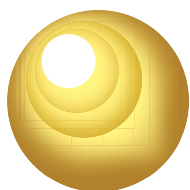# Leading Systemic Dialogue:

Unlocking Collective Intelligence for Purpose-led Performance

Sarah Rozenthuler & Edward L. Rowland
with Scott Downs

September 2016

The Whole Partnership

Kind words about
Leading Systemic Dialogue: Unlocking Collective Intelligence for Purpose-led Performance

As our organisations, leaders and change agents grapple with increasing volatility and uncertainty, a new norm of leadership is emerging which is more purpose-led, collective and systemic.

In this timely and important ebook, Sarah Rozenthuler & Edward Rowland go right to the heart of it, providing insight on life-changing ways to converse and intervene to enable organisations to thrive amid the challenging times ahead.

Giles Hutchins
Thought leader, speaker, adviser and author of Future Fit

Congratulations to the authors for such a clear and comprehensive summary of these key aspects of the emerging essential C21st leadership tool kit.

Richard Olivier
Artistic Director, Olivier Mythodrama

TESTIMONIALS

This is one of the best development programmes I have ever attended - very practical, with uniquely strong research and academic foundations.

Vilma Nikolaidou
Head of OD, Tate Gallery

Sarah's expertise in dialogue makes her a thought-provoking consultant who has helped me work through a number of challenges within the businesses I've worked with.

Gareth Fendick
Director of Talent & OD
Associated British Foods plc

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I. Introduction: Co-creating 21st Century Leadership

Leadership, always a hot topic, has been in the spotlight more than ever in recent times. The proliferation of unexpected, even unthinkable, global events – including the migration and refugee crisis in Europe, the outcome from the Brexit referendum, the emergence of authoritarian strongmen for national political roles, the rise of the so-called Islamic State and the deception strategy uncovered at Volkswagen – has created an unprecedented need to re-equip leaders to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

"The leadership skills of tomorrow are fundamentally different to the leadership skills of today", write Nik Gowing and Chris Langdon in their hard-hitting report, Thinking the Unthinkable: A New Imperative for Leadership in the Digital Age (2016, published by the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants.) From a series of 60 confidential, one-to-one interviews with top-level leaders from across the globe working in corporates, government, the military and humanitarian sector, a sobering picture emerges.

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. There is, according to Gowing and Langdon, a "new unease" arising amongst this group of top-level executives. They point to "new vulnerabilities'" and "new fragilities" being felt by those who are at the helm. The inadequate and belated attempts to deal with the unexpected and the unpalatable, whether this is the devastating outbreak of Ebola in west Africa, the seizure of Crimea by President Putin or the cyber attack on Sony, has put leadership "in freefall." Many leaders confess that they struggled to anticipate these "unthinkables", let alone find solutions for them.

"Mind-sets, behaviours and systems are currently not yet adequately calibrated for the new reality," conclude Gowing and Langdon. Old models of leadership, as well as politics and economics, need a whole-scale upgrade. To lead wisely and effectively during this unparalleled re-ordering of our highly interdependent global reality, where consumers are the new opinion formers and global developments flash across the planet at lightning speed, new capacities are called for. This ebook outlines some of the skills and systemic mind-set required for 21st century leadership.

A Whole Self, Whole System approach

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) attend to the systemic dimension of leadership rather than simply focus on the development of individual leaders; and (b) attune to the human dimension of leadership that engages the whole person and not just a person performing a role. 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.

Purpose-Led Leadership: 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.

Figure 1
Purpose-Led Leadership: Six core capabilities

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 and talents with the noble purpose of the organisation

Crystallise Potent Purpose

Leader's Awareness & Presence

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

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 generative dialogue, systemic coaching and constellations, 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 above.

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.

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.

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, 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 capacities, please see the Coda at the end of this ebook.

Introducing and Defining Systemic Dialogue

There is much more that could be said about all of these areas, and we will do in future publications. For now, the crucial insight we'd like to share with you is this: the ability to foster and hold dialogue is a critical skill of purposeful leadership. In addition, the most skillful holding of dialogic spaces requires a systemic perspective. We call this integrated approach "Systemic Dialogue", which we define as:

The artform and skillset of holding powerful meeting spaces to navigate critical business challenges and find solutions that strengthen the system as a whole.

