

## CHAPTER 3

# The Skills You'll Acquire

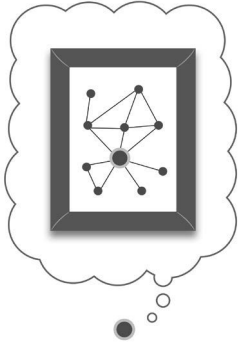
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We've spent a lot of time working with and studying leaders at intersections. Some were profoundly successful, many were profoundly unsuccessful, and most were somewhere in the middle. Common among all of them was a specific set of skills that were sometimes consciously used and other times not. As we worked to better understand these skills, we noticed that they fell into three relatively tidy groups. While “Think Like a System, Act Like a Network, and Lead Like a Movement” is a pithy slogan, it also helped us better understand what we were seeing and evolved into this book. Throughout the book, we'll share the skills, robust real-life examples, and exercises designed to help you develop your capacity to use them yourself.

The book is divided into three sections, with each chapter covering a particular skill. In each section we also explore at least one case study that encompasses a number of the skills discussed in that section.

## THINK LIKE A SYSTEM

Understand your desired impact and how it fits into a larger picture

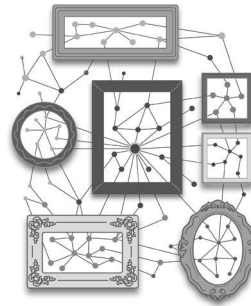


- Observing with curiosity
- Recognizing patterns and trends
- Taking a big step back
- Listening with empathy and reflection
- Tapping into intuition
- Reframing for a new way of seeing things

## ACT LIKE A NETWORK

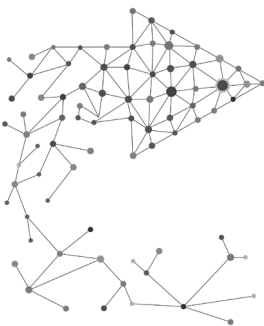
Connect your work to others and find new collaborators

- Acting as a part of a whole
- Getting out of your silo
- Learning other professional languages
- Code-mixing with intention
- Understanding hidden power
- Rewarding risk



## LEAD LIKE A MOVEMENT

Bring collaborators together and move them in a unified direction



- Building diversity
- Integrating multiple logics
- Establishing feedback loops
- Saying no
- Managing dissonance
- Managing incumbents
- Managing secret agendas

## Think like a system:

### Understand your desired impact and how it fits into a larger picture

Thinking like a system means changing our thinking from how we as individuals have an impact to how a larger community can have an impact (and what our role within that community is). This shift helps us to harness resources outside our own domain and has greater impact with less work—we get the full power of the system and its leverage to help us.

Much has been written about systems thinking in organizations. Peter Senge popularized these ideas, particularly in his much-revered book, *The Fifth Discipline*. According to Senge, the core of systems thinking “is to understand how it is that the problems that we all deal with, which are the most vexing, difficult, and intransigent, come about, and to give us some perspective on those problems [in order to] give us some leverage and insight as to what we might do differently.”<sup>1</sup>

Senge and many other systems thinkers help leaders see that all organizations are complex, constantly changing systems, and that they're dependent on many other interdependent systems. Additionally, systems thinkers encourage us to build learning into all we do to foster growth, flexibility, and the ability to manage change. Finally, they challenge us to always be alert to the world around us, scanning for relationships between seemingly disparate parts of our lives.

But what do we mean by “system”? A good example that Senge mentions is families. We are individuals, and we are usually part of a larger family system with its own unique collective history and patterns of interactions that might seem quite normal to us but completely foreign to someone else. In a work setting, when we are faced with a challenge, we utilize systems thinking to look beyond our own skills, to think about the whole system in which we're embedded—our team, our organization, our industry, and our partners. By looking at the whole system, we can see challenges, opportunities, and solutions that were impossible when looking at the situation through a smaller framework.

We've identified six skills that are particularly important to developing competence and proficiency in thinking like a system:

- **Observing with curiosity**
- **Recognizing patterns and trends**
- **Taking a big step back**
- **Listening with empathy and reflection**
- **Tapping into intuition**
- **Reframing for a new way of seeing things**

The next section of this book will dive deeply into each of these skills and help you find ways to develop your proficiency with them. A few people have refined these skills to accurately see otherwise hidden signals of change, like entrepreneurs who build companies that seem to solve problems we didn't even know we had. But even at their most basic application, these skills can produce profound results. Kenneth Mikkelsen and Harold Jarche published an article some years ago in the *Harvard Business Review* that illustrated why the skills developed in thinking like a system are so important for building great organizations and avoiding powerful problems.<sup>2</sup> The article shares a story about race car driver Juan Manuel Fangio in the 1950 Monaco Grand Prix, when he hit the brakes as he went screeching around a turn, just in time to avoid crashing into a multicar accident. An act of inspired luck? Pure athletic genius? Or using systems thinking?

