

A Systemic Primer

Professor Peter Hawkins, July 2015

Introduction

At a recent Coaching conference looking at the future of coaching there was much interested in the whole area of systemic coaching and systemic team coaching, but many reported not being clear about what these terms meant. Others thought they were clear but demonstrated that their clarity was very different from the clarity of others. We were all speaking English, but many of us were speaking different conceptual languages, while possibly the wise or shy were remaining silent! One participant said: "I always work systemically because I always hold in mind the wider system out there." I provocatively replied: "Anyone who talks about 'The System', is not thinking systemically? Systems are not things."

On reflection I do not think that was a kind or helpful response, but it did wake me up to the need for ways of clarifying different system and systemic lenses and to develop some shared language for thinking, perceiving and dialoguing systemically. Below is my first attempt to clarify for myself and colleagues what I have found to be useful distinctions drawing on the pioneering work of such great systemic thinkers as Gregory Bateson, Fritjof Capra, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Thomas Berry, Wendell Berry, Giles Hutchins and many others. Giles Hutchins has both commented on and added to this paper

1. Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is to study an integrated whole and the essential properties which arise from the relationships between the parts, rather than look at the parts. (Fritjof Capra: "The Web of Life": p27)

Thus we look at a Bicycle not as a compilation of saddle, frame, wheels, tires, pedals chain handle bar, but at how the parts interrelate to create a vehicle that can stay upright and move along if the system also contains a cyclist!

Thus we look at the team as an entity rather than the sum of the team members – and ask 'what can the team do together that they could not do working in parallel?'

2. Purposive Systems Thinking

Here we are not only looking at the essential properties that arise from the relationship between the properties of a whole system, but asking: ‘what is the system’s purpose?’

Thus we study what does the bicycle and rider system, enable the rider to do and to go to. The same bicycle that is being used to fetch lifesaving help, is different than when it is being used to win the Tour de France.

We ask the team: “who is the team in service of?” “What value is it there to create for all its stakeholders?”

3. Nested Systems Thinking

“It is never enough to focus on just one level of system. To understand the human individual, we need to understand the sub-systems that comprise the individual; these could be the physical organs, that are necessary for their physical well-being, or the many roles and sub-personalities that are integral to their way of being in the world. We also need to look at the systems the individual is part of- their family of origin, their current family, the team and organisation they work within, the national, local and ethnic culture they are part of. As Wendell Berry the great American farmer philosopher beautifully shows, we all live within: ‘a system of nested systems: the individual human within the family within the community within agriculture within nature’. (Berry, 1983: 46)” (Hawkins, 2014B)

Thus we think about the Bicycle as part of the system of bicycles, which are part of a transport system, which includes cars, buses, pedestrians, crossroads, traffic lights, flows and stops. Which are part of a human community which requires journeys, which are part of a more than human ecology.

We study teams in the way they are nested within organisational systems, including:

- organisational structure; how the team is part of a division which is part of a business which is part of group company;
- Organisational processes such as production flow, communication, value creation etc.
- Stakeholder communities, customers, suppliers, investors, employees, communities in which the organisation operates
- The political, economic, social, technological, cultural and legal systems in which the team and the wider organisation operate.
- the ecological biosphere in which all of the above takes place and upon which it is totally dependent.

4. Participative Systems thinking

This arises from the realisation that I can never see a system objectively, for by studying a system I create a new system which connects the studied and the studier, in which both affect the other.

The bicycle and rider are affected by the audience that is cheering them on, timing their journey or asking them questions.

The team and the systemic team coach, together create a new system of team x coach in coaching process.

You can never see the totality of a system that you are part of, for you will always see that system from the perspective of your position within it. However, supervision and other reflective processes, provide the space and methods to reflect on the system you are coaching and the coaching system you are part of to access a greater meta-perspective (Hawkins and Smith 2006 & 2013; Hawkins 2011 & 2014 and Hawkins 2014B).

5. Systemic Thinking

Systemic thinking focuses on the patterns, relationships and interdependency between systems,

This leads to three important notions:

- a) **Interdependency** – every system is dependent on the sub-systems within it and the systems it is nested within.
- b) **Co-creation**: the species is shaped by its environmental niche and also changes and shapes this same niche. This is the constant ever-changing dynamic dance that is happening at all levels of the system.
- c) **Creativity and innovation** do not happen within closed systems but at the interface between systems

The bicycle system (including the rider) is changed by the transport system in which it is functioning –the surface of the road, the density of other traffic etc. and at the same time is changing the transport system of which it is part – shaped and shaper.

