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A Systemic Look Into Organisations

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This isn't working

1.1 **Damn, it's not working...**

From now on you'll do things very differently

Picture this: you return from a management course full of energy, motivated and with your batteries recharged. You know exactly how you'll make the necessary changes. From now on, you're going to do things differently. Starting immediately.

But before you can even begin, an email tells you that an incident has taken place and you're the one who has to clean up the mess. You have to placate a group of angry and disappointed employees. Slowly but surely, all your fresh ideas melt like snow in the morning sun. And before you know it, you're doing exactly what you told yourself you'll never do again.

Why is it that after immersing ourselves in leadership programmes and emerging from business schools highly motivated, we find ourselves unable to apply everything we've learned because our environment refuses to play ball.

This dynamic has always intrigued and irritated me in equal measures. I could never understand why my efforts were ineffective. Having turned myself inside out, I'd return to the office energised and with a fresh new perspective.

But once back at the office, all-too-often something very different happens than what you wanted. Sometimes, it's because your own manager has bypassed you with other agreements. Or you become the victim of decisions that you yourself would not have made. It's as if you are transmitting on a frequency on which your message becomes distorted, or even completely lost. Is this how it's supposed to work?

No. It can also be different. You can learn to understand how to exert influence on your environment. How to understand forces at play in the organisation that are greater than yourself. But what's in it for you? Well, you can learn to turn the resistance in the organisation to your advantage, while maintaining relationships and achieving results that are at least as good.

1.2 **Why simplicity is no longer enough**

“Businesses and other human activities are systems. [...] Our actions are bound by invisible fabrics and it can often take years for the effect of one action to play out on the effect of another.”

Peter Senge²

What can you do if you cannot control the things that happen?

First of all, you have to acknowledge that everything you do has consequences, some of which you will definitely not see coming. You could even find yourself as the victim of what you do, without realising it.

Sounds familiar? Then stop thinking that you're making it too complicated. Truth be told, you're probably not making it complicated enough. Our world is complex and interconnected. All our actions are part of a greater whole.

Not many people would argue with this, yet few will do anything about it. Attempts to control the big picture often run aground by oversimplifying things. Oversimplification can lead to crucial insights being overlooked. If we want to impact our environment, we must have an understanding of those insights, so that we know what will happen if we intervene. This calls for interest, understanding, insight, time, knowledge and ideas.

These are often lacking in an organisation, which is why people in the organisation will try to find an approach that makes complexity manageable, doable even. Yet they realise all too well that not everything is doable, particularly in the timeframe and for the budget that they might have in mind.

What they have to do is look at how things in and around the organisation are interconnected, and the interconnection with and between people. Only then can you get a handle on the forces, interests, assumptions and preferences that have to be taken into account in your environment. This has to be the departure point for your actions.

So why isn't that happening?

Because we spend most of our time managing things we think will produce tangible results, quickly. Take the vision and strategy of an organisation, for example. Good leaders can put these into words, with appealing imagery and obvious expectations. The mistake too many leaders tend to make is to fragment good ideas into simple goals that lack the connection with the kind of vision that will stimulate the enthusiasm of those around them. This is exactly where the mismatch between management and strategy and policy starts.

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Consequently, the changes that leaders so much want to make are placed in the same environment they'd rather leave behind them. They become more of the same, but flavoured with a different strategy and policy.

But back to you, the leader who so desperately wants to do things differently. Your good intentions and knowledge become tangled in a web of informal working methods, agreements about tangible results, tight deadlines and a desire to steer clear of complexity. But the big picture stays obscured, and there's scant room for real innovation. Ideas are swallowed up in the daily grind, a succession of measures that can no longer even be extrapolated into a rational decision. Decisiveness and energy evaporate, to be replaced by lethargy. Before long, the willingness and ability to change are reduced to zero.

Why does all this happen? Because every organisation wants to make challenges manageable. We all want our organisation to be malleable, but that's not always possible. And we are kidding ourselves if we think we can reduce every problem to its simplest form. So a lot of what we'd rather not see we sweep under the carpet.

Before you know it, managers and employees will have woven an invisible tapestry of written and unwritten agreements that ultimately lead to inflexibility. A large part of it will be protected by what's loosely called organisational culture, and anyone trying to mess with it is gently shown the error of their ways. And persistence will get you branded as a trouble-maker.

