Joining the Dots: How Do We Help Our People Lead Complex Systems?

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Overview

This report explores how to develop public service leaders capable of leading complex systems and fostering cross-agency collaboration. Through a literature review and interviews with senior leaders across sectors, the study identifies key attributes and environmental factors that enable effective system leadership. It highlights the importance of relational skills, a mindset oriented toward collective impact and an environment set-up to incentivize joined-up delivery of results for communities. The report offers practical recommendations for embedding system leadership into development programmes, aligning incentives, and fostering innovation. The insights aim to complement existing New Zealand public service leadership development activity and strengthen the pipeline of agile, collaborative leaders equipped to deliver public value in an increasingly complex environment.

Introduction

In an age where public discourse appears increasingly polarised and binary, the challenge of tackling deep-seated community problems seems, on the face of it, harder than ever. Anecdotally, most public servants recognize that their agency can't solve multi-faceted issues such as family harm, sustainable stable housing and mental ill health, on its own. Complex and enduring problems (so-called 'wicked' problems') involve multiple interacting systems, can be volatile and in a state of flux, can create uncertainty and ambiguity for participants, making the consequences of interventions hard to predict. As a result, wicked problems rarely, if ever, have a single agency holding exclusive control over the outcomes, irrespective of how that agency might be structured or set-up. As a result, "command and control cannot be the only tool in the leader's repertoire" (Herrington & Colving, 2015).

Our communities need their public servants to work effectively and efficiently together to avoid duplication and creating confusion for the public. Agencies too, understand the need to better engage with both their communities and their workforces to problem solve. And to make it more likely that any solutions are 'owned' by the people who are most affected. To set our agencies and teams up well to execute this way of working, we need to develop leaders who can appreciate the complexity of community challenges but strive for solutions that are understandable and accessible in a context of increasing demand and pressure on resources.

Working collaboratively is generally considered in the literature as essential to address wicked problems and, "is associated with smoother decision making, service delivery and ultimately, with the creation of public value" (Cheng & Sandfort, 2023, p. 3). Arguably, the risk of siloed working is increased by the structure of the public service in New Zealand, in which we have multiple individual agencies funded by separate

appropriations, but with overlapping functions and accountabilities. Furthermore, collaboration in public services, and not just in the New Zealand public service, is no easy feat: “Cross-sector collaboration is hardly an easy answer to complex public problems. Indeed, it is typically frustrating for participants - although sometimes exhilarating as well.” (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2015, p. 647).

According to the literature (Green, 2025; Gidlow et al., 2024), one of the factors that makes collaboration difficult is retaining buy-in to the purpose of collaboration amongst multiple stakeholders with diverse agendas, different mental models of what collaboration means, and strong egos. Without a shared purpose, there’s more risk that collaboration, rather than being an essential mode to deliver improved service for communities, becomes the end goal. So not only do we need to understand how we develop leaders who can effectively collaborate across organisational boundaries, ideological differences and cultural worldviews, we need to develop leaders who stay focused on delivering change.

Rationale for my Fellowship report

Leading across the ‘system’ but in the service of results is all the more important given the inter-dependencies across the Government’s public service targets, and the changing face of the public service. ‘Systems leadership’, according to one author, describes “collective action towards a common goal: harnessing the energy of many and spanning boundaries across policy sectors or outside government”. (Cairney & Toomey, 2025, Plain Language Summary, para. 1).

However, the literature, or at least one branch within it, suggests a lack of definitional clarity for system leadership; what it is, how it’s best applied and how, practically, leaders should go about doing ‘it’, and how their employers could help them. Based on

my review of the literature on system leadership, I'd agree that, although there is lots of 'why' and a reasonable amount of 'what' in the literature around system leadership, there's little on the practical 'how' based on leadership insights.

Motivated by my experience over several years as a Regional Public Service Commissioner, I became increasingly interested in how system leadership differs in practice from traditional forms of top-down leadership that rely more on role-based power and authority. And the extent to which our structures were better equipped to deal with standard operating procedures than the unpredictable complexity usually found in a system leadership context.

In particular, what were the views of our own senior leaders and identified system leads of the sort of leadership skills and capabilities we understand to be key to system leadership? How ready to lead at a system level did our leaders feel? What worked well in practice? Through conversations with a variety of leaders across sectors, I hoped to be able to answer these questions and provide insight into what more is required of the public service to better develop our leaders to collaborate for their communities.

