



Systems Thinking, Wicked Issues and Leadership

Written by Louise Beard, Director of Housing, Assets and Communities at Coastline Housing and a member of the Housing LIN SW Leadership Set.

A time for learning and reflection is often a rare occurrence in my busy schedule. But thanks to Belinda Weir, Director of Leadership, University of Birmingham, Health Services Management Centre, thinking about leadership was exactly what I was doing at the South West Housing Leadership Set in Bristol recently.

‘Systems Thinking, Wicked Issues and Leadership’ were the themes of this inspiring session. The discussion went from walnuts to resilience in the space of two hours!

A walnut analogy very interestingly got my brain stimulated! Visualising it, cracking it and its shape... fascinating with all of its mishapes and interrelated pieces. This picture then shifted rapidly to a deep and dark element of how, ultimately, if a seed is planted it will not produce any nuts until long into the future once I will have left the earth, giving only a healthy return in the long term. This very analogy stirred some deep thinking around how time is critical and that not every target can be a quick win but that equally important are the long term goals. Patience can often be critical to reap the reward!

I made a new discovery about A Edward Deming (1900-1993) who was an American Statistician who believed that a network of interdependent components work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system and that, ultimately, a system must have an aim. Without the aim, there is no system. But it prompts the question - do we, as people, always know what we want? His view was that, in order to understand this, it is beneficial to monitor behaviour which will often provide the answer. Clearly, in our world today an easy and obvious practical example of this is on line shopping where our preferences are monitored and we are guided as to what we might want or even believe we need!

The thinking in the session then moved on to how the best leaders encourage innovation and have multiple perspectives (the Meyers Briggs model). They Influence rather than control. How very true this is. There is a theory that human systems are organic, living and therefore cannot be controlled, measured or fixed as if they were machines. Synergy, relationships and connections matter. This all rings very true, in my experience.

But, for me, the final thought that I have come away with is that the sheer brilliance of a great leader is that of resilience. Someone who is able to hold their nerve and is

always observant and questioning (the 5 questions why?) To be a great leader I need to ask the right questions but not necessarily know all the answers.

This final thought is clearly the reason why I personally am committed to being part of the South West Housing LIN Leadership Set. It uniquely brings together senior managers in the region from housing, health and social care sectors. It enables me to question other leaders with a wide and varied skill set and develop my own knowledge and skills whilst sharing them with others. I might not realise it, but I am learning and developing knowledge constantly. Time for reflection on the train on the way home was extremely valuable and a positive way to end an enlightening day.

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