It's not about where to be different; it's about starting differently.

By learning to see and understand what's already there, then learning to work from that departure point. Irrespective of whether you're a manager, director or professional, your leadership can provide guidance and support, and thus make all the difference.

Just how complex can it be to expose such an invisible system? Exhausting, and something you shouldn't really worry about, because you'll end up undermining your own results? I often hear managers and professionals sigh audibly and see them shy away as soon as this topic arises.

Until, that is, they see how harmful a system can be. And how results can be improved in the long run, for less energy and lower costs. Managing and steering the system by people is a more sustainable way of working. By investing in knowledge and acquiring insights you'll create awareness and increase the value of the organisation. Surely, that should be the ambition of every leader?

It's not about keeping an unchangeable system running as smoothly as possible, however hard change might be needed. If you have confidence in your own ability, knowledge, experience, insights and motivation to increase value, then you'll make a difference. What's more, it's enriching; it brings peace of mind and gives you confidence in yourself and your surroundings.

1.3 **Leadership in the context of a persistent reality: a systemic approach**

Managers' and executives' experiences with change can be compared with repairing an older car. Install a new battery and the starter motor starts playing up. Replace the starter motor and then the exhaust fails. A repair can trigger a chain reaction throughout the vehicle, whose parts are already in need of maintenance anyway. Tinkering in one area can often have negative repercussions for other interconnected parts. It's the same when you introduce change into a system. Such an initiative, or intervention, will permeate the whole organisation and bring about things you don't expect. The most important lesson here is that if you identify a weakness in the organisation, you can safely assume that many other areas of that organisation are also affected.

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The theory of systems thinking connects everything that influences someone's functioning as a person, manager and leader. If you want to do things differently in an organisation, you'll need insights into where a system can create bottlenecks. The first thing you need to realise is that systems in an organisation revolve around people. And people don't come with part numbers that enable you to source a replacement from the warehouse. Positioning people in a system is an altogether more subtle game. People don't necessarily do what's expected of them; they do what they think they should.

Incidentally, do you know what happens when people do exactly what their job descriptions say? They do anything and everything that they shouldn't really be doing. They know it. Do you?

People are individual parts of a bigger picture. It starts with the family that you were born into and it continues in the work situation. The stronger the bond between the people, or parts, in an organisation, the better an organisation can respond to events. The proper functioning of a team is not down to a single member of that team; its success depends on the chemistry between the various members and what the context calls for. As organisational guru Peter Rombouts explains, it's like an empty space that cannot be pigeonholed in processes, job profiles or team assignments.

But how does one deal with that empty space between people? Take a closer look, and you'll see that it's full of patterns and dynamics. As a leader, you need to learn what occupies this space. And understand what's going on in it. To exert any influence you must dare to enter that space and see which patterns and dynamics need to be addressed. In what order are they? What purpose do those patterns serve? Which balls do they keep up in the air, frenetically or otherwise? What is obvious and what is subtly concealed? Which of the dynamics are carefully maintained on a daily basis because people are proud of them, and which ones are battered and bruised and thus kept under wraps? It's in that space that you might be able to learn whether an intervention will be successful.

Another precondition is being willing to step into your own empty space and confronting the cracks and gaps in it that make you what you are. This will enable you to show the kind of leadership that will balance the system. Taking a systemic view will develop your ability to carry out effective interventions. Learn to see the bigger picture, understand the role of the undercurrent and learn to recognise the patterns.

"A system comprises a multitude of particles, all of which are interconnected and 'communicate' with one another. In a system there is always an order of what comes first and what follows and there will be an invisible dynamic that tries to bring it all back into balance. A systemic leader recognises and understands that the patterns of a system have a self-organising and self-directing mechanism."

Lia Genée (1953), behavioural scientist and owner of Passerel³

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My own journey

In the lyrics of Coldplay's 2016 song "Adventures of a lifetime"⁴ there is a line that says: "We are diamonds taking shape". This is a wonderful way of looking at people and organisations, and at yourself too. It's having the confidence that someone will find their own character and nature. That you can sometimes help by being the rock, sometimes by being water. Or even by being the implement that forms the rock, taking care, of course, not to damage it.

