for participants and inspiration to try new things. This can require encouraging participants to 'hold' multiple perspectives, to appreciate commonality (and diversity) but not rush to

consensus. It can mean challenging our own assumptions and world views around how change happens. Participants may find this uncomfortable and may push back – but they should be supported through what can be a truly valuable phase. This is about holding onto complexity whilst also creating simplicity. It is about exploring boundaries instead of baulking at them. It is about holding onto the 'why' to fully understand what is happening in the system, rather than prematurely shifting the 'how' of the solution. And it is about enhancing the ability of participants to see the system for themselves. Methods such as systems mapping can prove valuable here. It can unearth the 'real' problem, not just what you thought it was. Over time, a new theory of change or hypothesis for how to shift the system may even emerge. The group should be deliberate about articulating these discoveries. This takes time and effort and good shortcuts are rare. A final challenge is that sometimes the real problem turns out to be something either nobody wants to solve or fund the solving of. This is also worth making explicit.



3. Negotiate funding

'Sometimes we are so grateful we just obey'

Many initiatives would go nowhere without external funding and sponsorship. There is a temptation to be so grateful to have received funding that there is no negotiation of the process or the outcomes of the project. At worst, we can end up making promises about outcomes

that have no place in emergent processes. This isn't about playing hardball. This is about engaging with funders upfront as partners in the process. This is about understanding each other and what is required for the partnership to work on both sides.

Ideally, a funding relationship should be built on accountability whilst also allowing for autonomy, flexibility, responsiveness and emergence.

There also needs to be a degree of comfort with uncertainty and acceptance of what it means to be in a genuine place of 'inquiry'. It is ironic and perhaps difficult to communicate that by not committing to specific outcomes, we can create the conditions to actually deliver real outcomes. One outcome which we can be specific about is the

increased capacity that will result in terms of the skills, behaviours and networks of the project participants. Investing in people is an important outcome. In some cases, building systems literacy may even be a more important and lasting intervention than systems change.

'It is ironic and perhaps difficult to communicate that by not committing to specific outcomes, we can create the conditions to actually deliver real outcomes'

4. Invest in people

'There is power in someone believing you can do it'

As a deeply transformational change process evolves, the emphasis will often naturally shift from project planning and outcomes, to genuine commitments and the people involved. It is people not methods that are at the heart of transformation. A focus on accountability for project

outcomes still remains important. However, focusing on people allows room for emergence and for new commitments to arise over time. This requires the design of processes that are more than a download or communication of technical information. Participants need to be able to identify and understand the root causes, see a role for themselves in creating change, and develop the behaviours, skills and mindset to deliver on those insights. This is about investing in each other – as team members, as stakeholders and as equal owners of the initiative. This focus on people and the deep seated and long-term personal commitments that arise over time have been a common theme of successful projects. Participants can become empowered, powerful and active long after the project itself has finished. In one example, it was participants from the wider community, 'unknown' in the 'usual circles' before the project began, that became the most effective leaders in the long run. They committed themselves in a much deeper way than the 'well known' participants representing organisations and in attendance because it was part of their job. For many, this was their first opportunity to 'step up' in a new way and to take action, believing until now that they had no influence. This requires resilience and the ability to keep learning, acting and adapting – both integral to systems transformation. Perhaps most simply, this insight is about the power of believing in someone and how that in itself can unlock a whole other level of agency for the individual.



5. Invite 'the others'

If you listen to the language of change, there is often reference to 'the other' - be it other people, groups, alliances, places, systems or organisations. It is implicit that the other are somehow not 'with us'.

'There is no them'

We can then easily imagine that they are competitors or adversaries. This habit of creating an us and them doesn't serve well in systems change. To create a process of genuine co-creation, rather than trying to sell a particular solution, actors from across the system need to be included. As the saying goes, you can't sail far on your own. There can be no 'other'. The first step in this process is to realise our own role in the system and how we can act from that position. In some senses, we are all other and we can tap into this otherness in ourselves.

