



White Paper
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The Systemic Coach

Part 4/4

In this final paper, we consider the idea that thinking systemically is actually not very useful ... that to be a 'non-systemic' coach may be a good thing!

To say, 'I am a systemic coach' is to say little more than 'I look at the big picture' and there are few coaches who don't seek to understand the big picture. More interesting is to consider the specific systemic philosophy of the coach and how that shows up in practice. In the first three of these White Papers we looked at three quite different systemic approaches to coaching. The approach taken significantly impacts the way the coach thinks and behaves. In this final paper, we consider the idea that thinking systemically is actually not very useful, that to be a 'systemic coach' is to adhere to a set of assumptions that might get in the way of the coach being maximally effective. That to be a 'non-systemic' coach may be a good thing!

Introduction

In the first three White Papers of this series, we looked at three systemic approaches to coaching; a first-order systems (SSM) and a complexity theory (Complex Adaptive Systems). First-order systems theories depict organizations as simple systems operating to straightforward rules. Second-order systems theories recognize that the functioning of organizational systems is 'complex, problematical and mysterious'. The practitioner is encouraged to solicit multiple perspectives as to the functioning of the system and insights are gained through reflection on action. Complexity theories position change as dynamic, unpredictable, and constant. To understand change we need to examine what's happening at the micro level and recognise that change at the macro level emerges from change happening at numerous local centres. Patterns of change that look chaotic at the macro level may look strange but they are not random. Change, through this lens, cannot be directed or controlled, but it can be influenced.

The challenge to us here, thinking of ourselves as systemic coaches, embracing complexity theories, is that we may unwittingly still be thinking in terms of simple cause and effect.

In this last paper we question whether it is useful at all to think about organisations as systems. We first called this perspective ‘post-systemic’ before deciding ‘meta-systemic’ was a better label. What are we talking about?

Part 4 – Meta-systemic

One problem with systems

Many systems theorists are mathematicians whose ultimate aim is to replicate the functioning of social systems (such as organisations) using mathematical formulae. Such a determination to model complex systems mathematically inevitably leads to the practitioner sticking some form of cause-and-effect somewhere in the model. A good example is *Boids*.

In 1987 Craig Reynolds attempted to explain the flocking behaviour of birds using a computer programⁱ. The program consisted of a network of moving agents called Boids. Each boid followed three simple rules:

1. Maintain a minimum distance from other boids
2. Keep the same pace as other boids
3. Move toward the centre of mass of local boids

When all the boids followed these same rules then the boids flocked. In a sense Reynolds was reproducing the functioning of a complex system, in that there was no overall intention to create a flock pattern. The flocking pattern emerged from the interaction between local agents, all following simple rules. The problem with this simulation when applied to organisations is that the boids are all essentially passive and homogenous. They all follow the same rules, no matter what. This isn’t a good metaphor for the functioning of organisations, in which people live by different rules, and in which people are self-conscious and self-regarding, and may change the rules by which they operate purely for the sake of it. Human beings are conscious, emotional and spontaneous, capable of observing the pattern of interactions within which they are operating and responding accordingly. People think about their work, are bored by repetition, seek novelty, dislike being told what to do, and may actively avoid changeⁱⁱ. The functioning of human beings, and the interactions between human beings, may be un-modellable, and the system metaphor may not be very useful.

The challenge to us here, thinking of ourselves as systemic coaches, embracing complexity theories, is that we may unwittingly still be thinking in terms of simple cause and effect. Yes, we recognise that human interactions are complex. Yes, we recognise that different aspects of the environment have an impact on the issue at hand. But we nevertheless regard the behaviour of the individual in first order terms – if my coachee does x, then y is bound to happen.

The meta-systemic tag recognises that the systems metaphor is helpful in many contexts, be it a first-order, second-order, or complexity perspective – so long as we remember that organisations are not really systems and that the systems perspective will always be imperfect and incomplete.