I was also interested in whether Māori leadership practices had value in deepening an understanding system leadership. As outlined in a recent literature review of Māori leadership prepared for a Workforce Development Council (Scarlatti, 2024), principles include a commitment to collective wellbeing over individual needs or objectives, and the emphasis on relationships, both of which are highly aligned with system leadership.

How is the New Zealand public service supporting system leadership?

With regards the scope of this question and my framing of it in this report, it's important to acknowledge that there a number of elements relevant to the question that I have deliberately not fully considered. These include the rationale for and impact of changes to the Public Service Act 2020; how agencies interact with each other and central agencies to implement cross-agency initiatives; and various structural changes within Government agencies. Rather, I have focused on the elements I consider to be most directly related to system leadership behaviour and developing system leaders. I've outlined my framing of this question briefly below in terms of structure, leadership expectations and leadership development offerings.

Structure

Structurally, at a national level, our public service has six identified system leads appointed under the Public Service Act 2020. System leads are mandated to lead across the Public Service in relation to a particular area or function. They do this by creating a common vision for the future, setting standards and frameworks for agencies to operate within, coordinating and supporting best practice and looking for opportunities to work better together.

At a regional level, the Regional Public Service Commissioner (RPSC) in New Zealand play a key leadership role in coordinating and integrating public services across regions to better meet local needs. Like national system leads, RPSCs are appointed by the Public Service Commissioner. Their value lies in strengthening regional leadership, improving service delivery through local insights, and driving system-wide initiatives.

Expectations

One of the tools available to public servants through Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission is the Leadership Success Profile (LSP), which defines effective leadership

across the public sector and provides a common framework for recruitment, development, and performance. The LSP is organized around five core leadership dimensions, one of which is 'Stewardship' and is explicitly tied to system leadership. Likewise, the public service Leadership Strategy for New Zealand - Te Rautaki Arahi i te Ratonga Tūmatanui o Aotearoa, notes that strong system leadership will be one of the most important enablers to achieve the aspirations for the Public Service described in the Public Service Act 2020.

The criticality of system leadership in the public service is further reinforced in the expectations of Chief Executives as set out in the respective position descriptions. The position descriptions make it clear that, as well as their accountabilities within their own agency, the Chief Executive is "responsible for providing strategic leadership that contributes to an effective and cohesive Public Service; working together to model leadership behaviours; and assisting the other members to fulfil their responsibilities." (Public Service Commission, 2024, Accountabilities section, para. 2)

Development

Alongside changes in the Public Service Act to promote System Leadership, the current Coalition Government identify system leadership as a key leadership trait for executives delivering outcomes in a cross-agency capacity. Naturally, Central Agencies have a big part to play here given their role in the system, but legislative changes are also highlighting system leadership as a requirement within most other agencies. For example, the Ministry for the Environment are currently leading on the Resource Management Act reforms, a significant piece of work for this government. Demonstrating and deploying strong system leadership capability is considered critical in ensuring success in these and other similar reforms.

In recognition of the need to build leadership capability that supports cross-agency collaboration, the Leadership Development Centre (LDC) has a central role in developing leaders across the New Zealand Public Service. As part of Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission, the LDC plays an important role delivering development to support the enactment of system leadership. It connects individuals and member agencies with common development programmes and resources to strengthen leadership capability.

As a result, the Executive Talent Management cohort, the Executive Leadership Program run by LDC, and other leadership courses, focus on system leadership as an important opportunity for developing senior leaders at different stages of leadership maturity. The programmes consider both the leadership attributes and skills required of the leader in relation to the context in which they need to operate, and balance the offering around knowledge, management discipline and leadership introspection accordingly.

The approach of the Executive Talent Management initiative in particular includes a greater emphasis on whether the individual leader's skills match the demands of senior leaders and Chief Executives roles. Key to this initiative is a focus on identifying high-potential leaders who can receive targeted development support to ensure the public service has a strong pipeline of future system leaders. Support includes executive coaching and mentoring where rising system leaders are paired with experienced mentors from different sectors.

Methodology

To ground this study in evidence, I began with a targeted literature review focused on actionable insights into system leadership — what works, why, and how. Few sources offered practical guidance, reinforcing the need to hear directly from New Zealand leaders.