'How far apart we can be, ideologically, but still insist on one another's humanity?'

It can be difficult to sit together with those that historically have been perceived adversaries or are so thoroughly marginalised they are presumed to have no voice. This is not about world peace. However, a systems approach requires the diversity of the system to be part of the solution. Many times, the solution lies with 'the others' or it is their

insights that allow for a better understanding of the system and identification of crucial leverage points. Change and growth often starts at the 'edge' of the system. We can begin with ourselves by acting through fear to really listen and create the space for collaboration. There will be disruptors and people who act with alternative agendas. This is part of reality and something that should be surfaced rather than avoided. It is possible to learn a lot from the motivation and interests of different participants. Spaces for collaboration are always potential spaces for contest. Use it as a creative driver. Likewise, there will be those that have been silenced so long they struggle to find a voice. They also need to be invited on to (and supported while on) the main stage. Lastly, think outside the system or sector of focus. At the boundaries there are those who may appear to be outsiders but who can bring new and unique perspectives which can unearth new understandings and breakthroughs.

6. Pay attention to power

There is a lot of work on the changing nature of leadership – from that of the heroic leader to that of the humble host. Here, we found that the more relevant factor was power and how it is used. Power can have different dynamics and intent. It can be power 'from within', 'with', 'over' and power 'to'. There is not necessarily a perfect approach but it was generally agreed that power 'over' is the least effective in the context of systems change. This can mean that in order to succeed there is a need to turn away from - or challenge - traditional power structures and hierarchies. Being sensitive to power dynamics, calling it out and making it visible is important. As the saying goes, privilege is invisible to those that have it. Powerlessness can be invisible too. For example, many of us have worked with senior decision makers who realise the need for 'another way' but are struggling through institutional barriers that many others can't see and don't appreciate. They were seen as (and sometimes blamed for) being powerful when they were in fact highly constrained. Many of us have facilitated dialogues where a perceived power imbalance can exist – for example between grassroots community members and senior government decision makers. Sometimes a simple technique such as creating participant name badges with first names only (no surname or organisational affiliation), can signal an intent to hold a space where everyone has an equal voice (and power).



7. Make the invisible visible

A reoccurring theme for us has been the impact of making the invisible visible. Whether this is highlighting power dynamics or identifying conflicting agendas in the room, it is important to communicate this transparently. In some cases, the greatest power comes from the power to be invisible or covert. This isn't about seeding conflict. It is about airing difference and using that difference to generate insights and make progress. In some cases, it may mean challenging or reframing accepted behaviours or protocols. The invisible is where the real gems can lie. This is about sensing the unsaid and unseen at the individual, organisational and system levels. It is also about recognising that there are many transformations already happening all around us. Making these visible can help to open up how the system is already shifting.

8. Vulnerability is bravery

In the stories we shared of our work, more than once a tipping point was when someone seen as powerful by others reveals personal vulnerabilities that totally change the tone of conversation. This is linked to trust. By being vulnerable, they have taken a huge risk. They could have been perceived as weak. Cultural narratives often portray power and vulnerability as mutually exclusive. We have seen that this is not the case. By being vulnerable, that person has become more powerful because they have owned their own story. And by being open, they have created the

'Vulnerability and power can co-exist. It isn't one or the other'

'Courage and bravery can come from unexpected sources if there is the space to allow it to emerge'

space for others to open up as well. Convenors have also had positive stories of vulnerability. Being transparent about the challenges of their work and the need for help has led to some amazing stories where help had come from unexpected places. The call for assistance opened up new networks that the convenor hadn't even known about. The feature here is that openness and vulnerability can be a precondition to deeper connections, trust and often greater personal power.

9. Relationships are the unit of change

In discussing impact and the right scale for change, it can be tempting to focus on scale in terms of geography or the size of the project. In reality, the best measure for the appropriate 'unit of change' is actually relationships. It is the interconnections between actors in the system that are the most important aspect of any transformational change effort. This is because systems are made up of interconnections. The degree of interconnection will depend on the focus but, from a systems perspective, the unit of change is relational not numerical.

