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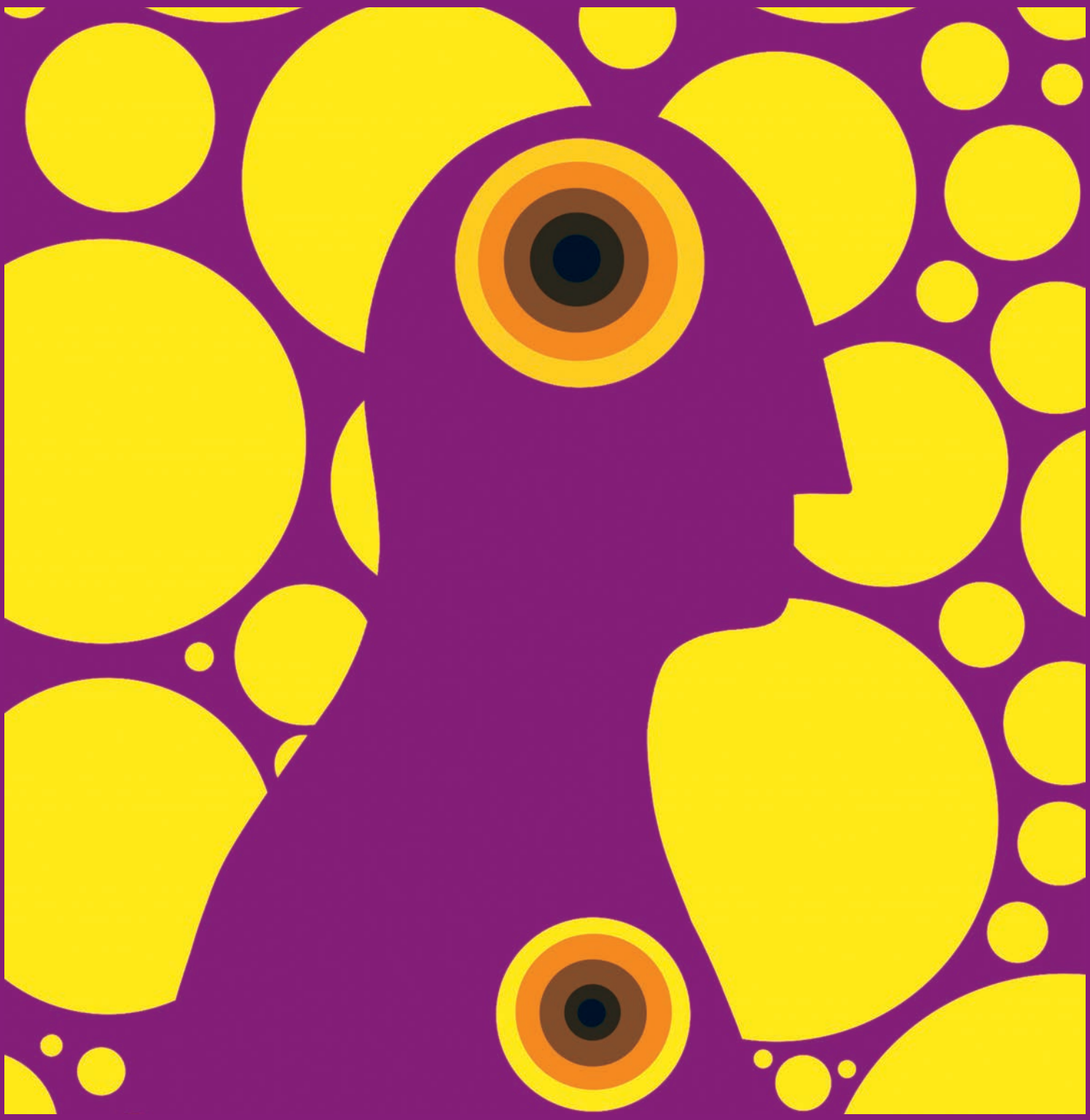
Protection Prevention Preparedness Response Resilience Recovery



HEAD AND HEART

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN A CRISIS

Food Security | Supply Chains | Stress, Wellbeing & PTSD | Cybersecurity | Human Factors | Bangladesh Focus

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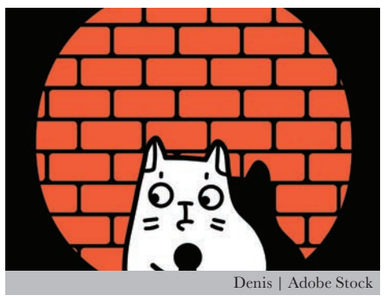

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comment

As CRJ goes to press, we are on day six of war in Ukraine. We do not have a crystal ball; you will be reading this several weeks after it has been written, and we could be in a maelstrom of our worst-case scenarios and fears. I fervently hope that we have somehow managed to avoid even greater global atrocity, though it seems to be stalking ever closer, tracking the still-warm footsteps of the pandemic.