Systemic Dialogue is a weave of perspectives, practices and micro-skills that underpins the leadership capacities above. As such, it is a powerful foundation for the overarching aim of purposeful leadership which includes (a) discovery of purpose and (b) bringing it life through elegant action in the world. To begin to understand its power, let's first consider Systemic Dialogue from a dialogic perspective.

Bill Isaacs, one of the world's leading authorities on dialogue, and a former colleague of Sarah's, writes in his seminal (1999) book, Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together:

"Dialogue, as I define it, is a conversation with the centre, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization in into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and correlated power of groups of people." (p. 19)

Dialogue, viewed in this way, is an inherently collective activity. It arises in the space between people, not by individuals thinking or operating alone. Instead of focusing our attention solely on individual leaders, we expand our attention to what is happening in their midst. Dialogue weaves between people and creates a rich tapestry of meaning that can only emerge from minds meeting in mutual respect. Isaacs continues:

"The intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act. In dialogue, one not only solves problems, one dissolves them. We do not merely try to reach agreement, we try to create a context from which many new agreements might come. And we seek to uncover a base of shared meaning that can greatly help coordinate and align our actions with our values."

By talking and thinking together, a shared pool of understanding emerges. Out of this, new insights, and possibilities for action arise. Dialogue is not, therefore, merely a "talking shop." True dialogue, particularly in a corporate context, leads to aligned action across a system. When there has been a true exchange and synthesis of views, there is coherence in co-creating the new. Isaacs goes on to say:

"Dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in a relationship with others -- possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred…" (p.20)

Dialogue involves people coming into contact with one another. The roots of the word dialogue come from the Greek words dia and logos, where dia means "through" and logos translates as "word", or "meaning". In essence, a dialogue is a flow of meaning that moves through a group of people gathered together.

Dialogue flows most easily – and creatively – when people speak to what is moving "through" them in the moment. This authentic voicing, combined with deep listening to all the different views that people express, creates an expansive emotional space where truth can be spoken. In such a "container" or holding environment, difficult, even unpalatable issues can be surfaced

without relationships rupturing. When our attention can include – and go beyond – any single view, the field of possibilities widens.

For the new to flow in, people need a different stance. Instead of the more typical behaviours that dominate meetings – asserting an opinion, objecting to an opposing point of view and discarding another's perspective – a more receptive mindset is called for. As David Bohm, an eminent quantum physicist and philosopher, wrote in his book On Dialogue (1996):

"In dialogue ... nobody is trying to win... There is a different sort of spirit in it. In a dialogue there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail... It's a situation called win-win... in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins." (p. 7)

Or, as I [Sarah] put it in my own book, Life-Changing Conversations (2012):

"A true conversation is a co-creation." (p.202)

When there is a culture of dialogue, breakthrough solutions and new insights emerge as the product of collective intelligence. As we will see, this practice, linked with a few others, has the capacity to transform the performance of an organisation.

What is needed to call dialogue forward?

Creating a culture of dialogue is an act of leadership. It has greatest potential when sponsored by an organisation's most senior leaders, but anyone at any level of an organisation can contribute.

Although seeding a culture of dialogue is a generative process with as many forms and manifestations as there are people and organisations, four key elements in the process stand out.

