

Whole Self, Whole System: Selected writings on Systemic Coaching with Constellations

by Edward L. Rowland
with Sarah Rozenthuler and Scott Downs



Kind Words

"20 years ago when I started-out in working in large-scale whole-system change, I wished someone would have provided me with this small book. It is a genuine treasure: rich full of engaging stories, sensible practical insights and deep learning for the practitioner and newcomer alike. This leadership competence of systemic awareness is surely essential for our times. I can wholeheartedly recommend this book from Ed.

Cracking stuff!"

**Jason Nickels, Business Psychologist and Certified Scrum Master,
Intellectual Property Office (IPO) UK.**

"Perceiving and acting more systemically is the key leadership skill for today's complex, ever changing and interconnected world. At the same time, it can be fiendishly tricky to explain! In this compendium, Ed (with Sarah and Scott) beautifully cracks the conundrum and gives us an accessible yet authoritative account of the leadership skill our world so urgently needs.

A valuable gift to both leaders and those who coach them"

Deborah Rowland, Author: Still Moving. Formerly HR Director of BBC Worldwide and Gucci

'There is a major shift afoot in business. It can be characterised as a shift from perceiving the organisation-as-a-machine to recognising the organisation as an emergent living system. Many forward-thinking leaders and organisations are grappling with what this means in practice, and in-so-doing realising that the organisation-as-living-system demands quite different approaches to what many of us are conversant with. Experts in their field, Edward, Sarah and Scott explore in a prescient and practical way how we can best sense into and attune the living-systems of our organisations for improved vibrancy and responsiveness. This e-book helps our organisations to not just survive but thrive in these increasingly volatile and complex times; it is essential for practitioners and leaders alike who are sensing into the emerging future of business today. I highly recommend this insightful and accessible work.'

Giles Hutchins, author of Future Fit, and Chairman of The Future Fit leadership Academy

"Enlightening and resonant; Ed, Sarah and Scott offer a really accessible and valuable lens on organisational change and leadership that left me feeling far better resourced to lean in to the challenges and opportunities that we face in business today and, very practically, help others do the same. I would recommend this book to both those who are new to systemic coaching, as an introduction to the perspective, and those who are experienced with working in this way, as a vehicle to help translate this approach to a broader client base. I love the clarity of message and gentle challenge to think more broadly and deeply about things that initially appear to be too complex or problematic. It is brilliant to be able to pick up a book with real depth that also feels light and easy to work with."

Nisheeta Shah, In-house Senior Executive Coach

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Preface

Two years ago, while filming a dialogue with Jan Jacob Stam - who is a widely acknowledged thought leader in the field of systemic coaching and organisational constellations - I was delighted to discover that we shared a perspective about the trajectory and place of this work in the world.

The perspective, or insight, was the response to a question: if constellations work is almost universally recognised as an extremely powerful and effective way of working by those that experience it, why has it gained relatively little traction in the mainstream of leadership development and organisational change (particularly outside Germany and the Netherlands)?

Good question! There are various responses of course but the one with most energy for our conversation was this. Over the last 15 years, the community of systemic practitioners has focused too much on the mapping tool of constellations - and teaching other change coaches how to use that tool - and too little on communicating the important understanding of human systems that this lens and way of working has revealed (particularly to business leaders).

We shared our respective plans for new leadership and capacity-building programmes that would use this systemic lens to open up the systemic intelligence and conversational potential that is already there in leaders and teams (and inherent to human beings, in our view).

New writing is of course another way of redressing the imbalance. Over the last 18 months, together with my colleagues Sarah Rozenhuler and Scott Downs, we have published a number of articles about the systemic approach in a wide range of publications - Business Zone, Coaching at Work, Ethical Performance, HR Director, Huff Post, Salt Magazine - as well as on our own website and LinkedIn.

These articles focus on building systemic awareness rather than the method itself. They introduce the systemic approach to a mainstream audience (chapter 1), discuss the key principles and ordering forces including the centrality of purpose (chapters 2, 3 and 4), explore the stance of the change coach (chapter 6) and set out our approach for integrating this approach into leadership (chapter 5). They say very little about actual constellations, though they give hopefully enough case stories and practical examples from our live work with clients to bring the material to life.

This ebook brings them together for you to download and read in one place. We hope you find them useful and informative, and that they spark insights for your own leadership and coaching practice. Your feedback is really welcome!

very best Ed

1. Whole Self, Whole System:

An Introduction to Systemic Coaching with Constellations

(This article appeared in **Salt** - a magazine for positive change agents, gamechangers, visionaries, & inspiring ideas - in January 2017)



Systemic Coaching and Constellations co-pioneer Edward Rowland introduces a powerful new 'wide-angle lens' approach to transforming challenges in organisations.

We live in an uncertain, high-pressured world where the pace of change is faster than ever before. The pressures and anxieties that this vortex of change places on individuals, especially leaders, are unprecedented. Many leaders, behind closed doors, report feeling bewildered, impotent and overwhelmed at the scale and rate of disruptive change in our rapidly unfolding digital age, according to Nik Gowing and Chris Langdon in their hard-hitting report, *Thinking the Unthinkable: A New Imperative for Leadership in the Digital Age* (2016). From a series of 60 confidential, one-to-one interviews with top-level leaders from across the globe working in corporates, government, and humanitarian sector, a sobering picture emerges. The authors argue that most leaders are simply not equipped to lead in these volatile times, and that "the leadership skills of tomorrow are fundamentally different to the leadership skills of today".

Yet simultaneously, we live in an increasingly globally connected world where the opportunities for technological change, entrepreneurialism and social action seem greater than ever. In this volatile but promising context, coaching has come to play an increasingly central role in the development of leadership, organisational excellence and personal performance, becoming a multi billion-dollar business.

The Limits of Individualism

While many useful coaching models have emerged to meet this growing demand, from my work in organisations over the last 20 years, I've witnessed the limits of conventional coaching models that focus on the client as an individual actor, thereby failing to consider the opportunities and challenges of the broader systemic context in which the client lives and works.

Such coaching models are typically limited to a more cognitive approach, often overlooking the wider range of "ways of knowing" available; they also tend to impose some form of organisation and discipline on what the coach and the client already know and so avoid tackling the questions - and discovering the deep truths - that most deeply influence the client and systems surrounding her. Accordingly these conventional approaches rarely truly realise the creative potential of the client or their business, and reduce the chance for breakthrough results.

A Systemic Approach

Experience has also taught me that achieving breakthrough coaching results requires skilfully navigating the client's systemic context, and in doing so courageously stepping into the unknown. This journey requires experience, insight and practice in working systemically, and the strength and skill to hold the tensions and discomforts of that journey.

Working systemically requires recognising we are embedded in systems. Our businesses survive and thrive only because of their dependence on a wider ecosystem of customers and suppliers, as well as the planet herself.

Systemic coaching coaches the individual client or team with the system in mind – exploring the part in the whole, and the whole in the part – so as to unlock the potential and performance of both. This way of working changes the game of coaching, rendering each coaching encounter a systemic intervention in itself.

Seeing the Bigger Picture: Finding Solutions that Serve Everyone

So how does it do this?

Firstly, it sets up maps ("constellations") of a question or challenge within its wider systemic context. This mapping of key elements in a system can be done in the following different ways:

- 'Tabletop style', using figures or post-its in 1-1 settings to represent key elements.
- Using floormarkers, a useful way to help individual clients step into their resources, blockers and potential solutions more fully.
- Helping intact teams to create maps of their own system.
- Using people to represent other systems as part of a group simulation.

Whatever the method used, these maps illuminate systems dynamics that might otherwise be hidden or invisible. For example, since the leaders and teams we coach are always part of a larger system, they can often act as 'symptom-bearers' for that larger system. When leaders or senior teams carry difficult patterns belonging to the whole system which aren't being fully addressed by the Board or executive team above them, it can be very hard to see or understand such systems dynamics - and to resolve them - without a wider systemic perspective and method.

Secondly, Systemic Coaching and Constellations draws from a set of underlying principles that this particular way of seeing systems has revealed. It works with the understanding that organisations are purposeful living systems subject to a 'hidden architecture' of systemic ordering forces that powerfully influence the relationships and dynamics arising in them. If organisations can attune to this architecture, there is a basic alignment in which all members of a system feel at ease – leading to a flow of leadership, trust and purposeful action, which enables solutions to emerge for the benefit of the whole system.

