

MENTORING FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

REFOCUSING LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

In a world of complex, interconnected challenges, traditional leadership models are falling short. This paper explores how mentoring can evolve to empower leaders who think and act systemically—leading not only their teams but driving large-scale change across ecosystems. Learn how mentoring can foster sustainable, scalable solutions in the social impact space.

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the transformative potential of mentoring programmes in driving systemic change within organisations and ecosystems. By empowering leaders to think and act systemically, mentoring can address complex societal challenges more effectively than traditional approaches. Funders and donors are increasingly seeking scalable, sustainable solutions, making mentoring a high-impact tool for social impact.

Introduction: Beyond Individual Development

Mentoring, often viewed as a one-on-one process for individual growth, has historically been narrowly viewed as a means to develop personal leadership capabilities. However, today's global challenges demand that we move beyond personal development. To drive real, lasting change, we must empower leaders to think systemically, leading not just within their organisations but influencing the broader ecosystem.

The future of social impact leadership lies in mentoring not as an isolated tool for individual success, but as a catalyst for systemic transformation. By equipping leaders with the skills to navigate complexity and drive collaboration, mentoring can unlock the potential for large-scale societal change.

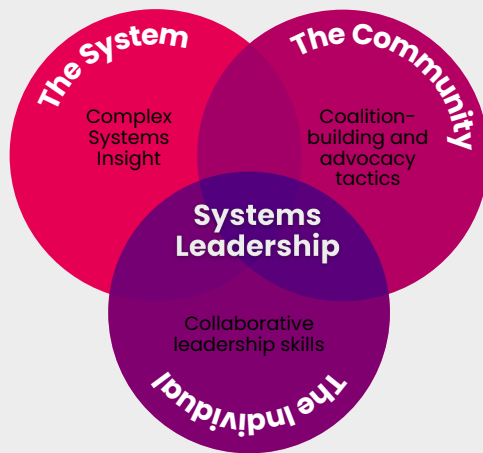


Definition and Importance

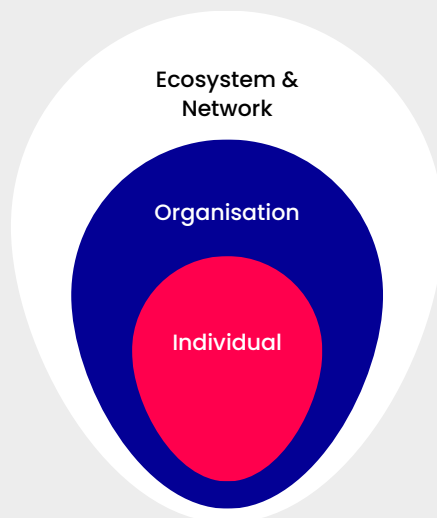
Systems change refers to shifts in the underlying conditions that sustain complex social issues. This involves recognising the interdependencies among various actors, sectors, and challenges. According to the [Harvard Kennedy School](#), “Systems leadership is about working collaboratively across boundaries to achieve better outcomes for complex social problems.” For example, rather than addressing education, healthcare, or poverty in isolation, systems change encourages a holistic approach that considers the interplay between these factors.

Systems Leadership: A Holistic Approach to Driving Change

Systems Leadership Approach



The Human Edge Approach



Systems Leadership sits at the intersection of three critical dimensions: Complex Systems Insight, Coalition-building and advocacy tactics, and Collaborative leadership skills. It recognises that today’s challenges are interconnected and require leaders who can navigate and influence entire systems—understanding the bigger picture, building alliances, and working across boundaries to create change.

At The Human Edge, we embrace a human-first approach that prioritises individual growth as a foundation for broader impact. We develop collaborative, self-assured leaders equipped with the skills, mindset, and competencies to tackle complex challenges. By fostering personal development alongside organisational growth, we empower leaders to connect people and build coalitions. These leaders are not just driving performance but also making societies more inclusive and equitable—ultimately creating lasting, systemic change.

The Limitations of Traditional Leadership Programmes

While traditional leadership programmes focus on personal and professional development, they often overlook the broader context in which leaders operate. Many of these programmes emphasise individual skills, which may not translate effectively to the complex challenges faced in today's interconnected world.

Lack of Systems Thinking: Traditional models often fail to encourage leaders to think beyond their organisational silos. Research indicates that traditional leadership programmes do not equip leaders with the skills necessary to address systemic challenges.

Need for Collaboration: As social issues become increasingly complex, the ability to collaborate across boundaries is paramount. Traditional programmes may not foster the collaborative mindset necessary for systemic change.

The Shift Toward Systems Change

Funders and donors are increasingly seeking interventions that move beyond isolated impacts and towards scalable solutions that target the root causes of complex societal challenges. Whether it's climate change, inequality, or poverty, the issues we face today require leadership that is capable of thinking in terms of interconnected systems rather than isolated outcomes.

This focus on systems change is rooted in a recognition that individual solutions, no matter how effective, cannot create sustainable change in isolation. Rather, we need approaches that address the interconnected nature of problems, transforming the structures, policies, and relationships that maintain the status quo.