That will not, of course, mitigate the suffering happening in Ukraine right here, right now. And what of the other parts of the world also enduring war or terrorism, pandemics, famine, floods or fires?

The greatest privilege of working on this journal lies in how our readers and contributors are motivated to make the world a better place for others. Our *CRJ* community knows all too well the effects of conflicts and their human toll. Lives lost, intergenerational grief, battered societies, attacks on civil infrastructure and the use of banned munitions all leave deep, long-term physical and emotional scars and a burning sense of outrage.

As you read this, even if we have somehow managed to sidestep cataclysmic escalation, the tragic effects will be pervasive and long lasting.

The first casualty when war comes is truth. The endless scroll of mistruths, propaganda, manipulation, self-centred extreme views, greed and power plays, which sought to divide societies and foment distrust between people, have all played their part.

The darker side of human nature appears to have gained momentum. Many thought – in retrospect, with complacency – that it was under control.

As Tony Jaques laments on p42, we consistently ignore red flags. Buried among the tsunami of news on Ukraine, the *IPCC Sixth Assessment Report* says that climate change is already affecting every corner of the world. It warns that some impacts are already too severe for adaptation to prevent severe losses and damage, noting that we have a narrow window left for change.

The truth is, we were warned. We did not heed the approaching drumbeats of this war; will we also fail to act upon the even more dire warnings about climate?

I wish I were writing this now with the benefit, relief and safety of hindsight.

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Making the water visible: A methodology

Gill Kernick shares her methodology for exploring systemic change that she developed to help make sense of our failure to learn from catastrophes

When I was interviewed a couple of days after the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, I commented: "We have to get beyond blame to the systemic issues that actually led to decisions being made."

I soon realised that there was little understanding about what we mean by systemic change. To fulfil my promise to myself make sure that we learned from the incident, I began exploring and writing in this domain and, in 2021, my book *Catastrophe and Systemic Change* was published.

Many people have expressed an interest in the enquiry-based approach – making the water visible – that I used to research and structure the book. I have attempted to codify it here, so that others can use and build upon it. Although it was developed to consider disasters, it could be applied to any complex issue.

After expanding on the need to make the water visible, I will discuss the components of the methodology and end by summarising some key findings.

It's useful to distinguish between piecemeal and systemic change as I mentioned in my previous article, *Systemic change in complex times* (*CRJ*,16:4). Most of the responses to Grenfell and other disasters are piecemeal: changing parts of the system but not the system itself. For example, piecemeal change will happen post-Grenfell, and it is critical that it does. We will see changes to regulations and to firefighting practices and we will see changes to what materials are used when buildings are erected and to how they are tested and certified. I am not at all confident, though, that we will see systemic change.

Will we shift the conditions holding in place our failure to listen to residents and others operating at the sharp end? Will we shift the conditions holding in place our over-reliance on regulations and ivory tower expertise? Will we shift the conditions holding in place our reluctance to examine our deep, and often unconscious biases, beliefs and assumptions?

Piecemeal change is relatively easy – you identify what went wrong and then put plans in place to correct it. For systemic change, we need a different perspective. Systemic change requires making the water visible – illuminating the systemic forces at play and 'grappling with this messy kaleidoscope of factors'.

There are four components to the methodology I use to make the water visible: The principles; the approach; the model; and the questions.

First, let's look at two of the principles that underpin the methodology. Principle One says that piecemeal solutions do not cause systemic change and can

have unintended consequences, while Principle Two suggests that traditional bureaucratic, linear cause-and-effect ways of thinking and leading are ineffective in enabling systemic change.

As an example, the penguin pool at London Zoo, completed in 1934, is an icon of modern British architecture and engineering. However, the penguins were relocated in 2004 after contracting a bacterial infection – bumblefoot – from micro-abrasions caused by walking on concrete.