(1) Focused intention. Someone needs to hold the desire to activate a culture of dialogue. Drawing a group of people together to create shared meaning and to discover new insights provides a powerful and necessary energetic foundation for dialogue to take place. An invitation to talk needs to stir people into action. As practitioner and academic Gervase R. Bushe puts it in the OD Practitioner Journal, (Winter, 2013):
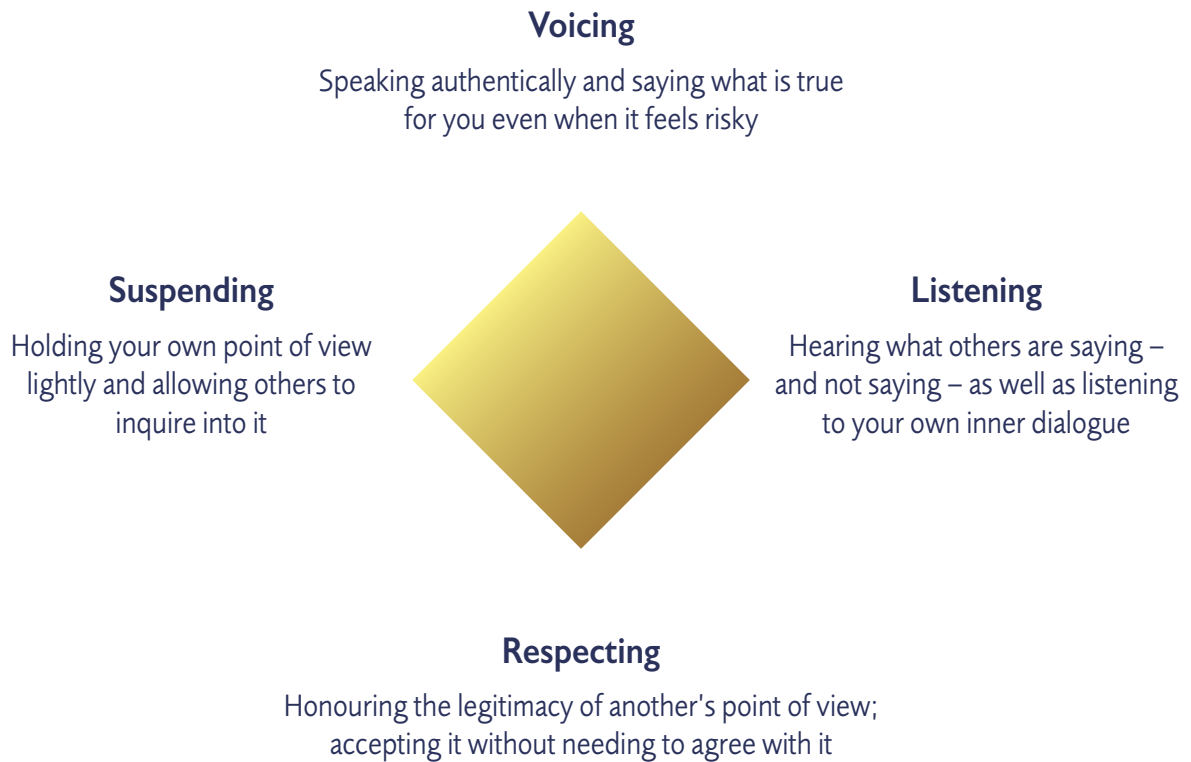
"I try to hold out until we have framed the issue in a way that community members will be "willing to crawl over glass" to attend events where that is what is being talked about... The framing of the issue has to be open enough to allow unexpected, surprising ideas to surface."

(2) A charged container. Someone needs to create a meeting space for the dialogue. There are concrete aspects – including the room, light, air, seating and access to nature. There are also more subtle aspects: as people enter the space, they need to feel able to open up and suspend "business-as –usual". A crucial component is that people feel a sense of safety and trust. They need to believe that bringing themselves authentically to the conversation will be respected – and rewarding. When people meet authentically, openly and expansively, this "charges" the space with co-creative energy.

(3) Diversity of perspective. "It's as if we've been programmed to be collectively smart," writes James Surowiecki in The Wisdom of Crowds (2004). In order for a group of people to be "wise", however, certain criteria need to be met. Chief amongst these is that participants have diverse points of view. People need to feel that their uniqueness and perspective – and that of all the others – is encouraged. There needs to be an atmosphere of welcoming, curiosity and acceptance.

(4) Dialogic practices. Participants need to learn and share skills that foster dialogue. Embodying new patterns – for example, of speaking, listening and asking questions – may sound simple but it is often not easy. Leaders need practical support, committed practice and ongoing encouragement for these ways of interacting to become the new muscle memory. Inspired by the work of Bill Isaacs, we build capacity for the practices outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Dialogue Practices

Voicing

Speaking authentically and saying what is true
for you even when it feels risky

Suspending

Holding your own point of view
lightly and allowing others to
inquire into it

Listening

Hearing what others are saying –
and not saying – as well as listening
to your own inner dialogue

Respecting

Honouring the legitimacy of another's point of view;
accepting it without needing to agree with it

Dialogic Practice

When these four conditions are met, dialogue has a chance to unfold. When it does, dialogue can unlock the collective intelligence that is already there in the room.

Next, we will explore what we mean by a systemic perspective, and how this can enhance the dialogic approach.

If the fostering of dialogue alone is so powerful, why do we need to inform it with a systemic perspective? We will see that bringing a systemic 'lens' shifts patterns and changes the conversation in a way that goes beyond what a purely dialogic approach can achieve on its own.