Mentoring offers a unique opportunity to drive this shift. At its core, mentoring is about transferring knowledge, fostering new ways of thinking, and empowering individuals to lead with a systemic mindset. When aligned with the goal of systems change, mentoring becomes a tool for developing leaders capable of addressing the complex, interdependent challenges of our time.



What makes mentoring so powerful is its ability to work at multiple levels—personal, organisational, and systemic. Traditional leadership development programmes often focus on building individual competencies, but mentoring has the potential to go further by developing the capacity to influence and drive change within systems.

1. Mentoring for Complex Problem Solving

Mentoring is not just about helping leaders navigate their own personal or professional journeys. In the context of systems change, mentoring becomes a way of equipping leaders with the skills to tackle complex, multi-faceted problems. These leaders must learn to identify leverage points within systems, spot patterns, and make decisions that impact not just their own organisation, but the broader ecosystem in which they operate.

For example, a leader in an organisation dedicated to reducing gender inequality may be mentored to see how their work fits within a broader context—understanding how education, healthcare, and employment systems intersect to either perpetuate or reduce gender disparities. This leader can then advocate for cross-sector collaborations that create systemic solutions, rather than siloed initiatives that only address one part of the problem.

2. Developing a Culture of Collaboration

Leaders driving systems change must work across boundaries, both within and outside of their organisations. This requires a shift from traditional hierarchical leadership models to one that is collaborative and participatory. Mentoring programmes can help leaders build these capabilities by fostering cross-sector learning, encouraging diverse perspectives, and creating networks of influence.

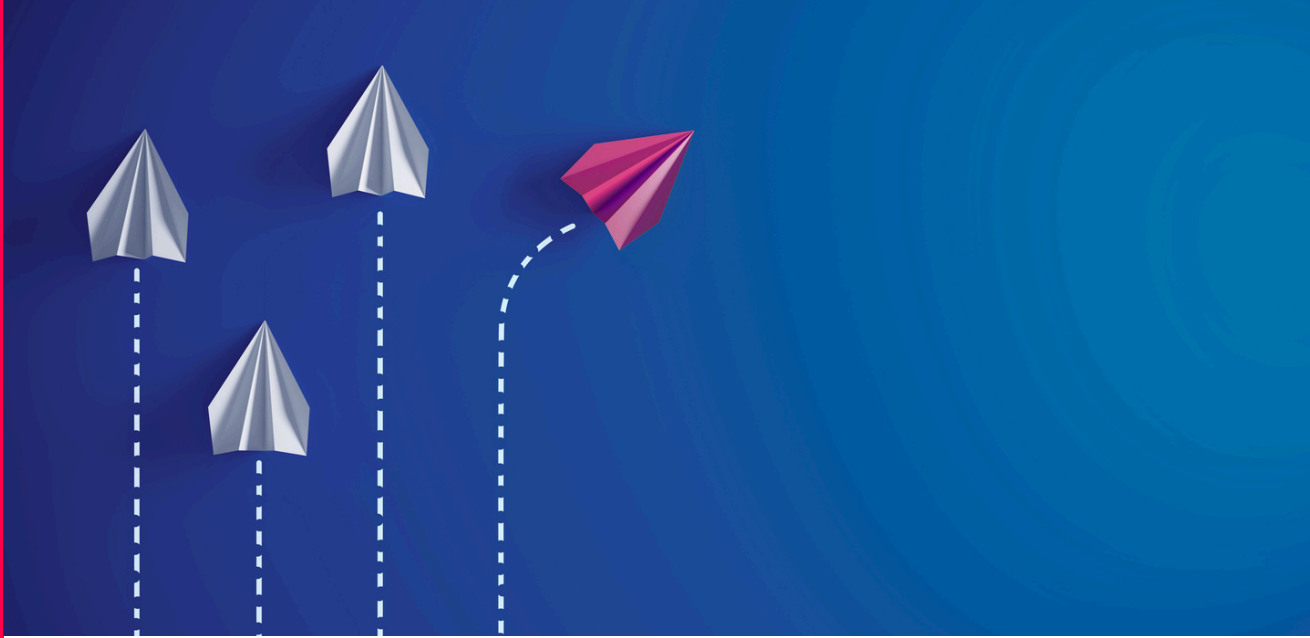
In mentoring relationships designed for systems change, the mentor acts not as a guide with all the answers but as a thought partner who challenges the mentee to think differently, question assumptions, and build collaborative networks. This shifts the focus from solving individual problems to influencing and transforming larger systems through collective action.

3. Embedding Systemic Thinking into Leadership

At its core, mentoring for systems change is about embedding a new way of thinking into leadership. Mentoring can help leaders develop the ability to think in terms of systems—recognising the interdependence of various actors, sectors, and challenges, and acting in ways that promote holistic, sustainable solutions.

When mentoring programmes are aligned with the goal of systems change, they focus on developing leadership qualities like adaptability, resilience, and the capacity to think strategically about the long-term consequences of decisions. This approach equips leaders not just to manage change but to drive it.