In a letter to the *Evening Standard*, architect John Allan explained that rather than issues with the original design, decisions made by the zoo had led to this outcome. The original, largely rubber paving designed for the penguin's comfort, had been replaced with concrete. A layer of quartz was added to the ramp surfaces for the benefit of the keepers, but to the discomfort of the penguins. And the original birds for which the pool was designed prefer to huddle, but were replaced by Humboldt penguins, which prefer to burrow, making the original nesting quarters unsuitable.

Issues with penguins' health at London Zoo show the limitations and unintended consequences of piecemeal solutions, the ineffectiveness of linear cause-and-effect ways of thinking and the need to step back and view issues holistically

This illustration of the principles shows the limitations and unintended consequences of piecemeal solutions, the ineffectiveness of linear cause-and-effect ways of thinking and the need to step back and view issues holistically. It reminds me of building on floodplains and other piecemeal decisions that have led to devastation and suffering.

These principles give rise to the approach, designed to move beyond these ways of thinking. It is grounded in enquiry and sense-making, with the intent to enable action and change. The use of stories and critical friends is essential in this process.

Authentic enquiry requires inhabiting the space of 'not knowing' – to paraphrase Socrates: "I know that I know nothing." I use the term 'enquiry' to differentiate this from the more formal investigation processes or inquiries.

The two overarching enquiries I settled on were: Why does our failure to learn make sense? and: What will it take to enable systemic change?

Sense-making, a term coined by Karl Weick, is tangled with an enquiry-based approach. Sense-making is not an academic exercise and does not require your neutrality. Distinct from analysis, interpretation or exploration, it is a creative process that makes sense of unknown and complex domains in a way that enables action. This intent to engender action is critical.

Throughout the process, I was surrounded by critical friends and mentors. This was invaluable because they validated and challenged my sense-making and helped shape my thinking. They also gave me hope.

One of my mentors was Jim Wetherbee, a retired American Naval officer, test pilot and NASA astronaut. On a day when I felt particularly helpless, Wetherbee said: "The doors of the people who should be talking to you will likely be closed; stop knocking on them. Look for the open doors." This took me out of linear thinking, into the emergent maze of change and complexity. I have learned that systemic change requires disruption – that I need to shift how I think and act. I've come to see that kindness can be more disruptive than aggression, that compassion can be more impactful than taking positions. I've learned to plant seeds and not to worry about which ones live and which ones die.