The starting place for working with a systemic approach is an understanding of the nature of wholes, and how parts and wholes interrelate. Conventional thinking, by contrast, encourages a focus on parts, and often on individual people or components. At best we are encouraged to see 'context' in organizations as a collection of those parts – rather like the assembly of parts in a car engine. Indeed the prominence of a machine metaphor in the worldview of western culture is testimony to this.

When we are considering human beings and living systems – whether organisations, communities or families – this reductionist view has many limitations. It encourages a view of performance, behaviour and creativity as residing in the individual (rather than also in the relationships between individuals), making us more likely to fall into patterns of blaming others, taking things personally or fighting for our corner.

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 and understanding – let alone transforming – 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." (p. 167, 1996)

Adopting a systemic perspective is to turn this view on its head. It enables us to see parts as a reflection of the whole rather than as separate elements acting independently of each other. When we see that systems such as teams, divisions and the wider ecosystem outside the organisation are all interconnected, with permeable and often overlapping boundaries, we understand that these systems have a crucial impact on each other. The effect of a systemic view on the way we look at people and at organisational performance, change, even marketing, can be significant.

But how do we work with this in practice, in an organizational situation? The systemic method provides leaders and change agents with a range of powerful mapping tools and processes, as well as a framework of key systemic principles, whose integrated use brings many benefits. These include:

- The sense of complexity that often overwhelms people, in relation to their critical business and leadership challenges, is usually lifted. By identifying and mapping the key features of a system under scrutiny, and understanding the principles that govern systems, we help to make the complex much simpler. (Indeed, many people report that they literally gain a new and simpler perspective on their challenges - in our experience, this is the feature of this way of working that is most appreciated by business and change leaders).

- The hidden dynamics that exist in the relationships between the various parts of the system are revealed. This enables stuck patterns, misplaced loyalties and outdated allegiances to be addressed and resolved.

- People can see and sense the whole, including the ways forward that strengthen the whole system. This unlocks great potential for innovation and energy to achieve excellence. As well as helping people crystallise elegant pathways forward, it also helps them to find their own place in the system, which in turn gives rise to better performance and a greater sense of belonging and well-being.

Next, we will look at some of the key systemic principles that inform this way of working.

Five principles of human systems

Below is a brief summary of five of the most important features of human systems.

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

All systems, human or otherwise, consist of elements that are connected to one another in continuously changing relationships. Human systems can be seen as a type of living 'organism' that often behaves differently to the sum of the parts. A simple example of this phenomenon is a team at work or in sport that is made up of stellar individuals, but which functions very poorly as a team. A change in the composition of the team can create a shift whereby the team suddenly starts behaving and functioning very differently.

At the same time, the health of the individual part is influenced by, and strongly 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 senior teams carry difficult patterns that belong to the whole system, and which are not being fully addressed by the Board or executive team above them.

2. Problems are solutions, 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. In other words, within the flow of influences on them (and not always seemingly for the best), systems have a natural tendency to move towards balance. Achieving balance is a constant and continual process. The question we can therefore ask ourselves as systemic practitioners is: "For what is this phenomenon or pattern a solution?"

For example, a Board might have trouble filling a senior position. A particular role may have had many occupants in just a few years and the role seems somehow incapable of being occupied, even by seemingly well-qualified candidates. The real issue can often be that a prior incumbent had been mistreated, disrespected or excluded from institutional memory. The effect can show up as a difficult pattern for that person's successors as they assume this "ejector seat" role, and – through identification with the prior incumbent – are also expelled from the system.

At a deeper level, we can see that the system is seeking a solution: to resolve the prior imbalance by calling for recognition of the earlier incumbent. However, the system's 'solution' appears as a 'problem' for the current leadership team – and especially for the unhappy successors – until the core systemic issue can be resolved.

3. 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, often leading 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. Accepting reality as it is – including what's unthinkable or unpalatable – is, somewhat paradoxically, a prerequisite for change to happen. When a team or organization faces what is being denied, repressed or belittled – including their own resistance to change – they can then integrate these 'hard truths' so that whatever was previously being avoided no longer trips them up.

4. 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 relationships and dynamics arising in them, both positively and negatively (for further information, see the next section). 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.