Harvard Business School: Leading Change and Organisational Renewal

To give me a broader grasp of leadership theory and its practical application in real-world organisations, as part of my Fellowship, I was fortunate enough to attend the 'Leading Change and Organisational Renewal' week-long residential course at the Harvard Business School from 16-21 March 2025. The course aims to equip leaders from around the world to drive transformation through a focus on overcoming barriers to change and aligning strategy, structure, culture, and leadership to foster renewal. One of the most relevant take-aways for me was the point that organisations need to become 'ambidextrous' in order to simultaneously execute short-term performance and foster long-term innovation. Although this point was made with commercial business development in mind, it has implications for the public service, and I expand on this aspect in the discussion.

Interviews

I conducted in-depth interviews with 53 senior leaders mainly from the public sector, including Chief Executives with system leadership experience (see Appendix A for a list of interviewees). A 'snowball' sampling approach was adopted with participants initially selected based on their system leadership roles and additional referrals emerging organically throughout the process.

Conversations explored what enables effective system leadership in the context of the Public Service Leadership Strategy's call to "accelerate the growth of system leadership capability." Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) covered key themes from the literature: personal attributes, leadership mindset, enabling environments, and developmental potential. Each interview began with a scenario-based prompt grounded in 'VUCA' conditions—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.

Midway through fieldwork, I came across a 2024 qualitative review of 84 system leadership studies that provided a useful organizing framework for understanding key themes related to effective system leadership (Cairney & Toomey, 2024). I decided to adapt this framework as a key interpretive lens to assist with the analysis and coding of my own interviews.

I used all but one of the five features of system leadership specified by Cairney & Toomey (2024) to frame my findings. In an operational rather than policy context, and because of the amount of overlap between the two, there was little value in including both 'Foster a System Leadership Mindset' and 'A Sophisticated Understanding of Wicked Problems and Complexity'. I therefore removed the latter from the discussion of the interview findings. The critical features of effective system leadership specified by Cairney & Toomey (2024) that proved most relevant to my research included the following:

1. Foster a systems leadership mindset

- Reject heroic top-down leadership
- Embrace collaboration to produce and deliver a collective vision
- Focus on the big picture and be comfortable with systemic uncertainty and ambiguity
- Facilitate dialogue, consider multiple perspectives, and learn from others.

2. Boost systems leadership capacity

- A distributed and collaborative approach requires a large and well-trained profession
- Systems leaders are able to communicate key values and principles, fulfil essential roles and competencies, and practice and reward relational approaches
- Essential skills include meaningful delegation and enabling, facilitation, to foster creative tension and conflict, and to work effectively in competitive political systems.

3. Maintain a supportive architecture

- Systems leadership does not come naturally. It needs high and sustained political support
- Maintain a culture of collaboration, development, and reflection
- Reward innovation
- Maintain collective support for a common vision.

4. Embed innovation and learning to provide evidence of progress

- Shared stories of facing barriers and having some successes are essential to the morale and understanding of actors performing systems leadership
- Substantive evidence is essential to more sceptical audiences and the policymakers required to provide political, financial, and organisational support for systems leadership approaches.

Discussion

Based on key informant interviews, my review of the research literature as well as a Harvard Business School course I attended, and using Cairney & Toomey's (2024) framework, I've drawn-out key pieces of insight and advice under each heading that relate to what individuals, agencies and the Public Service could do to grow more effective system leaders. I elaborate on some of the most salient points in the discussion below and then summarize suggestions and recommendations in a table at the end of this next section.

A System Leadership Mindset

Participants talked about how keeping your focus on the bigger picture helped to take the conversation away from a 'win-loss' calculation where one side won at the expense of the other. In one national senior leader's view, creating the right conditions for a collective win meant understanding other agencies' positions on an argument; what their parameters were, and showing up prepared to compromise.

Several leaders observed that it is not possible to bring different parts of the system together without first being open to how someone else might see the same situation. The research reinforces the point that system leaders try and appreciate the component parts alongside the potential for the integrated whole (Shaked, H & Schehter, C, 2017). A Māori leader felt that the concept of 'whakawhanaungatanga', the process of establishing relationships and relating well to others, was foundational to the mindset needed to lead systems effectively. He suggested that embedding principles from Te Ao Māori, such as collective decision making and holistic problem solving, into leadership development, would help develop better system leaders.

A Chief Executive system lead felt that having a system leadership mindset meant focusing on building a coalition of the willing and not needing to have everyone on the

waka to leave the shore. In so doing, one could reduce the risk that collaboration becomes an end in itself and stymie progress. This advice is consistent with the phenomenon known as the 'Ringelmann effect', in which individual effort decreases as group size increases, acting as a potential barrier to effective collaboration. Ringelmann, an early twentieth century social psychologist, attributed this decline to 'coordination losses' and 'motivation losses' (Kravitz & Martin, 1986).

