Community Energy Association

RSPN Lunch and Learn: Change Management and Systems Thinking

April 15, 2026

GREEN MUNICIPAL FUND
FONDS MUNICIPAL VERT

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How to use this resource

This resource has been co-created by everyone in attendance at the meeting on April 15, 2025. It's complementary to the meeting summary that can be found at https://www.communityenergy.ca/rspn/ and includes downloadable graphics, links to additional resources, and more.

This resource can be shared with people outside the network.

You will also find useful resources and links, identified by these icons:

Downloadable resource for presentations & reports

External resource link

Exercise or take-away activity

Change Management and Systems Thinking – April 15, 2026

Meeting Objectives:

- To share knowledge on change management and systems thinking to support change management.

Highlights:

- Kari Tyler, of Kari Tyler Consulting, presented on systems thinking and applying a systems thinking lens to support change management in the context of climate adaptation
- Kari noted that climate change will represent *continual* change throughout our lifetimes and adaptation will, in turn, require adaptive systems that can continually learn within, and adapt to, widescale and multi-faceted change
- Kari highlighted the ISET Resilience Framework, particularly noting the systems that influence each other and each others' resilience: people, governance and culture, infrastructure and ecosystems. Each is affected by climate change and, applying a systems thinking lens to adaptation, each should be considered in resilience planning in order to develop a resilient system overall.
- The group shared their views on best practices in managing change
- Kari gave examples of change management models, highlighting that climate change adaptation requires models of change that encompass continual learning loops in an adaptive system
- Finally, Kari discussed the importance of relationships and culture in change management, requiring top-down leadership support and the cultural dynamics to support change

The full recording can be found at https://www.communityenergy.ca/rspn

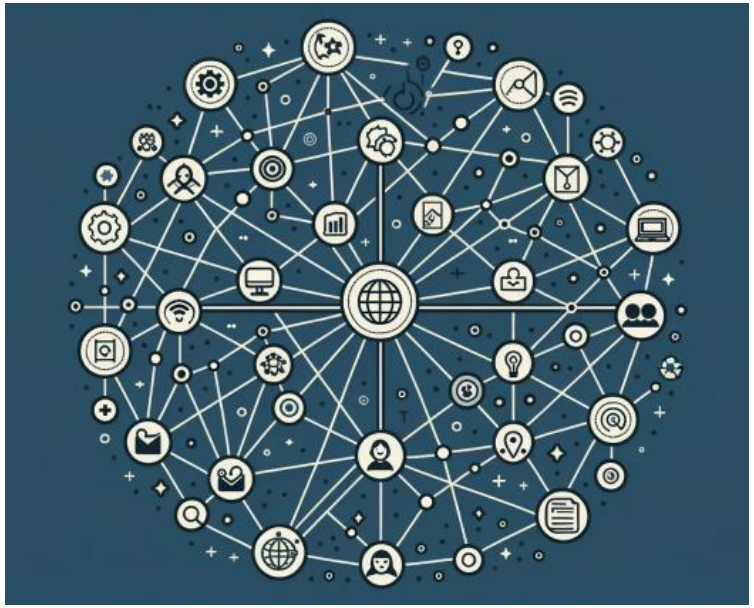
Key points

1. ‘Systems Thinking’ can be used as a framework for organizing your approach to resilience
2. ‘Change Management’ is the work, and often what is most challenging
3. Relationships are the engine by which we drive change and collective action

What do we do with the wicked problem of climate change?

- We are already experiencing climate change and will experience it for the remainder of our lives, even with significant action to address it
- There is a contrast between the reality that we currently inhabit (climate change) and the worldview that informs the systems that we operate in
- Our governance structures, legislation, design guidelines etc. were created in a time when we assumed world and weather systems would not change significantly over time
- Our systems need to change to meet the new normal of ‘continuous change’, rather than a resistance to change

Navigating Uncertainty: Think about complex adaptive systems



When thinking about ‘continuous change’ it’s useful to consider the systems we work in. Our governance bodies, decision-making structures, policies, relationships, etc. are all part of a Complex Adaptive System.

Characteristics of Complex Adaptive Systems:

- Dynamic
- Nonlinear
- Many entities (elements, components or agents) influence each other

Linear models of change are unlikely to align with the reality of how our systems function in practice.