Fangio had studied a photograph of a similar accident in a previous race at this very spot. He had noticed how the turned heads of fans in the stands gave a darker hue than one might expect in that area of the photograph. He saw the same dark color as he approached the turn and saved quite possibly not only his own life that day.

Mikkelsen and Jarche use this story to point out how leaders must

“scan the world for signals of change,”<sup>3</sup> but we see something much simpler in this tale: leaders, innovators, inventors, and others like them look around at what others are doing. Like a point guard in basketball, they are always scanning the environment for change. In observing how things are playing out in front of us, we start noticing how our world works—how the players on our teams or the fans in the stands are existing in relation to ourselves. In short, we are beginning to think like a system. Our success lies in our understanding of the relationships between everything we are seeing.

But, of course, simply *thinking* in a way that makes sense of our interrelated world is not enough. We will still be alone, dreaming of companionship. This leads us to our second set of skills, *Act Like a Network*.

## **Act like a network:**

### **Connect your work to others and find new collaborators**

Acting like a network allows you and the initiative you're working on to greatly magnify your impact and innovation. Networks have a remarkable ability to accomplish work efficiently because you're not trying to do everything all on your own. In fact, if you're tapping into networks, you're likely finding people who are much better at some of the work than you are. Perhaps more importantly, when you tap into networks, you're tapping into areas of knowledge you didn't know existed. You're learning what you didn't know you didn't know. This is why so many great companies and organizations take a network-based approach: it helps them uncover their blind spots and work in new ways. To be clear, we're not talking about connecting with others to promote yourself or your company. We're talking about acting like a computer network, a neural network—or a network of very different people and organizations.

To act like a network, you'll need to develop competence in the following areas:

- **Acting as a part of a whole**
- **Getting out of your silo**
- **Learning other professional languages**
- **Code-mixing with intention**
- **Understanding hidden power**
- **Rewarding risk**

These skills get you out of your own intellectual, organizational, and conceptual silos. There's so much you can learn, adapt, and harness from other people, perspectives, and organizations. When you act like a network, you're using not just your own skills and knowledge but also others' for results that far exceed what you can do on your own. John Kania and Mark Kramer, whom we referenced in our detour in the first chapter, generated a concept called "collective impact" that acts as good source material for this concept. They argued that the nonprofit sector, in particular (but we would argue you could extrapolate this out to any sector, really), "most frequently operates using an approach that we call isolated impact. It is an approach oriented toward finding and funding a solution embodied within a single organization, combined with the hope that the most effective organizations will grow or replicate to extend their impact more widely."<sup>4</sup>

Acting like a network sets you up to do more than just hope that someone will notice what you are doing. You bring a parade of potential partners into your sphere. And since you are already thinking like a system, you become a learning machine from all these new influences. Indeed, once you start looking at how other people perceive the world, you can start adopting their best practices. Are you planning on being a race car driver like Fangio anytime soon? Probably not. Might you easily find yourself remembering this practice in another scenario, noticing how a crowd is looking at something to anticipate a situation? Definitely!

In the aptly titled *Cracking the Network Code: Four Principles for Grantmakers*, written by Jane Wei-Skillern, Nora Silver, and Eric Heitz, the authors deliver ideas on how organizations can work together within and outside their sector to build their impact.<sup>5</sup> Principle four is to be a “node, not hub,” which means to see yourself as one part of a larger web of activity, not a central station. “‘Node thinking’ succeeds because resources of all types—leadership, money, talent—have dramatically more impact when leveraged across organizations, fields, and sectors.” This is, in essence, sharing the wealth to the greater benefit of all. You are bringing your work into something much larger. If you bring the best of what you have and I bring the best of what I have, surely what we have together is better than what either of us has individually. To accomplish this as effectively as possible, the authors suggest getting “multiple boats in the water.” In other words, success is about how many different boats can make up your fleet, not about being the biggest boat in the fleet.

It might seem like race car drivers like Fangio, or famous tennis players or golfers, or CEOs, or presidents, or movie stars, accomplish what they do by being the biggest, most important boats in the water. And they certainly do have leadership skills and technical skills that magnify their impact. But time and time again, when you take a closer look, the best and the brightest are backed by the best teams, institutions, and partnerships.