Nonetheless, both the Cairney & Toomey (2024) qualitative review, and almost all of my interviewees, referenced how important it is for system leaders to be able to deal with the ambiguity and uncertainty that working across multiple groups may bring. It's therefore important to know your partner's strategy, not just your own organisation, so you have a wider lens on what is at stake for others. One of the RPSCs set out what they felt was a useful mindset when faced with a novel situation: "Don't assume simplicity – try and understand the complexity rather than attempt to jump to a simple fix". The solution could be a simple one, and ideally would be, but simple solutions can become complex in their execution.

To help guard against the 'coordination and motivation losses' that are a risk for collaboration and therefore system leadership initiatives, several leaders mentioned the need to identify the problem to ensure clarity about what you want to achieve in partnership. Problem definition was also the core planning principle of the Harvard 'Leading Change and Organisational Renewal' course. In the Harvard framework, the key purpose of problem definition in the interests of organizational renewal, was to ultimately determine whether your problem represented 'a performance gap or an opportunity gap'. The type of gap you identify determines how you approach solutioning and action.

A performance gap directs the effort toward being able to 'exploit' known conditions within your existing set-up, including people capability, whereas an 'opportunity gap' suggests the need to explore options in a more novel, less predictable, context. Importantly, for the 'Leading Change and Organisational Renewal' professors, exploring an opportunity gap may require a different set of skills and personnel from those who deliver performance under standard conditions. And potentially a different risk appetite.

This 'exploit or explore' framework has interesting implications for system leadership initiatives in the public service, as they're likely to entail novel scenarios for the participants, at least compared to agency core operations. Does that suggest we should think differently about how to resource system leadership initiatives as opposed to how we resource lifting core performance? Certainly, the 'horses for courses' message of the Harvard framework has echoes in the Talent Management initiative referenced earlier, in terms of recognizing that a senior public servant's impact is enabled or limited by the particular requirements of the role, which is determined by the context the role needs to operate in, which, in turn, is not static.

Defining the problem was also considered foundational in terms of being able to draw a line between short-term deliverables, which are likely more tangible but can seem transactional on the face of it, and the longer-term benefit sought at the system level, which can be compelling but where it is often harder to show definitively where investment has made a difference. National and regional system leaders felt that going into system-lead scenarios aware of this tension helped put the onus on using the often limited planning time available in time-pressured settings to define and align around the problem. And to ensure that short-term deliverables are explicitly linked to wider system gains.

System Leadership Capability

Although Cairney & Toomey (2024) talks about 'capacity', I've framed this around individual 'capability' considerations. It captures more relational attributes and relates to fostering skills such as brokerage, facilitation, evaluation, conflict resolution and political astuteness.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, interview participants generally found it more straightforward to talk about the personal attributes they associated with system leadership, than enterprise or environmental factors. A 'relational approach' came up regularly, often with the byline of 'putting effort into the relationship during peacetime', which was seen as a reciprocal exchange rather than one-way. The intentional effort for a busy individual is in part a down-payment on the likelihood you'll need to work closely together when the pressure is on in the future. A common development suggestion in this vein was to hold more action-learning or peer coaching sessions, where leaders could share challenges related to live system-leadership scenarios and practice skills such as enrolling others to gain buy-in.

A key part of these informal relationship-building meetings was seen as generating trust. In the context of system leadership and collaboration, many leaders of all role types felt that others won't make a sacrifice without trust (the 'sacrifice' here might be the time and effort that the other person could put elsewhere, rather than into collaboration with you, knowing that their investment might make it less likely they will hit their own agency's performance expectations). As one national leader succinctly put it, "If someone likes you, they'll help. If they don't, they won't". Trust is also a feature in the literature, where it's seen as valuable in reducing transaction costs between agencies attempting to partner up (Scott & Boyd, 2017) and as a resource to help change structural conditions (Cheng & Sandfort, 2021). There was also strong agreement amongst interviewees and in the literature that trust is not automatically created: it needs to be earned.

Believing that others were empathic, with high emotional intelligence, was considered by many interviewees as an enabler of feeling psychologically safe, and therefore an important component of building trust. Without it, participants felt that a leader would hit a ceiling, as their ability to foster the right environment for collaboration and reciprocal exchange would be compromised in the eyes of others.

