

## On the First Honest Step

**Real systems change takes years. The first honest step does not.**

Real systems change takes time.

That is true.

It takes years for ideas to move through policy, training, professional culture, funding structures, public services, and everyday working conditions. Nobody serious should pretend otherwise. A system does not change because a good sentence has been written, because a framework has been noticed, or because one project briefly finds better language.

But this truth can also become a hiding place.

“Systems change takes years” can be used honestly, as a reminder of scale, patience, and discipline.

It can also be used defensively, as a way of avoiding the first step.

Because although implementation may take years, recognition does not have to.

And the first movement is not mysterious.

A change in sequence towards service users can begin immediately. When pressure is reduced, safety becomes more possible. Safety allows greater honesty. Greater honesty allows a clearer understanding of actual capacity. Understanding capacity allows responsibility to be matched more proportionately. Responsibility then makes better outcomes more possible.

That sequence is not abstract. It can be seen in practice whenever a room becomes less defended, less extractive, and less pressure-led. It can be seen when people are approached with enough steadiness that something more truthful becomes sayable. The issue is not that full systems change can happen overnight. It is that the direction of change can begin at once wherever sequence is allowed to alter.

Unless people begin making such changes in their own lives, in their own attitudes, and in the way they relate to civil service and vulnerable people, real systems change has little hope.

This is why the first honest step matters.

It does not require a national rollout, a steering group, or a complete organisational strategy.

It requires something much smaller and much harder.

It requires a body, a worker, a manager, or a project to say:

Something may be happening here.

We cannot absorb it casually.

We cannot use the language without understanding the ground.

We need to protect the origin of the work.

We need to examine whether we are already contradicting the sequence we claim to support.

That step can begin immediately.

Where it does not begin, something else often happens instead.

A project may appear ethically serious. It may speak of participation, listening, reform, fairness, and systems change. It may even visibly shift its method in a better direction. But if the work that enabled that shift is only welcome in softened form, detached from its ethical ground, then the project has not yet taken the first honest step.

It has adapted.

That distinction matters.

Pressure-first systems are very capable of adaptation. They can alter tone, become more careful in presentation, and take up better language. They can even improve their method in limited ways. But if they still resist the origin of the shift, still narrow contact once questions are raised, or still retreat into confusion, defensiveness, or managerial protection when authorship becomes inconvenient, then the old sequence remains alive underneath.

That is not transformation.

That is adaptation under better language.

This is one of the warnings life experience needs to hear clearly.

People with lived experience may be invited in. They may be listened to. They may even see something of their own ethical sequence reflected back in changed practice. But unless authorship, contact, and ethical ground are actually protected, their contribution remains vulnerable to a familiar pattern:

welcome,  
interest,  
selective uptake,  
defensiveness,  
back-tracking,  
and quiet abstraction of what was useful.

That warning is especially serious in spaces claiming to make systems fairer.

Because the danger is not only openly hard systems.

The danger is also projects that are ethically sincere in aspiration but have not yet examined their own pressure structure.

A project may give service users forms with named contacts and say clearly that those people are there to be contacted. It may verbally reassure participants that support, collaboration, or recognition are available. It may create the impression that ethical participation is real. But if, once concerns are raised, those same contact routes are retrospectively narrowed or treated as inappropriate, then the project has created a misleading participation structure.

That is not a minor administration issue.

It is a serious ethical problem.

Because what is exposed is not only confusion about process. What is exposed is the fragility of the project's relationship to scrutiny. The project may want participation, reflection, and improvement, but not yet on terms that require clear accountability around contact, authorship, and origin.

That is where coercion can begin, even if unintended.

Coercion is not only force.

It can also be:

being welcomed until your terms matter,

being heard until your authorship creates difficulty,

being valued until your openness produces responsibility in others,

being included only on condition that what you offer can be used without altering the hierarchy.

That is why the first honest step matters.

It may not look like progress. It may not produce an immediate outcome. But it changes the direction of travel.

It says:

We will not pretend to understand what we have not yet lived.

We will not use what we have not properly received.

We will not complete a project and abandon the sequence.

We will not call something systems change while leaving ourselves untouched by it.

We will not quietly extract useful insight from vulnerable people while denying the ground that made it possible.

That is the beginning.

Not the launch.

Not the policy.

Not the public claim.

The beginning.

There is also a cleaner form of refusal.

If a body encounters work and decides clearly not to use it, that should be recognised honestly. Refusal may still reveal limits, but it is better than partial absorption. A body that says, "We will not use what has been shared," at least leaves the work intact.

The greater danger is not always rejection.

The greater danger is a body taking the language, copying the sequence in basic form, adapting the tone, or learning from the effect while refusing to name the ground that made it possible.

That is where extraction begins.

Sometimes the work may not be formally used, but its effect has already touched practice. A room may settle differently. A person may feel less pressured. A service user may be met with more care. A worker may realise that safety brings honesty, honesty clarifies capacity, and capacity allows more proportionate responsibility. That matters.

But if the better way has been shown, and those who saw it return quietly to their own purposes without naming what changed, then the ethical question remains open.

The work may have moved.

But responsibility has not disappeared.

Vulnerable people need systems.

They need better systems.

And anyone claiming alignment with systems change must be willing to help make systems more humane, not merely speak as though change is underway while avoiding the first honest movement in themselves.

Real systems change may take years.

But the first honest step can happen now.

And if a body, project, or institution with the power to begin refuses even that, then the work must remain protected.

It cannot be forced into a container that is not ready to hold it.

It can continue elsewhere.

Or it can wait.

But it should not be diluted simply because an institution finds it useful before it is willing to become responsible.