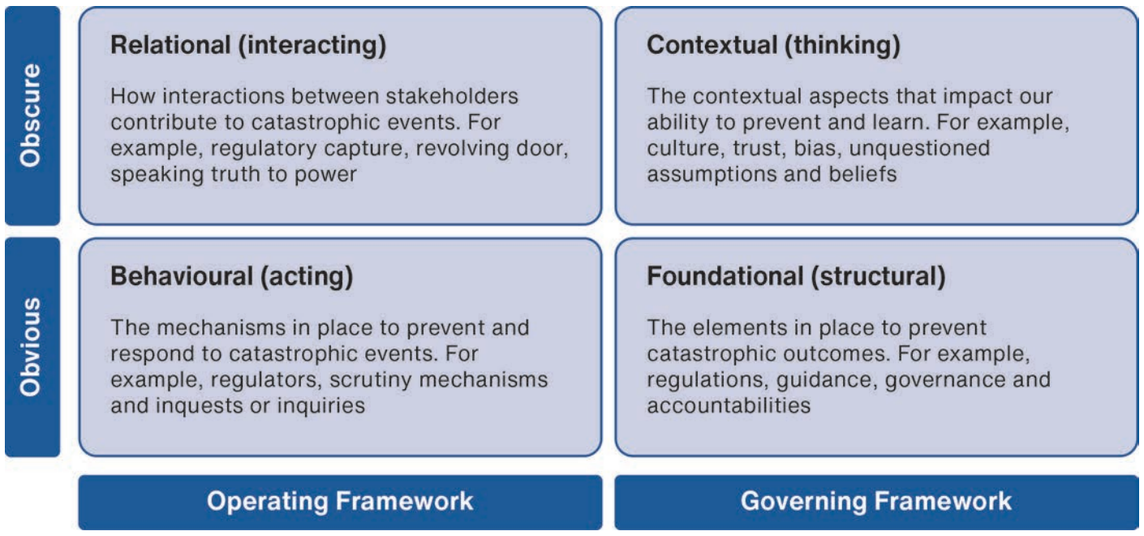

Figure 1: The Grenfell Model for Systemic Change

Enquiries	Foundational (Structural)	Behavioural (Acting)	Relational (Interacting)	Contextual (Thinking)
Myths What are the myths we hold onto that prevent us from looking at issues systemically?	That regulations guarantee safe outcomes	That the default world is perfect and error-free, and mistakes are abnormal	That the 'softer' relational issues aren't that important	That you can enable systemic change without shifting deeply held assumptions and beliefs
Why don't we learn? What is the condition holding the *status quo* in place	Our persistent failure to address issues in governance and accountability	Our obsession with blame and blame avoidance	Our failure to rebalance power effectively	The lack of political intent and will to enable real systemic change
How could we enable systemic change? What is our biggest opportunity to disrupt the *status quo*?	Improve our capability to deal with complexity and ambiguity	Ensure fairly borne consequences, where those that enabled disasters (versus the victims) bear the consequences for remediation etc	Tap diverse and distributed knowledge	Create safe spaces to engage with and challenge deeply held views

Table 1: Making the water visible

When I say that the intent of the approach is to enable change, it is change that will disrupt the *status quo*, which is about planting seeds and experimenting and discovering which seeds grow and which don't.

This approach to making the water visible is existential in nature – you will be changed, your beliefs and biases will (and should) be challenged and exposed, questioned and altered.

The Grenfell Model for Systemic Change (*Figure 1*) is named in honour of the 72 lives lost during the fire, provides a framework for making the water visible.

Obscure elements

It looks through four lenses: Governing and operating frameworks, and obvious and obscure elements. Governing frameworks provide the architecture for decisions and actions, whereas operating frameworks guide how we function. The obvious elements are the lenses we usually look through, such as regulations or scrutiny mechanisms. Most analyses focus solely on these, but this fails to create a holistic, systemic picture. The obscure elements include issues such as relationships, power, narratives, culture, biases and issues of trust.

These lenses sit behind four quadrants. The foundational quadrant considers what elements are in place to prevent catastrophic events. The behavioural quadrant considers what mechanisms are in place to prevent and respond to catastrophic events. The relational quadrant considers how relational issues contribute to catastrophic events and our ability to learn. The contextual quadrant considers the contextual aspects that affect our ability to prevent and learn from catastrophic events.

Within each of these quadrants, I considered four questions designed to give access to the complex factors, to facilitate sense-making and reveal new openings for acting (or seed planting).

■ **Question one:** What are the known issues? This expands understanding and reveals issues that have persisted over time but have never improved, such as complex delivery mechanisms in local and central government that prevent clarity of accountability. This entails more traditional research methodologies and then sitting with the picture this presents to enquire into the remaining questions;

■ **Question two:** What myths are contributing to our inability to learn? This is designed to reveal widely held (and mostly unquestioned) beliefs that hinder learning. Hanging onto these myths justifies an over-reliance on the obvious responses that fail to address systemic issues;

■ **Question three:** Why don't we learn? Here, through a process of sense-making, I propose the key factor holding conditions in place and inhibiting systemic change. Rather than working to shift these factors, which are entrenched, my view is that considering them as 'givens' and working to enable change despite them will be more effective; and

■ **Question four:** How might we enable systemic change? Here, I enquire and propose a key opportunity to disrupt the *status quo*. I created these after sitting with the messy kaleidoscope (for years) and observing what people were doing and the impact (or lack of impact) this was having. I expect these to alter and iterate with time.

As an illustration, *Table 1* summarises some of my sense-making, considering why our failure to learn makes sense.

As a warning, this is a retrospective articulation that bears little resemblance to the messy emergent process that took place over a three-year period. As such, it will always be flawed. Making the water visible is never going to be a neat and tidy methodology. I found myself immersed in a world that, at times, was emotionally and intellectually overwhelming. I had to learn to sit with the mess, to allow things to emerge, to dwell in 'not knowing' and to start over – again and again and again, until some new thread or thought helped me make sense of things in new ways.

As Rebecca Solnit says in her book, *Whose Story is This? Old Conflicts, New Chapters*, my hope is that engaging with this kind of approach may help us to: "Remake the world, and… do so mostly by the accretion of small gestures and statements and the embracing of new visions of what can be and should be." C·RJ

Author

GILL KERNICK *is an internationally experienced consultant specialising in safety, culture and leadership. Between 2011 and 2014, she lived on the 21st floor of Grenfell Tower, London, UK. Her book,* Catastrophe and Systemic Change: Learning from the Grenfell Tower Fire and Other Disasters, *was published in 2021*

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