

Building People and Culture Systems for Government-Focused Systems Change Work

HIGHLIGHTS AND INSIGHTS FROM THE AFRICA SYSTEMS CHANGE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT LABS ON PEOPLE AND CULTURE

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Introduction and Background

The African Systems Change Community of Practice (CoP) is an initiative of Co-Impact, a global philanthropic collaborative dedicated to advancing just and inclusive systems change that improves the lives of millions. The CoP provides a platform for Co-Impact's partners across Africa to share knowledge, learn from one another, and collaborate on systems change in education, health, and economic opportunity. Busara Africa, a Pan-African leadership and organisational development firm, serves as the convener of the CoP.

One of the common challenges, expressed by partners in the CoP, is the ability to build internal people and culture systems robust enough to support complex systems change work with government. As a result, Busara convened two virtual Organisational Development (OD) labs, focused on people and culture and its relation to systems change. The focus on culture was in recognition of the fact, that increasingly people and culture has evolved from being only a support function to a strategic organisational function.

The resource person for the labs was Ceverene Mureithi, a strategic operations leader with expertise in advisory and consulting, specialising in people and culture. The picture that emerged from the candid discussions that took place in these labs was partners grappling with sophisticated external change goals while simultaneously needing to transform their internal operations.

As one partner noted during a lab session: "What's got us to this position isn't what's going to get us to the next level." This sentiment captures the core challenge—organisations that have succeeded in program delivery now need fundamentally different people and culture approaches to influence government systems effectively. The labs, therefore, became a critical space for learning and sharing and about how partners can navigate these challenges with guidance and expertise from Ms. Mureithi. This paper pulls together the insights and lessons from these sessions.

People and Culture Challenges When doing Systems Change

The following are some of the common challenges partners cited when it comes to people and culture in systems change:

1

Limited staff capacity for systems change work.

Many organisations lack enough staff with the skills and competencies needed for complex systems change. The few skilled individuals available often become overburdened, which leads to burnout and reduced effectiveness.

2

Talent retention pressures.

As more organisations take on systems change, demand for skilled talent has surged. Retaining staff is difficult, as organisations often cannot compete with the salaries and benefits offered by larger, better-resourced institutions. This creates a constant cycle of recruitment and loss.

3

Mindset gaps around systems thinking

Many staff are accustomed to project-based approaches and struggle to adapt to systems thinking. Moving from short-term, isolated projects to long-term systemic strategies requires a deep mental shift in how staff perceive their roles and contributions.

4

Lack of the seven sensibilities for systems change.

As identified by Rakesh Rajani, there are seven sensibilities required to do systems change work and they include humility to listen and learn, curiosity to explore new perspectives, and empathy to understand lived realities. They also require courage to challenge the status quo, persistence to stay the course amid setbacks, creativity to imagine new possibilities, and collaboration to build collective solutions. Without cultivating them, staff often default to transactional rather than transformational ways of working.

5

Rigid organisational systems

Bureaucratic processes and hierarchical structures make it difficult for organisations to be agile. Slow decision-making and excessive red tape often hinder innovation and timely response to evolving systemic challenges.

6

Concentrated organisational learning.

Knowledge and learning are often held by a few individuals, creating bottlenecks and dependency. This limits collective growth and weakens institutional memory when key staff leave.

7

Cultures resistant to learning and innovation.

Some organisational cultures prioritise compliance and control over experimentation and adaptation. This stifles creativity, discourages risk-taking, and undermines the agility required for systems change.

8

Leadership gaps in shaping culture.

Many leaders lack the understanding or tools to intentionally build cultures that support systems change. Without leadership that models openness, learning, and collaboration, organisations remain stuck in old ways of working.

Six Strategic People and Culture Capabilities for Systems Change-Ready Organisations

Unsurprisingly, partners shared a wide range of ideas and suggestions for addressing the challenges noted above. With Mureithe's guidance, however, these were distilled into three key strategic imperatives for people and three for culture, outlined below:

THE THREE IMPERATIVES WITH RESPECT TO PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

Ensure Enough Skilled Staff — and Retain Them

1.

Map Skills, Don't Guess

For systems change to succeed, organisations need the right people in the right roles. A good starting point is a skills mapping exercise to clarify what skills already exist and what is missing. Universal competencies such as systems thinking, humility, and deep listening are essential for all staff, while role-specific skills like policy analysis, government relations, or technical expertise should be assigned more strategically. Mapping also helps determine who needs direct access to policymakers and who plays a supporting role, making organisations more nuanced and effective in how they deploy capabilities.

Retain Talent Creatively

Because highly skilled staff are expensive and often difficult to retain, organisations should consider creative staffing solutions. Instead of relying solely on full-time hires, they could use consultants for specialised expertise, share talent across partner organisations, or create hybrid roles that combine technical knowledge with relationship-building functions. These approaches reduce costs while ensuring access to the right skills when needed.

Keep Staff Motivated

Finally, systems change work attracts ambitious professionals who want more than a paycheck. They are motivated by opportunities to grow, recognition that goes beyond financial rewards, and autonomy within clear strategic boundaries. They also need to see how their efforts connect to long-term impact, even if change unfolds over a timeline longer than their tenure. Meeting these needs helps organisations keep their best talent engaged and committed.

Rethink Performance Management

Traditional NGO performance management often seroes in on immediate outputs. Systems change, however, demands a broader lens. Organisations need to track process indicators alongside outcomes — things like the quality of relationships built, frequency of policy engagement, and the strength of stakeholder networks. Learning metrics should capture what teams discover about how systems function and how their understanding evolves over time. Influence tracking is also key, measuring how input shapes policy conversations, even when final decisions remain unchanged. Finally, accountability should extend beyond technical skills to include behaviours. Staff should demonstrate the seven sensibilities of systems change, not just technical competence in their roles.