Another problem with systems

When we think of systems we think of bounded entities. A car engine, for example, is an object. It interacts with the surrounding environment, but we have no problems distinguishing the car engine from its surrounds. Similarly with the living organism. We can compare the functioning of the human body with the functioning of a car engine. Again, we have no problem distinguishing between human body and its environment. When we talk of organisations as systems we run the risk of thinking of them in similar terms, as bounded entities. The way people inside organisations behave reinforces this illusion. Organisations are supposed to have their own discrete strategies, their own culture and policies, clear rules of membership etc ... But to think of an organisation in this way is to be seduced into a simplistic way of thinking. We may be more likely, when drawing pictures of the organisation, to integrate these supposedly hard boundaries into our depiction of the way things work. We may overestimate the influence of people inside the 'organisation' and miss altogether the influence of people outside the 'organisation'. If we think about the functioning of an organisation as a 'complex adaptive system, as described in the previous White Paper, we may pay lots of attention to interaction happening inside the walls of the organisation and insufficient attention to events outside those walls. The system metaphor may distract us from paying attention to the role that other people play in the emergence of change, people such as contractors, clients, suppliers, friends and family, media, and the bloke in the pub. Organisations are not, in any real sense, systems.

Complex Responsive Processing

Rather than think about systems, Stacey and Mowles (2016) suggest we focus squarely on the responsive manner in which people interact with each other. The focus here is on the functioning of social networks. We have no need of the systems metaphor. At first we called this perspective 'post-systemic', implying, as Stacey and Mowles suggest, that the systems metaphor may be unhelpful and counter-productive. But then we thought 'meta-systemic' might be better. The meta-systemic tag recognises that the systems metaphor is helpful in many contexts, be it a first-order, second-order, or complexity perspective – so long as we remember that organisations are not really systems and that the systems perspective will always be imperfect and incomplete.

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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 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 talks to some internal stakeholders, who suggest that his team should engage others earlier in decision making processes. Mark shares the feedback with his team, who make a special effort to be collaborative. Feedback improves, but still some people are unhappy.

Linda then encourages Mark to talk to different internal stakeholders. She suggests that different groups of people will have different needs and will be making their own sense of how his team is behaving. If he wants to change the big narrative, he needs to explore little narratives first. Mark follows her advice and discovers the complexities of interpersonal relationships within the organisation. He begins to understand how stories about him and his team are being co-created by networks of people, including people his team doesn't interact with directly. Based on these insights, Mark identifies half a dozen people inside the organisation that he and his team need to build stronger relationships with. Feedback again improves, but still some people are unhappy.

Listening to Mark's story, Linda realises for herself the limitations of systems language. She has unwittingly encouraged him to focus only on understanding the functioning of internal networks. She and Mark engage in a new conversation, the outcomes of which are that Mark:

- Begins to wonder if some key suppliers might be unhappy with their relationships with him and his team. If so, whether those key suppliers are talking to internal stakeholders about those relationships.
- Remembers that the CFO used to work for a competitor. He and his team have always abruptly declined opportunities to network with competitors, believing they have little gain from such conversations. Mark now wonders what impact that response may be having on the reputation of him and his team within the industry.

Mark leaves the conversation feeling uncomfortable. Does he need to think more broadly about the way he and his team interact with others outside the team?

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A meta-systemic coach

Following her epiphany moment, we might expect to see Linda:

- Seeking to understand patterns of local interaction and how local interactions converge into wider patterns of behaviour – very much like a ‘third-order’ coach.
- Hold lightly the idea of ‘organisation’. Seek to understand more broadly the functioning of social networks.
- See everything through the lens of social co-creation, holding at arms length hypotheses attributing emerging change to local agency.

Conclusions

More and more coaches, coach training houses, and authors are advocating a systemic approach to coaching. These voices urge us to look beyond the dyadic relationship between coach and coachee to consider the impact of other variables in the ‘system’. The system metaphor, however, is being used to depict quite different approaches to working with clients. First-order approaches depict the organisation as a coherent system operating to a set of rules. Second-order approaches see the organisation as a mysterious ‘black box’ to be understood only through purposeful experimentation. Third-order approaches pay attention to local interaction and view broader patterns of behaviour as an outcome of myriad local interactions. The meta-systemic perspective recognises the limitations of the system metaphor and focusses squarely on the functioning of social networks without paying too much attention to imaginary organisational boundaries. These are four quite different philosophies, and because they are so different, it may be useful for us to start talking explicitly about the differences between them. In doing so, it may be useful for us each to refrain from aligning ourselves too closely with a particular perspective and recognise that all four perspectives may prove useful when regarded as metaphor and deployed in different contexts.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

- i. Explained in Stacey, R.D. & Mowles, C. (2016). *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics*. 7th edition. UK: Pearson.
- ii. Suchman, A. L. (2011). Organizations as Machines, Organizations as Conversations. Two Core Metaphors and Their Consequences. *Medical Care*, 49(12), S43-S48