

Coaching through Complex Change

Part 2: Use of the Knoster Model



“The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Very recently, my dear friend Jeff led a group of eight individuals on a seven-day hiking trip to the backcountry (the “WAY” backcountry) in the forests of Montana. In hearing Jeff speak of this experience, the details of their daily surroundings became crystal clear.

With enthusiasm, Jeff spoke of rocky trails that twisted some ankles, evergreen trees that released a fragrance found nowhere else, and pools of clear water that offered very cold baths under the mountain sun. He described fresh and decayed leaves creating soft paths under sprawling trees, lakes providing fish for dinner, mountain peaks generating sweaty brows, and a sky so blue during the day and so filled with stars at night that they were easily reminded of the vastness of their surroundings.

It was after a brief pause in the story that I noticed a distinct shift in Jeff’s thinking and oration. With a thrill and amazement, he then described how each detail was connected to another. Within the epic, sprawling daily view, the snow on the mountain peaks provided the water for the lakes and the streams, and that same water contributed to the life of all the wildlife they enjoyed on their journey. That same incredible sky when filled with dark rain clouds each afternoon supplied the moisture needed to sustain the living creatures, while also contributing to the decay of the soft leaves in the path. Further down the mountain, those many trickling streams converged to become a raging river with enough power to carve out deep

canyons. Jeff paused again, taking a deep breath, sharing the sincere gratitude and deep understanding of all he had experienced.

With each step of the journey, Jeff had clearly noticed each detail, including the caramel color of the grizzly bear that blocked their path for several minutes.

With a step back, he was mesmerized by the essence of the relationship between each detail.

That is what being a “systems thinker” is like.

You see every detail while also noticing the relationship between the details. The discrete events become part of a whole. Rather than having 'tunnel vision,' you begin to rise above the 'tunnel,' seeing the patterns that emerge in and out of it. Rather than seeing just the 'trees,' you begin seeing the forest.

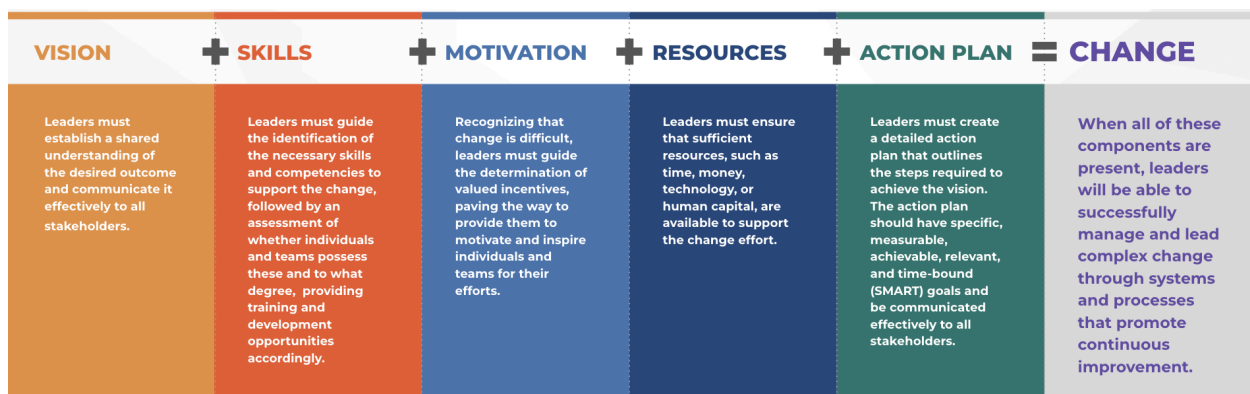
As we begin systems-level thinking, we tend to notice the relationship between things only when they are physically located close to each other and when the interaction between them happens within a short period of time.¹ Consider, for example, the rain from the clouds dampening the leaf-strewn path and it becomes slick. In other words, the broader cause and effect are often obscured by distance and time.¹

By elevating ourselves and leaders to a higher vantage point, we are able to envision several parts of the process in a single glance. This is the essence of systems thinking. We must elevate our thinking to see past the obstructions of distance and time.¹

To coach leaders through leading complex change, we must first coach them to clearly see the details contributing to the change.

