

***A study in systems and complexity when working in teams:
Implications for Coaching practice.***

**By Suzi Skinner
October 2004**

Overview:

In order for a Coach to be successful working with individuals and teams in organisations, communities, families (or one to one) – it is imperative that the Coach has a clear understanding of the human system and frameworks within which the client is operating (O'Neill 2001). Whilst the nature of Coaching is typically and rightfully client driven (Grant 2001), the Coach needs to be equipped with an insight into the wider context within which the Coaching is taking place, if it is to be sustainable.

Systems thinking can be a way of helping a coaching client view their world from a broader perspective. This includes viewing and reviewing the structures, patterns and events of their environment, rather than just focusing on the client interpretations alone. This broad view can help the client to identify the real causes of issues and know where to work to address them - rather than merely focusing on the potential symptoms of an underlying (and unidentified) problem.

In building this broader perspective with Coaching clients, it is also useful to have an understanding of team characteristics and capabilities that build team performance. This is particularly relevant for clients working as part of a group or team and tasked with delivering specific outcomes. The characteristics of goal setting, leadership, interrelationships, and effective communication are often of critical to the performance groups (Leonard 2000). Whilst some groups do not take on the full characteristics of a "team" (Katzenbach & Smith 2004) and perform at a high performing team level, this can often be influenced by the limitations of task type and amount of time they spend together (Forsyth 1998). As these characteristics can impact on the outcome of any group, it is necessary to be able to identify these challenges for clients in order to enhance the results for the client and the effectiveness of any coaching intervention.

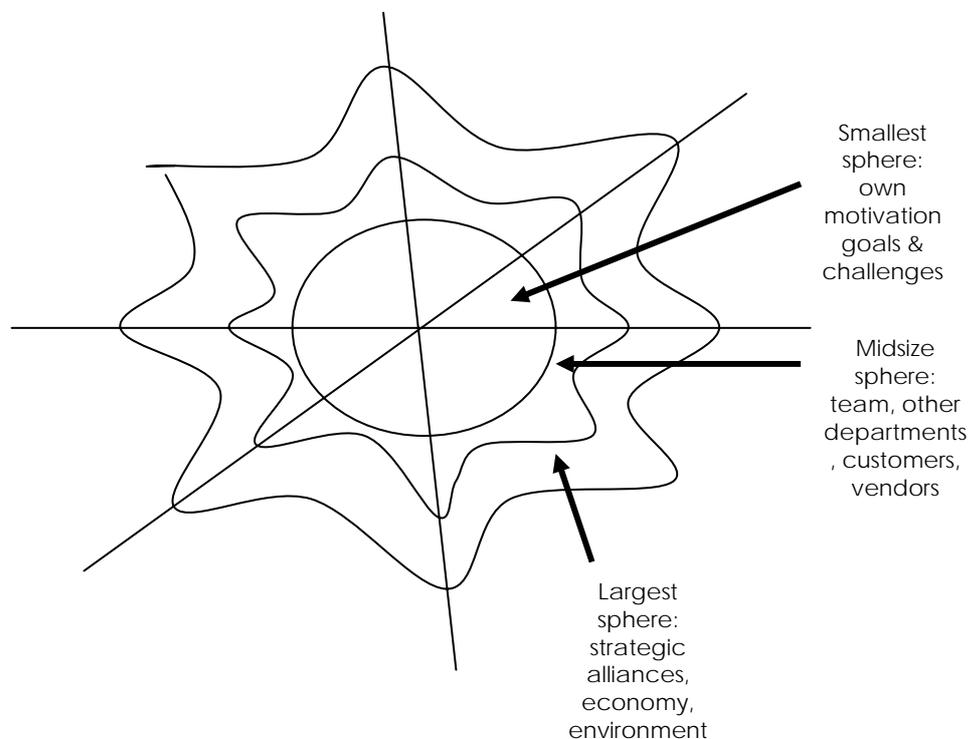
Human Systems:

From a human systems or complexity perspective, it is useful to understand the characteristics of the human systems within which we all operate.

A human system can be defined as an entity which maintains its existence through the mutual interaction of its parts. The key emphasis here is one of "mutual interaction," in that something is occurring between the parts, over time, which maintains the system (O'Neill 2000). Therefore as an example, any newly formed work group within an organisation is of-course part of a whole (the company division) and part of a larger whole (the organisation) at the same time (Portfelt 2002). This meta view concept is key to the conceptualisation of systems theory as first developed by von Bertalanffy in 1968.

Indeed this systems perspective of being part of a greater whole involves the concepts of interdependency and interrelatedness, emergent patterns and sub groupings. Interdependence can be understood whereby a change in one part of the group (or organisation) always results in a change in the other parts. These small changes can make a huge difference to the outcome of the group or organisation and can ultimately make the adaptive processes of the group and the group outcomes unpredictable (Portfelt 2002). The popular conceptualisation of the impact of change (in the figure below) reflects the interrelatedness of the individual or team experience within the wider “web” or system in which one is operating.