Speaking personally (as Ed), this capacity to strengthen the whole system remains - after 16 years of immersing myself in, and passing on this approach - perhaps the most captivating, beautiful and worthwhile aspects of this way of working.

Benefits to Leaders

The benefits of Systemic Coaching and Constellations include:

- **Simplifying complexity:** the often overwhelming sense of complexity leaders and executives can experience handling critical business and leadership challenges is usually lifted. *(In our experience, this is the feature of this way of working that is often most appreciated by business leaders and executives).*
- **Untangling patterns:** hidden dynamics in the relationships between different parts of the system are revealed, enabling stuck patterns, misplaced loyalties and outdated allegiances to be addressed and resolved.
- **Enabling innovation:** by giving people a clearer sense of the the whole and ways forward that strengthen the whole system, the potential for innovation and energy to achieve excellence can be unlocked.
- **Finding our place:** helping leaders find their own place in the system leads to a greater sense of belonging and wellbeing, and improves performance

Benefits to Coaches

There are also many benefits to coaches of working in this way, including helping us find our own best place in the client system, in relation to both the client organisation and any individual or team we're working with. Finding our 'right place' helps us feel we have our 'ground' and presence to do our best work. We have the confidence to challenge when appropriate, and can see our client and their wider system with a clear perspective, building a sense of trust and reliability. *(See further chapter 6 below).*

A Stance for Leaders and Coaches

Setting up maps systemically builds our embodied knowing and presence. After decades of organisational and leadership development initiatives in his own businesses, Bill O'Brien, the late CEO of Hanover Insurance, wrote that: "The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener". The Theory U movement, developed by Otto Scharmer at MIT in the U.S., has called the lack of attention to our interiority and presence, the 'blind spot' of leadership and change.

Using our 'Self' as an instrument, we learn that knowledge about systems can be accessed as a 'felt sense', not just through the mind but directly in the body - in our feelings and intuition ('Whole Self'). This expanded awareness deepens our capacity to 'zoom back' and take a birds-eye view, so we can

see, and listen for, what the wider system is trying to tell us ('Whole System'). For leaders and coaches, the more we can raise our inner game, the more we can raise our outer one.

In Closing

Calling on our newfound capacities for presence, seeing the system as a whole, and attuning to our own purpose and right place within the organisation's system, we can feel relaxed and well-placed to do our best work. And the more we deepen these capacities, the more we can lead or guide others and businesses to create the best future possibilities and evolutionary pathways needed to reach their full potential.

2. The Wisdom of the System: The Perspective of Constellations Work

*(This article appeared in HR Director magazine in April 2017.
It contains a case study that separately appeared in Coaching at Work).*



*"If you want to go fast, go alone - if you want to go far, go together"
African proverb quoted by Paul Polman, CEO Unilever, BBC News, 16/01/2017*

Systemic Coaching and Constellations work has emerged over the last 20 years as a powerful, awareness-based approach to seeing and transforming challenges in our organisational and professional lives. By creating maps of the whole system, it enables the hidden dynamics of even seemingly intractable situations to be illuminated - and often resolved - quickly and effectively.

During these volatile and uncertain times, the systems perspective of this work - as well as the method - will benefit HR professionals, leaders and change agents who want to open up the systemic intelligence and co-creative potential that is already there in leaders and teams.

The "persistent bias" of individualism

Barry Oshry, a systems theorist, has noted that our efforts both to diagnose and intervene in organisations have a "persistent bias": we interpret things from a personal perspective. He notes that the leadership capacity of seeing the systemic contexts in which people operate is "missing":

"When we don't see systems, we see individual personalities. Our explanations are personal, and our solutions are personal. Fix the individual."

This prevailing view in organisations has many limitations. It encourages a view of performance, behaviour and even creativity as residing in the individual (rather than also in relationships or systemic patterns), making us more likely to blame others, take things personally or fight for our corner.

Much of leadership development focuses on the individual. We tend to think that we can solve many problems just by building new skills or instilling different behaviours. Whilst it is important to take responsibility for one's own actions and impact, we have found that there is a limit to what can be achieved by working in this way.

The Web of Systems - aka Life!

All of us live within a web of relationships. Everything we do is shaped by relationships and systemic forces, whether we acknowledge this dimension of reality or not. Our body is a system; we are born into a family system; we join and leave other systems from school onwards and in the world of work. Our businesses survive and thrive because of their dependence on a wider ecosystem of customers and suppliers, as well as the planet herself.

The systems of which we are part pull on us with powerful force. All of us are deeply influenced by our sense of belonging in various groups. We ask ourselves, do we really belong here? How do we balance the loyalties of our belonging to different groups? In our work systems, we might ask, what is each person's role or right place? What tensions does this create in each person and in the team? In systemic coaching and consulting, these are the dynamics that we learn to notice, model, navigate and align.

Five Features of Human Systems

There are five important features of human systems – and our understanding of them can expand what we see, how we intervene and the impact we have.

1. A system (the whole) is different to - and behaves differently to - the sum of the parts.

Human systems are living 'organisms' that behave differently to the sum of the parts. As a simple example, a team made up of stellar individuals might function very poorly collectively. A change in the composition of the team can mean that the team suddenly starts behaving and functioning very differently.

At the same time, the health of the individual part is strongly influenced by, and influences, the health of the whole system. Indeed, since systems – such as teams – are always part of a larger system, they can often act as 'symptom-bearers' for that larger system. As an example, we often see that leaders and teams carry difficult patterns that belong to the whole system, as they are not being fully addressed by the leaders above them. Without a systemic understanding, leaders and HR professionals are often at a loss about how to deal with these stuck patterns.

2. There is a hidden architecture governing the dynamics in human systems, which if respected and attuned to, supports the whole system

Organisations are subject to an invisible 'architecture' of systemic ordering forces that powerfully influence the dynamics arising in them, both positively and negatively. These forces - to do with belonging, exchange and place – both ensure the survival of the individual and safeguard the system itself.

If organisations attune to this architecture, there is a basic alignment in which all members of a system feel at ease – leading to a flow of leadership, trust and purposeful action. (*See chapter 4. Hidden Architecture below for more on this*).

3. Problems are solutions in progress, from a systemic perspective.

Another key insight of the systemic approach is that problematic patterns are typically reactions to something that happened, and the attempt of the system to find a solution. Given that systems have a natural tendency to move towards balance, the question we ask ourselves as systemic practitioners is: "For what phenomenon is this problem or pattern a solution?"

This principle can be illustrated by the following example, where an MD and Board are having difficulty filling a senior position (even by well-qualified candidates).

EXAMPLE CASE STORY: the MD and the Ejector Seat

A. Coaching Scenario – 'The Problem'

Simon is MD of a mid-sized business with 500 employees, and 18 months into his role. Although his business has a globally recognised brand, and some good products, he feels that the business has become 'stagnant' – both in terms of its culture and its sales performance. There is a problem with 'low morale' among the staff, which is manifest in a steady revolving door of people entering and joining the organisation.

In particular, he and the Board have trouble filling a senior position. A particular role – that of HR Director – has had many occupants in just a few years and the role seems somehow incapable of being occupied, even by seemingly well-qualified candidates. The current incumbent, who Simon chose, is also struggling in the role.

Generally, Simon intuitively feels that there are 'skeletons' – and unfinished business – in the organisation that are holding it back, but a) he can't put his finger on what they are and b) doesn't know what to do about it. Attempts to improve the situation, through coaching the current HR Director, a new strategy process, and attempts to create a more open, transparent culture, have as yet yielded little benefit.

B. 'Solution'

Problems such as Simon's are typically 'solutions in progress', from the perspective of Systemic Coaching and constellations. In other words, what we find – viewed through this mapping lens – is that problematic patterns are often reactions to something that happened, and the attempt of the system to find a solution. Taking a slightly different

approach, the question we systemic practitioners therefore ask ourselves is: "For what phenomenon is this problem or pattern a solution?"

