



The Australian Prevention  
Partnership Centre  
Systems and solutions for better health

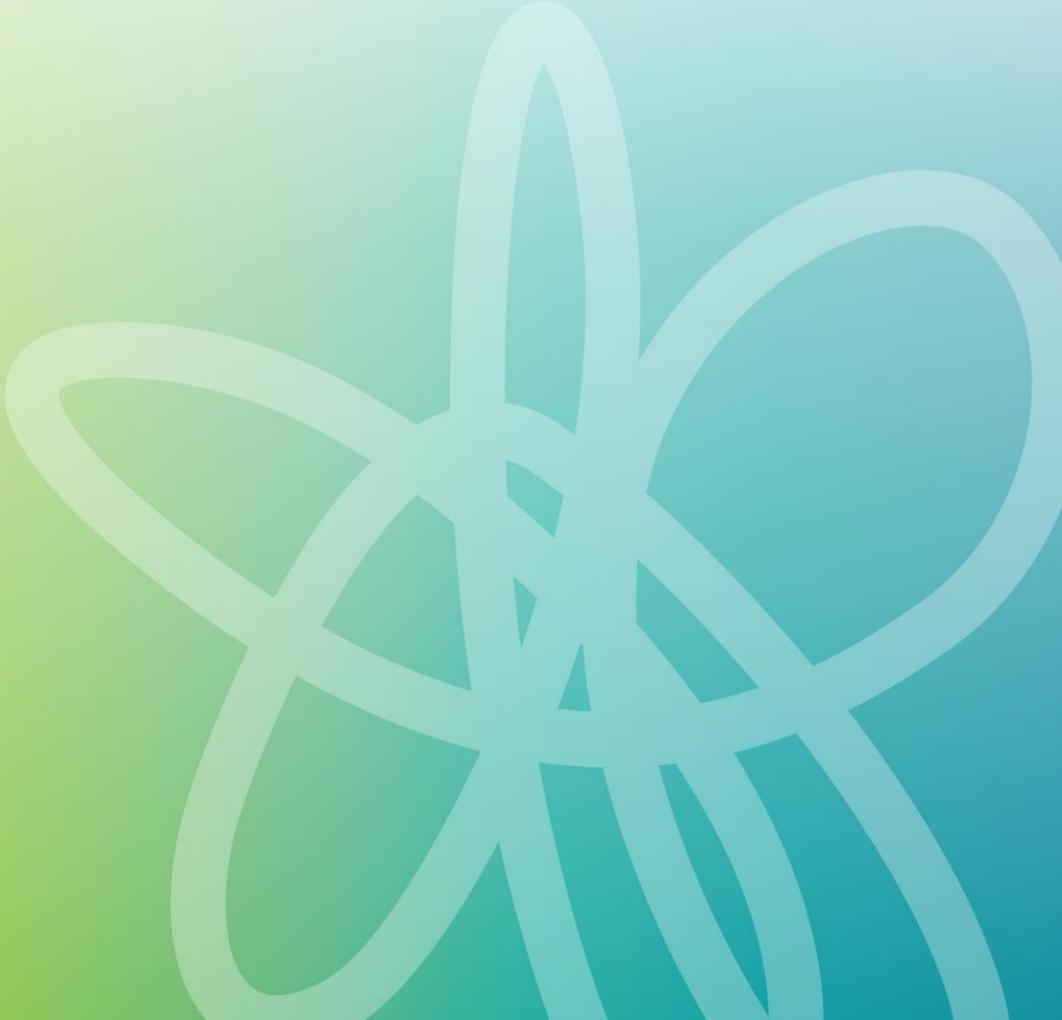


Tasmanian  
Government

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# Systems Change Framework

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# Systems Change Framework

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# The Systems Change Framework

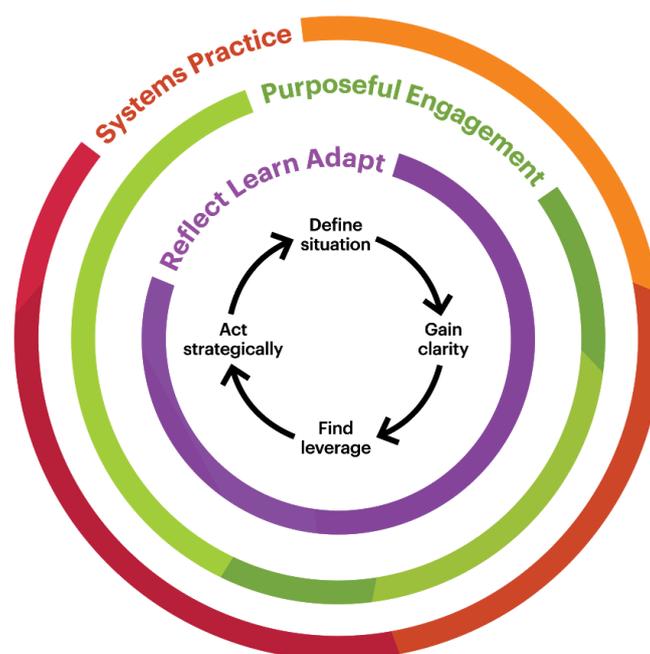
The Systems Change Framework has been developed as a sensemaking tool to support individuals and collaborations to become more familiar and capable of working in systems and towards systems change. It outlines a structure, process and set of practices which, when taken together, enable a systemic inquiry for systems change.