Western University (uwo.ca)

Characteristics of Resilient Systems

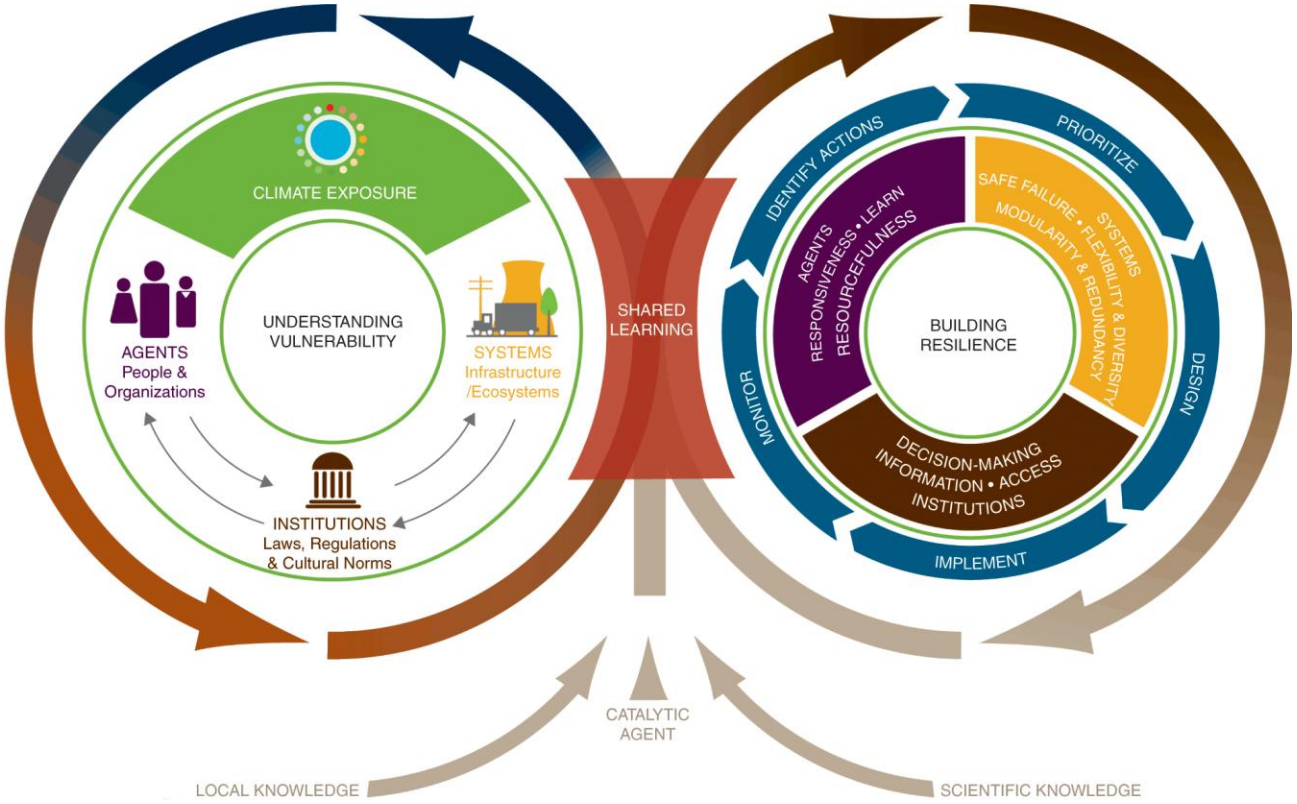
When considering whether a system as a whole is resilient, consider the following systems, noting that these overlap and are not siloes:
Infrastructure, people, governance and culture, and ecosystems

INFRASTRUCTURE: transportation networks, power, internet, water, bridges, etc.

Resilient infrastructure is: flexible and diverse; includes redundancy or modularity (ability to change parts or segments); and plans for safe failure. The latter is particularly important in a changing world as it may not be effective or efficient to plan for full adaptation in all places but, rather, plan for safe failure.

