Systems practice is a humanism
System, know thyself

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#stsp26

In 1945, Sartre – here in his French army uniform (he was a meteorologist in the service) gave a lecture entitled 'Existentialism is a humanism'. I read it again last night, I was honestly less impressed than when I wrote this. Anyway

He was responding to a charge: existentialism was vague, abstract, paralysing. It avoided action. Or worse – a technocratic trick. Subjectivist, in a problematic way.

Systems practice gets much the same accusation.

So let me be clear what I mean.

Systems practice is not primarily about tools or models.

It is about responsibility.

Sartre, 1945
'Existentialism is a humanism'
Accusations:
- vague
- abstract
- paralysing

Response:
- responsibility

Parallel:
Existence precedes essence
Practice precedes the model

Sartre's assertion was simple:
existence precedes essence.

The systems version is:
practice precedes the model.

We become what we do.

(Short pause)

You don't discover purpose in the strategy. You infer it from behaviour.

You don't change anything by 'observing the system'. You change it by changing interaction.

And I'll say one other thing here, because it matters later. I don't care very much whether people badge themselves as systems, cybernetics, or complexity. It's are one extended family, with plenty of arguments in it. The useful distinctions are not the broad marketing vehicles. The useful distinctions are about how we are seeing, where we are standing, and whether our practice can learn.

Critical

Self-reflective

Second order

Systems exist / systems don't exist

Category error.

A system is:

- a boundary
- a framing
- a set of distinctions

No given systems essence.

Our choices shape:

- what counts
- who is seen
- what can be learned

When I say 'system', hear 'a pattern we are enacting and a boundary we have drawn'

RedQuadrant

'Systems exist' or 'systems don't exist' – that's a category error.

A system is not a thing, it is a way of drawing a boundary around activity. A framing. A set of distinctions.

Our choices shape:
what counts,
who is seen,
what can be learned.

There are things that function in the world – confusingly, we call them systems too.

So yes, I am still going to use the word 'system', because English has to get on with the job. But every time I say it, hear this instead: a pattern we are enacting, and a boundary we have drawn.

Once you see that, there's no escape route. No 'the system did it'. There are only patterns we are participating in.

There is no given system essence waiting to be discovered. Only what we enact. Sartre would recognise that immediately.

A system that cannot sense itself will hurt people

'If you have requested a read receipt, please ignore the message informing you that this has been deleted.'

- eleven calls
- social care, housing
- Portal, generic email
- 'urgent repairs only'
- omnichannel omnishambles

Bad faith begins where consequence is disconnected

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Let me make this real.

A few years ago I was trying to help my elderly dad who was losing his memory and no longer coping well.

I rang the council because I wanted to talk to someone sensible and well-informed about what might actually help.

Eleven calls later, I had been through social care, children and families, housing solutions, a housing association that could not call out, a generic email address, a portal that didn't work, and finally this message: 'If you have requested a read receipt, please ignore the message informing you that this has been deleted.'

At one point I was told the fastest route was online. At another, that the team could do a three-way call but could not set one up. At another, that they were not an outgoing call centre – thought they left me lots of messages. At another, that they were only taking urgent repairs. Rather than advice, I was consistently direct to 'applications' and 'assessments'.

I was told, sotto voce, that my dad had to be homeless to receive sheltered house.

It was an omnichannel omnishambles.

Now – no one in that story was trying to be cruel.

Most people were trying to help.

Which is exactly why the story matters

(Short pause)

What we changed in a comparable situation

What changed (in practice)

- followed real journeys end to end
- showed the system a picture of itself
- weekly case learning (not reports)
- ownership across boundaries
- engagement of management
- changed small things, repeatedly – process and practice

Results:

- better listening, better response
- failure demand fell
- fewer escalations
- people got help earlier

Responsibility begins in practice. Not system redesign, not heroes. Capacity to learn and adapt.

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So what did we do in a comparable situation in public services?

Nothing heroic.

We followed real journeys end to end.

Showed the system a picture of itself.

Held weekly case learning – not reports.

Set up ownership across boundaries.

Engaged management – gave them enough visibility for them to feel secure.

Changed small things. Repeatedly.

What happened?

Better listening.
Better response.

Failure demand fell.
Fewer escalations.
People got help earlier.

This is the Sartre move again: responsibility begins in what we do, not what we say.

We didn't 'fix the system'.

We built the capacity to learn.

(Beat)

Targets met at each step. Failure across the whole.

Sees:

- contacts
- queues
- transactions
- targets

Does not see:

- fear
- effort
- deterioration
- meaning

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Because most failures are not a lack of effort.

They are systems that cannot see.