We might begin with a fairly typical contracting process that includes: deeply listening to Simon, exploring feedback from others on his leadership style and also the outcomes he wants from the coaching process.

However, our systemic perspective might then encourage us to ask some slightly different questions, such as: Which earlier or present member(s) of the system was excluded, devalued or forgotten? Has anyone been dismissed in an unnecessarily disrespectful way? In this case, these questions yield answers from Simon that have a certain energetic charge, which the systemic coach is trained to pick up. These include the facts that there was a 'brutal cull' to one business division 10 years previously, and also that a previous HR Director had been bullied and then fired for underperforming by Simon's predecessor as CEO four years previously.

The next step is to take Simon to a bespoke constellation workshop – attended by a business champion or two plus neutral representatives – so we can see the hidden systems dynamics at play.

This process reveals the real issue that the prior incumbent in HR had been mistreated, disrespected and effectively excluded from the firm's institutional memory. It also revealed the difficult pattern for that person's successors as they assumed this "ejector seat" role, and – through identification with the prior incumbent – were also expelled from the system.

This helps us find the resolution that the system is seeking: to remedy the prior imbalance by recognition of the earlier incumbent. Simon is happy to do this, and the follow-up coaching explores how this 're-membering' can be embedded in the organisation through conversations with the HR Director and collective ritual (and dialogue) – while helping him navigate all his other challenges!

4. Change begins with agreeing to reality as it is.

Another principle is that trying to suppress, minimise or even get rid of problems typically keeps them around. This often leads to resistance to change or unintended consequences elsewhere in the system.

By contrast, identifying and acknowledging 'what is' is a crucial first step in bringing ease to a system. In a leadership team this might mean, for example, acknowledging cynicism about making positive changes. Unacknowledged and explored resistance halts progress in its tracks.

5. Successful intervening in systems requires an awareness-based, phenomenological approach and not just an analytic one (which focuses on details).

Our own experience, which includes supervising change coaches and consultants over the last twelve years, has truly brought home the truth of the Theory U maxim that: "The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener".

We have already mentioned that using our embodied presence is a critical skill in working systemically. We learn that knowledge about systems can be accessed not just through the mind but directly in the body, and through our feelings and intuition ('Whole Self').

Our expanded awareness then enables us to 'zoom back' and take a birds-eye view so that we can see – and listen for – what the system overall might be trying to tell us ('Whole System'.) In time we can learn to become skilled pattern perceivers.

The Benefits of Systemic Mapping

With these systemic principles in mind, it is possible to map complex systems in surprisingly simple ways. Spatially arranging objects to stand for elements in a system, for example team members, competitors and even market forces, creates powerful windows into the system. These insights can then be used to disentangle problematic relationships and carve out new pathways for moving forwards.

A systemic stance is often more inclusive than other approaches to leading change. By people looking together at the context in which they are working, greater insights into how the system

is working emerge, freeing up trapped energy - and creative ideas - and generating a stronger commitment to bring these ideas to life in day-to-day work.

In Closing: the value of a Systemic approach

When people ignore - or simply cannot see - systemic influences, they often feel pressures and tensions that they cannot explain. These invisible, yet potent, forces drive behaviour, and often block plans and strategies in ways that seem mysterious or inexplicable.

On the other hand, when the systemic context is engaged with skilfully, we gain deeper insight into "What Is?", and many unexpected, creative possibilities about "What Could Be?" emerge. With systemic support and training, leaders, coaches and HR professionals can learn to navigate previously unseen pathways with skill and elegance. This opens the way to unexpected breakthroughs, unlocks collective intelligence and aligns people with the inherent wisdom of the system – and the creative flow of life - itself.

We would like to thank colleagues Judith Hemming and Jan Jacob Stam in particular, for their prior efforts to set out the systemic principles of this approach. We have obviously done our best to bring them to life with our own examples and words.

3. The Heart of Purpose: Through a Systemic Lens

(Versions of this article appeared in LinkedIn and the Triodos Magazine in 2017).



"Purpose needs leadership....Mission statements are helpful – but purpose goes much further and is rooted in commitments to others, including individuals, communities and the world at large"

Purpose in Practice: Clarity, Authenticity & the Spectre of Purpose Wash (2015)
Claremont Communications

During these times of disruptive change, many voices are calling for a new approach to leadership. Most of us want to find our true work and right 'place', so that our leadership brings out the best in ourselves, others, and our workplaces and communities as a whole.

Alongside this search for personal meaning and purpose, a growing business case for purpose - researched by EY, Deloitte, Harvard and Saïd Oxford Business Schools - shows that purpose-led organisations have greater competitive advantage, customer loyalty, employee engagement and agility to innovate than those that seek profitability alone.¹

This article contributes to the inquiry by briefly exploring the phenomenon of purpose, as revealed through the particular lens of systemic coaching and constellations work. It shows how this method - together with robust dialogue - can create a powerful leadership practice for the attunement to, and discovery of potent purpose.

And we offer an original tool, the Purpose Diamond, that can be used as part of this process. We also suggest - using a client story as an example - that to bring purpose to life in organisations, it is essential to 'see the whole' and navigate the wider systemic context as part of the discovery process.

Mapping the Invisible: the Method as X-Ray

By creating maps of the whole system - including 'intangibles' such as purpose, brand and the best emergent future - the awareness-based constellations method enables the invisible dynamics and deeper potential of leadership and business situations to be explored, and illuminated.

In less than an hour, for instance, we can "x-ray" the current reality and true health of our organisations by setting up a simulation containing its key intangibles together with more concrete, tangible parts of the system. We can do this alongside - or even without - time-consuming and potentially expensive data collection of people's perceptions through, for example, surveys and focus groups.

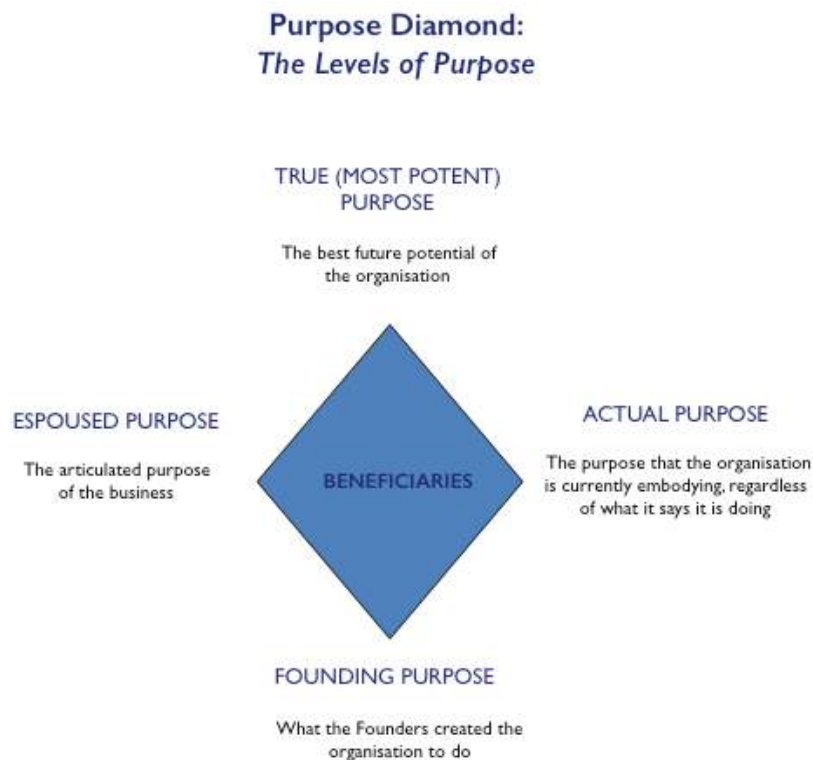
This mapping work graphically reveals some interesting things! At its best, we often see that when a system connects to its true purpose, this serves as a powerful energetic wellspring for its people, customers and beneficiaries. Conversely, this method frequently illustrates that some challenges perceived as belonging in other areas, for example marketing, poor sales performance or even a lack of leadership, have their roots in lack of clarity around purpose.

Purpose is a challenge for many leaders, despite all the work being done in this area. For instance, we see that some leaders seek to move forward and innovate, but do so at the cost of ignoring the past. When the history of a system is not sufficiently included – for example, the founders are forgotten – there is a stuckness that impedes powerful progress.