5. Successful intervening requires a phenomenological and not just an analytic approach (which focuses on details).

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 this lack of attention to our interiority and presence, the 'blind spot' of leadership and change.

Using our 'Self' as an instrument, including our presence or embodied knowing, 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 the body, in the senses and in our intuition (our 'Whole Self'). This expanded awareness 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'.)

By working with this 'Whole Self, Whole System' approach, and these other principles, we can develop a capacity to create optimal conditions for people to attain and maintain a sound level of well-being and performance – and release their creative potential.

Next, we need to understand more about the hidden architecture governing human systems.

The hidden architecture of human systems

However well an organisation defines its goals and strategies, it doesn't operate only according to its self-declared intent. Obviously there are factors in the wider environment such as market conditions, changes of government policy or natural catastrophes that can play a critical part in success.

As living systems, organisations are also subject to a hidden 'architecture' of systemic forces, whose nature and impact is less well understood. These are the forces that can quickly activate those systems dynamics -- which as our Dutch colleague Jan Jacob Stam put it, "can in one moment give us wings to fly and in another moment hold us paralyzed and unable to act."

In the systemic coaching and constellating tradition we use the term 'ordering forces' to describe these natural underpinning structures, which influence organisations, families and other human systems. (The use of the word 'ordering' is not connected with law and order, or religion; a better association is with natural forces in the physical world such as gravity or electromagnetism.)

These orders are often invisible to most people working in organisations, which makes them difficult to attend to. More negative manifestations can include employees suddenly leaving, internal conflicts, power struggles, massive drops in sales and performance or a crippling stagnation.

More positively, when these forces are attuned to, they can powerfully orientate a system to its true purpose. The systemic method can be used not only to resolve issues, but also re-pattern the relationships between key systemic elements, thus enabling a better flow of leadership and purposeful action across the whole ecosystem of stakeholders.

Below is a brief introduction to some of the ordering forces we work with. These six ordering forces can be used as a lens to quickly 'scan' a team or organisation to help identify where crucial systemic issues may be located. They can also help us to understand the "acupressure points", meaning those places where we intervene most skilfully to create change in a system.

1. Purpose. 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 - along with its constituent principles - answers the profound question of what an organisation's place and function is in the world. The founding purpose needs to be respected, but also continually evolved to meet the changing needs of the marketplace and society.

2. Belonging. Everyone in the system has a right to belong (dependent on their performance), including and especially the founders of the organisation. It is important to check that all participants are acknowledged for their roles and contributions, that they feel seen, heard and respected as valued members of the organisation. Difficult systems dynamics can emerge where this is not the case: either where earlier participants are excluded from overt institutional memory or where the current roles and contributions of particular individuals and groups are ignored, belittled or excluded.

3. Exchange. There needs to be a balance of giving and taking. Resources and rewards need to be made available in a way that engenders trust and perceived fairness. Exchange is rarely of precisely equivalent things, especially over relatively short periods of time. Inherently, people give of what they have and seek to receive what they need. But it is essential to

assure that each participant is contributing something of value, and also receiving things that respond to their own needs, whether in the form of, for example, money, respect, learning or development. Effective leaders need to take a little more of the blame, and a little less of the credit when things go well.

4. 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. There also needs to be sufficient clarity around take-up of roles and responsibilities, for there to be a clear flow of leadership and decision-making. The expectations and rewards of each person's place and role need to be seen as fair, just and 'right' – mutually – by the incumbents, by their seniors and by others working around them.

5. Time. Those who come before have priority over those who come later (within a system). People's length of service needs to be respected. Often just acknowledging the experience, knowledge, wisdom and insight that comes from long institutional memory releases difficult dynamics and lets more experienced participants contribute more fully – and newer entrants learn – in surprising ways. This in no way limits or inhibits 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. Conversely, new systems have priority over older systems, for example in mergers. The partners need to agree that a new system is being created, and let go of some of the 'old ways' and loyalties so that the new can truly flourish.

6. Space. There is 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 and often ignored. It is valuable to notice and attend to spatial relationships in working life – how physically close people are, where they work, how they sit or stand, where they figure on organisation charts. When we explicitly and visibly map a system, paying attention to relationships other than the asserted formal ones, we can see which participants are energetically close together or far apart, and which ones appear to be aligned or in conflict. Looking at systemic maps can give spatial clues as to where a system may be stuck. Freeing movements or adjustments to the system, which bring greater ease, energy and flow, often appear very readily under this kind of lens.