Other leadership attributes vital for establishing trusting collaborative relationships that were frequently referenced, both in the interviews and the literature, included:

a) self-monitoring - a pre-requisite for understanding the impact of your leadership approach on others, and then being agile enough to adapt according to different situations and people

b) courage and resilience – particularly in the sense that as you get more senior there is both a higher profile and fewer people around who can relate to the responsibilities you hold

c) curiosity and a growth mindset, in terms of exploring the implications of a situation and the 'what ifs' and looking to learn. Also noted was pragmatism, as collaboration usually involves compromise

d) integrity, described, in its most simple terms, as doing what you will say you will do, or trust and credibility erodes.

Several leaders felt strongly about the importance of storytelling, or having a 'compelling narrative', using common terms, to underpin and enliven a common cause. What came through the conversations was a belief that good leaders sincerely communicate in simple terms the value of a common goal. But equally, that we could be better at selling the value proposition that what we're doing in the public service matters to New Zealanders, in a language more likely to connect with them in a period where people experience information overload and have less time to engage with more complicated messaging.

Interviewees were also asked to consider the question of 'how we get the collective operating when each person is likely trying to prove themselves to others?' The Māori leadership concept of the humble leader may be relevant in this context as a counterweight to the negative effects of strong egos on collaboration, a barrier referenced in the Introduction. The principle of whakaiti emphasis humility and self-discpline, where leaders act behind the scenes (Haar et al., 2019). However, the authors' research suggests that humility can be a double-edged sword in that it creates the perception of warmth and sensitivity, which can foster trust and collaboration. But conversely, humility can lead others to view these leaders as less competent and influential. The negative connotations perhaps reflect more traditional leadership paradigms, which led to Cairney & Toomey (2024) including a characteristic of holding a system leadership mindset as being to 'reject heroic top-down leadership'.

A Supportive Architecture

The third feature is "A Supportive Architecture". Interviewees discussed their view of the 'authorising' or 'enabling' environment that system leadership activity took place in. And whether the structure, form and functions of the system promoted or stifled collaboration.

A generally positive outlook was held by leaders in relation to the public sector's ability to protect a common vision or focus. This was described as the sense of purpose that many in the public service have – the desire to make a difference in people's lives and the notion of a higher calling. The 'spirit of service' that former Public Service Commissioner Peter Hughes spoke of.

The role of performance measures and targets in building momentum came up in several discussions, especially with senior system leaders. The consensus was that targets were a good foundation to drive delivery of a result but were not without risks.

One Chief Executive observed that targets help incentivise contributions, especially when leaders are considering how to 'spend' the limited discretionary effort over and above what's required to tackle non-negotiable, core agency commitments. Scott and Boyd, in their 2017 review of the New Zealand results programme, highlight how targets with named lead Ministers and Chief Executives helped diminish the Ringelmann effect by lifting accountability. However, several leaders with experience in system roles cautioned that not all targets automatically drove collaborative behaviour toward joint outcomes. Their advice was that we need to be more intentional around how targets are structured and deployed to minimise the risks of unintended consequences.

System leaders at both a national and regional level noted that it's important to be realistic about the leverage you have with other agencies and the fact that 'business as usual' doesn't stop. As a result, those tasked with leading joint efforts across agencies must be deliberate with where they put their effort; be explicit about the goal and how it will be measured; and seek every opportunity to build a coalition, recognising that change is more likely to be the aggregate of multiple marginal changes rather than a 'big bang'.

Several conversations considered how to shift collective goals from discretionary efforts on the periphery, to core work. Having a clear sector strategy with Ministerial buy-in to joint outcomes; as well as targets that incentivised collective impact (recognising the potential longer timeframes to realise the impact) and individual performance plans that stipulated joint achievement areas, were considered pre-conditions for effective system leadership. These aspects of enabling system leadership are notable components of the Harvard Kennedy School's 'CLEAR' framework (Dreier, Nabarro & Nelson, 2019), where 'A' stands for 'Accountability':

- Establishes clear roles, responsibilities, and shared goals
- Leaders ensure transparency and track progress.

And ‘R’ stands for a ‘Results Orientation’:

- Focuses on measurable impact and long-term outcomes
- Leaders align efforts with strategic objectives and community needs.

One Chief Executive supported allocating key agency leads to critical joint targets, “If delivering on a joint target is the most important thing we think we should be doing, why not put the best people from the contributing agencies to work on them?”, which relates back to more deliberate matching of skills to context seen in the emerging approach to executive talent management.