The aim of a systemic inquiry is to understand opportunities and develop strategies to influence and shift the system from an undesirable to a more desirable state.

The Framework is adaptive and can be scaled depending on the problem or situation being interrogated, and the degree and duration of effort committed.

It comprises two key aspects, an iterative inquiry process (centre of the diagram below) and the learning context (three outer circles in the diagram below).

## Systems Change Framework



**Source:** The Framework was developed in partnership by The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre and the Tasmania Department of Health, June 2018.

## Systems change

Working within a system for systems change is not about achieving neat, sequential and contained solutions for problems often seen in traditional approaches to problem solving. By contrast, a systemic inquiry is a social learning process, which involves an ongoing process of interrogation to shift from the current undesirable state to a future desirable state. This process is non-linear, includes many disjunctures, will unfold over longer periods of time and will involve many different sets of actors at different scales in the system, likely in an uncoordinated manner.

Systems change can come about in one of two ways. More commonly, change in a system comes from smaller scale (shifts in sub-systems), continuous and evolving changes and may enable cumulative and emergent larger scale change. More rarely is there potential for systems change that can take place on a larger scale, be transformative and shift the system significantly.

Most people involved in systems change will not be in a position of power or influence to affect such transformative change. This is usually the cumulative effect of multiple emergent changes. We must shift the system from our place of agency - what we are able to directly shift and change. We don't shift a whole system, we gently nudge parts in sub-systems, which in turn has a cascading influence across other sub-systems. This reorientation to how systems change and our scale of influence is critical to setting reasonable expectations about systems change processes.

## Systems practices

*"Live the full life of the mind, exhilarated by new ideas, and intoxicated by the romance of the unusual."*

~Hemingway, author

Systems practices underpin the whole Framework and should be undertaken throughout a systemic inquiry process. Systems practices develop our ability to better understand and make sense of complex situations, which enables more effective decision making. In a systemic inquiry we want to have a high capacity to see and sense a system, that is, perspectives, boundaries, relationships, and dynamics.

We can build our capacity to do this by engaging regularly in a systems practice. This means reflecting on our assumptions and mental models, exploring unintended consequences of actions and how we listen and learn from other perspectives. A systems practice is something that we can do as individuals, in teams or with larger communities. But at the very foundation, it must be our personal practice. For more information about systems practices, read the poster at the end of this document.

## Purposeful engagement

*"Collaboration is not about gluing together existing egos. It is about the ideas that never existed until after everyone entered the room"*

~@participatoryc, community systems change foundation UK

Engaging in the system and working towards systems change cannot be done in isolation. Working in systems is inherently social and requires us to engage and collaborate with different perspectives and roles across the system. Only with the inclusion of diverse perspectives can we begin to see the true depth and complexity of the system, which is necessary for finding a way to change the system. In a systemic inquiry we must constantly engage with the question of who needs to be present. Participants will expand and contract at different stages, as will the need for different perspectives at different times, or the expertise required. This aspect prompts us to adapt participation and expertise based on our stage in the inquiry process, rather than defaulting to the 'usual suspects'.

# Reflect, Learn, Adapt

*"Learn to live the paradox of action as reflection, and reflection as action"*

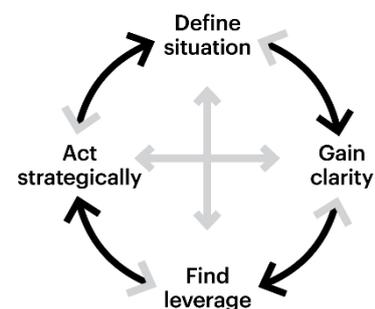
~ Westley, Zimmerman and Patton, authors 'Getting to Maybe'

The process of reflecting, learning and adapting is what enables a systemic inquiry to be flexible, emergent and non-linear. It has an ever-present and ongoing nature, which is different to traditional problem-solving approaches where reflection comes at the end of the process.

We don't know where an inquiry process might take us in our learning or how an action might influence a system, so we need to continually be course-correcting until we start to get the traction we desire. In this way, when we are generating new information in a systemic inquiry, we ensure it informs our next step as we are constantly expanding our understanding of the system.

## Iterative inquiry process

The internal inquiry process in the centre of the Framework is key to a systems investigation. Moving through each of these key elements enables a deeper understanding of the system. The duration and level of intensity can be adapted according to available time and resources and the context in which the inquiry is taking place. Often, an inquiry will move through multiple and non-linear iterations of this cycle as new information about the system surfaces.



### 1. Define situation

*"If I had only one hour to save the world, I would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem, and only five minutes finding the solution"*

~Einstein, scientist

This component initiates the systemic inquiry in response a situation or problem you want to explore. It involves defining the initial boundaries of your work and considering the enabling factors. The purpose of this stage is to:

- consider if there are enabling factors to support a systemic inquiry
- identify some initial boundaries for the work
- form a systemic inquiry group who are curious and open to learning.