As Kania and Kramer argue, however, “collaboration is nothing new. The social sector is filled with examples of partnerships, networks, and other types of joint efforts. . . . Unlike most collaborations, collective impact initiatives involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants.”<sup>6</sup>

We couldn't agree more. This leads us to our final set of skills, *Lead Like a Movement*.

## **Lead like a movement:**

### **Bring collaborators together and point them in a unified direction**

Movements allow us to think greater and change our relationship with the world. We often think of social movements in terms of activists and politics, but many successful companies have built social movements into their work. IKEA built a social movement to make highly designed, fashionable Euro-chic furniture affordable for everyone. Companies like Apple (“Think Different”) or Volkswagen (“Drivers Wanted”) build entire marketing campaigns around the movement of people you can join by buying their products.

Governments, too, utilize social movement approaches in their work, particularly in public health campaigns, such as stopping smoking and reducing vaping behavior. Traditionally, governments try to change citizens’ behaviors through laws and regulations. In social movement approaches, a government aims to galvanize large numbers of people into acting in an organized way and motivating people to take political actions. In these cases, the government becomes the catalyst, and their work becomes so much more powerful.

Leading like a movement is where you’ll seriously heighten the impact of the system you’ve co-created, leverage the network you’ve gathered, and harness powerful forces to use for change. You’re tapping into people’s deeper needs and desires for creating a better world—even if it’s hard. Think Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, or Greta Thunberg. They brought diverse groups of people together to accomplish the impossible. But they weren’t, at least initially, elected to be leaders. They weren’t handed authority, and others weren’t told to follow them. They just helped others around them understand the flow of the traffic of their movement and helped them see their role in it. Over time and through their attention to aligning a network of people to move together in a single direction, people turned to them to lead.

You don’t have to be Gandhi to create change. And change can happen at the intersection of an entire country’s political and social system, but



it can also happen at your weekly company meeting. Either way, learning to lead others in new ways can be challenging. Minimum viable consortia (MVC) is a newer model of collaboration recently advanced by a group of researchers called the Stakeholder Alignment Collaborative. Building on agile methodologies in entrepreneurship, the MVC approach aims to simplify collaboration by not overplanning it. The model encourages collaborations to (1) align their interests, (2) act together and separately, and (3) adjust the collaboration by reviewing progress, resolving disputes, and celebrating success. We aim to keep things similarly simple for you.<sup>7</sup>

A better world is just that—something improved from where it was before because we've built out a process to fix it. We seek this in our own lives in small ways, with our small victories solving our day-to-day problems. By observing these leaders, you can see the impact we can have when we bring stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to an intersection to solve something quite huge.

We've worked with and studied movement leaders and have distilled the skills they utilize to the following:

- **Building diversity**
- **Integrating multiple logics**
- **Establishing feedback loops**
- **Saying no**
- **Managing dissonance**
- **Managing incumbents**
- **Managing secret agendas**

Acquiring these skills and using them in your work with other sectors will magnify your impact. Mathematician and philosopher Antanas Mockus, mayor of Bogotá, Columbia, from 1995 to 1997 and again from 2001 to 2003, is a great example of a movement leader. His movement?

Ending traffic fatalities. When Mockus first took office, over 1,300 people died each year in Bogotá in traffic accidents.<sup>8</sup> When he arrived in office, he inherited a 1991 constitutional reform strengthening the mayor's ability to work within the confines of national laws and regulations. Mockus then issued 350,000 thumbs-up/thumbs-down placards to the public to call out the dangerous behavior of their fellow citizens. The city traffic police department was abolished, and traffic safety became the responsibility of the general metropolitan force. Starting with Mockus and continuing with other mayors, bike and bus lanes were built. The problem was tackled from all angles, each sector with its own agendas. Mockus couldn't just tell them what to do if he wanted sustainable results. In fact, democracies as a political system are built to keep leaders from establishing lasting agendas without buy-in from the people. They sustain only if the leaders can deftly maneuver behind closed doors and build a groundswell for the work. And the groundswell is ongoing. In 2017, the city announced a "Vision Zero" road safety plan—a day in which the number of road fatalities in Bogotá is zero.<sup>9</sup>

Yes, Mockus was the mayor, but he was certainly far from a political insider and the problem he wanted to solve was far more than one office could achieve. He played one critical role that he earned as much as he was given: he took all those great teams, institutions, and sectors and deftly pointed them in a unified direction.

You can too.