Innovation and Learning

The final feature proposed by Cairney and Toomey is the need for innovation and learning. In general, most interviewees, especially when considering the public service, thought that we needed to be better at innovation, which also emerged as an issue in the public service census. Risk aversion, or the inclination to risk-manage failure, was seen as having the most chilling effect on taking calculated risks and becoming more entrepreneurial. In addition, some interviewees felt that we needed more incentives for innovation and rewards for showing courage and ambition, there being few consequences in the system for leaders staying in their comfort zone. A senior leader actively involved in trying to build a partnership around an opportunity commented that officials needed to be mindful of where the agency is in a performance cycle, as that will affect the appetite to go for an opportunity gap.

Several good suggestions were made by interviewees to foster innovation:

i) public servants in particular need to acknowledge the pull of the familiar and therefore the need to deliberately act against complacency. As one leader put it, “it’s easy to defend the status-quo. We should not confuse a vision

with consensus". Well targeted 360-degree assessments informed by self-assessment were suggested as one means of counteracting complacency

ii) being up front that things will go wrong in human systems and that the first response should be to understand what went wrong at the system, rather than individual, level. Once an individual feels that they are being put under unfair scrutiny with a view to apportioning blame, the break in trust is very hard to repair

iii) formally create more enabling settings for calculated risk by having risk appetite statements for the joint endeavour parties are involved in. These will highly likely be different to the risk appetite settings present in either parties own agency for BAU

iv) routinely checking progress, ideally with others less invested in the task, to ensure the effort is still worth it. As one national leader observed, "Is there a pausing moment? There's nothing worse than doing something really efficiently that didn't need to be done at all"

v) prioritising gaining wider experience of other 'frontline' agencies, especially NGOs and Māori entities that are typically closer – or have more access to - the views of the communities they operate on

vi) recognize and reward collaborative successes (joint budgets saved, equity improvements made etc.) in senior-leader performance reviews.

It's important not to take any one of these features, or suggestions for developing system leaders, in isolation and assume that they're sufficient to deliver more effective system leadership. As one group of authors put it, "curiosity and learning are not a match for high stakes policy and high-pressure practice" (Evans, Marsh & Stoker, 2021, p. 354), especially if you're working in a context where a mistake is interpreted as failure.

Parallels between a Te Ao Māori worldview and system leadership

Many of the attributes described within the features of system leadership echo principles of leadership within Māori culture. A Chief Executive of a Hāpu-affiliated enterprise shared an interesting assessment of how the Māori worldview aligned well with overcoming the challenges that models of system leadership can face in the public service. The challenge being that multi-factorial issues don't lend themselves to narrow solutions and attempting to solve through over-simplified constructs creates operational tension. The frame outlined three main commonalities:

1. Hāpu and Iwi are inter-generational familial collectives and are in it for the long-haul, so are willing to invest in long-term benefits
2. Holistic perspectives: hapu and iwi appreciate that there are multi-dimensional elements at play, some of which are seen and understood; others unseen and not understood. But both sets are still relevant to the need to have a broad-base diagnosis of a problem.
3. Inter-connectedness of the people: the "power of the village" that provides a range of support levers, transfers wisdom to avoid repeating the same mistakes across generations and the power of the community voice.

A Te Ao Māori view of leadership would support a clearer focus on localism, in that leaders should be answerable to the people and communities that have most to gain or lose by whether or not their leaders' actions succeed. Certainly, several regional leaders in particular believed that national leadership structures needed to have more emphasis on what goes on outside of Wellington, to promote a more realistic assessment of how policy settings or initiatives are playing out on the ground.

What does system leadership mean in practice?

From the interviews, whilst there was no clear 'blueprint' [for system leadership] articulated by participants, there was a strong sense of how system leadership applied

in the interviewee's own context. One perspective from the literature suggests that a blueprint isn't desirable at any rate, as it acts against the emphasis on practicing 'agile and flexible leadership' (Mangan & Lawrence-Pietroni, 2019).

Nonetheless, there was a general sense that we in the public service could be clearer on what enables system leadership at an individual and architecture level, how we prepare for complex leadership challenges, and how we organise ourselves to promote system leaders, in a system that could be better at supporting effective leadership across boundaries.

There were also views on the benefit of strengthening regional leadership structures. In particular, a smaller number of priorities that need a regional focus and using regional insights to inform national leadership strategies.