'There is no good practice, just good people'

It is worth noting here that some of the biggest change agents in history have been awful people (or good people who do bad things). But they were still in relationships, even if they were that of leader and follower. Here, we are talking about facilitating collaborative systems change rather than the personalities of individual change agents. Relationships between people come before and last long after individual projects. Relationships forged in system change work can be the outcome that outlasts everything else.



'Some of the best innovations are innovations in relationships'

In systems change efforts, forging new relationships can require individuals to reimagine their own role. Sometimes the most valuable change can come when we see through false divisions based on our own perceptions of difference. This may require letting go of the status of 'expert' and instead fostering curiosity. Or it can mean experimenting with

new ways of working as a team. Sometimes, it can mean being ok with being the outlier, not the centre of attention. It can mean working on ourselves as much as any solution. It can mean working at a slower pace in order to allow stakeholders to strengthen their connections. And it can mean building skills and behaviours such as empathy, deep listening, sense making, and brokering connections. Taking the time to connect as humans is not often a priority in projects. But this connection is crucial. There are also the relationships that need to be built or rebuilt. These take time and deserve effort and attention. They are just as important as other 'technical' work or more tangible planning.

10. Hold a convenor mindset

This insight is specifically related to those that are acting as convenors. We are not attempting to say how a convenor needs to think, rather we are emphasising the importance of valuing and caring for the convenor's state of mind. Being an effective convenor of a significant systems transformation project requires a mix of audacity, advocacy and ambition (or sheer bloody mindedness) as well as humility, neutrality and specialist facilitation skills. Mastery as a facilitator requires making alignment visible, asking sharpening questions at the right time, managing points of transition, managing the space 'in between' points, and modelling transparency. Like other participants, convenors need to be willing to shift their own perspectives in the face of learning. They also need to be able to create a safe harbour for others and hold that space through moments of tension, all whilst keeping in sight their own values. Even if specialist facilitators are brought in to run sessions, the convenor is still the meta level facilitator of the overall project. Sometimes the orchestra-conductor metaphor is applied, but the convenor has nothing as simple as a sheet music to work from. This isn't to say convenors are worthier or more important compared with other participants. But they are necessary. And the job is often far from glamorous.

'Holding tensions is at the heart of what we do. It requires holding oneself in that space- holding on to who you are. But don't hold yourself from a position of moral high ground'

'Find astonishing people'

Convenors often have to grapple with uncertainty, ambiguity and the sense of never quite reaching the finish line. They know they are never truly first and others will be quick to remind them that 'someone else already tried this'. They can grapple with feelings of constant self-doubt. Self-care is critical but strategies differ. Some convenors meditate, others find gardening does the trick! Everyone has different ways to give themselves moments to restock their inner pantry. Perhaps most importantly, although the interior condition of the convenor is crucial, we also have to remember that it is never truly about 'us'. We have to get out of our own way in order to create the space for others to manoeuvre. This includes the backbone team supporting the project. Systems change work can be challenging for some team members. By understanding

'Don't underestimate the potential of a small committed team'

the capacity and agency of people in the team, it is possible to set clear roles and expectations while allowing team members to flourish and learn as they work.

11. Co-create 'with' not 'for'

'It's great to 'teach a man to fish'. But ask if he likes fishing first'

Co-creation is about bringing to life ideas in a joint effort that involves more than one participant. Put simply, it is work done "with" not "for" the end user. It is not about reaching consensus or getting lost in debates over language or caught up in definitions. A degree of common understanding is important, but only to the point of being fit for purpose.

Leave academic debates at the door. Collaboration is not something that happens without effort. Likewise, co-creation requires a degree of effort and support.

It is important to emphasise that emergence isn't the opposite of structure. Structure can be about signposting the phases of ideation, iterative solution development or prototyping. It doesn't have to be about dictating solutions. These supporting structures can also help create a shared understanding and infrastructure for long-term change. It is worth noting that user-driven co-creation may not yield the same results as that which an expert would provide. This should be expected and is in fact the whole point. To help participants adapt their behaviour and behave collaboratively, go for venues that lend themselves to creativity, get outside, bring in music and food that feed the soul and reduce anxieties, and provide frequent opportunities for 'fireside chats' or informal discussions.