The team is shaped by the organisational system it is part of, the stakeholder systems it interacts with, but also is changing the organisation and the stakeholders.

6. Beyond separation: Inter-Being: Holographic participation.

Here systems thinking not only studies the relationships between systems and how they co-create each other, it goes further and becomes aware of how the larger system patterns are embedded within the systems within that system and vice-versa.

Transport systems and the human need for exercise or getting somewhere are embedded in the bikes design and the rider's riding, not just external to it. The transport system never exists without the vehicles which are an essential part of its system.

The organisation is within the team as well as the team is in the organisation.

The culture of the organisation is not external to the team, it is embedded within the team. The stakeholders are not just external groups we serve, they can also be seen as residing within the team.

The environment is not something that is external to the human species, it is within us. The rain that falls on the earth flows through my body, the radiation of the sun that warms the earth, penetrates my skin and change the chemical balance within me, the air of my ecological niche is in constant interchange with the air within me with every breath I take. There is a constant flow between me as a system and the world in which I live and breathe and the boundary between the two is an artifice, a conceptual boundary necessary for our thinking, but that is never stable or fixed in nature.

This is the principle of co-abiding. Participatory, holographic universe – a paradigmatic shift in our worldview from ‘separateness’ to ‘inter-being’ fundamentally transforming our sense of place and purpose within the Mind of Nature.

Mind is entwined within matter at every level of inter-being, all particles, all cells, all bodies, all teams, all organisations of nested systems immersed within deeper systems of inter-being, all sharing the same immersion within the Mind of Nature and the constant co-evolution of creation.

7. The Seamless Web: The Oneness of all Being.

Gregory Bateson (1972) has shown us how the universe is a seamless web, but that to understand it conceptually or talk about it, we need to apply the analytic scissors and in our minds divide the indivisible. He suggests there are more and less sensible places to apply these scissors, based on the density of connection, but true madness, he indicates, is to apply the analytic conceptual scissors, but then think the divide is in the nature of reality. Non-duality, which is the practice of returning our awareness to partake in the indivisible oneness of being, has had many spiritual teachers throughout the ages. In the current time there has been an upsurge in both religious and secular non dual teachers. Non-dual practices can help us realise that any system we study is a conceptual creation, and to ween our tendency to focus on things and to participate in flow.

The bicycle, the maker of the bicycle, the rider, the journey, the roads, the traffic, the wind, the rain, the sun, the purpose of the journey etc., are not only all interconnected but they are all part of what shows up in both the kaleidoscope of consciousness and in the great dance of creation.

Conclusion

So long as the smaller systems are enclosed within the larger, and so long as all are connected by complex patterns of interdependency, as we know they are, then whatever affects one system will affect the others. (Berry, 1983: 46).

No longer can we afford to just think about the client (be they an individual, a team. An organisation or a partnership) who is our central focus and ‘the system’ that they client is a part. We need to attend to at least three levels of nested systems and the systemic co-creative dance between them.

In addition, we need to be able to meta-reflect on the system that we are co-creating with those we are studying or working with. This requires some form of disciplined reflective supervision.

With a team, one needs to consider the individual members who are the sub-systems of the team system, as are the various functions that comprise the work of the team. One also needs to consider the wider systems of which the team is just one part. This includes their organisation and the stakeholder eco-system that they both serve and are served by. It might also include the professional culture and system they operate within.

However, in today's world, where the human species has pushed beyond the limits to growth and is on course for doing irreparable damage to the earth's bio-system, every leader, leadership team and organization also needs to be able to continually live and act with the awareness of how all human systems are nested within the wider ecological systems of the earth. The environment is not just something external to us as humans to be plundered as resources, managed, or even stewarded, but the system which contains and shapes our very existence. We as a species are only at the very beginning of discovering how to live non-competitively and interdependently with this wider eco-system in which we all are housed.

The definitive relationships in the universe are thus not competitive but interdependent. And from a human point of view they are analogical. We can build one system only within another. We can have agriculture only within nature, and culture only within agriculture. At certain points these systems, have to conform to one another or destroy one another. (Berry, 1997: 47).

Allowing ourselves, our teams, our organisations to open up to this Field, allows for a deeper Mind of Nature to be attuned with, whereupon we re-member our sense of place and purpose in this inter-relational mind-matter world. With this, we allow ourselves to open up to deeper ways of knowing beyond the mechanistic (whether reductionist or systemic) into a oneness of being that informs our human collaboration in participating in co-evolution.

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