

# No, it's not 'the system' – You, are the system

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## OPINION

### No, it's not 'the system' – You, are the system

**Dr Leandro Herrero, Chief Organisational Architect at The Chalfont Project, discusses system behaviours at work and what impact redirection could make on culture.**

*"The problem of people not working together won't be solved by interventions such as team-working, participation, empowerment programmes and the like, for one simple reason: it is the system that governs behaviour." – John Seddon*

John Seddon has my highest respect. His contribution to organisational life and systems is enormous. However, I am bound to add a critical comment to the statement above. I have borrowed it from somebody quoting him, so apologies if I make a misinterpretation out of context.

The statement provides a polarization: the system or the people/group interventions. It implies one is before the other and the implication is that it is 'the system'. It implies unidirectional causality: systems → behaviours.

But unless one assumes that 'the system' has just landed from heaven as an envelope within which all those interventions struggle ( and apparently condemned to do it in a futile way), the reality is that 'the system' was created in the first place by people.



The same kind of mighty people who could create the envelop, could also modify it. The problem with 'focusing on the system' is that it naively assumes that fiddling with processes and structures and sub-systems can be done like playing chess. By whom? Robots? A deity? It's people. People have the ability to create, modify, improve, screw up, renew, and any other thesaurus sister, 'that system'.

### 'It's the system, not me'

Blaming the system (I am not saying Seddon does) creates a fantastic alibi for lack of agency and non-action. 'It's the system, not me', is the equivalent of the pathetic 'sorry it's business, don't take it personally'.

The problem with the system behaviours 'piece of algorithm; is that it has cut a tiny part of the long chain: behaviours → system → behaviours → system → behaviours → system etc (and I am sorry

that on ‘paper’ it looks linear instead of circular). Depending on where you ‘start’ you will take a different view.

My take, which I am aware is not shared by systems fundamentalists, is that modifying (or creating conditions to modify) individual and group behaviours (within a system) can change the system big time, which in turn will re-direct behaviours etc.

Macro systems such as the NHS in the UK (a truly ‘wicked problem’) yes, require a ‘systems view’, but, if I am working with a department with its own assets and liabilities, its own functional and dysfunctional life, invoking ‘it’s the system’ will not achieve any doable change.

Very often the very ‘system’ that is declared fixed (you are stuck with it) has 20 ways to be modified that have nothing to do with ‘the system’ but with behaviours of individuals, whether in leadership or not, who can change ways of working in a second. And believe me, ‘the system’ would not send the police.



People who work in a ‘regulated industry’ often invoke compliance to regulations as a mighty God that dictates every single movement. The reality is that, for example, there is nothing in those straight jacket ‘regulations’ that forces you to have 30 people making decisions in 30 days when you could easily (no regulations broken) have 3 people making the same decision in 3 days. The former is called bad management, regulated bad management but bad management.

The Deus-ex Machina ‘System’ gets away with murder. If we are to advance as society and agents of our own responsibilities, we need to leave Greek Tragedy at the door.

## About the Author

***Dr Leandro Herrero - Chief Organizational Architect at [The Chalfont Project](#), Author, [International Speaker](#) and Psychiatrist. For the past 25 years, Dr Herrero and his team have been transforming culture in organizations via his pioneering [Viral Change™ methodology](#). Follow Dr Herrero on [LinkedIn](#) for all the latest updates.***

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