

White Paper
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Team coaching

The limitations of a systemic approach

There exist hundreds of different systems theories, many of them incompatible and there exists a train of thought that says to think systemically is not always helpful, indeed that it may limit our understanding of the working of small groups.

The term 'systemic coaching' is now becoming increasingly prevalent in the team coaching literature, almost inevitably given that writers in the broader team development literature have long acknowledged that factors outside the team influence events taking place in the team. Less explicit in the team coaching literature is a more nuanced consideration of what it means to be a systemic team coach. Many use the term 'systemic' simply to mean 'holistic' - taking a balcony view - but use of the term 'systemic' also implies some kind of theoretical perspective, a perspective not often made explicit. There exist hundreds of different systems theories, many of them incompatible *and* there exists a train of thought that says to think systemically is not always helpful, indeed that it may limit our understanding of the working of small groups.

What is a systemic team coach?

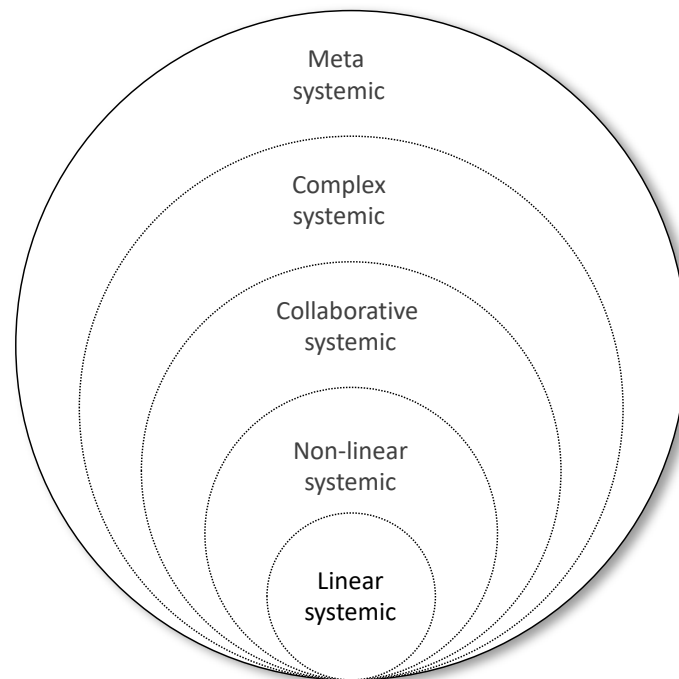
Laura Hauser interviewed eight experienced U.S. based coachesⁱ. The coaches all emphasised the importance of "*helping the team pay attention to, the interrelatedness of the whole system in which the team existed,*" and so might all have described their work as systemic, but these coaches worked differently. John (one of the coaches) focused on relationships between team members, including the team leader. Whilst this approach might be termed systemic, in that it focusses on the functioning of internal relationships, it would not be called systemic by those who use the term to refer to the relationship between what happens inside the team and what happens outside the team. Christine (another of the coaches) talked about encouraging the team to pay attention to the needs of their clients, while Joe took into account the needs of other stakeholders besides. So, although all the coaches described their work as systemic, only some attended to connections outside the boundaries of the

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team, and those that did so considered different aspects of the external environment. The article doesn't tell us what, if any, theoretical framework each coach was referring to in describing their work as systemic. The Hauser study illustrates how confused many of us are in trying to work out what 'systemic' team coaches do.

Five lenses

The systems literature is vast and not always easy to understand. In an attempt to capture some of the essential differences between these theories, we talk about five ways of thinking about systemsⁱⁱ. Each can be then framed as a lens through which to consider different approaches to team coaching.



Linear systemic

Through this lens the coach regards the team as a machine, in which the relationship between components is simple and linear. A team coach looking through this lens regards the team as a real entity, a machine that works properly when all the components of the machine are working to the same ends. An effective team has a clearly designated leader and a group of people all of whom have clearly defined roles.

Non-linear systemic

Through this lens the coach is watching carefully for less obvious patterns of cause-and-effect. That includes circularity (when factor A has an impact on factor B which in turn has an impact on factor A) and delays in time between cause-and-effect. A team coach looking through this lens still regards the team as a machine and is still focused on ensuring everyone understands their role and is

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focused on the same objectives, but this coach recognises that the connections between events in different functions may be difficult to discern. She encourages the team to slow down and to be thoughtful and analytical.

Collaborative systemic

Second order systems theories recognise that the world is too “complex, problematical and mysterious” for humans to understandⁱⁱⁱ, and that we all observe events through a subjective lens. This philosophy requires us to be humble, and to be genuinely committed to collaborating with others. The team coach working through this lens still believes teams are real entities, comparable to a system, but doubt sthe capacity of any one individual (including the team leader) to be able to establish what is going on, and what intervention to deploy. The coach encourages team members to engage in enquiry and dialogue, and pays attention to the way team members relate with each other and with others, because quality of interaction is important. The coach encourages the team to explore other stakeholder’s perspectives and to beware over-privileging its own collective view of the workings of the organisation.

Complex systemic

Theories of complex adaptive systems (CAS) recognise that agents in a system operate according to local rules. People make sense of broader events together, in their local environments, and from those local sense-making processes emerge local insights, beliefs and intentions. The leader of an organisation cannot dictate or control the emergence of change, but she can influence it, by engaging personally in conversation. What happens in these local sub-systems is subject to feedback from the broader system and the sub-system responds accordingly. Interaction at the local level therefore continues to evolve as local agents seek to survive in the broader system, and local rules continue to emerge and evolve.