Human Systems



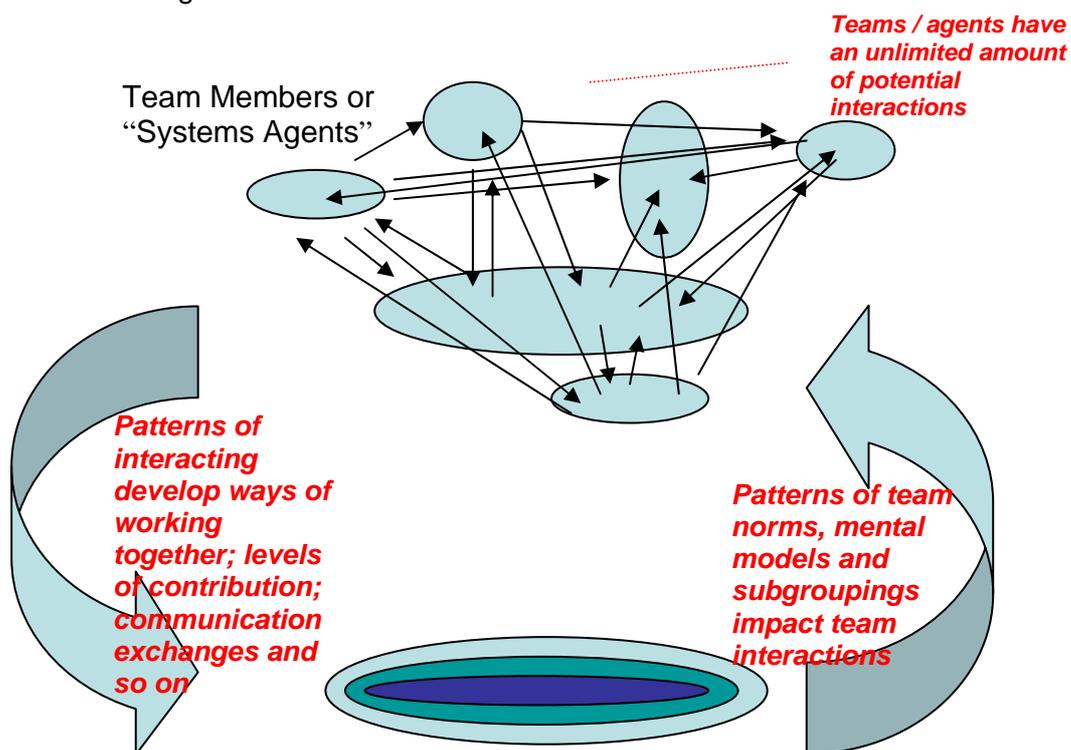
Source: Executive Coaching with Backbone And Heart – (O’Neill 2000 p.11)

This concept of interdependency within teams can mean that as a group they will be influenced by some of the main characteristics of human systems. Influences may include the fact that:

- a) People adapt in their own way to situations: this can be seen by the varying amounts of stress and compensatory behaviours adopted by team members throughout the assignment process;
- b) People react differently to change: this can be seen in the diverse reactions of individuals when perhaps the team goal is changed and then changed further. Examples may include individuals withdrawing from discussions, experiencing and venting frustration, through to using humour to diffuse any difficult tensions. Whilst these reactions in themselves are not unusual, the ability to predict which individual at which time would react and how, is difficult to forecast throughout any team process.

- c) Relationships with other people often determine how people react – this can be seen whereby discussions may be held between original dyads and triads (close relationships) that existed initially within the group. Interestingly, at different times these dyads can form and reform based on the stage of development of the team and the level of agreement between the individuals.
- d) Behaviour cannot easily be predicted or controlled – teams can experience times of cohesion and conflict (which are often not expected). These can result in different team members attempting to take leadership roles or directive roles within the group.

As a result of the interrelated nature of the individuals within the group, distinct patterns of behaviour, thinking and norms can emerge. This concept of “emergence” is based on the concept that from the mutual interaction of the parts of a system there arises characteristics which can not be found as characteristic of any of the individual parts (Olson & Eoyang 2001). This can include: the development of group norms (examples such as punctuality; reliability and follow up; rotating team leaders nominated each week; and implicit mental models (the level of contribution made by each member; the equality of dialogue between all members and the need for inclusion). The characteristics of Interrelatedness and emergent patterns can be seen in the figure below:



Emergent Patterns develop from the teams endless interactions whilst at the same time these patterns influence the interactions of the team

Adapted from Olson & Eoyang 2001

Fundamental to the concept of emergent patterns is the impact of feedback within the systems whereby every influence is both cause and effect (Portfelt 2002). Importantly in a human system nothing is ever influenced in just one direction – as can be seen in the figure above. Effective teams are considered to be an open self regulated system – interacting with each other and the environment and adjusting

responses or adapting to these influences. This process of adaptation, “containing various parts of the system, that integrated makes a whole” (Portfelt 2002) – means that team adaptation often results in something qualitatively new – perhaps a team presentation that is significantly altered from the original position.

