
Systems Thinking for Executives: Mapping Causes, Feedback Loops and Leverage Points Training Course

11 – 15 January 2027
Cape town





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Programme Summary

Systems thinking for executives is the subject of this one-week training course for senior leaders, ending in a system map and leverage point plan for one recurring organisational problem. Many leaders fix visible symptoms and then meet the same issue again, or a new one created by the fix. The programme teaches how causes, feedback loops and delays interact, and applies each method to a problem the participant owns. Mars Training Centre UK delivers this programme on systems thinking for executives to mixed-organisation cohorts.

The Business Case

When problems are analysed one function at a time, solutions in one area push cost and risk into another. Rework, repeated escalations and initiatives that stall after early gains are common results. Leaders who read the whole system, find the feedback loops that sustain a problem and test options before acting can choose actions that hold and explain trade-offs to colleagues.

- Recurring Problem Rate: Falls as root causes and reinforcing loops are addressed instead of symptoms.
- Unintended Consequence Cost: Falls as side effects are anticipated before decisions are approved.
- Cross-Function Rework: Falls as interdependencies between units are mapped and agreed.

Principles and Evidence Base

- Causal loop diagrams: The notation for reinforcing and balancing loops structures the maps built in Sessions 2 and 3.
- System archetypes: Recurring patterns such as fixes that fail and shifting the burden guide the diagnosis in Session 3.
- Stock and flow thinking: Accumulations and rates explain delays and build-up in Session 2.
- Leverage points: Ranking places to intervene in a system shapes the options appraisal in Session 4.

Intended Participants

- Directors and heads of function who own problems that cross unit boundaries.
- Senior managers who sponsor improvement and change programmes.
- Strategy and planning leaders who test options before commitment.
- Leaders who must explain why earlier fixes did not last.

Typical functions include operations, public services, healthcare, finance and logistics.



Learning Outcomes

1. Participants will be able to diagnose a recurring problem as the product of a system.
2. Participants will be able to construct a causal loop diagram of its causes and delays.
3. Participants will be able to evaluate the unintended consequences of a proposed fix.
4. Participants will be able to identify the archetype behind a repeated pattern.
5. Participants will be able to prioritise leverage points by effect and effort.
6. Participants will be able to justify an intervention plan to colleagues and sponsors.

Programme Structure

Day 1: Systems Thinking for Executives and Problem Framing

Why do the same problems return after they have been fixed?

- Symptom Versus Cause Ladder
- Problem Boundary Statement
- Stakeholder Perspective Grid
- Behaviour Over Time Graph
- Mental Model Inventory

Day 2: Feedback Loops, Stocks and Delays

How do reinforcing and balancing loops shape behaviour over time?

- Reinforcing Loop Sketch
- Balancing Loop Sketch
- Stock and Flow Diagram
- Delay Marking Convention
- Causal Loop Diagram Draft

Day 3: Archetypes and Diagnosis

Which recurring pattern explains what the system is doing?

- Fixes That Fail Archetype
- Shifting the Burden Archetype
- Limits to Growth Archetype
- Unintended Consequence Review
- Diagnosis Summary Sheet

Day 4: Leverage Points and Intervention Design

Where can a small change shift the behaviour of the whole system?



- Leverage Point Ranking
- Intervention Options Table
- Effect and Effort Matrix
- Pilot and Learning Design
- Early Indicator Set

Day 5: Applying the Tools to One Organisational Problem

Do the framing, loop, archetype and leverage tools support one intervention plan?

- Applying the Session 1 Problem Boundary Statement
- Using the Session 2 Causal Loop Diagram Draft
- Testing the Session 3 Diagnosis Summary Sheet
- Checking the Session 4 Effect and Effort Matrix
- Completing the System Map and Leverage Point Plan

Methodology

The programme uses a case analysis method built on anonymised organisational problems from several sectors, drawn as maps and graphs of behaviour over time. Participants work in peer groups on a shared problem, challenge each other's loop diagrams and receive written facilitator feedback on each exercise set, before turning to a problem of their own.

- Suggested activity: Redrawing a failed initiative as a causal loop diagram.
- Suggested activity: Naming the archetype behind a repeated budget overrun.
- Suggested activity: Ranking three interventions by leverage and side effects.

Capstone Output

Each participant completes a system map and leverage point plan for one recurring organisational problem. It holds a problem boundary statement, a causal loop diagram, an archetype diagnosis, a ranked option table and a set of early indicators. The plan is used at work to brief sponsors, align colleagues across functions and design a small pilot before wider action.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is systems thinking for executives suitable for leaders with no modelling background?

Yes. Systems thinking for executives assumes senior responsibility and experience of recurring problems, and builds diagram and reasoning skills step by step without software or mathematics.



Which methods does systems thinking for executives rest on?

Systems thinking for executives rests on causal loop diagrams, stock and flow thinking, system archetypes and leverage points, applied to real organisational problems.

How is the plan from systems thinking for executives used at work?

You use the system map and leverage point plan to brief sponsors, align colleagues across functions and design a small pilot before wider action.

How does systems thinking for executives differ from general problem-solving training?

Systems thinking for executives centres on feedback, delays and interdependence across a whole organisation, while general problem-solving training centres on step-by-step root cause methods for a single process.