Your form and uniqueness are the best you can offer in a system. So, first of all, look at where you come from and what it was that formed you.

My first managerial job was in the 1980s, at a bank. I was too young really, definitely lacking in experience, but bursting with zeal and drive, highly motivated and full of character. As soon as I had become familiar with how the department functioned, I was asked to work together with the team to organise it more efficiently. I definitely had ideas as to how to do it, but reconciling collaboration with my own role proved far from easy. I saw everything, but I had trouble distinguishing between events and patterns. I struggled to differentiate between patterns that facilitated progress and those that impeded it.

Even insignificant things grew out of all proportion. My workplace, for example, proved problematic for our team's senior employee. And when I sat by one of the other managers all hell broke loose. Minor changes were simply reversed by employees.

A management training that I followed proved an opportunity to spar with other line managers in the bank and learn more about what was expected of you as a manager. However, that course was just a standard, by-the-book solution to help new managers find their way. What I missed were the tools that would enable me to appreciate the underlying layers and understand the effects of what I did. In the peer reviews and meetings that we had, I can't remember whether we were able to focus on what really happened in the organisation. Acquiring new information and techniques is quite different to learning how to use it all.

2.1 Then I put my systemic glasses on

It was only when I followed a more in-depth coaching course some years later that I began to better understand a number of things. As a coach you have to understand what goes on in an organisation, that there is a difference between what you see and what really happens. How things in the foreground and background can influence decision-making and define a company's culture. I learned to identify the visible and less-visible threads that ran through the organisation, making it stronger or weaker.

This coaching course was my first conscious experience of seeing things systemically and my first practical applications of working systemically. Systemic working is defined as the influence exerted by the systems of which someone is a part. Working systemically can be regarded as a way of acquiring insight into your own place in a system and your relationship with others in it. It shows where the obstacles are, and why you can keep reverting to behaviour that can inhibit your development and growth.

I came to realise that while I had tried for many years to function effectively, I didn't really appreciate the impact my actions were having. There were several things I hadn't seen at all. And in other areas, I really had no idea what the most effective intervention would be. I didn't know what to change, or what the effect of a change would be. By the same token, I also had no idea what I should leave well alone. The fact that some of my interventions worked out well was more down to luck than judgement.

Wearing the systemic glasses of a coach gave me a whole new perspective of the world. I learned to look from several angles and it gave me the tools to connect head, heart and gut feeling, and make them all work for me.

Looking back, I would have loved to have known how I could have intervened more in what was going on around me. And to this day I am still amazed that many training courses hardly allude to the combination of leadership, context and having a systemic view, or don't allude to it at all.

2.2 **Lessons learned: you don't have to make the mistakes that I did**

I see it as a challenge to inspire you as a leader to do what you do better, derive more enjoyment from it and, above all, contribute more. In my time I've fallen foul of all the classic pitfalls, several times. I've regularly had to run the gauntlet, and carried so many monkeys on my back that I could have opened a zoo! Yet I've never shied away from the challenge of wanting to change my environment.

Being on automatic pilot, that's often what it felt like, relying on pure strength and staying power. Perseverance, learning by doing. And oftentimes shedding the proverbial blood, sweat and tears. Always learning, discovering, but above all, wanting to understand and learn from it. Working systemically is a perspective and a way of learning that you won't get from a book. It's something you learn by doing and understand-

ing, substantiated with theory and content, giving you thorough insights into what's going on around you and how things happen.

2.3 **My image of people: how do I see them now?**

“Mastery has little to do with being the master of something, but everything to do with a high level of control. People who have a high degree of personal mastery are consistently able to shape the ideas that are really important to them. They look at things like an artist looks at a work of art, by committing themselves to lifelong learning. Continuously clarifying and deepening our personal vision, keeping our efforts focused, developing patience and maintaining an objective view of reality; these are the disciplines that lead to personal mastery. They make personal mastery a cornerstone of the learning organisation - the spiritual foundation of the organisation. An organisation's commitment and ability to learn can never be greater than that of its members.”