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

Systemic mapping

With these orders and systemic principles in mind, it is possible to model complex systems in deceptively simple ways. Spatially arranging objects to stand for elements in a system, for example for team members, competitors and even market forces, creates powerful windows into the system. We can then use these insights to dis-entangle problematic relationships and carve out new pathways for moving forwards.

Skilled facilitators can help leaders to use this mapping process to generate incisive ideas for change. With even limited exposure to these principles and a little practice, leaders and team members can use systemic mapping for themselves without external professional assistance. The learning can be magnified when we create living maps, using people rather than objects to stand for the systemic elements, because the people acting as representatives can act as sensitive instruments to sense into the flow of the system. We have many years of experience in exploring this rich space, and we go deep into this work in our coaching and consulting work and in our programmes.

So far on our journey together we have seen that (a) dialogue opens up creative conversations and taps collective intelligence; and (b) the systemic lens allows people to see wholes much more clearly and to work with the intricate relationships that exist in human systems. In our work with clients over many years, we have found that weaving together these two powerful perspectives has a multiplier effect. The generative power of both approaches is enhanced when they are combined rather than held alone. This synthesis is what we call Systemic Dialogue.

When people apply the systemic lens in dialogue, all participants are able to see more clearly and insightfully the context in which they are working. Systemic mapping of structures, influences and relationships gives everyone new and profound insights into both the current reality and future possibilities. It reveals the "acupressure points" for where action will have the most leverage.

The systemic lens also enables relationships to flow more readily in the dialogic circle. Mapping can reveal previously hidden patterns, such as misplaced or outdated loyalties, that are creating stuck dynamics. Participants can "model themselves" systemically, such as placing themselves along dimensions of belonging, exchange or time in the organisation - any of the orders introduced above. This in turn enables a group to reflect more effectively on its own workings, processes and viewpoints. For an example of how some live mapping in a global leadership team shifted the dialogue into new territory, see the case study in the Annex.

A dialogic practice, in turn, expands the power of the systemic lens. Each person present has a chance to "join the dance" and be inspired by what others have contributed. More people looking and reflecting together means greater insight into how the system is working, more creative ideas about how to free up trapped energy and a stronger commitment to take those insights and bring them to life in day-to-day work. When all the different perspectives are weaved together – skillfully and sensitively – the whole can be truly greater than the sum of parts

As a Foundation and Enabler for Purpose-Led Leadership

Given the complexities of human systems, discovering and embodying organisational purpose is inherently a systemic undertaking. Too often, senior leaders, sometimes alone or with a small handful of advisers, attempt to define corporate visions – and sometimes purpose – as the act of a heroic leader. Singular efforts to outline espoused corporate principles almost always end up being seen by other stakeholders as superficial, irrelevant or even hypocritical. If purpose is laminated and not lived, cynicism settles in.

If, on the other hand, purpose is carefully discovered and uncovered by a wider ecosystem of stakeholders, it can act as a true touchstone for inspired action. When there is an appreciation of all the systemic forces that shape a noble purpose, along with the creative engagement of many diverse voices through dialogue, the organisation's north star is felt throughout the whole system to be "right." It touches something profound and inspires loyalty, commitment and innovation. Aligned action attuned to noble purpose creates a truly vibrant and pioneering organization.

From working over many years with clients all over the world, we have observed the following 'top ten' benefits of Systemic Dialogue for leaders, teams and organisations.

1. Builds trust. Without this vital ingredient, teams don't work, leaders lack traction and projects fail. The quickest way to build trust is through being willing to talk about what matters most - and encouraging others to do the same. Seeing the systemic aspects of a situation subtly builds everyone's confidence that they are being seen and heard in their true place within the system, that powerful options for change and growth can will be discovered. The systemic lens also allows everyone to convey that sort of deep acceptance and creative engagement to others. Safety, respect and an insightful view of the realities of everyone's true situation become a lovingly shared resource.

2. Inspires new ideas. People share their best thinking, work hardest and come up with their freshest ideas when they are engaged. By listening to people, helping them listen to each other and paying careful attention to their interdependent relationships, we can access the wealth of untapped intelligence in a team or organization.

3. Cultivates collaboration. Without good dialogue, problems remain unresolved and "silo working" sets in. Good communication is at the heart of productive teamwork, successful projects and effective leadership. People who talk together create together.