Whilst it is clear that there's no single recipe for successful system leadership applicable to all contexts, an ingredient list could consist of:

- ✓ A simple yet compelling narrative that is easily communicated.
- ✓ A frame that aligns the system benefit with the purpose of the agencies partnering.
- ✓ An appreciation of the operational realities of each participant agency.
- ✓ Shared responsibilities reflected in joint success measures.
- ✓ Short-term deliverables with regular report back and freedom to test different ways of operating.
- ✓ The mandate to recommend individual agencies' change their procedures or approach if they are demonstrably not enabling achievement of the common goal.

Practical suggestions for embedding system leadership into development programmes, aligning incentives and fostering innovation

This table summarises the suggestions highlighted earlier in the discussion.

Feature	Suggestion	Intended Impact
A system leadership mindset and system leadership capability 	• Incorporate principles from Te Ao Māori, such as collective decision making and holistic problem diagnosis, into leadership development. • Further embed formal training focused on system leader development, such as Te Manutaki programme, with an emphasis on problem definition. • Continue development of deliberate approach to senior talent management, which open-up opportunities, targets development of succession plan and aligns leadership skills with context • Run action learning sets or peer-learning circles: small cohorts work on live system problems over several months, ideally guided by a coach.	• Align capability with defined performance or opportunity gap. • Clear guidance on the attributes and pathways for aspiring system leaders. • Deeper self-awareness and an understanding of how context can influence capacity to lead. • Targeted growth.
A more supportive architecture of innovation and learning 	• Cross-sector strategies with Ministerial alignment on goals and trade-offs where possible. • Align performance measures and incentives in individual leaders' development plans with cross-agency outcomes and joint targets. • 360 reviews informing coaching plans. • Promote, shadowing, secondments and other shared placements across agencies, NGOs, and iwi/Māori organisations. • Recognize and reward collaborative successes (joint budgets saved, service user impact, equity improvements) in senior-leader performance reviews.	• Targeted investment in driving system delivery. • Sustained collaboration and adaptive culture. • Greater readiness to innovate with 'few' regrets. • Community-oriented insights that support greater community engagement. • Stronger networks across sectors and from national to local.

Conclusion

This Fellowship has underscored a clear appetite among senior public servants for system leadership that delivers meaningful outcomes. Leaders consistently expressed a desire to move beyond rhetoric and into practice—where collaboration is not just encouraged but enabled through deliberate design.

The findings suggest that system leadership must be treated as a strategic capability, not a discretionary skillset. It requires bold, relational leadership; clear accountability; and development pathways that align individual capability with system-level challenges. Without this, collaboration risks becoming diffuse and ineffective.

Senior and aspiring leaders are uniquely positioned to champion this shift, supported by the Public Service Commission. By embedding system leadership into talent strategies, aligning incentives with cross-agency outcomes, and fostering environments that support innovation and learning, we can build a public service that is more agile, connected, and better equipped to deliver public value in complex conditions.

The opportunity is not just to improve collaboration—but to lead a system that consistently delivers better outcomes for New Zealanders.

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Appendix A - Fellowship interviewees

Interviewee Name	Role Title
Ezra Schuster	Chief Advisor and Regional Public Service Commissioner, Bay of Plenty – Ministry of Health
Rose Jamieson	Tumu Whiria – General Manager Public Impact – InternetNZ
Grace Smit	Deputy Secretary, Regions National Office – Ministry of Māori Development
Aphra Green	Deputy Chief Executive – Policy, Data & Insights – Social Investment Agency
Gráinne Moss	Secretary for Regulation and Chief Executive – Ministry of Regulation
Callie Corrigan	Co-Director – Whiria Te Muka (Whiria Te Muka, Te Hiku Iwi Development Trust, Kaitaia, Northland)
Juanita Ryan	Deputy Chief Executive Pae Ora – Department of Corrections
Carolyn Tremain	Secretary for Business, Innovation and Employment and Chief Executive – Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment (MBIE)
Nick Flack	Chief Executive Officer – Hawke's Bay Airport Ltd
Leigh Marsh	Commissioner Custodial Services – Department of Corrections
Melanie Porter	Deputy Secretary, Strategy and Assurance – MBIE
Karen Evison	Director Pae Ora – Department of Corrections
Alison McDonald	Deputy Secretary – Immigration, MBIE
Rebecca Powell	DCE People and Capability – Department of Corrections
Kerry-Leigh Dougall	Chief Māori Officer Pae Ora – Department of Corrections
Darren Evans	Chief Executive Officer – Calder Stewart
Helmut Modlik	CEO – Te Rūnanga o Toa Rangatira
Alastair Turrell	DCE Infrastructure and Digital Assets – Department of Corrections
Jeremy Lightfoot	Chief Executive – Department of Corrections
Ben Storey	Chief Nurse – Director Physical Health – Department of Corrections

