

## Setting Conditions for Success

by Royce Holladay

*If, as an employee, it's your job to please your boss,  
you are working for the wrong customer.*

*Patrick Dolan*

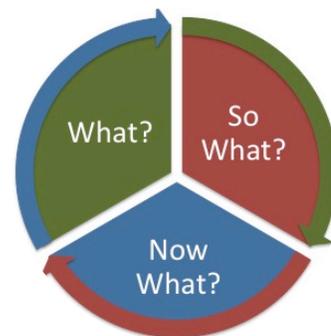
In a complex human system, [you can't be certain of](#) “top-down” control; [you may not be able to](#) predict of the future. Your every interaction shapes emergent patterns of behavior and decision making. The world you know is open to known and unknown forces that influence from inside and outside your system's immediate boundaries. You and others in the system are connected to each other in non-linear ways, blurring the view of cause and effect. Decisions you make today are based in what you learned yesterday, and your actions shape tomorrow, often in surprising ways. Every action at any scale has the potential to influence patterns at any other scale, yet no one action can be guaranteed to cause an intended outcome. While you see and make sense of what is happening across the system and you know your actions matter, you can't really take direct action on the parts of the system you cannot touch.

In such a system, how do you define the role of the leader? What is the leader's job, and does that job belong to just one individual in the system? Does that job belong to just those who are “in charge” of smaller segments of a larger system? Is leadership still defined by organization charts, with specific titles in boxes leading to cascading lists of smaller boxes and connecting lines?

What if you could re-define leadership in such a way that each individual in the system stepped into the potential they have to shape the system's success? Consider what it might mean if, at each level of your organization or community, each individual understood their role in setting conditions for success for those who work one step closer to the ultimate “customers”.

- In a school district, the board and superintendent set conditions for the executive cabinet to do their best work. The executive cabinet members understand their roles to set conditions for the middle-management staff—directors and principals—to do their best work. Middle managers understand their roles to set conditions for service providers—coordinators, line workers, and teachers—to do their best work. Then ultimately, service providers would set conditions for students to do their best work.
- In a government agency, commissioners would set conditions for directors. Directors would set conditions for middle managers. Middle managers would set conditions for service personnel. Service personnel would set conditions for citizens to access the services and benefits offered by the agency.
- In retail or service businesses, from the board of directors to the sales or service staff members, each level would focus on setting conditions to enable success and high performance at the next level closer to the customer.

What would this approach to leadership require? It would require individual and organizational adaptive capacity at each scale, focused on the ultimate direction or goal of the whole system. In human systems dynamics (HSD) we define adaptive capacity as the ability to see, understand, and influence patterns of interaction, behavior, and performance [to reach the](#) greatest fit for the system at all scales. We define [adaptive capacity—and leadership](#)—as engaging in iterative cycles of Adaptive Action to inform every action and decision.



*What does it mean to “see” in this definition of adaptive capacity?* It means that you look across the scales of the system. You watch patterns and gather data about what is happening inside and outside the immediate boundaries of your own part of the system. It means that you sense the tension, and the conditions around that tension. It means that you pay attention to your own role and your potential impact on the system, learning what you can from mistakes and successes, opportunities and challenges, collaboration and innovations.

*So what does it mean to “understand” in this definition of adaptive capacity?* It means that you make sense of what you see, in the context of other scales and in the context of the ultimate direction and fitness of the whole system. It means that you explore the tensions you see, making sense of conditions that shape the tension its fitness for purpose across the whole. To “understand” is to look for options for action that fit with the purposes, expectations, and direction of the system where you work. Your “sense making” is not just about you and your own wants and needs. It’s not about making management or workers or customers wrong. It’s about standing in perpetual curiosity around what you see and experience and the impact on the whole organization.