12. Go for a big vision

It is not possible to promise particular outcomes in a systems change project. But this doesn't mean that there shouldn't be a big shared vision for the work. Visions have to be bold enough to attract others into the space. People want to get on board with big visions, not the medium ones. A vision statement needs to define the scope to some degree but also leave space for alternative outcomes arising from the project. In coming up with a shared vision, asking open questions can open up expectations. Support participants to reimagine their future by asking 'what if?'. Work with others who dream big. Set a big vision and have faith in the process and the team. Avoid over planning or micro-managing tasks. Of course, there are the 'black hats' that will seek to ridicule or dismiss the vision. That is inevitable. They can even be useful for refining the statement and making it stronger. Don't let them cut it down. Master the art of zooming in and then spinning back out to the big picture.

13. Naivety is a skill

To be called naive is usually intended as an insult. In our humble opinion, being called naive should be taken as a compliment. In fact, it would be great if we knew how to 'operationalise' naivety and (re)train people in it. It is a skill that too many lost or left behind in childhood. Naivety is about asking 'why, 'why not' and 'why can't we?'. Children know how to keep asking why to get to the heart of the matter and the root causes (just try explaining why the sky is blue!). It is the power of the open question. In naivety lies dangerous ideas, hope, impact, and the challenging of the status quo. It is a beautiful thing that should be valued and protected. Participants asking 'naive' questions should not be censured. They should be encouraged.

'Bucking the orthodoxy will be seen by others as a naive endeavour. That's fine with me. I see it as a badge of honour'

14. Prototyping is about focus

'Prototyping is never abstract. It is always concrete'.

An important ingredient of co-creation is experimentation. This is often enabled by the creation of low fidelity 'prototypes' that can be tested with stakeholders and the feedback incorporated into refinements. It may seem surprising, but testing and experimentation are not common skills or behaviours for many individuals and organisations. Too often,

prototyping doesn't happen because the fear of getting something wrong overrides the willingness to experiment. And it can take time to learn how to think big but also start small and focused on a particular assumption or hypothesis for testing. In fact, sometimes the solution that needs prototyping is so small or unglamorous that we don't want to see it and we add unnecessary complexity.

It can also take time to learn how to apply feedback, rescale and build out prototypes, and lastly to embed them in the system – be it in policy, practice, culture or a particular market. For example, one participant worked with a group who decided to make a feature film style documentary to change the way people thought about their challenge. After a lot of refinement, they realised that the best way to test their assumptions was to first develop a three-minute video and share it via YouTube to gather feedback. This became their first prototype. A single round of feedback isn't usually enough. Once a first prototype is developed, ongoing coaching is needed to ensure participants don't revert from prototyping back to project management and over-planning. It is a slippery slope! On this front, when it is time to incorporate a business model element, it is important to test the model just as one may test any other prototype – and retain flexibility to evolve as implementation reveals new insights. This can include elements such as who the 'customer' really is, channels for communicating the 'product', and whether or not there is even a 'market' for the solution. It can also include experimenting with styles of working and new networks and relationships – particularly when the barrier to transformation is getting people to change their habits about the way they work with others.



15. Success and failure are relative

In a systems initiative, there isn't a clear line between success and failure. In some examples, success has been when a project has been discontinued and something new emerges in the wider system. In another example, success was the continuation of an even bigger and better version of the same project. In another case, the project was deemed a failure for not delivering a specific outcome, even though it triggered a whole new conversation amongst stakeholders which continues to this day. One strategy is to have measures of success that include both the project as well as the wider system. Another is to measure the development of relationships and systems literacy. While system outcomes can take time to emerge and can be hard to document, there are ever improving methods for evaluation. And just as important as defining success is to document the learnings and adaptations that occurred along the way. In other words, celebrate and recognise the 'wins', but don't forget to document what did and didn't work. In the context of uncertainty, the ability to adapt can be more important than the ability to stick to a plan.