From a Coaching perspective, a key to understanding how to make effective change within human systems is the ability to identify leverage points within the system (Olson & Eoyang 2001, Baron 1994). By being in tune with the dynamics at play, a Coach is able to assist the group or team to understand the systems dynamics influencing the group. The concepts of Double Loop learning further facilitates the groups learning by encouraging team members to understand the “why” of their team processes and bring these patterns into question. “Change can be surprisingly easy if you identify the right connections...knowing where to intervene so that a small effort can get a huge result” (O’Connor & Mc Dermott 1997 pp.21).

From a team viewpoint, factors which make up a team (versus a group) as outlined by Katzenbach & Smith (2004) include concepts of shared leadership roles; individual and mutual accountability & equality of contribution; specific team purpose and clear goal setting; collective work products; open ended discussions; performance measures and doing real work together.

Without true leadership roles within teams, opportunities to engage in tangible double loop learning can be lost. That is, questioning the developments of the group as the team progresses can provide useful insight into the planning for the teams future success. Essentially a lack of feedback back into the group on the fundamentals of the team processes that are at play – what’s working and what’s not working well - is a key function of any team leader (de Shazer 1985). When one considers the research on team goal setting and the impact of positive versus negative feedback - whereby teams that had received negative feedback set higher goals, developed more strategies and performed at higher levels than groups that received positive feedback (Mesch, Farh & Podsakoff, 1994) - one can assume that any loss of team learning and reflection can mean that wider, more effective strategies are not pursued by the group and overall performance can be affected.

Conclusion:

The performance of groups and teams of people is wholly affected by the systems and relationships within which they operate. Team projects can provide useful insight into the powerful impact of systems dynamics of interrelatedness, relationships and emergent patterns of behaving. In order to assist with sustainable change, the Coach needs to understand the system characteristics and work within these to achieve effective outcomes.

The transition of a group of people to that of a high performing team is dependent upon many team variables such as team composition, team task, leadership, and inter-relationships (Katzenbach & Smith 2004). Indeed if a group is to become a high performing team these characteristics need to be focused upon and built over time such that the team becomes self organising and effective. The Coach can play a pivot role in this process by raising an awareness of the importance of these frameworks and educating the members involved such that the team outcomes consistently exceed the sum of its individual parts.

Reference List:

Baron, R.A & Byrne, D., (1994) Social Psychology Understanding Human Interaction. London: Allyn and Bacon. Pp.484-515

de Shazer, S., (1985). Keys to solution in brief therapy New York: W.W.Norton

Forsyth, D.R., (1998). Performance. In D.R. Forsyth, Group Dynamics (chapter 10). Belmont: Brooks

Grant, A.M. & Greene, J., (2001) Coach Yourself. Make Real Change in Your Life London: Pearson Education Ltd

Holman, T., (2002) The Dynamics For The Company Officer, Fire Engineering, U.S: EBSCO Publishing

Kamberg, M., (2001) The Dynamics Of Team Interaction, Women In Business, Vol 53, Issue 2

Katzenbach, J. & Smith, D., (2004) The Discipline of teams. In Harvard Business Review on Teams That Succeed, Harvard; HBR Paperback, pp.1-25

Leonard, H. & Freeman, A., (2000) "From Scientific Management Through Fun and Games to High Performing Teams: A historical perspective on consulting to team based organisations". Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 52, 3-19

Mesch, D., Farh, J., Podsakoff, P., (1994) Effects of feedback on group goal setting, strategies and performance. Group and Organisation Management Thousand Oaks: Vol 19

O'Connor, J. & Mc Dermott, I., (1997) The Art of Systems Thinking: Essential Skills for Creativity and Problem Solving. London: Thorsons Publishers

Olson, E.E. & Eoyang, G.H., (2001) Facilitating Organization Change, Lessons from Complexity Science, San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons

O'Neill, M., (2000) Executive Coaching with Backbone And Heart San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Portfelt, I., (2002) Adaptability of a university organisation Sweden: Karlstaad University

Von Bertalanffy, L., (1968). General System Theory. Foundations, Development, Applications. New York: George Braziller Incorporated.

Whitaker, D., (1999) The Spirit Of Teams Wiltshire: Crowood Press Ltd