Examples:

- Protocols for closing roads in flood conditions vs. engineering solutions to prevent flooding in all cases
- Multiple roads in and out of a community
- Distributed power networks, such as solar and battery storage at critical facilities
- Green infrastructure for stormwater management and urban heat reduction



ISET Resilience Framework (ISET)
A Framework for Climate Resilience (Taylor & Francis)

Characteristics of Resilient Systems

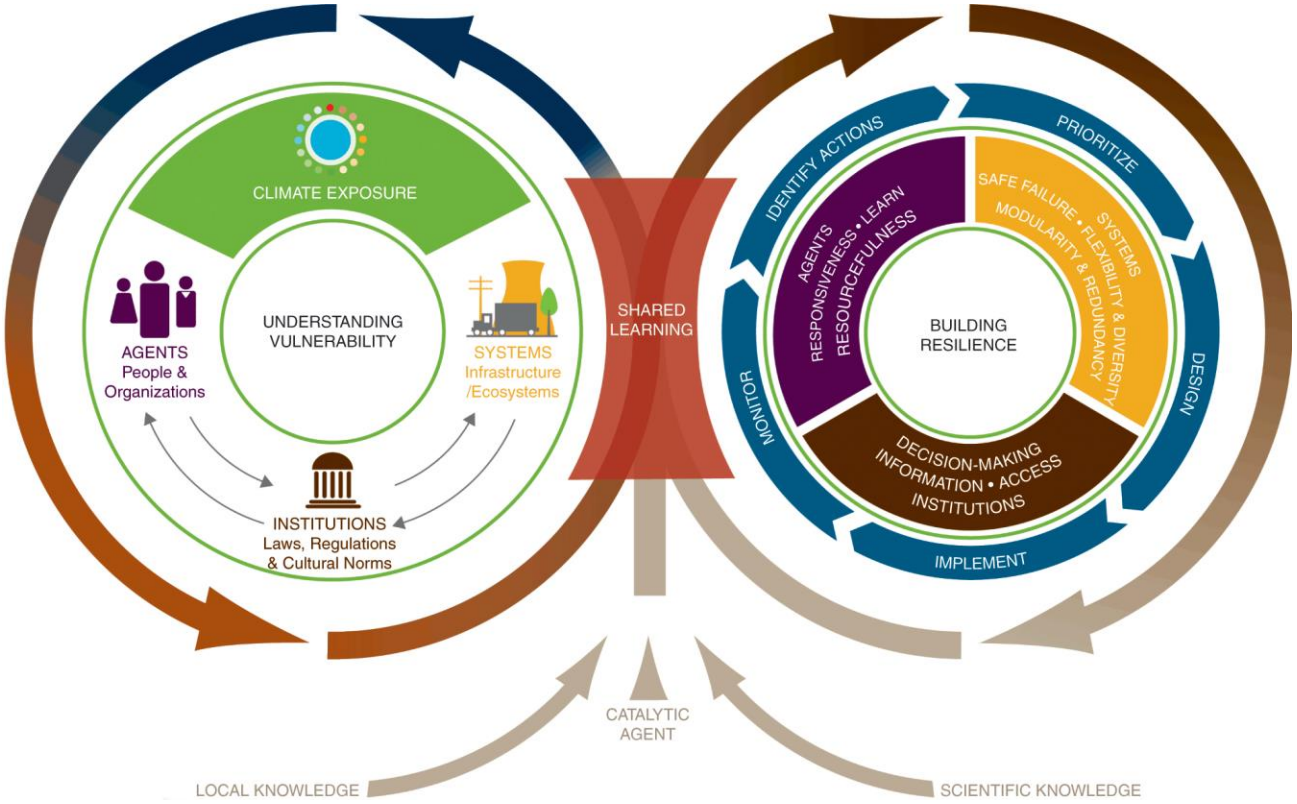
When considering whether a system, as a whole is resilient, consider the following systems, albeit noting that these overlap and are not siloes

PEOPLE: people and small groups, including individuals, households, communities, businesses

Resilient people are: responsive (able to organize and reorganize, adapting to change); resourceful (able to mobilize assets, information, staff and other resources; and have the capacity to learn (retain knowledge, innovate, improve processes, practice)

Examples:

