

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

Alert. Relaxed. Collegial.



**Recap of 6/21/23 session with Dr. Charlice Hurst,
U. of Notre Dame, Mendoza College of Business:**

**How mental models and untaught skills impact our ability to
effect systems change**

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

It was a privilege to be joined in June by someone who has looked deeply into the mindset and skills it takes to tackle complex problems and make sustainable change. Although many of us are attracted by the idea of systems thinking and are keen to unearth root causes, we may think that simply mastering analytical tools is all we need. What Charlice Hurst has been looking at is the mental models and fundamental capabilities that can keep us from maximizing the use of those tools to make change. As she said in the invitation, "Being able to see and question taken-for-granted assumptions and cherished beliefs requires self-awareness, humility, emotion regulation, and perspective-taking. We don't learn these things in school." Observing this reality in her classrooms has made her think about how to change that, at both individual and organizational levels.

The Iceberg Model can help broaden our perspectives

Charlice began by showing us the [Iceberg Model diagram](#), a tool for guiding systemic thinking more deeply. It's used by substituting an event the thinker cares about, working down through the patterns, systems, and mental models, and then moving up and down between levels as insights occur. A question to consider last is, "Does the iceberg model help broaden your perspective? If so, how might this new perspective be helpful?"

Systems maps can help us discover where to intervene

Another question is: "Consider the concept of entry, or 'leverage' points. These are points at which intervention in a system could lead to its transformation. Does the exercise show you any new entry points at which you are inspired to intervene?" This idea led Charlice to display a systems map about smoking in priority populations so that we could see how intervening at the wrong place in a system, or in a counterproductive way, creates feedback loops that can produce unintended consequences and hold a problem in place.

If you want to think about this using public service systems maps, visit the Public Sector Consortium's examples at <https://govleaders.org/leadership-dilemma.htm> (scroll down). This collection was painstakingly created by a small group of leaders in this network and elsewhere over 20 years ago. The maps are every bit as relevant and useful today.

Charlice mentioned that her students were uncomfortable with the idea of examining their assumptions, and that it was difficult to get them to confront their belief systems. There didn't appear to be anyone in the session who thought that was limited to students. Apparently, if systems change is hard, looking in the mirror is exponentially harder – but necessary if we want to change systems in ways that work, and last.

The IDGs framework presents 5 dimensions and 23 skills & qualities

Charlice made us aware of an ongoing international effort to identify skills and qualities that could help inculcate systems thinking among leaders and everyone else. Browse <https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>, see who's working on this (including long-time American systems thinkers Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer), and note that you're invited to become involved in large or small ways if this speaks to you.

One of the things Charlice mentioned toward the end was learning how to lead without formal authority. This sparked enthusiastic sharing on several topics that could be sessions in their own right. What happens if we:

- Decide to slow things down in meetings and listen deeply?
- Radically redesign a college math course to wake students up?
- Choose curiosity, humility, and continuous learning over hubris?

These stories all came from people who happen to have formal authority, who work in power-sharing, energizing ways that open the door to better outcomes.

Participant affiliations

ASPANational Capital Area Chapter
BM Martin Solutions
Department of the Air Force
Department of Education, retired
Department of Homeland Security, retired
Government Accountability Office

Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority
Old Dominion University
Securities and Exchange Commission
University of Notre Dame, Mendoza College of Business
Walmart Global Sourcing

Participants joined from North Carolina, Louisiana, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and the Washington, DC Metro Area.

Each time, we begin with a round of introductions to warm up the space. Afterward, participants are sent a "Who was in the room" message to facilitate ongoing connection. Please consider joining us in the future. If you know of others at any level of experience who are in favor of better public leadership, who would like to be part of this flat conversational network, please invite them to contact me so I can add them to the list.

Sincerely,
Kitty Wooley
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