

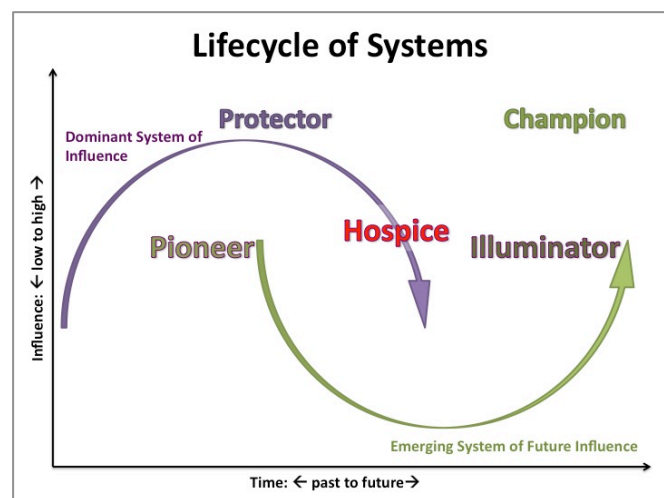
# Life Cycle of a System

*Adapted from the work of Margaret Wheatley & the Art of Hosting community.*

**In living systems change happens through emergence.** In nature, change never occurs as a result of top-down, preconceived strategic plans, or from the mandate of any single individual or boss. It is often born of necessity and in response to the reality of the moment, as living organisms adapt to survive. Human systems are no different, however as individuals, many of us may be unaware of changes in the systems we live in—what is declining or dying, what is starting to emerge, what innovations are taking hold—and the role(s) we may be playing within those systems. Recognizing the way change occurs and our relationship to those changes can help us navigate the uncertainty that ultimately accompanies a time of great transition.

**Systems have life cycles.** They have a beginning, middle and end—and then a new system emerges. But this isn't just a rolling sin curve, where one system waxes and wanes then morphs into the next. Rather, we've come to see that the old and new overlap, the old way making room for the new emerging way when it can no longer sustain itself in the complexity of the times. Throughout history, we've seen this cycle of change many times, as new ideas and perspectives coalesce, take root, rise up as a new system, enjoy a period of dominance, and gradually fade, to be replaced by what is needed next.

The map/model to the right is one way of looking at the life cycle of a system and the roles that we play at various stages in that life cycle. In the many discussions and conversations we've had with groups about this map, it has become clear that all roles include both supportive (*Value*) and destructive (*Shadow*) behaviors in the process of emergence, and that no single role is most important. Rather, each role plays an important part in the process of change and the inevitable cycle of life, death and rebirth.



## **Some of the Roles We Play**

**Protector:** *Value:* upholding and protecting the existing system of influence from collapse – can be for the sake of those dependent on that system, and/or to “buy time” for that which is emerging and needs time to strengthen. *Shadow:* blind to groups marginalized or under served by the current system, as well as to the value of Pioneers and Illuminators and their contributions; rigid, holding onto power, seeing and squashing new ideas/contributions as potential threats to the current system or to their own power.

**Pioneer:** *Value:* inventor, creator, innovator; those who are seeking alternatives and new ways within and outside of the current system of influence; often give initial voice, shape and name to what is emerging. *Shadow:* can be arrogant and show disdain for leveraging institutional power; may exclude

those who are not fellow pioneers; can co-opt contributions from groups marginalized or under served by the dominant system and claim them as their own.

**Champion:** *Value:* using current power and influence to nourish, support and accelerate what is newly emerging and starting to take hold. *Shadow:* delegating risk to protect one's high profile; overlooking value of Hospice and the strategic need to process transitions.

**Illuminator:** *Value:* building bridges and lifelines between the declining system and emerging one; translators, communicators and guides who often work on the edges between the old and new, seeking to bring people "across" to what is starting to take hold. *Shadow:* impatient with Protectors and Hospice; may be over zealous to take on delegated risk from Champions and therefore lose credibility; often playing role of Hospice as well but without patience for slower transitions, or "gentle landings."

**Hospice:** *Value:* Caring for what is declining or dying in system of influence; helping people let go, grieve, and move on. Often found where pain is most acute in the system; when focused on helping to process grief and loss, can have a powerful influence on the pace and resilience of transition. *Shadow:* spoiler, saboteur; attached to the past; bitter because the loss of what matters to them.

#### Questions to Consider:

- What roles are you playing now?
- What roles would you like to play?
- What roles need to be filled/tended to?
- How can you be more intentional about the role you are playing and its relationship to the natural cycle of change?

**Working with Emergence.** The world changes when networks of relationships form among people who share a common cause and vision of what's possible. This is good news for those of us intent on creating a positive future. *Rather than worry about critical mass, our work is to foster critical connections.* Through these relationships, we develop the new knowledge, practices, courage and commitment that can lead to broad-based, systemic change.

As leaders, when we are seeking something new, determining what can grow, blossom and thrive, we need to be mindful of the conditions or perspectives that support emergence. These concepts are foundational in participatory leadership practices:

- **Start anywhere, follow it everywhere:** *it is more important to take intentional efforts and learn from them than it is to craft a perfect, risk-free plan*
- **The leaders we need are already here:** *part of our task is recognizing and inviting leadership and participation from all the people (traditionally served and under-served) who have a vested interest and stake in a healthy, influential system*
- **We have what we need:** *waiting and hoping for the right people, leaders, resources, budgets, environmental conditions, etc. is a powerless stance that breeds cynicism and apathy: we must use what we have to do what we can*
- **We are living the worlds we want today:** *believe and act as if the change we want is already*

*here; role model the behavior that will be institutionalized in a new system*

- **We make our path by walking it:** *the courage to set out on a new path creates the map; when we lack practical experience of the future we want, we must enact that experience. Doing this with others widens the path, making it easier for others to follow*