- Neighbourhood-level preparedness networks and community resilience hubs (i.e. cooling or clean-air centres)
- Accessible community adaptation training and resources for households, businesses, and community groups
- Emergency response and business continuity planning
- Household emergency response prepping



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Characteristics of Resilient Systems

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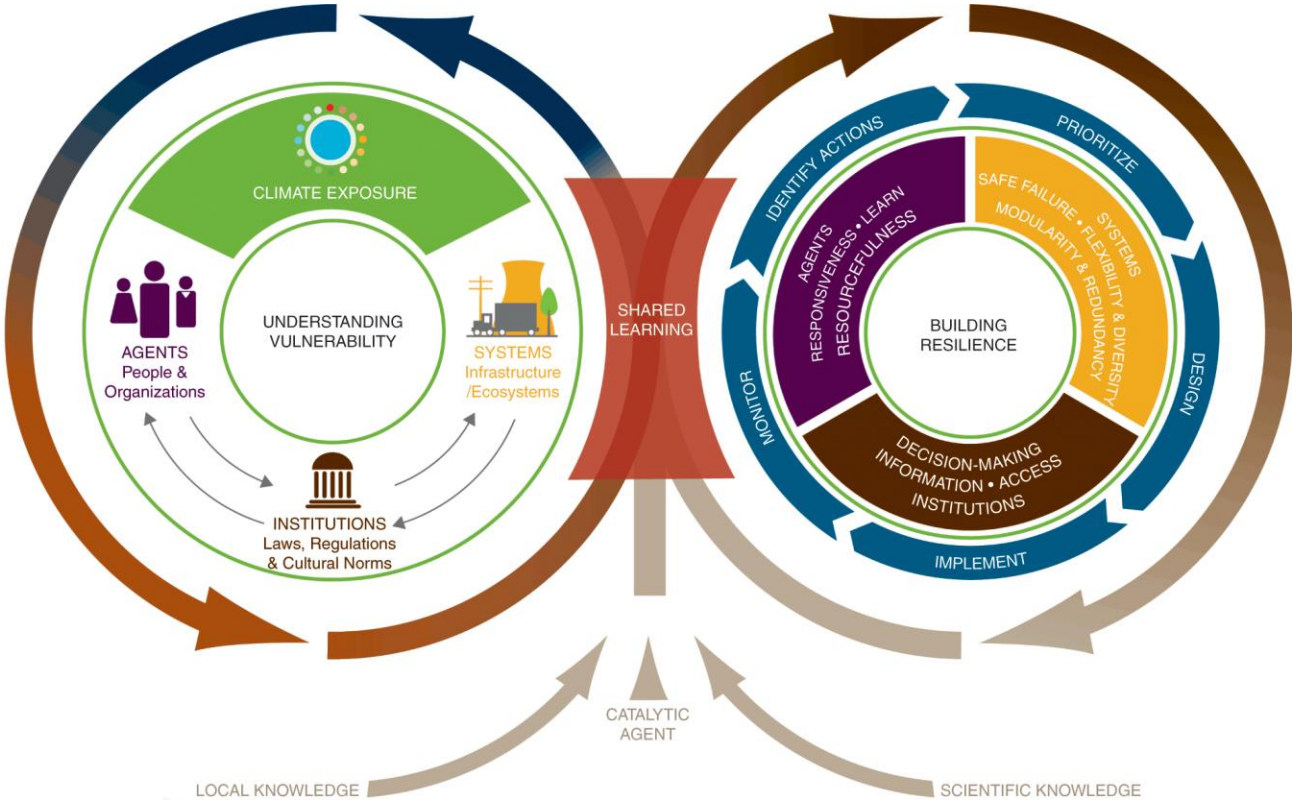
GOVERNANCE & CULTURE: the systems that define and regulate the relationships people have with people and ecosystems; the systems of the 'how'

Resilient governance structures are: intentionally inclusive and equity-focused, including intentionally including those currently underrepresented; engage with interest-holders and the wide variety of people impacted by the governance mandate; practice foresight and gather new knowledge, with good monitoring and evaluation for reflection and learning; representative and accountable, practicing transparency

Examples:

- Cross-sector coordination and planning (internally and externally)
- Inclusive engagement with underrepresented and highly impacted groups
- Monitoring and evaluation to support adaptive planning