Alice Sciascia	DCE Strategy and Corporate Services – Department of Corrections
Emma Gardner	Chief Mental Health & Addictions Officer – Department of Corrections
Shaun Sullivan	Director Office of the DCE Pae Ora – Department of Corrections
Paul Stocks	Deputy Secretary, Building, Resources and Markets – MBIE
Jessica Borg	Chief Psychologist / Director Programmes – Department of Corrections
Brendan Boyle	Acting Chief Executive – Pharmac
Sean Mason	DCE Communities Partnership & Pathway – Department of Corrections
Leeann Watson	Chief Executive – Business Canterbury
Emma Powell	Chief Executive – Te Puna Aonui
Sharon Thompson	Chief Executive – WorkSafe NZ
Rachel Leota	Deputy Chief Executive – Regulatory & Identity Services, Department of Internal Affairs
Herewini Te Koha	DCE Māori – Tumu Herenga – Department of Corrections
Jodi Anderson	Internet Governance Lead – InternetNZ
Richard Waggott	DCE Organisational Resilience & Safety – Department of Corrections
Nic Blakeley	Deputy Secretary, Labour, Science and Enterprise – MBIE
Diane McDermott	Canterbury and Chathams Regional Public Service Commissioner – Biosecurity NZ – Ministry of Primary Industries
Megan Main	Chief Executive Officer – Accident Compensation Commission (ACC)
Julia Lynch	Auckland Regional Public Service Commissioner – Ministry of Social Development (MSD)
Karen Bartlett	East Coast Regional Public Service Commissioner – MSD
Henare Edwards	Kaiwhakamana – Canterbury
Pratima Namasivayam	Deputy Chief Executive – Advisory, Analytics and Ministerial Services, Ministry for Ethnic Communities

Steph Voight	Otago-Southland Regional Public Service Commissioner – MSD
Debbie Power	Secretary for Social Development and Chief Executive – MSD
Antonio (Toni) Moreno	Professor – Harvard Business School
Ruth Money	Chief Victims Advisor – Ministry of Justice
Ryan Raffaelli	Professor – Harvard Business School
Mark Fraser	General Manager Urban Development Delivery – Kāinga Ora
Philip Grady	Interim Director of Mental Health and Addiction, Ministry of Health
Liesle Theron	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Armon Tamatea	Associate Professor – Waikato University
Paul Kennedy	Manager, Business Enablement & Targeted Investments – Injury Prevention, ACC

Appendix B - Fellowship interview template

Preamble

Joining the dots: how do we help our people lead complex systems?

By way of context, here are two excerpts from Te Rautaki Ārahi i te Ratonga Tūmatanui o Aotearoa | The Leadership Strategy for New Zealand's Public Service:

'Building on these foundations, the reforms of the Public Service Act 2020 will change the way we work and create a more adaptive, agile and collaborative Public Service. Strong, system focused leadership is one of the most important enablers to achieve this change.....

..... What we need to do next is accelerate the growth of system leadership capability, build a stronger sense of team spirit among our leaders, and make it much easier for them to go to where their skills are needed most.'

Interview Questions

1. Looking back to that time now, or to the start of the process if you're still in it, what would you have liked to have known before you started?
2. Do you think there were any gaps in your readiness to play your part to your fullest and if so, what would have helped fill that gap(s)?
3. What strengths helped you lead at the system level/do you think you could have used more often?
4. What/who (experiences/people) usefully prepared you for leading at the system level? In hindsight, what else would have been useful?
5. How important was mindset?
6. What gets in the way of establishing an authorising environment supportive of more collaboration?

7. More generally, how would you describe the style of leadership that in your opinion is most effective for collaborative or system leadership?
8. Are there any particular differences in how you think you need to operate as a system leader as opposed to more 'traditional' leadership, within a team or a function? Any areas of commonality?
9. What advice would you give to someone else stepping into a complex leadership situation that requires collaboration at a system level?
10. What could the public service/private sector/insert entity do to better prepare its future leaders to be effective system leaders?