



CENTRE FOR COACHING
IN ORGANISATIONS

White Paper
August 2019

The Systemic Coach

Part 2/4

The term 'systemic coach' has already been appropriated by different people, many of whom advocate quite different approaches to working with complexity.

In the first of these White Papers we referred to the recent rallying call to coaches to become more 'systemic'. We can expect to hear more and more about 'systemic coaching' as organizations continue to wrestle with the demands of the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', the super-fast transformation of society that we are all a part of. The term 'systemic coach' has already been appropriated by different people, many of whom advocate quite different approaches to working with complexity. In the last White Paper we looked at an example of a first-order systems theory. In this paper we look at a second-order systems theory and consider how that may show up differently in the coach's approach.

Introduction

In the first White paper of this series, we looked at a first-order systems theory called cybernetics. We concluded that first-order systems theories depict organizations as simple systems operating to straightforward rules. Change is assumed to be the outcome of simple, linear, 'cause and effect'. Consequently, first-order system approaches are unlikely to prove adequate in thinking about the functioning of large complex organizations. That's not to say such theories are not useful. They may be useful, so long as we treat them as metaphors, to be handled with care. In the next three White Papers we will consider three further categories of systems theories, with an example of a second-order systems theory up next.

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) takes us into the domain of purposeful uncertainty. Our perspective of events is always hypothetical and must therefore be 'held lightly'.

Part 2 – A second-order systems theory

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM)

First-order systems theories fail to take into account the complexity of organisations. Second-order theories are based on the premise that organisations are 'complex, problematical and mysterious'ⁱ. Gregory Bateson, well known anthropologist, warned us not to over-privilege our own perspective of events because our interpretations of reality are always personal and subjectiveⁱⁱ. Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is an example of a second-order systems theory. The development of SSM was marked by three key ideasⁱⁱⁱ, namely:

1. All problems are situations in which people are trying to take purposeful action.
2. Different people have different perspectives on a situation, and therefore different versions of what needs to happen next.
3. People need to work together to come up with a working model of the system, in service of coming up with a plan of action, and they need to learn together from the application of the model.

SSM takes us into the domain of purposeful uncertainty. Our perspective of events is always hypothetical and must therefore be 'held lightly'. Hypotheses are always there to be tested, hence the emphasis on learning through application.

Example

Linda coaches Mark. Mark decides he wants to be more influential and resolves to pay more attention to the needs of internal stakeholders. He discovers that people experience him and his team to be somewhat unfriendly, so he thinks hard about what to do. His team get things done, and he doesn't want to push them toward a different set of behaviours without thinking more deeply about the situation. He does some more research and comes to the conclusion that the team is offending the prevailing culture of the organisation, which values collaboration and 'niceness' over achieving results. In conversations with people outside the team, team members tend to get straight down to business and invest little time in relationships. Mark is loathe to suggest fundamental changes to the way his team operates, because they have a lot of work on and he knows they will be subjected to far harsher criticisms if they don't deliver on time. Linda doesn't argue with Mark, nor does she hold strong views, since she doesn't have the same access to the organisation as Mark does. But she does gently point out some of the assumptions he might be making and she suggests he shares his hypotheses with other stakeholders.

A second-order systemic coach likely believes that it isn't possible to come up with a single 'true' perspective of the functioning of an organisation.

Mark does as Linda suggests. He shares his findings and interpretations with Rob, the Group HR Director, and Susan, Head of Finance. Rob doesn't agree with Mark's analysis. He agrees that the culture of the organisation is collaborative, but pushes back on the idea that everyone is expected to spend a lot of time on small talk. The organisation is super-busy, he says, and everyone places an emphasis on getting things done. Many people do make time, however, to spend time together outside work, at organised social events and on a Friday afternoon. Rob points out that no-one from Mark's team attends any of these events and wonders if that might be part of the issue.

Susan has been in the organization for 15 years. She shares with Mark some of the history of the company including efforts made in the past to break down silos and enhance collaboration across departments. The last such initiative, took place about 18 months before Mark's arrival. The leadership team encouraged people to involve others in decision making early in the process. The program had been largely successful, and comments have recently been made about Mark and his team, that they tend to hold their cards tightly to their chests, showing little interest in engaging others in decision making. Mark shares all these findings with his team, and they came up with some new ideas to put in practice, pledging to regather in a month to review progress.

Soft Systems Methodology revisited

Mark has pretty much applied a SSM approach to the issue he faces, in that he:

1. Clearly defines his problem.
2. Frames his problem with reference to his theory as to how the organisation works.
3. Explores others views through the lens of his framework.
4. Identifies actions to implement and review.

A second-order systemic coach

Linda thought Mark did well. If we think for a moment as Linda's approach being second-order systemic, she is likely to believe that:

1. It isn't possible to come up with a single 'true' perspective of the functioning of an organisation.
2. It is therefore important to seek out multiple perspectives in order to come up with a useful working explanation of events.

The main critique of second-order systems thinking is that it doesn't really address one of the main critiques of first-order systems thinking, namely that we can stand outside an organization and diagnose its operation, coming up with solutions we think will steer things in the desired direction

3. An effective change leader behaves collaboratively.
4. Practical judgment and learning through experience are valuable.
5. Her own perceptions and observations are fallible, and supervision as reflective practice is useful.

Watching such a coach in practice, we might observe the coach encouraging the coachee to:

1. Become increasingly self-aware of their own mental models and frameworks.
2. Seek to understand the mental models and frameworks underpinning others' behaviours.
3. Hold all observations and thoughts as to how the organisation is functioning lightly, as working hypothesis.
4. Be open to others' interpretations of events.
5. Expect the unexpected!

Critique

The main critique of second-order systems thinking is that it doesn't really address one of the main critiques of first-order systems thinking, namely that we can stand outside an organisation and diagnose its operation, coming up with solutions we think will steer things in the desired direction. Second-order thinking *does* counsel us to regard the organisation as complex and to beware the nature of our individual sense-making process, but it still privileges the perspective of the outside observer. In the case of first-order systems thinking there may be just the one outside observer, failing to acknowledge the subjectivity of their point of view. In second-order systems thinking the outside observer is encouraged to recruit assistance, so that the observation process becomes more collective. But this doesn't address a key critique of first-order systems thinking, that someone who is inside the system cannot stand aside and plot interventions as if they were not part of the system. Others in the system will be engaging in their own reflections, coming up with their own interpretation of events, implementing their own action and review strategies. Second-order systems thinking still privileges the outside eye, the omnipotent interventionist, the grand theorist. As such it is questionable the extent to which the process or outcomes will be much different to those achieved by a curious and collaborative first-order systems thinker. Mark and Linda haven't really addressed the way complex systems work.

In the next White Paper, we will look at complex adaptive systems (CAS) theories, and consider an approach that squarely positions coach and leader right in the middle of the chaos and complexity that so oftens characterises organizational life.

Conclusions

Second-order systems theories acknowledge that organisations are complex and they acknowledge that our perspectives are personal and subjective. These approaches discourage us from thinking about change in terms of simple, linear, 'cause and effect' and encourage us to engage with others in our meaning-making. But the approach still privileges the idea that we as coaches or leaders can meaningfully position ourselves outside the system and somehow diagnose it, when we are as much a part of the system as all the other people we are observing. In the next White Paper, we will look at complex adaptive systems (CAS) theories, and consider an approach that squarely positions coach and leader right in the middle of the chaos and complexity that so oftens characterises organizational life.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

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