Every single person in that sequence could make sense of what they were doing.

When we say 'the system failed', what we usually mean is that we've organised activity so that consequences are not visible to the people producing them.

Public service failure is often epistemic before it's operational.

We have organised ourselves so that learning cannot happen. Because the system cannot even sense itself.
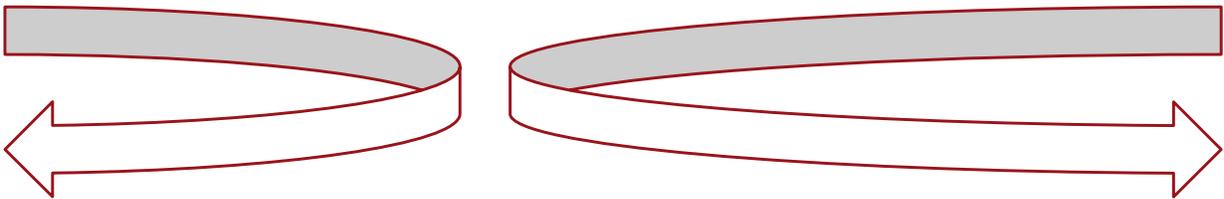
Broken and separated learning loops

Citizen results (outcomes, experience)	Citizen intent (purpose, needs, demand)	Service response (process, capacity, judgement)	Service results (outcomes, experience)

Learning loops: notice - interpret - adapt

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So.

Learning loops.

Notice.
Interpret.
Adapt.

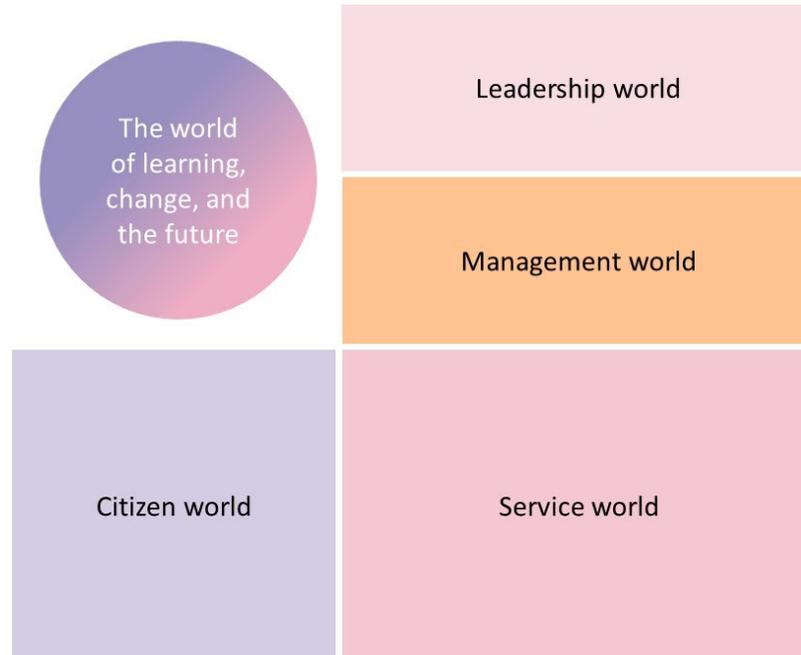Citizen intent.
Service response.
Results.

The citizen learning loop is connected. People learn to trust, or not to trust. To reshape themselves to fit the services that might help.

Not so the service side.

Most failures are broken connections between these.

Most failures are not a lack of effort or even care

The world of learning, change, and the future

Leadership world

Management world

Citizen world

Service world

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One way I make sense of this is through the five worlds model.

Citizen world.
Service world.
Management world.
Leadership world.
And the world of learning and change.

The failure pattern is simple. Each world talks mainly to itself. Each world measures what makes sense in its own language. And the boundaries between them harden.

So citizen world gets translated – transduced – into contact, in the limited vocabulary of the service.
Service world gets transduced into process.
Management world gets translated into performance.
Leadership world gets translated into policy and story.

And the world of learning and change is either absent, or merely ceremonial – locked in to the framings of the other worlds.
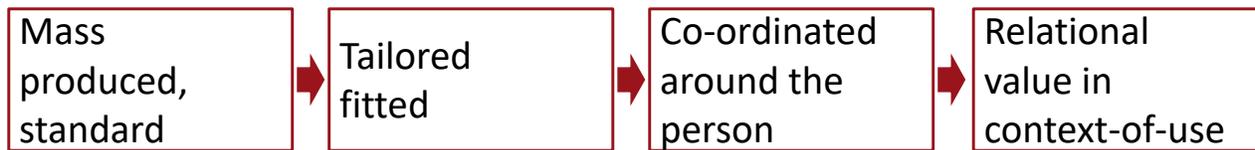
That is what I mean when I say the system can't sense itself. Not that some giant machine lacks consciousness. That we have organised human activity so the worlds do not inform one another properly.