### 2. Gain clarity

*"If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change"*

~Wayne Dyer, philosopher

When we gain clarity, we develop a deeper understanding of the system, including the key forces and patterns driving the system's behaviour and our role in the system. The purpose of this stage is to unpack the complexity of the problem by exploring it through different systems lenses, including:

- **Perspectives:** How do different perspectives understand the situation?
- **Boundaries:** What has been used to determine where the edge of the system is? This is, what line or 'rule' is drawn to determine what is in, and what is out?

- **Relationships:** What parts are in the system and which have a relationship to each other?
- **Dynamics:** What kind of influence or dynamics exist in the relationships between the different parts?

### 3. Find leverage

*"If you do not understand your role in the problem, it is difficult to be part of the solution"*

*~David Stroh, systems thinker*

This stage is about exploring the most promising opportunities for engaging with the system and influencing its behaviour in order to push it towards a desired goal, from where we have agency and authority to act. This is an important distinction from other traditional problem-solving processes, where it is usually 'others' that need to act or do something differently. In systems work, we seek to facilitate change from where we stand in the system.

### 4. Act strategically

*"Great big, innovative, world changing ideas are plentiful. People who take tiny little baby steps toward them are rare"*

*~ Mike Dooley, philosopher*

When we act strategically, we are designing and implementing an approach that exploits opportunities to make change in the system. More commonly, this is for small scale (sub-system) continuous and emergent change. The purpose of this stage is to test actions, seek feedback, respond to emerging system dynamics, course-correct, and engage in non-linear planning, all while being nimble. Key activities in this stage include checking for uncertainty, ambiguity and coherence in the system.

**At this stage we often gain greater clarity about the dynamics of the system, which encourages us to reconsider the definition of the situation we are in and sends us through another iteration of the inquiry process.**

# Systems practices you can do every day



Step back from the details to **see the bigger picture** and explore what else may be influencing a situation. *What else is going on here?*



**Be aware of your mental model** and how it influences your perspective and actions. *What beliefs and values inform how I see, engage, and react to this situation?*



**See yourself in the system** and how you engage, contribute and influence it. *What is my role in this situation? What can I influence?*



**Engage diverse perspectives** to see a situation from different vantage points. *Who has a different perspective from my own on this situation and how might they see it? Whose voice is not being heard?*



Be present in the moment and **listen deeply**, without trying to 'fix' a problem. *Am I listening or waiting to talk? Am I suspending judgement and criticism? Am I being open to new information?*



**Question assumptions** to surface what has informed them and to question if they are true. *What assumptions am I making about this situation and how can I test them?*



**Uncover unintended consequences** before committing to a decision or action. *What else might happen if we do this? What adaptations need to be made as a result?*



**Use visual modelling** to make sense of, or explain a complex situation, which may reveal new insights. *Can I draw or illustrate this situation with diagrams, metaphors, relationships or symbols?*



**Look for connections and relationships** between parts to gain new insights about the whole. *Which parts have a connection? What is their relationship? Is there an emerging or reoccurring pattern?*



**Reflect regularly** on a situation, interpret and give it meaning to draw deeper learning. *What did I intend to happen and what actually happened? What does it tell me about the system? How can I work with this new insight?*

We would like to acknowledge and are grateful for the work of others to identify and develop systems practices. Our practices are drawn both from these existing resources and our own experience working in systems. There are many more practices, but we feel these are the most practical for everyday use.

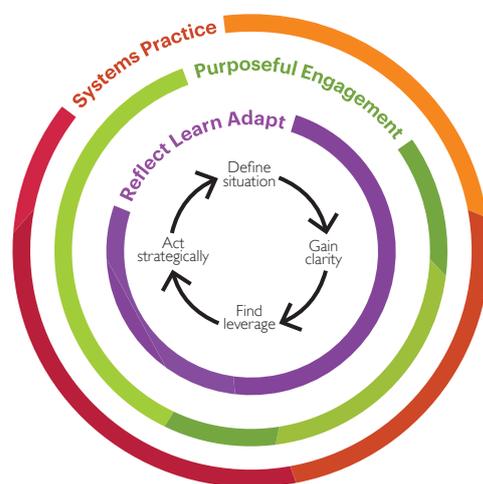
Systems practices develop your ability to better understand and make sense of complex situations, which enables more effective decision making. Applying these practices helps you to see the system, its parts, relationships and dynamics. Engaging in systems practice is an ongoing activity – like a muscle, it continually needs to be exercised.

On the left are 10 practices you can use every day – use the questions to help you apply them.

## Systems Change Framework

Systems Practices are a key part of the Systems Change Framework, which aims to support people to engage with the complexity of systems and work towards systems change. It has two key aspects:

1. An iterative inquiry process outlined in the centre of the diagram
2. The learning context within which the process should be carried out. This is denoted by the three nested systems on the outside of the inquiry process.



For further information visit [preventioncentre.org.au](http://preventioncentre.org.au)



The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre

# Systems Change Framework