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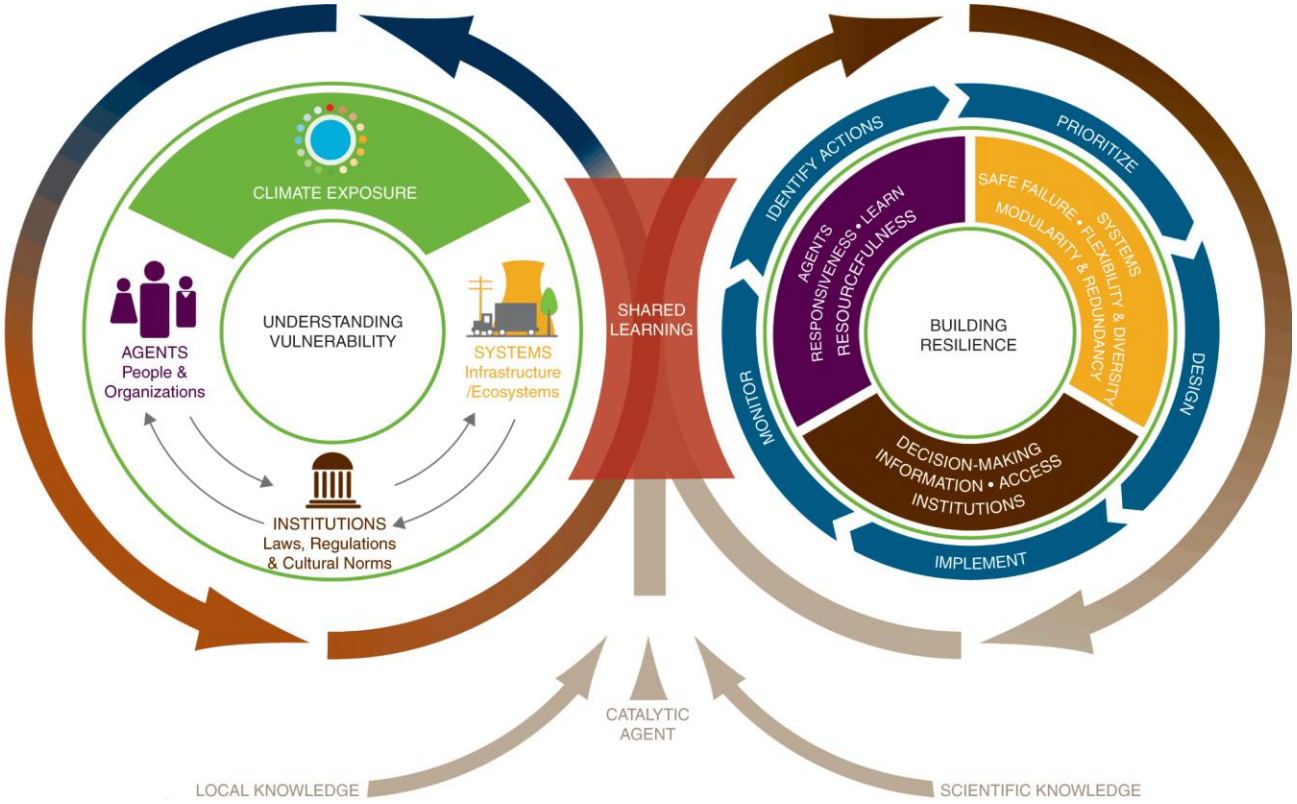
ECOSYSTEMS: natural environment systems, e.g. agricultural land, parks, wetlands, fishing grounds, forests

Resilient ecosystems are: flexible (meet different roles and so can adapt to changing conditions); diverse (diverse range of species with different sensitivities to varying conditions, and that may provide support/benefit to other species); connected (supporting migratory patterns, ability of wildlife to move to safe spaces and in keeping with natural behavior); protected (through governance structures, land use decisions, natural asset management, stewardship)

Examples:

- Nature corridors for biodiversity connectivity
- Restored and protected natural areas, reserves, and parks
- Climate resilient and regenerative agricultural practices



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Group reflections on managing change

Communication:

- Communicate early and often, with transparency
- Give space for input from those the change affects