On the other hand, leaders can sometimes be caught in the past, by being wedded to founding expressions of the purpose that do not light up staff or customers anymore. Put simply, the founding purpose needs to be respected, but also continually evolved to meet the changing needs of the marketplace and society.

Another issue is that many 'espoused' expressions of purpose, despite good intentions and a great deal of money invested in some cases, are some distance from the 'actual' purpose that the organisation is embodying. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such purposes - which are 'laminated' rather than lived - tend to have little impact on stakeholders.

To support rapid diagnosing of such issues, we have created a structural "constellation", which reveals the 'levels' of purpose in a system (see Figure 1). This mapping tool can be used 1-1 with a founder, in an intact team, or even in a group constellation using representatives. It also provides a good starting point for some lively conversations!



Purpose Diamond by www.wholepartnership.com is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Figure 1 - Purpose Diamond

Whatever the context, the power of the mapping process is that it allows us to see the deeper reality and both the stuck points and higher potential of what is unfolding for us, our organisations and our customers.

The Hidden Orders of Change: the Method as Tuning Fork

Although doing the subject justice would require additional posts, this systemic approach is much more than a diagnostic or mapping tool. It contains a profound understanding of certain hidden, 'Ordering Forces' that allow us to attune an organisation to the energetic lodestar of its purpose, and create the conditions in which leaders, teams and the business itself can flourish.

From the perspective of this systemic lens, purpose is inherent to systems and not constructed. True purpose therefore needs to be discovered and articulated rather than simply invented through ideas and words. It is the first and deepest 'Ordering Force' in organisations, and - along with its constituent principles - answers the profound question of what an organisation's place and function is in the world.

There are usually several core constituent Leading Principles (normally two to four), at the heart of the purpose. As our colleague Jan Jacob Stam has stated, these are an answer to the question: "What are we to the outside world?". These principles could include, for instance:

- Providing medical/nursing care and management (in hospitals)
- Doing research and providing executive education and transformative learning (in business schools).

The constellating process shows that it is very important to work out which Leading Principle has priority. Indeed, what is sometimes thought of as lack of leadership - or even poor marketing - often turns out to be a lack of clarity around guiding principles.

Leadership Practices

There are two important points to make about the discovery process, and the leadership practices needed to arrive at a potent articulation of purpose:

1. First, the mapping work needs to be combined with robust dialogue that unlocks the collective intelligence in the room. The discovery of purpose for a team or business is a co-creative exercise that calls for a deeper quality of dialogue than often occurs in organisations. This requires the ability to not just assert but to ask catalytic questions; there also needs to be a willingness to listen, to share hard truths and to allow the greater wisdom of the whole to come through. Creating the conditions for such dialogue is an art – and science – that is underused by many leaders. It is, however, a capacity that can be learned.
2. Second, the process of attuning to purpose - using the constellating method - needs to include and 'represent' key stakeholders both within and outside the system, as part of an exercise in expanded perspective-taking. Exploring the purpose through the eyes of different stakeholders enables team members to connect their "why" with the wider world so that their beneficiaries are really served.

These two points can be illustrated by the following example:

EXAMPLE CASE: A Senior Leadership Team

"It's not a tell", began the Chief Technology Office (CTO) of a public sector organisation. "It could be a tell," he continued, "I've done it that way before – two hours and several Post-It notes later, you've come up with something. It's expedient but it's not effective. I want our team purpose to be lived not laminated."

It was the opening line of the meeting. The CTO and his Senior Leadership Team (SLT) had set aside a whole day with the objective of finding and articulating a clear Purpose statement for the SLT, which was co-created rather than mandated and drew on everyone's input.

"I've been here 28 years and I've seen a lot of days like this," said the one woman in the team, kindly but somewhat provocatively, as the 'check-in' continued. "Things come and go – mostly go. It's not just about finding our purpose, it's about living it otherwise today will make no difference whatsoever."

Finding and embodying purpose is not a simple, linear task. Whether we are looking at the "why" of a team or an organisation, both are embedded in a larger ecosystem. The team's purpose does not exist in isolation - it obviously needs to align with the purpose of the organisation (whether in the public, private or third sectors), which in turn exists to serve the needs of a range of external stakeholders, customers etc. To crystallise a purpose that has a 'wow' for the team, as well as its beneficiaries, it is vital to take into account this larger, "whole system" context.

In this team's case, after a dialogic process to elicit the leading principles of the SLT (which included building IT capability and providing governance), these were mapped by members of the team to find out which had more energy and which had priority - both internally and in the eyes of various key stakeholders.

This in turn led to the co-creation of a draft purpose statement (which wasn't particularly honed or crafted at this stage). It was striking that by us all being on our feet, out of the circle of chairs, the level of engagement in the team had changed markedly. It was clear that the usual rules of conversation – who typically spoke the most, who agreed with whom etc – had been helpfully disrupted.

We then created a further stakeholder constellation, with each member of the SLT volunteering to represent one of the key stakeholders (CEO/COO /Divisional Directors/Staff/Externals etc). We asked the "representatives" to put their own thoughts to one side and step into being the stakeholder or "clump" of stakeholders that they'd chosen to represent, and place themselves in terms of distance (and direction) from the purpose statement.

It quickly became apparent that the draft purpose was incomplete. Whilst some of the stakeholder rep (Finance and Divisional Directors) were close to the purpose statement and energised by it, the others were spread right across the length of the room.

We explored this "embodied map" together by hearing what each person noticed about where they were standing (including sensations, feelings or observations about how close or far apart they were from the purpose or each other). After gathering this data, which - by the intakes of breath and laughter - appeared to be accurate to the SLT, we asked: "What's the one thing that would make you take a

step closer to the SLT purpose?" The responses came quickly and easily. We scribbled down this powerful data as we went around the room, gathering the insights that were flowing in our midst. The energy behind these observations felt very different to the cynicism at the start of the meeting.

This led to an expansive space of deeper dialogue about the purpose of the SLT in leading the wider system. Following this dialogue, we moved into a further co-creative process to come up with the next version of the purpose statement, and a potent articulation suddenly - and unmistakably - arrived, to the relief of everyone present.

This client story illustrates a pattern we see time and time again in our work. When a community attunes to its purpose through a wide-angle lens of interdependency, it usually comes clearly and easily into focus. Teams, departments and organisations do not exist independently – they occupy a niche in an ecosystem. When a collective attunes to purpose in this wider context, they are more likely to discover their best future potential rather than living out an espoused purpose that does not release the full potential of the system.

"Right-Sizing" Purpose

More generally, this work with mapping purpose reveals the critical importance of finding the right size for a team or organisation's purpose, beyond ideas about purpose. For instance, we have recently heard the resurrection of ideas about "planetary purpose" or - from green voices - that business purpose needs to be about contributing much more actively to the UN sustainable development goals. Maybe. This work certainly shows that many organisations have the potential to play a much larger role in addressing our shared social and environmental problems.

However, we have also worked with professional services firms whose purpose is simply to provide a good value, excellent service to its customers. In two cases, efforts to find a broader, grander, societal purpose were revealed to be an expensive and burdensome distraction. Some purposes need to expand, some need to deflate a little! In our view, finding authentic, potent purpose is much more important than any ideology or ideas we may hold.

Attuning to Personal Purpose

It goes beyond the scope of this article, but this capacity to map, discover and attune to purpose - using the systemic approach - is also true for individuals. We can quickly see the real condition of our deeper purpose, and what blocks and enables us reaching our full potential. This includes our level of attunement to the organisations for which we work. For example, we can help a client rapidly answer the question: "does my organisation's purpose and current role really resource my own deeper purpose or not?" We can also attune to our own Leading Principles as an individual, and arrive at a potent articulation of purpose.

Closing Reflection

In this age of disruption and uncertainty, helping people and organisations become fit for their deeper purpose - so they can serve their beneficiaries and ecosystem more fully - is surely one key aspect of the leadership most needed right now.