Ensure all Staff members have a broad understanding of systems change.

2.

Systems Change is Everyone's Work

Systems change cannot sit only with senior leadership. Every staff member — whether a data entry clerk, finance officer, or program manager — needs to understand how their work contributes to long-term systemic goals. When all staff see the bigger picture, routine tasks become connected to impact, and ownership of change spreads across the organisation.

Reinforce Understanding Regularly

Building this shared understanding is not a one-off exercise. It requires consistent reinforcement through team meetings, town halls, and informal conversations that keep systems change top of mind. Staff also need safe spaces to ask questions and admit knowledge gaps without fear of judgment. Creating this kind of psychological safety encourages curiosity and builds collective confidence in tackling complex systems challenges.

Invest in Skills Development

Beyond understanding, organisations must invest in building staff capabilities so that everyone is equipped to play their role effectively. This means ongoing training, mentoring, and exposure to tools that strengthen systems thinking and practice. Over time, this investment helps ensure that systems change is embedded into daily work, rather than being seen as an abstract strategy owned only by a few.

Leaders Should Champion Systems Change

3.

Leaders as Anchors of Understanding

For organisations to succeed in systems change, leaders must have a strong grasp of what it entails. This knowledge enables them to provide meaningful support to staff working on the frontlines of change. Without it, leaders risk becoming disconnected from the realities their teams face.

Leading from the Front When Needed

There will be moments when leaders themselves must step in — especially in engaging senior government officials and other high-level stakeholders. The more leaders understand systems change, the more effectively they can represent the organisation and build credibility with decision-makers.

Modelling the Seven Sensibilities

Leaders also set the tone for how staff behave. By consistently demonstrating the seven sensibilities of systems change — humility, curiosity, persistence, collaboration, and others — they provide a living example of what effective engagement with government actors and partners should look like. Staff then have a clear model to emulate.

Enabling Agility Through Decentralisation

Systems change requires agility, which cannot happen if all decisions are concentrated at the top. Leaders need to decentralise decision-making, empowering staff at multiple levels to act quickly and responsibly. This creates an organisation that can adapt to evolving contexts without waiting for approvals at every turn.

THE THREE IMPERATIVES WITH RESPECT TO ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Foster a culture in which Staff treat each other and external partners with humility, professionalism, care, and respect.

1.

Relationships Are the Currency of Systems Change

Successful systems change depends on strong, trusting relationships especially with government. Staff must engage one another and external partners with humility, professionalism, care, and respect. These behaviours not only strengthen internal collaboration but also build the credibility and trust needed for effective government engagement

Modelling Matters

When leaders and managers consistently demonstrate these values, they show staff how to navigate sensitive relationships with policymakers and other stakeholders. This modelling creates a culture where respectful, constructive engagement is second nature.

Building Trust for the Long Haul

Systems change is rarely quick. A culture grounded in care and respect ensures that relationships with government and partners are not transactional but enduring. It allows organisations to weather political shifts, policy changes, and setbacks while keeping doors open for continued dialogue and influence.

2.

Create a learning culture

Fail Fast, Learn Faster

Systems change with government is complex and unpredictable. Organisations cannot afford to wait for perfect solutions. Instead, they need cultures that value rapid piloting, iteration, and adaptation. This means shifting from perfectionism to learning, from risk avoidance to calculated risk-taking, and from individual accountability to collective responsibility.

Normalise Experimentation and Learning from Failure

Policy influence often requires acting before outcomes are guaranteed. A strong learning culture creates safe spaces for innovation, experimentation, and reflection. Failure is not punished but examined for insights, ensuring that the organisation grows stronger with each attempt.

Capture and Share Learning

Learning must be systematic, not incidental. Regular reflection sessions after major government engagements, peer learning with other organisations working in similar systems, and strong documentation practices ensure that both successes and failures are captured. Over time, this builds institutional memory and helps the organisation remain agile in shifting political and policy contexts.

3.

Build a Culture of Agility

Move Beyond Hierarchy

Traditional hierarchical structures often slow down systems change work. They struggle to respond quickly to unexpected policy windows or shifting government priorities. Agility requires moving past rigid approvals and creating ways of working that support faster, smarter decision-making.

Empower Teams to Act

Clear decision-making protocols are essential. Staff need to know what decisions require senior approval and what can be handled at other levels. Project-based authority allows teams to act with autonomy within agreed parameters, enabling rapid engagement with government when opportunities arise.

Continuously Remove Bottlenecks

Agility is not a one-time fix — it requires regular reflection on how structures and processes are working. Reviewing systems frequently helps identify bottlenecks and remove unnecessary layers of bureaucracy. The goal is to ensure the organisation stays nimble enough to adapt as the policy and political context shifts.

Conclusion

Systems change is as much about people and culture as it is about strategy and technical expertise. Without the right people, equipped with the skills, mindsets, and leadership needed to navigate complexity, even the best-designed initiatives will fall short. Likewise, without cultures that foster respect, continuous learning, and agility, organisations will struggle to engage government effectively or sustain long-term impact.

The six imperatives outlined in this paper point to a path forward. On the people side, organisations must ensure they have the right skills in place and retain them, build broad understanding of systems change across all staff, and develop leaders who not only understand the work but also model the behaviours required to succeed. On the culture side, they must foster humility and respect in relationships, create environments where learning and experimentation are embraced, and build agile systems that can seize policy opportunities and adapt to shifting government priorities.

Together, these imperatives remind us that systems change is not a technical project but a deeply human one. It requires organisations to invest in their people and shape cultures that match the complexity of the systems they seek to transform. By doing so, they position themselves not just to engage with government, but to do so with credibility, resilience, and the capacity to create lasting change.



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