4. Improves relationships. We deepen our connections with people by talking openly and honestly. When we look beyond our own self-interested perspective and try to see others' points of view, including their place in human systems, we build bridges with them.

5. Encourages creativity. To produce quality goods and services, we need the spark of new ideas which often emerge from the creative tension between different points of view. In a team, everyone holds a piece of the puzzle and a different place in the system. The only way to complete the jigsaw is by finding a way to talk together.

6. Increases well-being. Research shows that people who have substantive conversations are happier than those who just do small talk. When we have time to reflect with each other, we feel more fulfilled in our work and wider lives.

7. Creates more meaning. Younger people entering the workforce ("millennials") don't just want to make money. They want high impact work and to feel that they can shape their destiny. Employees who are inspired by meaningful dialogue are more likely to stay with their organisation than move on.

8. Creates new opportunities. Finding the courage to speak out creates new possibilities Unresolved conflicts and difficult feelings – resentment, frustration or disappointment – often fester if we don't communicate them. Dialogue helps to clear the air and make space for something new, whether it's a restored relationship, a shift out of silo working or an agreement to disagree.

9. Greater agility. Being skilful at Systemic Dialogue makes us more flexible. We are better able to understand others and the systems in which we operate, see the bigger picture and come up with solutions that we might never have reached by working alone.

These benefits, expressed through collective action, have the potential to lead to very concrete bottom-line business results such as:

• **A continuing stream of new products and services** – opening up new market segments, discovering new streams of customer activity and making continuous improvement in product and service quality, with associated revenue and market share growth.

• **Enriched customer experience** – increased rates of customer acquisition and higher rates of customer retention, with associated revenue growth.

• **Higher employee satisfaction and loyalty** – improved recruiting, retention, and employee productivity, with associated growth in profitability.

• **Increased brand reputation** – greater environmental responsibility, community engagement and enhanced public profile, associated improved consumer opinions and higher profits.

Opening the way for the emerging future

Our client engagements to date, including those with global leadership teams, leave us profoundly excited about the potential of Systemic Dialogue to raise the game, in both human and economic terms, for any organisation.

We would love to explore how our "Whole Self, Whole System" approach can enable 21st century leadership for you and your colleagues. To arrange an exploratory conversation, please contact us at **www.wholepartnership.com.** We look forward to hearing from you.

Coda - A Case Study

Here is an example of how we helped a global leadership team to start to develop four of the core capacities for 21st century leadership as part of an off-site team development 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 different "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.

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.

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 attunement.

(4) Co-creating a new reality

By the end of the day, 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.

In closing

It takes time, energy and investment to create the conditions where a whole team perspective emerges. Meeting face-to-face, valuing all the different voices and strengthening relationships improves collaboration, dissolves silos and empowers the whole, leading to truly excellent performance.

The Authors

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Founder of The Whole Partnership and a leadership catalyst and senior executive and team coach. A leading British 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). He then worked for the innovation consultancy nowhere group 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 and creativity. Clients have included Boston Consulting Group, VISA Europe and numerous UK Government Departments. He is also a Director of the Centre for Systemic Constellations (CSC), the UK training body, and he has worked at various business schools including Saïd Oxford, Henley and KAUST.

He lives south of Bath, loves sailing, dancing and singing - as well as his work - and has a 9-year old daughter.

Sarah Rozenthuler

A chartered psychologist, author, leadership development consultant and coach. A leading international figure in the area of multi-stakeholder dialogue, Sarah works at the cutting edge of psychology, systemic practice and organizational consulting to create transformative change for global leaders and their organisations. With a first-class degree in psychology and over 15 years experience as a coach and facilitator, Sarah helps groups of leaders to build trust, access their collective intelligence and co-create inspired solutions that strengthen the system as a whole.

Clients have included Standard Chartered, Grant Thornton and Old Mutual. She previously worked for DiAlogos and Bill Isaacs for 7 years, and also works at business schools including Saïd Oxford. As the author of "Life Changing Conversations", Sarah's pioneering work has been featured in numerous publications, including the Sunday Times, the Observer, the Huffington Post and Psychologies Magazine, as well as on the BBC.

Home for Sarah is her native Shropshire where she enjoys spending time with her family as well as yoga, dance, juggling and tennis.