Peter Senge, Director of Center for Organizational Learning MIT Sloan School of Management USA⁵

Peter Senge, the author of books that include *Presence* and *The Fifth Discipline*, sees systems thinking as the fifth discipline. This is a discipline that connects and ensures, on many levels, that we can keep learning, developing and transforming.

The basis for systemic working is that, as a leader, you have genuine affection for people. That you want to see people as being full of potential and you have a desire to help them live up to that potential. Meet these condi-

tions and you'll stop seeing a person as a vessel that can be programmed with few simple decisions. From here on in, the connotations are positive, you'll appreciate that we are part of an environment in which systems are designed to be self-sustaining. If you then commit to allowing people to flourish, and if you can identify and remove bottlenecks from a system, you will have found the key to actual transformation.

This will mean that you'll get more from your job than being financially rewarded for your efforts. The most important reward will be the opportunity to develop and contribute, and see that that development is actually taking place. You'll be stimulated to add value, to achieve, and to develop. And know that you'll have to be damned good at it because you will be continuously adapting and applying your own approach, countering the inherent resistance in every system.

This is where your personal leadership and that of others will join forces to form the bigger picture. The challenge is to discover how you affect an individual and a system. A systemic work approach gives you power. This power can detrimentally affect people and organisations. But it can also grow people and organisations, as well as facilitate their development. And that's what it's all about.

So learn to see what makes an organisation tick, how its teams work, and what affects the system, from an even broader context too. And dig a bit deeper to see which of your good intentions didn't work out as well as they might have.

“Where you stumble,
dig for treasure.”

Learning to understand a pattern will show you where patterns lead to constraints. Discover which interventions you can deploy that both suit you and work for the system, for both the bigger picture and for the individuals within it. That's when we can start talking about transformational leadership.

2.4 My leadership: how do I do it?

Thinking and seeing things from a systems-thinking approach are indispensable as a leader. If I stumbled over structures and procedures, I knew there were lessons there to be learned. I learned to develop sharpness, and to use it. I was firm and clear about the aimed-for result and any agreements that were reached. I spoke from the heart when it came to timing, time, individuality and people's capacities. And, like the conductor of an orchestra, I didn't shy away from using the baton forcefully to get everyone's attention. I then set the tone with passion, trusting everyone to play their respective roles.

Talent management is the crux of what we can accommodate in systems. It is also the basis that supports the development path along which systemic work is routed and looking at things from a systemic perspective. If you look at things from a systems thinking approach, you'll never be bored and it'll open up a whole new world for you, literally and figuratively. A world in which not everything can be solved with simple actions. In a kingdom in which complexity and chaos compete, looking and working systemically is King.

Sounds familiar?

- **You want to make a difference, but intangible forces seem to be working against you;**
- **New initiatives always seem to be trumped by established procedures;**
- **All-too-quickly you find yourself once again doing what you were so determined not to do;**
- **The fact that nothing ever really changes in the organisation makes you despondent.**

Systems form everywhere. You yourself are part of a system, but you can exert influence on it. Hidden away under the guise of organisational culture, a large part of a system remains invisible. So which system lurks beneath the surface in your working context? And which hidden connections, influences and emotions are playing their respective roles in it?

Having a systemic way of looking at and revealing hidden connections are essential aspects in effecting change. They throw light on what prefers to stay in the dark. Seeing things in a systemic way divulges what's going on below the surface. It will enable you to exploit a situation, as opposed to making the same mistake over and over again. And that's how you can really make a difference.

Inspired by heavyweight thinkers from the worlds of psychology and organisational science, along with many years of practical experience, *Hidden Connections* will encourage you to take a systemic look at things. Examples taken from everyday work situations and practical drills will help you understand and recognise the underlying connections. You will also understand your own connections and how they affect others. A systemic look will give you insight into new dimensions. Dimensions that have always been there, but that you were thus far unable to see. And irrespective of whether you are a manager, director or other type of professional, the knowledge you will acquire will enable you to make all the difference.

Margreet Oostenbrink has over 25 years' experience as a manager and director with larger organisations. Now, on behalf of her own companies, Movinc and Flow2Move, she plays similar roles on an interim basis, as well as offering coaching and training. By ensuring that organisations adopt a systemic perspective, she brings to the surface what is hidden, so that their leaders can really make an impact.

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