This is a fundamentally different perspective on organisation-as-system. Through this lens, the leader of the team cannot meaningfully regard their view of what’s happening inside or outside the organisation as anything other than the outcome of social interaction. The leader would be fooling herself to think she can stand outside the team or organisation, assess its functioning, then design an intervention based on this ‘objective’ analysis. The team coach looking at life through this lens recognises that team objectives emerge from social interactions, including interactions with people outside the team. She recognises that the team leader cannot control events, but can influence events, as does everyone in the system, in some small way at least. She recognises that purpose, objectives and roles are all fluid and constantly shaping and re-shaping. She encourages team members to engage in

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dialogue and enquiry, and to develop the capacity to better manage the quality of their interaction. She helps the team understand how it comes up with its intentions. Developing a better understanding of its own process helps it to better understand the functioning of the rest of the organization, including identified key stakeholders.

Meta systemic

CAS theories focus on the behaviour of individual agents, and the functioning of sub-systems within the framework of a bigger system. Mathematical modellers assign rules to individual agents and observe the outcome of the interactions between those agents. But how applicable is this approach in seeking to understand the behaviour of social networks, where the component is not a cog or a microchip or an organ of the body, but a human being? Human beings do not act in accordance with standard simple rules. They may be bored by repetition and seek novelty, yet on other days value constancy. They dislike being told what to do in some contexts and are compliant in others. They may seek change or seek to avoid change. In this sense human beings, and the interactions between human beings, may be unmodellable, and the system metaphor may not be useful^{iv}. Ralph Stacey and Chris Mowles critique the living system metaphor on the basis that *“organisations are not things at all, let alone living things.”* An organisation is *“an imaginative construct emerging in the relationships between the people who form and are formed by organisation at the same time.”* Stacey and Mowles suggest that there is no useful analogy between systems and social networks, because to portray the organisation as a system inevitably directs the practitioner to ascribing simple rules to the behaviour of people and humans don't abide by simple rules. Organisations are imaginary constructs; they are not real, which means the boundaries between different parts of the organisation are not real, which implies that teams are not real either; they too are imaginary constructs.

Stacey and Mowles suggest, on the one hand, that instead of thinking about systems, we think in terms of complex responsive processes. From this perspective people interact with each other locally, producing population wide patterns of behaviour. On the other hand they do not entirely discount the value of the systems metaphor. To compare organisations to CAS is useful in developing *“a clearer understanding of self-organisation and emergence and a strong argument that coherent, population-wide patterns can emerge from many, many local interactions.”* The systems metaphor may therefore be helpful sometimes, and sometimes it may not. It may not be helpful if coach and team over-privilege the boundaries they imagine themselves to working

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within, and under-privilege the impact of people located outside those boundaries.

Team coaches working through this lens recognize that teams are not real; that they are social constructs that enable people to feel an affinity with others. When working with a 'team' the team coach regards everyone in the room (including herself) as part of a broader social network. All conversations have an impact, including conversations that take place outside the confines of the team. If we define teams as groups of people working to common objectives, then the composition of the 'team' is likely to be in a state of constant flux. This team coach is agile, nimble and comfortable working with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Implications

There are lots of coaches calling themselves systemic, but not all explain what they mean exactly, with reference to the systems literature. This matters. A first order linear approach is very different to a meta-systemic approach. The meta-systemic approach is important to understand of itself, since it clearly frames the limitations of any systemic approach, including the complex systemic approach, which more and more practitioners appear to be referencing. If we continue to regard teams as always real, stable and clearly bounded, then we will increasingly find ourselves confounded by the reality of organisational life. Gone are the days when people used to belong to one team for a prolonged period of time. Mark Mortensen reports that 95% of people these days report belonging to more than one team and 25% of a team's membership disagree on its composition at any one time^v. Gone are the days when we could reliably chart a team's life, from team build to team launch, to end of project. Nowadays teams are constantly forming and reforming in response to an ever more complex working environment.

This all presents challenges to the team coach. Most team coaching definitions say it is only team coaching when the coach is working with the entire team. This conveniently excuses the coach from needing to know anything about team composition or how to best launch a team. In a complex environment however, the team practitioner needs to know about every aspect of a team's functioning, including the impact of diversity, multi-team membership, personality, team size, tenure, values, task complexity and interdependence on effective team formation. Including the literature on team cohesion, group emotional intelligence, psychological safety, resilience, team identity and trust. Including cognitive emergent states such as team efficacy, goal orientation, team mental models and transactive memory systems. Etc ...

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Faced with this daunting challenge, what is a team coach to do? We suggest the following five components of a good development plan:

1. Continue your never-ending voyage of learning and exploration. Read, listen and go to workshops.
2. Recognise what you do well, and what you don't yet do well – or don't want to do at all. Contract carefully with your clients.
3. Consider becoming part of a group. Work together with other team coaches whose skills and experience complement yours. Collaborate on assignments, each coach focusing on their expert domain.
4. Think more broadly. What needs to happen in the broader social network if the group of people with whom you are working are to be able to deliver more effectively? You may need to invest significant energies in enhancing the capability of people across the organisation to engage more effectively in groups.
5. Keep on doing the work, reflecting on the work you have done, and making the time to learn. Get yourself a great supervisor.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

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