In our experience, it is this weave of approaches – integrating the systemic method with whole systems dialogue – that best enables a team or organisation to attune to its sense of mission. By unlocking collective intelligence through dialogue and exploring the best emergent future for all the different stakeholders, purpose can truly become a magnetic force, channelling people's energy to serve the greater whole.

As well as enabling a powerful discovery process to crystallise purpose, the systemic approach also reveals quickly and easily the key "acupressure points" for change - so that the benefits of a purpose-led approach can be activated for individuals and the system as a whole. Incisive and swift attunement to the true potential of purpose is a unique contribution that a systemic lens is able to bring.

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4. Hidden Architecture - the orders of systemic change

An abridged version of this article originally appeared in Coaching at Work magazine in June 2017



Leading systemic coach Edward Rowland explains the "hidden architecture" in organisations and how leaders can work with it to create effective organisational cultures

Working with leaders across the world for more than 17 years, supporting them to create sustainable and effective organisations, I have learned that achieving breakthrough coaching results requires skilfully navigating the client's systemic context, and in doing so courageously stepping into the unknown.

At the Whole Partnership, an organisation I founded to catalyse purpose-led leadership, we've further developed a systemic coaching framework that pays specific attention to systemic factors – the complex human systems and relationships, often unacknowledged, in which all our clients live and work. This framework prepares and guides the coach and client on a journey into the unknown, toward dependable, though unpredictable, breakthrough insights.

And it engages the full range of human faculties and resources to enrich the journey, especially by paying attention to the unity of body, feelings and mind, with all the power, insight and creative potential an appreciation of that unity offers. It is a "whole person, whole system" approach.

The Web of Life

When we work systemically, we acknowledge that all of us live within a web of relationships. In systemic coaching we call these webs, systems. Working this way taps into a large array of psychological and therapeutic research and practice from the last few decades, and aligns with a systemic perspective that is transforming the outlook of 21st century science. And this method is also creating it's own body of research, with a range of PhDs exploring the effectiveness of the systemic approach in coaching, organisational change and even branding.

Everything we do is shaped by relationships and systemic forces, whether we acknowledge this dimension of reality or not. Our body is a system; we are born into a family system, which is the main 'pattern generator' in our lives; we join and leave other systems from school onwards and in the world of work. Our businesses survive and thrive because of their dependence on a wider ecosystem of customers and suppliers, as well as the planet herself.

No matter how well an organisation plans and defines its future goals and strategies, factors in the wider ecosystem, such as market conditions, changes of government policy or natural disasters can also play a critical part in an affecting an organisation's success.

There are also more hidden forces at work. This invisible 'architecture' of systemic forces is often poorly understood, even though they can powerfully activate those systems dynamics, that - as our Dutch colleague Jan Jacob Stam says - "can in one moment give us wings to fly and in another moment hold us paralyzed and unable to act."

Working with Systemic Forces

The various systems we're part of can pull on us with powerful force. When people ignore such systemic influences, they often experience unexplained pressures and tensions, which feel enormously powerful, driving their behaviour and that of others, either enabling or blocking plans, strategies and goals in ways that seem mysterious or inexplicable.

On the other hand, when the systemic context is *seen*, understood and engaged with consciously and skilfully, seemingly intractable challenges - and their tensions - can sometimes simply disappear overnight. Using systemic coaching with constellations, coaches learn to help clients navigate these often unseen pathways with skill and grace, often opening the way to unexpected breakthroughs.

The 7 Orders of Systemic Change

In the systemic coaching and constellating tradition, we use the term 'orders' to describe these underpinning structures that influence organisations and other living systems. Often invisible, these orders can be difficult to attend to. Negative manifestations include employees suddenly leaving, power struggles, massive drops in sales and effectiveness, or a crippling stagnation.

More positively, when these forces are well attended to, they can powerfully orientate a system to its true purpose. Such attunement can help resolve issues by re-patterning the relationships between key systemic elements, thus enabling a better flow of leadership and purposeful action across the whole ecosystem of stakeholders.

Using them as a lens to quickly and accurately 'scan' an organization, team or system, we work with the following seven orders to help identify where crucial systemic issues and the points of highest leverage are located.

1. Purpose

The founding purpose needs to be respected, but also continually evolved to meet the changing needs of the marketplace & society. From a systemic perspective, purpose is inherent to systems and not constructed. True purpose therefore needs to be discovered and articulated rather than simply invented. It is the deepest order in organisations, and - with its

constituent principles - answers the profound question of what an organisation's place & function is in the world.

Possible Considerations/Questions

- *What was the founding purpose? Is it remembered, and respected?*
- *What is the espoused or stated purpose currently? To what extent does the organisation 'live' and embody this stated purpose?*
- *To what extent does it really 'light up the ecosystem' and activate the potential of the business?*

2. Belonging

Everyone in the system has a right to belong, including and especially the founders of the organisation. Of course, belonging is dependent on performance and more time-limited (than in families, for instance). However, it is important to ensure that all participants are acknowledged for their roles and contributions, and that any dismissal is done as transparently and respectfully as possible. Entanglements can emerge when prior participants are excluded from overt institutional memory or when the current roles and contributions of particular individuals and groups are ignored, belittled or excluded.

A case example of how such a pattern can lead to an 'ejector seat' phenomenon in organisations is included in Wisdom of the System (at 2 above).

Possible Considerations/Questions

- *Who is missing, and who needs to be included?*
- *Were any earlier or recent members of the system excluded, devalued or forgotten?*

3. Place

Priority goes to those with greater responsibility for the whole. This means that leaders need to acknowledge and "own" their authority, and carry the responsibilities that are theirs. Leaders need to step up and lead; and other participants need to feel comfortable in leading and following, as appropriate. The expectations and rewards of each person's role need to be seen as fair and 'right' – mutually – by the incumbents and by others working around them.

Possible Considerations/Questions

- *What is the flow of leadership? How much do leaders really lead?*
- *To what extent are people playing to their strengths, and in the best place for the task?*

4. Time

Those who come before have priority over those who come later. Length of service needs to be respected. Often just acknowledging the experience, knowledge and insight that comes from long institutional memory releases entanglements, letting more experienced participants contribute more fully – and newer entrants learn – in surprising ways. This in no way limits change or innovation, rather it allows the new to emerge proudly, creatively and resourcefully in the presence of, and on the foundations of, what has gone before. Simultaneously, new systems have a certain priority over older systems, for example in mergers.

Possible Considerations/Questions

- *How long respectively have people served the business?*
- *How are the contributions of the older or longer-serving members valued?*

5. Exchange

There needs to be a balance of giving and taking. Resources and rewards need to be made available in ways that engender trust and perceived fairness. Exchange is rarely of precisely equivalent things, especially over relatively short periods of time. Inherently, people give what they have and seek to receive what they need. But it's essential to assure that each participant is contributing value, and also receiving things they need (e.g. money, respect or development).

Possible Considerations/Questions

- *To what extent do merit and responsibility go where they belong?*
- *How fairly are resources and rewards allocated?*

6. Space

There's a spatial order for organisations, when all the other orders are attended to, where everyone feels in the right place and facing in the right direction. This is a subtle point, often

ignored. It is valuable to notice and attend to spatial relationships in working life – how physically close people are, where they work, where they figure on organisation charts. In addition, when we explicitly and visibly map a system, paying attention to relationships other than the asserted formal ones, we can see which ones appear to be aligned or in conflict and get spatial clues as to where a system may be stuck. Freeing movements or adjustments to the system often appear very readily under this kind of lens.

7. Acknowledgement

The basic principle of acknowledging reality or 'what is', and not-denying, is in a sense an enabler for the other orders to apply and function. Research into big complex change by my systemic colleague Deborah Rowland (not a relation!) shows that agreeing to things as they are is one of the most crucial capacities of successful change leadership **1**. Acknowledgement has two main aspects: first, it means a friendly but unflinching truth-telling, including naming of difficult realities and inconvenient facts; and second, it means consciously owning those realities in relation to relevant others (e.g. "this was my decision and I take full responsibility for the consequences"). It is a natural order that when reality is faced in this way, a system gains in strength. Conversely, when reality is denied, difficult patterns get passed on.