The result is predictable. Different worlds, predictable distortions, repeated misunderstandings. Loss of partnership. Bad faith.

And because the boundary choices are weighted with implications, this is also a power issue. Who gets to define what'ss real? Who gets heard? Who gets translated out of existence?

Relational public services

- Relational service means the organisation becomes subject to value definition in the citizen's world.

- That requires a continuous process of learning and improvement.
- Humans as agents, not units.

| Mass produced, standard | → | Tailored fitted | → | Co-ordinated around the person | → | Relational value in context-of-use |

Value is defined in the citizen's context-of-use (Boxer)

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This takes us to relational public service.

The move here is not cosmetic, to 'be a bit more empathetic'. It's much harder than that.

This is the shift: the organisation becomes subject to value definition in the citizen's world.

Value is defined in context-of-use.

Humans as agents, not units.

Not 'we deliver value' as a public service.

We participate in it.

(Short pause)

Once you see that, the citizen/service divide starts to look less like a fact and more like a boundary we drew. And once you see it as a boundary we drew, you can start to redraw it.

This is why the block isn't method. It's identity. Freedom is hard on management.

And all of this includes us, as systems practitioners – come to my workshop this afternoon for more on that – I promise discomfort!

We know how to do this – at S1 and a bit of S2

- The constraint isn't method. It is:
- management capability
- management identity
- psychology of change
- Centre and place have validly different perspectives. Challenge:
- Co-ordinating capacity
- Governance ceiling (horizontal accountability)
- Organisational defences

- Use close-to real-time live data
- Value the transactional – you need 'wedge and circle' services
- Address strategy ceiling and governing mentality – by making the case, proving it, doing it
- Reconceptualise the divide
- Understand power and ego
- Don't split / polarise!
- Freedom is hard on management.

These are conditions people are working inside, not character flaws or stupidity.

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Now. We know how to do this. It's hard, but not mysterious.

Follow demand. Work across boundaries. Build learning loops. Use judgement.

The constraint isn't method. It shows up in: management capability, management identity, psychology of change.

But let me be precise. This is not about blaming managers. These are conditions people are working inside. The constraint shows up most strongly in management roles, because of the conditions those roles are placed in.

Most managers are asked to be accountable without real visibility, to perform certainty under pressure, and to maintain control across boundaries they don't actually control.

And then you ask them

To give up the idea that control comes from distance and legibility.

To stop performative certainty.

To become accountable for patterns they can't fully see – horizontal accountability to replace the current vertical accountability avoidance system.

That isn't a technical shift. It's an identity shift. And very threatening

–
And most change approaches skate straight past that – and, worse, blame managers, leaders, and politicians for responding to the context of their worlds and the information and pressures they receive.

So what you get is not bad people. You get very predictable behaviour from the role. And just to be clear – I do this too. As systems practitioners we're fallible too – put me under pressure, I will reach for control and certainty like anyone else.

So this is not 'them'. This is us.

Mauvaise foi

Bad faith – I am just doing my job

Sartre had a phrase for this.

Bad faith. In organisations it often sounds like professionalism.

Not lying. Not hypocrisy.

But hiding inside the role.

'I'm just doing my job.'
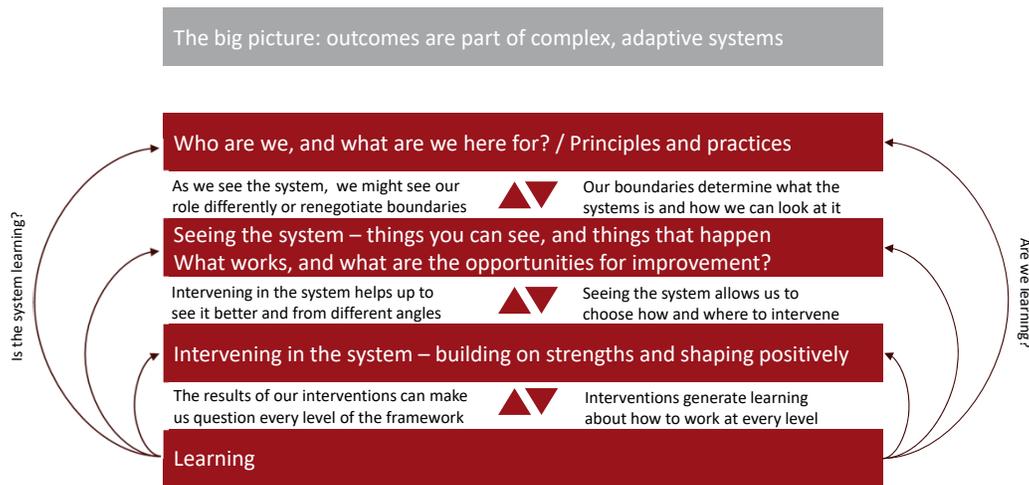'That's policy.'
'There's nothing we can do.'