Planning:

- Anticipate fall-out from the proposed change and get ahead of it
- Make space to hospice old systems
- Fail fast using an adaptive approach

Culture:

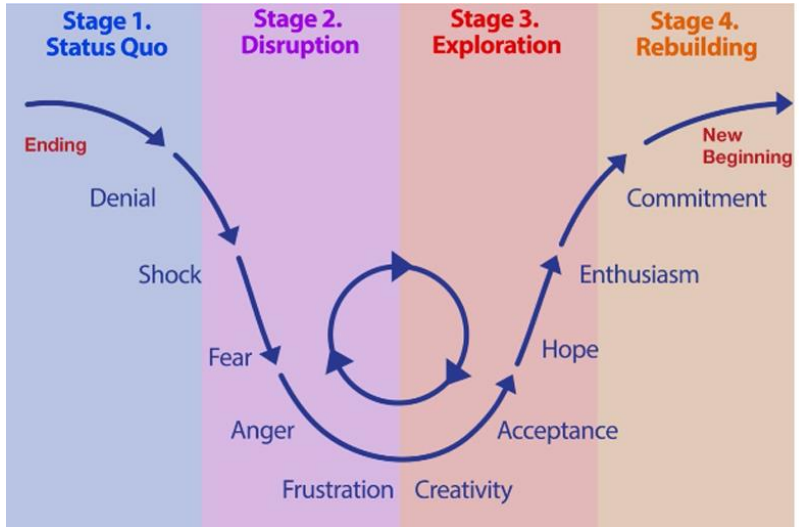
- Make change human-centered, managing people not just process
- Understand the emotions and threats people may be feeling along the way
- For those trying to effect change, understand that people's resistance to change is not personal
- Build a culture that is receptive to change – it doesn't have to be scary or overwhelming. When thinking about climate adaptation, let's also consider the opportunities and benefits, and promote those.
- Approach change with curiosity rather than a 'knowing' mind. If we think we know the absolute outcome of a change, we may close off to the unknown positive impacts that may arise.
- Acknowledge that grief plays a role in climate work, as people let go of old systems and acknowledge the reality of the systems that have created climate change (as well as other inequities and injustices)

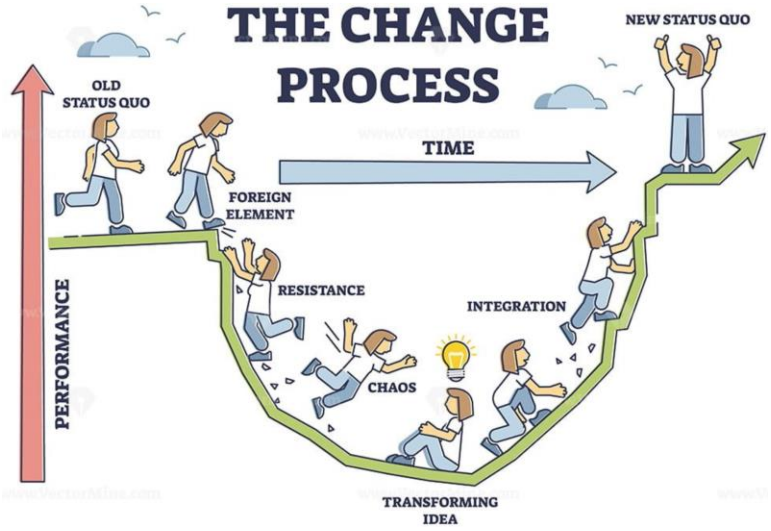
Change Models

These model diagrams capture the natural emotional arcs arising through change, and the planning processes needed to effect it.

However, all these models consider a *singular* change.

In climate work, we consider *continual* change and process adjustment.