Possible Considerations/Questions

- *How honestly are the difficult realities & undesirable facts facing the business discussed?*
- *What is denied, suppressed, belittled? What is the organisation's 'kryptonite' (the thing it cannot do), and is it named and owned?*

Force for Positive Change

For a variety of reasons, there has been little attempt to date by systemic practitioners to share their understanding of hidden architecture with leaders, other than revealing its impact when things are out of alignment. However, the more leaders can develop their systemic intelligence to understand and work with these ordering forces, the more they can remove obstacles and elegantly orientate their teams and organisations around a potent purpose. By integrating this understanding into their ongoing work and conversations, leaders can activate and co-create vibrant and effective organisational cultures.

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Integrating the Systemic Approach into Leadership



Introduction: Shifting our Perspective on Leadership

Upgrading our leadership so that it is truly fit-for-purpose in the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world we live in, requires a fundamental shift in perspective. We observe that much of our media remain in thrall to the myth that leadership is simply about individuals or the 'person at the top'. In this ebook we state the case for making leadership more distributed, engaged and dialogic than is typically the norm. We underwrite an approach that is more systemic than singular. To put it simply, the systemic challenges we face require systemic solutions. True systems leadership not only meets these challenges but shapes the future so that it serves the whole.

Many of us have experienced the frustration of working in organisations where rivalry between individuals, teams or departments undermines collective performance. Gillian Tett, a writer at the Financial Times, has recently published her new book *The Silo Effect*, which addresses both the upside and downside of silo-isation. Division of labour, the hallmark of our market economy, has led to benefits, at least in the short-term. Tett highlights how highly structured Sony, for example, in the 1970s, was a leading light for innovation with its Walkman and

Trinitron TV, as specialization can, at times, improve efficiency, increase profits and generate a greater sense of control.

Silo-working has, however, now become so taken-for-granted that we may miss seeing its dark side. As we become buried in our corner of the organization or immersed in our specialism, we are more likely to develop blindspots and tunnel vision. Dividing an organization, and its people, into "departments", "divisions" and "units" (the language itself is revelatory) has the unintended impact of stopping collaboration in its tracks. Despite our interconnectedness – news can flash across the planet at lightning speed – our lives and organisations are "crazily fragmented", according to Tett.

Working alongside each other rather than with each other, can lead to damaging consequences for a system as a whole. Tett highlights how in the UK the government, banks and regulators failed to spot the emerging financial crisis of 2008, and identifies lack of communication between key stakeholders as a root cause of this failure. With more dialogue between more diverse stakeholders, the catastrophic consequences of the banking crisis might have been avoided. The constraints of the mental models used by economists, who typically assume efficient markets and rational expectations, were not critically considered. Tett concludes that financial institutions are not just about economics: "Culture matters too."

For leadership to be truly fit-for-purpose for the 21st century, connectivity of a different order is needed. In a recent article in the Huffington Post (19 July 2016), thought leader Otto Scharmer argues that global events arise out of the interplay of two distinct "socio-emotional fields":

- The social field of "absencing", where there is disconnection, desensitization and destruction. This lack of humanity gives rise to terrorism, strongmen and the far right. Closed minds and hard hearts keep us sealed inside our own bubble even as the winds of change blow wildly around us.
- The social field of "presencing", where we move out of our social bubble or the habitual filters of our mind to engage more fully with the world around us. Our open minds and open hearts enable us to attune to the highest future possibilities and contribute to calling them forth.

Scharmer notes that the prevailing pattern right now is the first social field of fear, anger and prejudice (as we saw, for example, in much of the debate leading up to the Brexit vote and the 2016 US presidential campaign). Our focus here is on how leaders can activate the second, more productive and sustainable social field. How can leaders inspire others to make more of

their human potential available to the world, to each other and to themselves? What will enable people to move outside their own comfort zone and open their hearts and minds to a wider field of engagement and endeavor? How can leaders create a healthy flow of leadership throughout the system that they lead?

In our experience, answering these question calls for a dual focus. We need to both: **(a)** attune to the human dimension of leadership that engages the whole person - including their embodied presence - and not just a person performing a role; and **(b)** attend to the systemic dimension of leadership rather than simply focus on the development of individual leaders. In our view, it is this "Whole Self, Whole System" approach that is required to make 21st century leadership a true departure from what has gone before.

Shaping the Future Together

The leadership challenges of today are far too complex for any one person to meet - let alone solve - on their own. They require diverse stakeholders to think, talk and co-create together in groundbreaking ways. Leading in a 'VUCA' world - whether this is in a team, an organisation, a government or ecosystem of multiple stakeholders - needs to be less about individual heroics and more about mobilising collective potential.

New leadership requires new muscles. To meet the challenges of the 21st century – and not only adapt to them, but *shape* the future – many different capacities are needed. Thinking the 'unthinkables', engaging people to give their best energies, creating cultures of aligned action, and collaborating across boundaries, all call for new ways of seeing, being and acting together.

We have identified six core capacities for this new leadership, arising out of our combined expertise of working with leaders using systemic coaching and constellations but also generative dialogue, Otto Scharmer's Theory U and mindfulness practice, as well as recent business school and scientific research. These capacities are set out in Figure 1 below.

Mobilising collective potential and creating sustainable high performance, begins with leaders bringing their whole selves to work. To discover and articulate an authentic purpose for their team or organization - that inspires others to give of their best and act in alignment with what the organization wants to achieve - leaders need to be in touch with their own courage, curiosity and compassion. For this reason, we place these two fundamental capacities – a leader's full awareness and presence and crystallising a potent purpose – at the centre of our model.

Co-create a new reality

- Crystallise vision and intention based on deeper potential
- Engage stakeholders in new ways to generate insights for innovation
- Co-create prototypes & solutions inspired by new approaches

Attune to Potential

- Sense and activate the deeper potential
- Attune to the "Hidden Orders of Change"
- Align skills, talents and structure with the noble purpose of the organisation



Hold generative conversations

- Create "containers" for courageous conversations
- Be willing to "change the discourse" by being authentic and vulnerable
- Identify a question to take on a quest with others

See the larger system

- Surface the "hard truths" of the current reality
- Allow the creative tension of different perspectives to emerge
- Sense and see the invisible dynamics at play in the system

Figure 1 – The Six Core Capacities

Once an inspiring purpose has been articulated, catalysing a 'flow' of purposeful action across a whole system then becomes possible. At the core of 21st century leadership is the ability to call forward, align around, and bring to life a sense of vibrant and potent purpose. Purpose-led performance has been shown to lead to many benefits – see Figure 2.

Figure 2 – The benefits of Purpose-led Performance

A growing body of research - by EY, Said Oxford and Harvard among others - reveals how companies with a clear and resonant corporate purpose have several distinct advantages. A report called "The Power of Purpose" 2013 by Burson-Marsteller in collaboration with IMD, a leading international business school, found that purposeful organisations are able to:

1. Build **trust** more easily with their employees, shareholders and customers as their purpose guides principled decision-making.
2. Attune to **consumer concerns** more readily and create brand advocates more widely through positive comments aligned with corporate purpose.
3. Generate **competitive advantage** more distinctly, estimated to be an increase of 17% of financial performance, due to enhanced reputation in the marketplace.

In short, purposeful organisations are better able to not only ride the storms of change, but create new and powerful value from the evolution of market conditions, technology and competitors. To achieve this dynamism and resilience, 'purpose-beyond-profit' must be the central driver of an organisation's strategy, not an optional 'bolt-on'. It needs to be strong enough that it becomes part of the organisation's operating model and inspiring enough that it unleashes people's energy.

So if bringing to life an organisation's unique and powerful purpose is so important for 21st century leadership, how can this be done? In our experience, four other crucial capacities are needed. These capabilities, shown on the "outer rim" of the model in Figure 1, are:

- **Holding generative conversations.** To create a future that is different from the past, leaders need to step into unknown territory. This calls for a diverse constellation of stakeholders to sense into the future that wants to emerge. This, in turn, requires building "containers" or holding environments for courageous conversations where all the different voices matter – the essence of dialogue.
- **Seeing the larger system.** To build a shared understanding of a complex problem, leaders need to extend their awareness beyond the boundaries of their individual role, team or organisation. Seeing reality - and their own system - through the eyes of other people and stakeholders (with very different perspectives from their own) helps leaders to generate new insights. When leaders use a systemic lens to illuminate the

hidden dynamics that operate beneath the surface of day-to-day interactions, their interventions become far more skilful, elegant and powerful.