16. Stay standing

Unfortunately, systems change work brings with it many 'headwinds', 'allergic reactions', barriers and resistance. On the plus side, we can reassure ourselves that, if it didn't, it probably wouldn't be needed. At the top of this list of headwinds are the unspoken protocols and hierarchies that dictate behaviour from the individual through to the system levels. This is about who is 'allowed' to speak to whom, who 'owns' what, who is 'blamed' for what, and who is 'allied' with whom. Other common pain points included risk aversion, fair weather allies, complacency, cynicism, and an obsession with 'ticking the box'. Some days it can be frustrating and energy sapping and literally no progress seems to be made. It is on those days when it is enough to know you just need to keep standing. Hold the line. Being a patient but persistent presence in the system can unlock progress, even if it doesn't feel that way at the time.

'Some days it is just about slogging through the mud – keeping moving and strategically placing each foot'

17. It's ok to be strategic

'Catalysing large scale change and transformation is difficult. While the need may be obvious, it's not always appreciated or wanted'

Being involved in emergent and collaborative processes does not mean leaving strategy at the door. This is about being able to navigate a pathway whilst having one foot in the old system and one foot in the new system. We've included a few chestnuts that might seem obvious but have helped us make progress in different projects when missteps would have resulted in misadventure!

- Know when to stay under the radar and when to hook on to current and visible agendas
- Systems change can be like hand to hand combat - know when to step in, duck or step back
- Pick your battles - nobody changes the whole system by taking on a whole system



- There are choices to be made about where you can have impact - don't let others make them for you
- Work smartly with those 'fair weather' stakeholders and supporters
- Find alignment with key actors and help them reach their goals
- Hook into existing narratives (personal stories, local history, culture) at multiple levels of the system
- Be deliberate about where the work is located and who owns it
- Understand the appropriate level of risk for the context
- Use the best spokespeople for the audience - people learn and listen differently depending on the relative position of those they are learning from or listening to
- Always consider the context – where are problems coming from, where can solutions be led from

Those of us who have worked with large organisations know they are unique and unwieldy beasts at the best of times. Some strategic lessons related specifically to these large, traditional, hierarchical organisations are shared below:

'Never back a decision maker into a corner'

- It can pay to go external first then bring it internally - generating buy-in rather than asking permission
- Find other intrapreneurs to provide a support network
- Hold the vision but create the space for the organisation to eventually become the vehicle
- Remember that some organisations have the concentration span of a two-year-old so strike when you have their attention
- Deputies are your friend – the boss is too busy
- Never try to predict what a group of senior decision makers will do – you will always get it wrong
- Create a meaningful public focal point for champions within the organisation so they can connect their message to a wider agenda (for example a national debate or event or high visibility public issue).

18. Protect the heart

'Follow other people's stories, not just your own. Be guided by them'

In our professional lives and workplaces, talking about 'heart' is enough to make anyone cringe. But working with systems is about working with people. And as humans, we respond to things that trigger our emotions, our creativity and our curiosity. We seek connection and meaning. And we seek something 'worthwhile', whatever that may be. Don't apologise for paying attention to these factors. An important role is that of guardian

– of the space for dreaming big and being more than we thought we could be. Related to this is the importance of fun – broadly defined. If it isn't fun and engaging, participants, supporters and champions will quickly find reasons to be elsewhere. Fun is not a dirty word. At the heart of it all, we connect and find meaning through our stories. Make story telling a focus. Tell stories rather than give presentations. Provide support for participants so that they can tell a good and powerful story to a room full of strangers that will soon become friends. This could be a simple storytelling framework or assistance in creating a short film. Learn from these stories and use them as the basis for building out insights. And last of all, celebrate. Honour the time that people are giving to the process. Celebrate the occasions, commitments and connections in a world that never stops and the only certain thing is that it will be different again tomorrow.





