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Thoughts from Staff College.....the ninth in our series of Faculty blogs

A system creates some of its own potential

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In my previous contribution to this series of blogs, I wrote a letter to my younger self and recognised the extraordinary examples of clinical leadership, decision making, and implementation of changes done with previously unimaginable speed. Subsequently David Lilley referenced Kurt Lewin: "you never fully understand a system until you try to change it'.

As leaders, many of you will have tried to change 'The System' with varying degrees of success. In doing that, you will have learnt valuable lessons about how the system works and why and where it does not work. But what is 'The System' that is so often talked about in the third person in healthcare? 'The System' is frequently credited, or more often, blamed for lots of things. We frequently hear of "they did not allow …" or "the system does not work that way". There is no doubt that the NHS is a system, that is *a set of parts coordinated to accomplish a set of goals* [1]. This definition is from a rocket scientist, or more accurately, a Professor of Business Administration who also worked at NASA called C. West Churchman. Over many years he studied systems in their various forms including education, planning, information, and health. One observation he made is that *every system is embedded in a larger system* [1].

So, let me return to the nebulous description of 'The System' or 'They'. As a leader, for your patients and your staff it is very likely that they see you as 'The System'. That is quite a scary thought! You lead a system that is embedded within the larger system called the NHS. You are responsible and accountable for how your system works, for its culture, its ways of working and its care. As a leader, you are both an output of the system, in that you provide patient care, and you are also part of the inner process of the system: Put another way, as a leader, you are part of the innards of your system. So, to quote West Churchman again, *a system creates some of its own potential* [1].

A final thought: what is the potential that you are creating in your system? Highly capable leaders consider not just the output of their system but how well it works and how well they develop their teams.

References

1. C. West Churchman; The Systems Approach (Delta Publishing 1968)