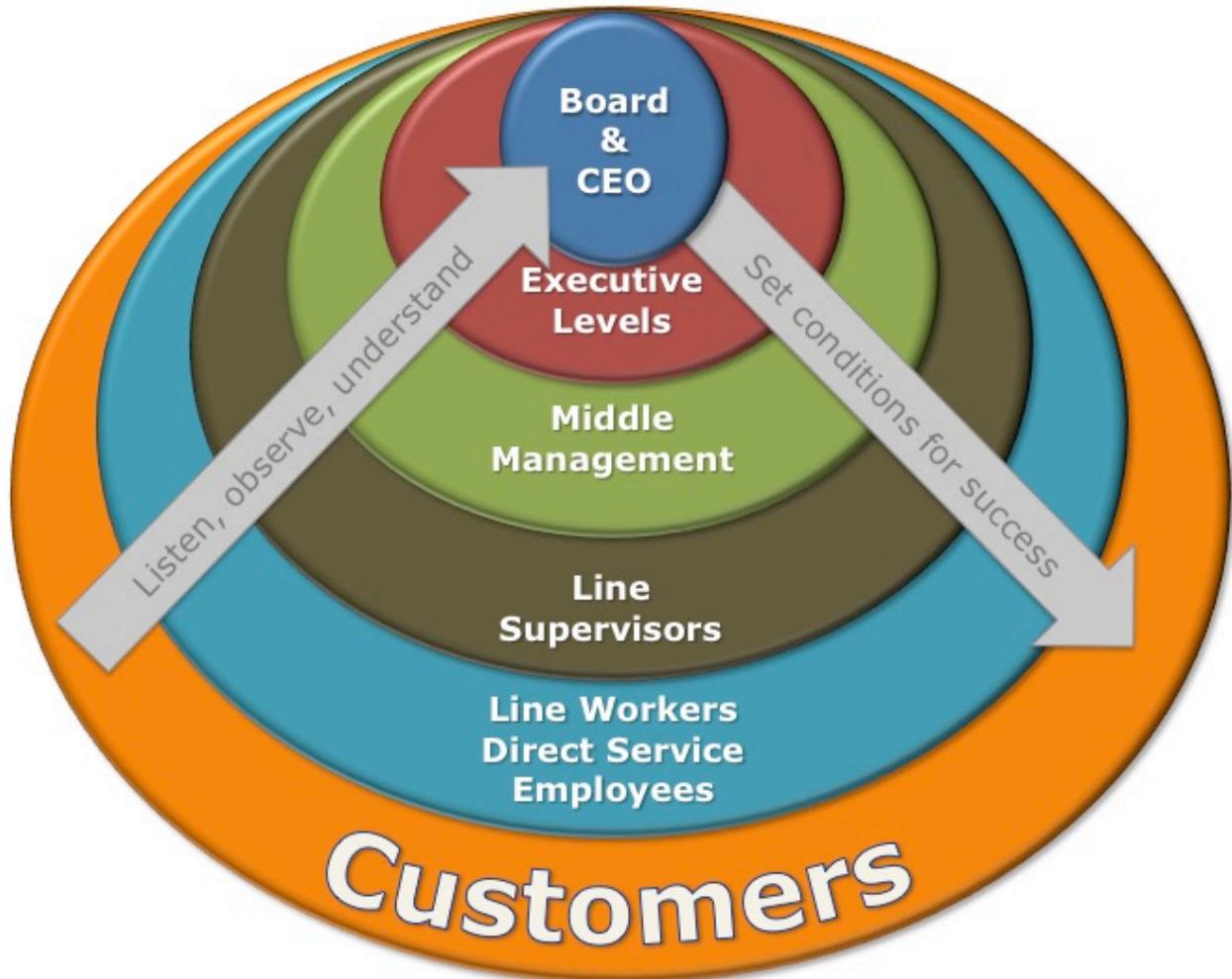
*Now what does it mean to “influence” in this definition of adaptive capacity?* It means that you take action that contributes to the purpose of the greater whole. You take action; you don’t wait for others to take action. You contribute to the purposes of the greater whole; you don’t just work on your own segment as a disconnected island in the greater system. You attend to the support and service for those who are at the next level closest to the customer or outcomes of the system. You take action to ensure they have the information, resources, skills, and authority to shape patterns of service and support for the people they serve.

In work shaped by the principles of HSD, this definition of adaptive capacity means that leadership is shared. No one person is the “lone” leader who guides the hordes of employees toward some poetically phrased description of his or her vision. Each individual is a leader, taking informed and wise action to set conditions for those around them to do their best work. Each and every individual is a leader, armed with information, resources, skills, and authority. Each leader engages in continuous cycles Adaptive Action, to see, understand, and influence the patterns around them that contribute to the system’s fitness and resilience in the greater landscape.

That’s how we define leadership. Try [it](#) and see how it shifts the patterns in your own system. If you want to know more about this approach to leadership in your world, visit [www.hsdinstitute.org](http://www.hsdinstitute.org) and <http://www.AdaptiveAction.org> to find rich and useful resources. Then let us know what you learn!

--Royce

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*Leadership in a complex human system:  
To set conditions for success  
at the next level closer to the  
ultimate work of the system.*