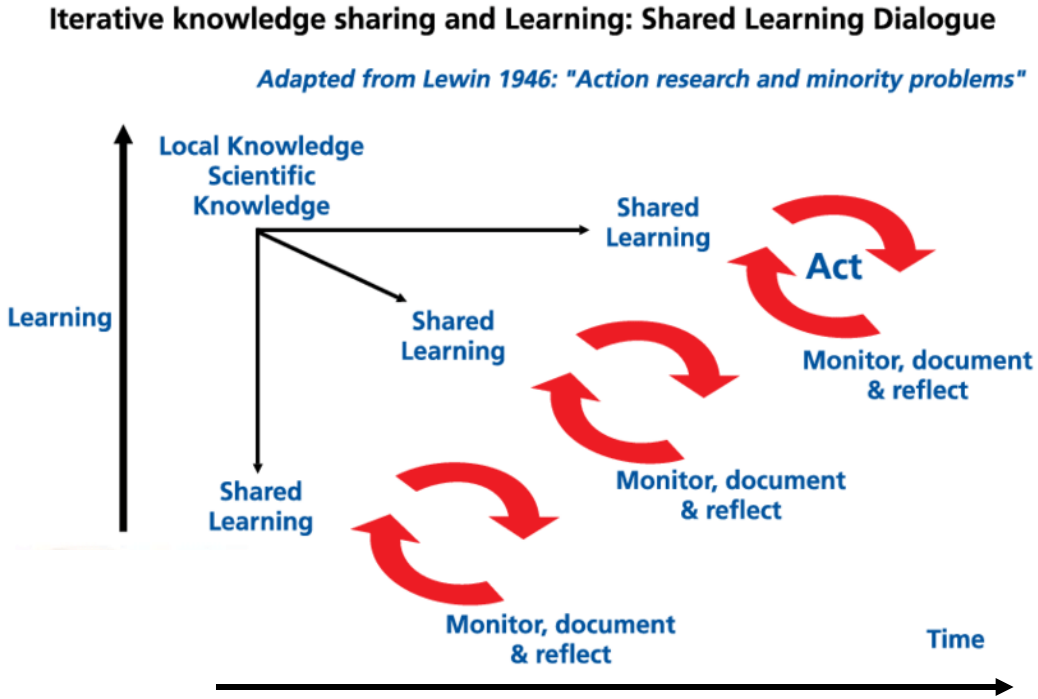


Change is about learning

This change model diagram better reflects the *continuous learning* and *adaptive cycles* needed in long-term change management and shared learning

It reflects iterative, continuous learning and action, brings in interdisciplinary participation and varied knowledge systems, and a basis of action research principles

ISET International Shared Learning Dialogue (ISET)
The Time is Now: Itn'l Workshop on Sustainable and Climate Resilient Urban Development (IRADe & ISET)

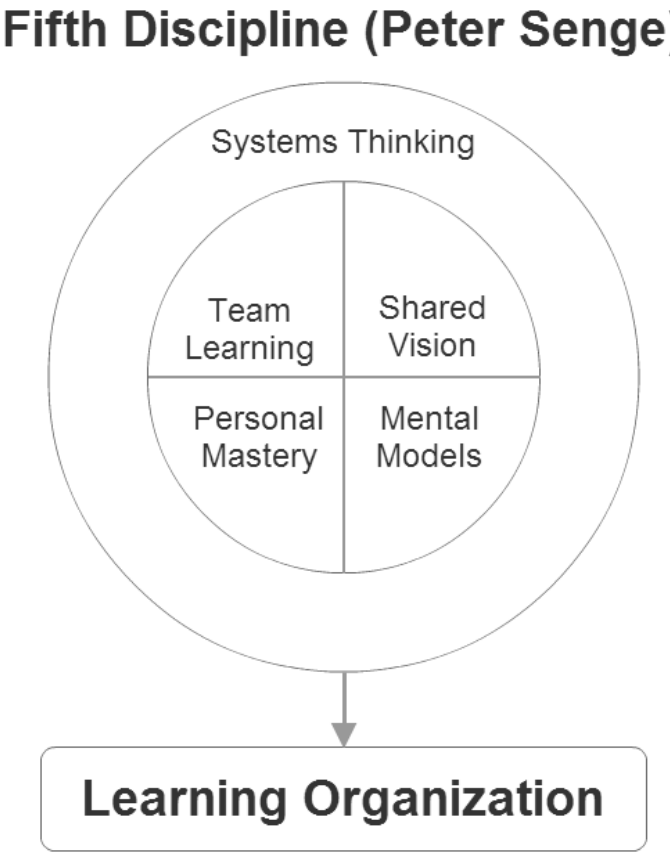


Source: ISET

Change Management

Systems thinking is a key requirement to becoming a learning organization. Additionally, all four of the following, employed by leadership and not just individuals, is needed to become a learning organization.