A Refocused Model: Mentoring for Systems Change



The traditional approach to mentoring must evolve to support this broader goal. This new model involves several key shifts:

- **From Hierarchical to Collaborative:** Mentoring for systems change shifts away from the idea of a mentor as a “sage” imparting wisdom. Instead, it positions the mentor and mentee as partners, working together to understand and navigate complex systems.
- **From Personal Development to Collective Impact:** While individual development remains important, mentoring for systems change places a greater emphasis on the mentee’s role in influencing and shaping broader systems. Success is measured not just by individual growth but by the leader’s ability to drive systemic change.
- **From Static to Dynamic:** In traditional mentoring, the mentor-mentee relationship is often linear, with a clear beginning and end. In contrast, mentoring for systems change is dynamic and ongoing, reflecting the complexity of the challenges being addressed. Leaders must continuously learn, adapt, and engage with new challenges.



CASE STUDY

THE MAVA LEADERS FOR NATURE ACADEMY

The MAVA Leaders for Nature Academy, developed in collaboration with Common Purpose and The Human Edge (then Mowgli Mentoring), is a compelling example of how mentoring can drive systemic change. This programme was created to strengthen leadership within the conservation sector and ensure the long-term resilience of MAVA's conservation partners. The programme's design, focusing on intergenerational learning and cross-sector collaboration, illustrates how mentoring can be utilised as a tool to foster systemic thinking and scalable impact.

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Key Objectives and Impact

The Academy addressed specific leadership development needs, including empowering young professionals, strengthening organisational resilience, and fostering collaboration across sectors and generations. It aimed to equip participants with the leadership skills necessary to drive systemic solutions to pressing environmental challenges. A central component of this initiative was mentoring, which allowed participants to develop beyond individual leadership and focus on creating ripple effects across their organisations and ecosystems.

Through its intergenerational leadership approach, the Academy paired younger professionals with more senior colleagues from different organisations, facilitating cross-generational and cross-sectoral learning. This dynamic helped leaders see the bigger picture, breaking down silos and enabling them to collaborate more effectively across boundaries.

Systems Thinking in Action



An example of systemic leadership fostered through this programme is seen in the mentoring relationships that encouraged participants to think beyond their immediate roles and responsibilities. Leaders, such as Herculano de Andrade Dinis from the Associação Projecto Vitó in Cabo Verde, were inspired to build partnerships that expanded their organisation's conservation efforts, engaging more deeply with local communities and government stakeholders. As a result, Projecto Vitó's conservation initiatives began delivering economic benefits to local communities, showcasing how leadership empowered through mentoring can extend beyond individual projects to influence wider ecosystems.

Legacy of Collaboration and Transformation

The Academy's success in fostering leadership capable of influencing systems is evident in the changes observed within participating organisations. The programme's emphasis on mentoring and leadership development led to shifts in organisational strategy and culture, with leaders prioritising team development and cross-sector partnerships. For instance, Clive Poultney and Sboniso Phakathi from the Southern African Wildlife College returned from the Academy and implemented leadership development as a key pillar of their organisational strategy, embedding it into their project planning and ensuring sustainable long-term impact.

Through mentoring relationships that continued well beyond the duration of the programme, the MAVA Academy demonstrated that investing in leadership development creates a ripple effect of change, influencing not just individual participants but entire ecosystems. This case study illustrates how mentoring, when aligned with systems change goals, can drive large-scale transformation by fostering leaders who are capable of thinking holistically and acting collaboratively.

Implications for Funders and Donors

For funders and donors looking to make a scalable, systemic impact, mentoring for systems change offers an exciting opportunity. This approach aligns with the growing recognition that complex problems require multi-faceted solutions, driven by leaders who can navigate and influence systems.

Investing in mentoring programmes designed for systems change ensures that funds are not just used to develop individual leaders but to empower those leaders to drive large-scale, sustainable change. It also provides a clear pathway for scaling impact, as the leaders developed through these programmes go on to influence policy, shape institutions, and drive collaborative efforts across sectors.

Conclusion: Mentoring as a Transformative Tool

Mentoring has the potential to move beyond individual development to become a transformative tool for systems change. By equipping leaders to think systemically, act collaboratively, and drive collective impact, mentoring can play a key role in addressing the complex societal challenges of our time.

Funders and donors have a unique opportunity to support this shift by investing in mentoring programmes that empower leaders to drive systemic change. Because fundamentally, mentoring offers not just a way to develop better leaders but to create more resilient, adaptive systems capable of creating large-scale, sustainable impact.

Through mentoring, we can empower leaders to think beyond the boundaries of their own organisations, inspiring them to take on the challenges that matter most to our society and our planet.

The Human Edge is a leadership development organisation that has been supporting entrepreneurs, managers, and leaders since 2008.

We design and deliver integrated leadership, mentoring and coaching programmes that equip individuals, teams, and organisations with the skills, tools, and approaches needed to drive lasting positive change.

Building thriving organisations requires clear direction, confident leadership, strong relationships, and the ability to overcome challenges.

Our programmes and courses focus on deepening self-awareness, strengthening leadership capabilities, and fostering connections and cultures that help people, organisations, networks and ecosystems achieve greater results, faster.

We collaborate globally with governments, foundations, NGOs, and corporations, working across diverse contexts, cultures, and sectors, and in multiple languages.

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