

The Systems Lens: Resources for Seeing What's Really Stuck

The Systems lens asks one question: ***What is the organization trying to preserve?*** Every organization is perfectly designed to get the results it is getting, and when a change stalls, the system is often protecting something that matters to it. The resources below will help you learn to see those patterns, name them, and find the places where a small move makes a real difference.

***Stuck looks like:** the plan is sound, the people are capable, and the change keeps drifting back to the old way; the same problem gets "solved" every quarter; everyone agrees on the change, and nothing about how work actually gets done has moved. → Reach for [MOVE](#).*

Recommended Resources

Grouped into six sets of three. Looking for free options? The last two sets are free articles and videos, and several resources in the earlier sets are free too (look for "Free" under the title). If you only read one thing, start with the Leverage Points essay: it is free, short, and will change how you look at your next status meeting.

Category	Resource	Link	Description
Start Here: The Foundations	Thinking in Systems: A Primer <i>Donella Meadows · Book · 2008</i>	Chelsea Green Publishing	The most readable introduction to how systems actually behave: stocks, flows, feedback loops, and why the same structure keeps producing the same results no matter who is in charge. Read the chapter on "system traps" first. Policy resistance, drift to low performance, and shifting the burden will look very familiar to anyone whose change keeps snapping back to the old way.
	The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization <i>Peter Senge · Book · Revised 2006</i>	Penguin Random House	The book that brought systems thinking into organizations. Senge names the patterns (like "fixes that fail") where today's solution quietly becomes tomorrow's problem, and shows how mental models keep people defending the status quo. Useful when the team keeps solving the same problem over and over.
	Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System <i>Donella Meadows · Essay · 1999 · Free</i>	Donella Meadows Project	A short, free essay ranking twelve places to intervene in a system, from weakest to strongest. The punchline: tweaking numbers (budgets, targets, headcount) is where most effort goes and where the least change happens. Goals, rules, and mindsets move far more. A great read before you add another step to the plan.
Seeing the Organization as a System	Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life <i>Barry Oshry · Book · 2nd ed. 2007</i>	Amazon	Oshry maps the predictable conditions people fall into as Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and Customers. The chapter on Middles is required reading for project and change managers: it explains why you feel torn between leadership and the front line, and why that tension is a feature of your position, not a personal failing.

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	Organizational Culture and Leadership <i>Edgar Schein & Peter Schein · Book · 5th ed. 2017</i>	Wiley	Schein's three levels of culture (visible artifacts, stated values, and the unspoken assumptions underneath) give you a way to see why the org says yes to a change and then acts like it never happened. The deepest level is usually what the organization is trying to preserve.
	A Leader's Framework for Decision Making <i>David Snowden & Mary Boone · HBR Article · 2007</i>	Harvard Business Review	Introduces the Cynefin framework, which sorts situations into simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic. Most change work is complex, where cause and effect only make sense looking backward. This is the clearest explanation of why applying more process to a complex problem does not fix it.
What the System Is Protecting	Immunity to Change <i>Robert Kegan & Lisa Laskow Lahey · Book · 2009</i>	Harvard Business Impact	Explains how people and organizations hold hidden "competing commitments" that quietly block the change they say they want. Their four-column map is one of the most practical tools available for answering the Systems lens question directly. Short on time? Start with their 2001 HBR article, "The Real Reason People Won't Change."
	Teaching Smart People How to Learn <i>Chris Argyris · HBR Article · 1991</i>	Harvard Business Review	A classic on defensive reasoning: why capable, successful professionals often get worse at learning when things go wrong, and how organizations reward everyone for protecting themselves. Introduces single-loop vs. double-loop learning, the difference between fixing the problem and questioning the thinking that created it.
	The Work of Leadership <i>Ronald Heifetz & Donald Laurie · HBR Article · 1997</i>	Harvard Business Review	Draws the line between technical problems (an expert can solve them) and adaptive challenges (the people with the problem have to change how they work and what they value). Offers practical moves like "getting on the balcony" to see the patterns, and regulating distress so people can do the hard work without shutting down.
Tools & Knowledge Hubs	The Systems Thinker Archive <i>Free Online Library</i>	thesystemsthinker.com	A free archive of the long-running practitioner newsletter on systems thinking in organizations. Start with the systems archetypes collection, including Daniel Kim's "Systems Archetype Basics," which turns common organizational stories into simple loop diagrams you can sketch with your team.

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	The Water of Systems Change <i>John Kania, Mark Kramer & Peter Senge · Report · 2018 · Free</i>	FSG	Names six conditions that hold a system in place across three levels: structural (policies, practices, resources), relational (relationships, power), and transformative (mental models). Written for the social sector, but the model translates directly to any organization. Handy as a checklist when mapping what is keeping a change stuck.
	Systems Thinking Resources <i>Donella Meadows Project · Resource Hub · Free</i>	Donella Meadows Project	A curated collection of systems thinking books, tools, courses, and organizations from the nonprofit that stewards Donella Meadows' work. A good next stop once you have read the primer and want to go deeper on a specific method.
Free Reads: Articles & Essays	Dancing with Systems <i>Donella Meadows · Essay · Free</i>	Donella Meadows Project	Meadows' companion to "Leverage Points," and the more practical of the two. A short list of habits for working inside systems you cannot control, like "get the beat of the system" before you try to change it, and "listen to the wisdom of the system." Reads like a field guide for change managers.
	The Dawn of System Leadership <i>Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton & John Kania · SSIR Article · 2015 · Free PDF</i>	Stanford Social Innovation Review	Names three capabilities system leaders build: seeing the larger system, fostering reflection and generative conversation, and shifting from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future. Useful language for the people in the middle who have to lead a change without the authority to mandate it.
	Total System Power <i>Barry Oshry · Article · Free</i>	Power + Systems	A short, free entry point to Oshry's thinking if you are not ready for the full book. Explains how people in every part of an organization fall into predictable patterns based on their position, and what becomes possible when they see the whole system instead of just their piece of it.
Watch: Videos	Beyond Continual Improvement <i>Russell Ackoff · Recorded Talk · YouTube · Free</i>	YouTube	A classic talk from one of the founders of systems thinking in management. Ackoff argues that improving the parts of a system one at a time does not improve the whole, and warns against "doing the wrong thing righter." Funny, blunt, and a perfect companion to the idea that more process will not fix a stuck change.
	How to Organize a Children's Party <i>Dave Snowden · Short Video · YouTube · Free</i>	YouTube	The creator of Cynefin uses a kids' birthday party to show the difference between managing a complex system and managing a project plan. You cannot schedule the fun; you set boundaries, watch what emerges, and nudge. Great to share with a sponsor who keeps asking for a tighter plan.

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	Adaptive vs. Technical <i>Ronald Heifetz · Short Video · YouTube · Free</i>	YouTube	Heifetz explains, in plain terms, the difference between problems experts can solve and challenges that require people to change their own habits and priorities. A free way into the ideas behind "The Work of Leadership," and a quick way to help a team see why their change is stuck.

Need a Hand?

Some systems are hard to see from the inside. If you want another set of eyes on what your organization is protecting, reach out at sarah@updikeycoaching.com or book time here: [Let's Talk](#). Full framework: [The MOVE Framework](#).