As presented in the Impact Insight, Part 1 of “*Coaching through Complex Change*,” the **Knoster Model**, developed in the early 1990s by Hendrik Knoster, is a five-stage model that provides a structured approach to managing change, offering a systematic way to deal with the challenges or obstructions associated with change.²

With the model identifying five components required for effective change, we as executive coaches are able to consider possible questions we might use to draw out, inspire, or develop “systems thinking” within leaders. Let’s take a look at the first two components today: vision and skills.



Vision

Leaders must establish a shared understanding of the desired outcomes and communicate it effectively to all stakeholders.

The following coaching questions aim to serve as a guide to coach an executive leader through consideration of the element of “vision.”

- **Defining Vision**
 - What is the ultimate outcome you envision for this change initiative?
 - How does this vision align with the overall vision, mission, and values of the organization?
 - How might you describe the long-term benefits you anticipate from this change?
- **Communicating Vision**
 - How might you communicate this vision to your team? To your internal stakeholders? To your external stakeholders?
 - What strategies might you use to ensure that everyone understands, shares, and lives out this vision?
 - How might you ensure that the vision remains relevant and inspiring throughout the change process?

Skills

Leaders must guide the identification of the necessary skills and competencies to support the change, followed by an assessment of whether individuals and teams possess these and to what degree, providing training and development opportunities accordingly.

The following coaching questions aim to serve as a guide to coach an executive leader through consideration of the element of “skills.”

- **Assessing Skills**
 - What key skills are necessary to achieve the vision for this change initiative?
 - How do the current skills of your team align with these necessary skills?
 - What strengths in skills have you identified?
 - What gaps in skills have you identified?
- **Developing Skills**
 - What training and development opportunities might you provide to build on strengths? To address skill gaps?
 - How might you support your team in applying new skills in their roles?
 - What resources or tools will you use to facilitate skill development?
- **Sustaining Skills**
 - How might you ensure that new skills are sustained over time?
 - What ongoing support and feedback mechanisms might you put in place?
 - How will you measure the impact of skill development on the change initiative?

With the use of coaching questions aligned to the model and designed to draw out, inspire, and develop the best and highest within people from the inside out, we can continually strive to **elevate our impact** as executive coaches as we serve executives leading complex change initiatives.

In Part 3 of “*Coaching through Complex Change*,” we will dive further into the next three components of the model: motivation, resources, and action plan. More to come!

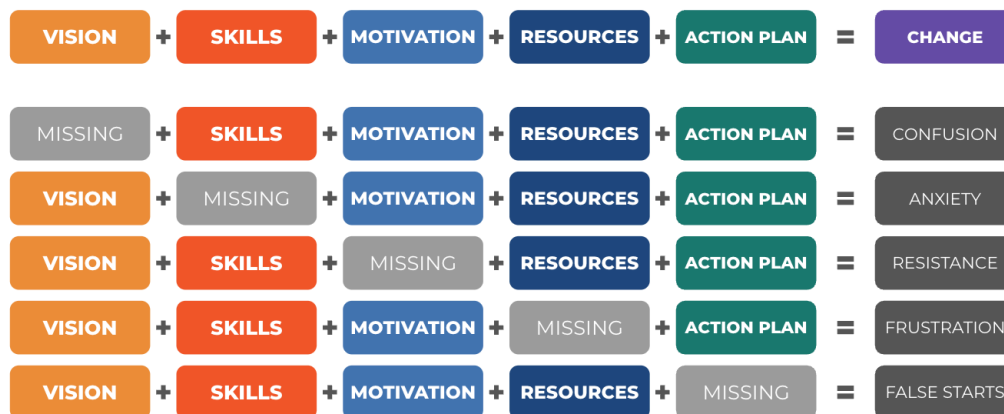
In the meantime, we invite you to walk outside and pause.

Consider the intricate details all around you. Now, consider the essence of the relationship between each of those details.

What’s your superpower?

Systems-Level Thinking

The Knoster Model Complex Change Matrix



Citations:

1. Timms, M. (2021). How leaders can inspire accountability: Three habits that make or break leaders and elevate organizational performance. Michael Timms.
2. <https://agilityportal.io/blog/knoster-model-for-change>