- **Mental models:** recognizing the assumptions and habits that shape decisions.
- **Shared vision:** creating a common understanding of where the organization is trying to go.
- **Team learning:** making space for people to learn, reflect, and problem-solve together.
- **Personal mastery:** building individual skills, confidence, and capacity to work in new ways.



Change Management

Intellectual understanding, emotional engagement and sustained action are all needed to effect organizational change. Information and data are needed to conduct assessments. But we also need to ensure that stakeholders are brought along by feeling safe, heard, included and appreciated. Finally, sustained action, the positive energy of change, carries actions through implementation.

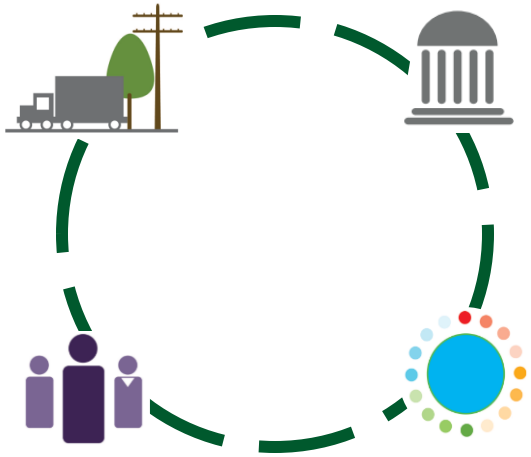
It may be that taking action on easy wins or smaller actions may support sustaining action by creating successes that can be communicated, build trust with leadership, and secure continual buy-in.

Change Management

Things to remember:

- Mindset: challenge the status quo, be open to asking why we do things the way we do
- Sometimes small, subtle changes have the biggest impacts
- Commitment to continuous learning / being a learning organization is key
- Time-saving may not save time
- Organizational change has to be top down, at some point. There are limits to what can be achieved without top-down support
- Culture change can start bottom up
- Change is difficult when the mechanisms to do the thing that is needed are not yet in place. This is particularly true for climate action, where there are a lot of mechanisms, policies, funding, data, and capacity that still needs to be unlocked.
- Your own resilience is also important. Know and care for yourself and your limits (and your team's).

Systems Lens on Opportunities and Challenges



Systems theory notes that all things are connected; this is one of the challenges and opportunities related to climate adaptation work.

As you understand the varying ways systems are connected, you may gain a view on different ways to effect change and build resilience. If headway is difficult to gain in one area, it could be that approaching a connected area yields better success and affects the former. There may be a spillover effect where building resilience in one area is viewed as a success by those controlling other areas, and we can be more likely to gain buy-in for further action.

Applying a systems lens may help adaptation planning within complex systems.

Adaptation Leadership competencies – culture change leaders

Leading adaptation work also means being a culture change leader, needing a large toolkit of both technical and human skills. No one person will excel across all of these areas, and so needs understanding enough to practice humility and find the appropriate teams, peers, and experts.

Competencies of a culture change adaptation leader include:

- Understanding of climate science and climate impacts
- And a diverse toolkit of complementary skills and know-how:
  - Understanding risk
  - Assessment process
  - Engagement and communication
  - Foresight and strategic planning
  - Understanding mental models and systems thinking
  - Intercultural competency
  - Anti-racism, equity & human rights

Adaptation Leadership: Creating Islands of Sanity

- **Generosity**
- **Creativity**
- **Kindness**

From Margaret Wheatley's *Restoring Sanity* and *Who Do We Choose to Be?*:
Creating 'islands of sanity' means building spaces for meaningful work that awaken generosity, creativity, and kindness.

Climate action and related challenges are large and the sense of an onslaught from the dominant culture is strong. Committing to creating 'islands of sanity' and modelling old ways of being creates personal resilience and spaces for resilience in others. This can draw in likeminded people, which is needed when so much of adaptation action needs to happen in partnership and community.

Interested in learning more about climate adaptation planning?

Contact peernetworks@communityenergy.ca