Now, constraints are real.

But so is participation.

And when we hide behind role, process, or method, we are not being rigorous.

We are avoiding responsibility.

System, know thyself

The big picture: outcomes are part of complex, adaptive systems

Who are we, and what are we here for? / Principles and practices

As we see the system, we might see our role differently or renegotiate boundaries

Our boundaries determine what the systems is and how we can look at it

Seeing the system – things you can see, and things that happen
What works, and what are the opportunities for improvement?

Intervening in the system helps up to see it better and from different angles

Seeing the system allows us to choose how and where to intervene

Intervening in the system – building on strengths and shaping positively

The results of our interventions can make us question every level of the framework

Interventions generate learning about how to work at every level

Learning

Is the system learning?

Are we learning?

Partial, situated, interested. Systems change… changes you. No external saviour.

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There is an obvious problem with my title: 'System, know thyself.'

Well, no. Not completely.

A system cannot know itself in any final, total, neutral sense. Not if by 'system' we mean a framing of activity that includes the people doing the framing.

Self-description is always partial. It always lags. Always interested. Always constrained. Always with an essential lack.

And it's never done by 'the system'. It's done by people.

So the real injunction isn't 'system, know thyself' in any heroic, total sense.

It's to become aware of the limits of your self-knowledge, and act anyway.

Make boundaries explicit and revisable. Surface who is excluded and why. Test what you think in reality, not in diagrams. Build loops that let people notice, interpret, and adapt.

Help people to shift their identities, with new narratives, over time.

Help them then to positively manage their relationships with the people and demands who kept them in the old identity.
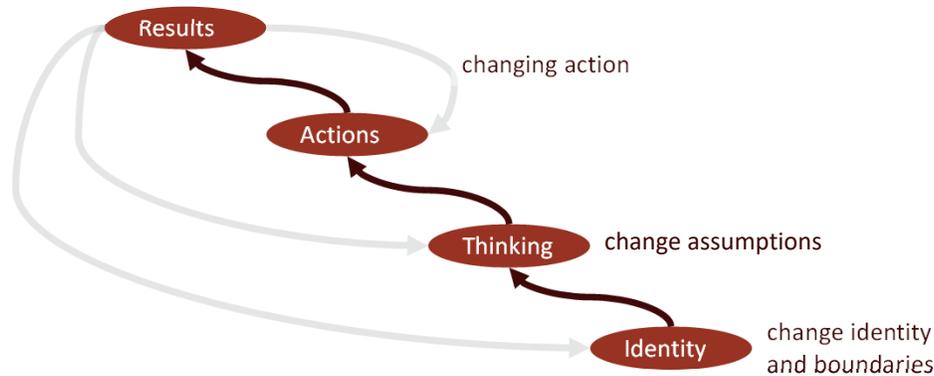
Including our own view and identity – we are inside this, not outside describing it.

All of this is where real disciplined humility comes from.

Triple loop learning

Results

changing action

Actions

Thinking — change assumptions

Identity — change identity *and boundaries*

We become what we do.

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If systems practice is a humanism, its craft is building learning loops.

Notice. Interpret. Adapt.

Change action. Change assumptions. Change identity and boundaries.

That is why systems change changes you.

The point is not to stand outside reality with a better framework.

The point is to become capable of changing the way you're participating.

And that's also why I have no patience for claiming to be action learning if your practice hasn't changed in 30 years or for context-free talk of 'objective complexity'.

Ordered and complex are not fossils waiting to be discovered. They depend on framing, intent, capability, distance, time, and consequence. Standing nowhere is still a stance, just an unearned one.

And if you think triple loop learning is 'outdated 1970s psychology', you've missed the point.

It's not a model. It's a description of what happens when practice actually learns.

Watch any team that actually improves over time.

First they change actions. When I joined Shepherd's Bush Advice Centre in '97 as admin person, security guard, scheduler etc we had people waiting up to four hours to see a harried 'reception duty' adviser for ten minutes to then be put into a horrendous appointment system to see the right kind of adviser. As my first job, I optimised the fuck out of the queuing and appointments system.