- **Attuning to potential.** In our work, we see time and again how a potent purpose acts like a "magnet" that brings alignment to a system that has become fragmented. Instead of people pointing in many different directions, there is greater coherence in the decisions people make and the actions that they can take. When leaders attune their teams, projects and services to the real reason for an organisation's existence - which includes attuning to the ordering forces (*set out in chapter 4*) - this unlocks great potential for innovation and energy to achieve excellence. A key part of this capacity is crystallising elegant patterns of emerging action that strengthen the whole system.
- **Co-creating a new reality.** Shifting from reactive problem solving to listening for what wants to emerge, and then bringing forward the new, calls for an expanded capacity for collaboration. Catalysing and embedding systemic change involves an ecosystem of systemic stakeholders – customers, suppliers, partners and employees – coming together to co-create new prototypes and solutions. Somewhat paradoxically, this more collective and fluid approach calls for a clearer flow of leadership than in "command-and-control" cultures so that each person feels authorised to take purposeful action.

Each of these capacities both enables people to bring their creative best to their work, and serves to unlock the potential of the whole system. When rigid dynamics, stuck patterns and entangled relationships are freed up, leadership can flow more fluidly through a system. For a practical example of how we worked with an intact leadership team to develop these four core capacities, please see the following case story.

EXAMPLE CASE STORY: The Global Leadership Team

Here is an example of how we helped a large global leadership team to start to develop these four capacities as part of an off-site team coaching session. This capacity-building session was for a group of around 30 individuals, with highly diverse cultural backgrounds, who worked in local operations teams in all corners of the world. Their goal was to provide excellent global execution across multiple time zones. Even picking up the phone to resolve an issue was a day-to-day challenge given the 11-hour time difference between some of the teams.

(1) Holding generative conversations

At the start of the meeting, instead of getting down to business straight away, we took time to meet as fellow human beings. This set a respectful, friendly and informal tone to the meeting. When people were asked to name a person or a leader who had inspired them, some mentioned formal leaders but most spoke of family members – their partner, parent or grandparent. Inviting all the different voices set a pattern of full participation, which was then sustained through the session.

Research by psychologists at the MIT Sloan School of Management in the US throws some light on how collective intelligence emerges in a group. In an article originally published in Science in October 2010 several factors were found to be associated with collective effectiveness. It is also worth noting what wasn't related: the average IQ of the group, the IQ of the smartest member and the size of the group. Instead, the researchers found that groups were more likely to perform well if three factors were present:

- *Conversational turn-taking – Groups with a more even pattern of participation outperformed groups where one or two individuals dominated.*
- *Social sensitivity – In the higher performing groups, individuals were more accurately able to discern what others were thinking and feeling by paying attention to their body language, facial expressions and other non-verbal cues.*
- *A higher proportion of women – The more women in a group, the more likely it was to perform well. This result might be because the women in the sample scored better on the social intelligence measure.*

As practitioners, what excites us about these findings is that we can co-create the conditions where these factors come into play. As the psychologists highlight, "It would seem to be much easier to raise the intelligence of a group than an individual." One simple way to do this is to sow the seed for healthy conversational turn-taking by enabling everyone to find their voice early on.

(2) Seeing the larger system

The second intervention we made was to create two simple team constellations (or maps) where people stood in different places in terms of:

- *Office location*
- *Number of years with the organisation*

To create the first map, we placed eleven pieces of flip chart paper on the floor to represent the eleven local offices. The layout reflected as closely as possible the global geography. It was striking how far apart the teams in Singapore and Argentina were from one another. The mapping enabled the teams to speak openly and non-defensively about the challenge of working across time zones and their tendency to engage in lengthy email exchanges rather than pick up the phone and talk.

When asked to describe the atmosphere in their local office, the range of responses was telling. Some teams were "happy", "noisy" and "commercial" but others were "silent" and "stressed." The more isolated teams were geographically, the more they appeared to be struggling. Making this invisible dynamic visible led to a powerful group dialogue about how difficult it was to find a mutually convenient time to talk. Having named the problem, the different teams went on to identify the windows of time when it would be possible to talk.

The second map made visible the range of length of service: from 20 years to 6 months. People listened carefully to the reasons that the longest serving members gave when they were asked what kept them in the organisation. The conversation that unfolded while people were stood on their feet brought not only respect but humour too. When asked what had drawn those who were new to the organisation "in one word", their answers included "Diversity", "Opportunity" and "Money!"

Acknowledging those who had been around the longest not only settled the group but also helped the group later in their dialogue. The two individuals who had served the longest were not the most senior. They did however bring a valuable perspective that more recent arrivals could not have contributed. One of the "old timers" began sharing a key insight by saying, "From the 20 year perspective..." Mapping the system in this way helped her to find her voice and authority more easily – and be listened to.

(3) Attuning to potential

Later in the session, colleagues from different local offices self-organised into mixed groups to discuss their challenges and aspirations, and crystallise the path forward. These small groups of individuals, who had to work together but who rarely got the opportunity to meet face-to-face, were asked to practise active listening. They had to play back what they'd heard and check their understanding before they asserted their own opinion. It was also an opportunity to practise "social sensitivity" by picking up what was not being said but communicated non-verbally by body language and tone of voice.

When we heard some reflections in the whole group, people spoke of seeing "common ground", not only in the issues they faced but, more powerfully, in their feelings about the team and its purpose. The earlier work we had done to map the team and reveal problematic patterns helped the team to see the big picture rather than stay stuck in feelings of being excluded. Indeed, they could now express their wish to belong (a key systemic ordering principle).

As the dialogue unfolded, people spoke passionately about their desire to become a high performing, flawlessly executing global team. It was clear that the team's strong sense of purpose was acting like a 'magnet' to draw them together, and charge the field for the next chapter of the team's potential. In an atmosphere of openness and curiosity, a deeper level of frustrations between the local offices were named and aired and cleared. Achievements were also acknowledged and shared, as well as the difficulties.

One team member said how she felt "touched" by how the whole team was working together to acknowledge and meet the problems that lay in their midst. By taking time to slow down and really listen to each other, there was a palpable sense of "we're all in this together." A clear sense of direction for the team emerged from this shared process of acknowledgement and attunement.

(4) Co-creating a new reality

By the end of the session, an expansive emotional space had opened up, tricky business issues had been discussed, and next steps had been agreed. Given the size of the global operations this team managed and the amount that they invoiced clients each week – several million dollars – increasing their group functioning and strategic alignment in this way would have a massive impact on the amount of working capital available. Investing in 'soft' (critical) skills has its tangible, hard edge.

7. In the System, but Not of It: *A Stance for Change Coaches*

This blog article first appeared on LinkedIn in October 2016.



*"If peace comes from seeing the whole,
then misery stems from a loss of perspective".*
Mark Nepo

Introduction

At the Association for Coaching's *'In the System'* conference in London in late 2016, Sarah Rozenhuler and I had the challenge of introducing this "whole self/whole systems" approach - and its core perspective and method - in a creative, fun and experiential way; and doing so in only 90 minutes. We did so by exploring a question of relevance to all coaches: how do we best resource our self, and optimise what we do, as we enter complex organisational systems where much may be demanded of us? In this article, we will share some of the main perspectives and insights from the day.

A Whole Self, Whole Systems Approach

How does this way of working benefit the coach, and what does it require? We can briefly summarise the stance required by this 'whole self, whole system' approach as follows:

1. First, coaching and setting up maps in this way builds - and requires - our embodied knowing and presence. Using our 'Self' as an instrument is a critical skill in using a systemic approach. We learn that knowledge about systems can be accessed as a 'felt sense' not just through the mind but directly in our body and feelings (**'Whole Self'**).
2. Second, this expanded awareness deepens our capacity to 'zoom back' so that we can see the system as a whole and find our right place within it (**'Whole System'**). For coaches - as with leaders - the more we can raise our inner game, the more we can raise our outer one.