Then people realise the assumptions behind those actions are wrong. What we did was we widened the opening hours, so there was suddenly no waiting! And people could speak directly to the expert they needed, first time.

Then, if they keep going, they realise they are not even asking the right questions, and they redraw the boundary of the work. We started benefits take-up and poverty reduction work.

Call that what you like. I don't care about the label.

But if you don't recognise those shifts, you are not watching closely.

And if your work never changes its assumptions or boundaries, it isn't perfect. It's stuck.

This is the systems version of Sartre's freedom. You cannot step outside action. You can only become more or less aware of it.

And this includes how we show up. Not just what the system does, but what we do, in it. We become what we do.

Human systems need variety **and** belonging

Segment – build variety

Group based on perspective, skills, interests, background to develop diverse specialised capabilities.

Blend – build belonging

Break bread. Share knowledge, learning and experiences. Understand commonalities and overlaps.

Empower – build agency

Each person uses their unique skills and perspectives and develop their unique talents and abilities.

Harmonise – build stability

Work towards a common goal, unifying and aligning efforts around a shared mission and purpose.

Balance avoids turf wars, groupthink, heroic exhaustion, or hollow calm

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Human systems need these four things at once.

If we overdo one aspect we get turf wars, mush, fragmentation, groupthink.

So one of the practical disciplines here is to build a better balance:
segment to build variety,
blend to build belonging,
empower to build agency,
harmonise to build stability.

This matters because for systems practice to be about sensing, it must be about creating conditions in which people can actually act, think, disagree, and learn together without flying apart or freezing solid.

If you want a phrase for it: robust human systems is what Barry Oshry called it.

Not neat, or frictionless. But capable of adaptation without disintegration. Capable of meeting the new or disconfirming facts and engaging rather than being defensive.

What to do on Monday – action before alibi

- start where you have agency
- strengthen sensors
- cross a boundary
- make one thing discussable

- run a tiny experiment
- build cadence
- protect honesty

Rigour is what survives contact with reality. Participation is harder to escape than blame.

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So, what can you do with this on Monday morning?

Strengthen sensors. Listen to real demand. Real journeys. Real friction.

Cross a boundary. Spend time in a different world and bring back one true story.

Make one thing discussable – something that people are circling but not naming.

Run a tiny experiment. Predict. Try. Notice. Adapt.

Build cadence. Retrospectives. Action learning. Weekly case review. Whatever fits the work. But make it real and recurring.

Protect honesty. Not niceness. Honesty. Because rigour isn't a vibe. Rigour is what survives contact with reality.

And participation is harder to escape than blame.

We are all citizens: humanism, in practice

If systems practice is a humanism, it starts with how we meet each other:
human to human, not role to role.

- The 'citizen/service divide' is a boundary we drew, not a fact we found.

- Deficit is a consequence of that boundary: 'we act, they receive'.

- Reframe: citizen as person with purpose, moving through a life.

- Public service is a boundary capability: it participates in value, it does not 'deliver' value.

- Three-track purpose: process demand, meet needs, enable purpose.

- Build the loop. Cross the boundary. Keep your promises.

Would you be content to live inside the system you are building?

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If systems practice is a humanism,
it starts with how we meet each other.

Human to human,
not role to role.

The citizen/service divide is a boundary we drew.

Not a fact we found.

Deficit is a consequence of that boundary.

The reframe is to see a person with purpose, moving through a life.

Public service is a boundary capability.

It participates in value. It does not deliver it.

Sartre's claim was simple: you're responsible for your life, for what you become.

The systems version is just as simple, and just as uncomfortable: we are responsible for the patterns we enact.

There's no neutral system or role. Only patterns we are participating in.

And participation is unavoidable.

So the question is: Would you be content to live inside the patterns you are helping to create?

Always happy to talk

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Systems community of inquiry: www.syscoi.com

Blog: chosen-path.org / antlerboy.medium.com

systems | cybernetics | complexity

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local government reform redquadrant.com/lgrhub

recent posts on relational public services

chosen-path.org/2026/03/21/collection-of-posts-on-relational-public-services

learn with me in the RedQuadrant tool shed

My recommended reading list link.redquadrant.com/systemscomplexitycyberneticsreading

All my links at antlerboy.com

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This is the work I do. I love the theory but the practice is what satisfies, and makes a difference. If I can help make a shift from bad faith to humanism, especially one that is actually sustainable, please talk to me.

In 1945, Sartre was marking a shift from the hard, clear-cut responsibility and bad faith of collusion with the Nazis and the bravery of resistance to attempting to build a world in which Nazism would not rise again. We face both those challenges now.

Our work could play a small but valuable role. Thank you.