Learning to become a skilled facilitator - who can guide leaders to intervene in their systems in an incisive way - can of course take significant training to master. Deepening our presence, and skills as systemic pattern perceivers, is a path without an endpoint. Equally, for many, this can be a delightful journey into a simpler more powerful way of working.

Finding our Place

However, there are aspects of the skill-set and stance of the systemic coach, which we believe can be learned in a few days and are of huge relevance and benefit to all coaches (whatever their background). These include:

- Setting up diagnostic (or 'read-only') maps of client systems to generate insights, that in turn help us to
- Experiment with 'inserting' ourselves as coaches to find our own best place in the client system.

Systemic coaching & constellations graphically reveals that finding our right place as a coach, in relation to both the client organisation and any individual or team we're working with, is one of the most resourcing things we can do for ourselves. Our 'place' as coaches (or consultants) is crucially important - whatever our way of working - because:

1. If we are too close to the system (on the one hand), we might be captured by it and get caught up in 'parallel process' or the unhelpful dynamics of the client system. We might also take on the work of the client. In a recent example, a management consultant acknowledged the accuracy of a supervisory map, and that he had "inappropriately joined" the executive team of his corporate client. This was causing resentment among some members of the executive team.
2. If we're too far away (on the other hand) we will have little impact on the system, and may be perceived as being withdrawn or ineffectual by the client.

We can of course be too close to one part of the system, and too far away from another, at the same time. This is a frequent dynamic in team coaching. For example, working recently with a team coach to the senior executive team of a global manufacturing company, her position was so close to the leader of the team - providing him with support in his complex role - that one of the other directors barely perceived her existence. "Team coach? There's a team coach?" he said. When she stepped back to a place where she could see the team as a whole, and they could see her, both team and coach breathed a great sigh of relief. She could now make contact with everyone in the team.

Finding our 'right place' in the system as a whole in this way might perhaps sound a little abstract on the page. However, it is something we all know at a felt, embodied level as soon as we discover it - just as we do when we find a sense of flow in our work. We feel we have our 'ground', and presence to do our best work; we have the confidence to challenge when appropriate; we feel we can see our client and the system of which they are a part with a clear perspective. This in turn builds a sense of trust and reliability with the client. We feel impartial and that we can embody the systemic stance of being on "everyone's side".

This is a big subject of course, and there is much more that could be said about the art of finding our right place. This will also vary somewhat according to the nature of our work and how we do it. We also need to be skilled contractors – gaining real clarity around our actual work in the organisation and its true function and scope. We need to be skilled phenomenologists – drawing on our felt sense of the system from the first phone call onwards. However, simple supervisory constellations of the kind described here can be a hugely powerful resource.

In the System, but Not of It

As humans, we can never be entirely objective or impartial guides or interveners in a client system. Those familiar with supervision theory and practice will know that our intervention will necessarily create a further 'coaching' or 'consulting' system with that of the leader or team and their wider client system.

However, without the capacities described here - including our presence and our capacity to see the system as a whole and find our right place within it - we might easily find ourselves in the "loss of perspective" or even "misery" that Mark Nepo has described.

With these capacities, we can legitimately feel, and say, that "we are in the client system, but not of it" and feel relaxed and well-placed to do our best work. And the more we deepen these capacities, the more we can guide leaders to create optimal conditions for people to maintain a sound level of well-being and performance – and release their creative potential.

7. Resources and Reading

NOTE: Those marked with an asterisk are a recommended starting point



Coaching and Organisational Systems

Horn, K.P. and Brick, R., (2005) *Invisible Dynamics: Systemic Constellations in Organisations and Business*. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag

*Rozenhuler, Sarah, Rowland, Edward with Downs, Scott (2016) *Systemic Dialogue* (a free ebook download at www.wholepartnership.com)

Sparrer, Insa (2007) *Miracle, Solution and System*. Cheltenham: Solutions Book

*Stam, Jan Jacob (2006) *Fields of Connection*. Groningen: Het Noorderlicht

Stam, Jan Jacob (2016) *Systemic Coaching*. Groningen: Het Noorderlicht (forthcoming)

Whittington, John (2012) *Systemic Coaching and Constellations*. Kogan Page

Intimate Systems

Hellinger, Bert, Weber, Gunthard, & Beaumont, Hunter, (1998), *Love's Hidden Symmetry*. Phoenix: Zeig, Tucker & Theisen

*Ulsamer, Bernard (2003), *The Art & Practice of Family Constellations*. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag

Franke, Ursula, (2003), *The River Never Looks Back: Historical and Practical Foundations of Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations*. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag

Related Reading on Leadership

Gowing, Nick and Langdon, Chris (2016) *Thinking the Unthinkable: A New Imperative for Leadership in the Digital Age*

Oshry, Barry (1995) *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organisational Life*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler

Senge, Peter, Scharmer, C. Otto, Jaworski, Joseph and Flowers, Betty Sue (2005) *Presence: Exploring Profound Change in People, Organisations and Society*. London: Nicholas-Brealey

Rowland, Deborah (2017) *Still Moving: How to Lead Mindful Change* Wiley Blackwell: Chichester

Tate, William (2013) *Managing Leadership from a Systemic Perspective* Centre for Progressive Leadership, White Paper

Articles

There are articles to download at: www.talentmanager.pt/downloads/-1441615696324-006a358a-bd69

* Weber, Gunthard (2000) *Organizational Constellations: Basics and Special Situations*

Journal

The Knowing Field is the only specialist journal in the systemic constellations field, editor: Barbara Morgan. It contains some articles on coaching & the organisational field. See: www.theknowingfield.co.uk

Websites and Training

www.wholepartnership.com/programme/systemic-coaching-programmes/ (further training)

www.thecsc.net (training and workshops in family constellations)

www.infosyon.com (research and accreditation)

www.carl-auer.com (for systemic literature)

Practitioner Mapping Resources

Arrow shaped post-its - suitable for constellating - are made by 3M (code 2007A) and can be ordered from Rymans or Amazon.

www.constellationset.com provide 1-1 figures (see previous page) and playmobiles.

www.coachingspaces.com provides a good collaborative online software tool, which enables you to build visual maps and constellations of systems, relationships or conflicts, and is very useful in 1-1 coaching work.

About the Authors



Edward L. Rowland MA is Founder of The Whole Partnership, a senior leadership and team coach, and also a Director of the Centre for Systemic Constellations (CSC). A leading Systemic Coach and Constellations practitioner for both personal and organisational systems, he has delighted in co-pioneering this way of working in a leadership and work context for the last decade. He learned the work in the early 2000s from its 1st generation pioneers, notably Gunthard Weber and Judith Hemming (on the original COLPI programme). Clients have included Boston Consulting Group, KAUST and Visa. He also worked with the innovation consultancy **nowhere** for 5 years.

With a background as a barrister, in creative industries and various psychological disciplines, he has over 17 years experience of helping leaders, teams and organisations in all sectors to unfold their unique potential. As well as leading the current COLPI programme, he has also taught and demonstrated this work at various business schools and universities including Henley and Said Oxford.



Sarah Rozenthuler is a business and organisational psychologist, leadership consultant, and relationship systems coach who collaborates extensively with The Whole Partnership. A leading international figure in the area of multi-stakeholder dialogue, Sarah integrates the systemic coaching & constellating approach to create transformative change for global leaders and their organisations. Her clients have included Old Mutual, EY, PwC, Virgin and the World Bank. She has also worked with a range of consultancies including Dialogos, Lane 4 and **nowhere**. The author of *'Life-Changing Conversations'* (2012), her work has featured in the Observer, Sunday Times and Huffington Post, as well as BBC online and Psychologies magazine. She has a first-class degree in psychology, and lives in Shropshire.

Scott Downs started his working life as a banker. He spent 11 years as a Managing Director of JPMorgan, working as the Chief Operating Officer of several global and regional business units. He then moved from banking to management consulting and entrepreneurship. He has worked in two of the world's leading consulting firms focused on creating great leadership cultures: Axialent and **nowhere**. During this period he has trained in systemic coaching and constellations and has co-developed a systemic coaching training program. Scott now works to help create great businesses and great leadership teams founded on great cultures. Scott has BA and MBA degrees from the University of Chicago. He has three adult daughters, and lives west of London with his wife Erica and their beloved labrador.