

Unlocking systemic wisdom

Bringing key knowledge from constellations to the work floor

Unlocking systemic wisdom – *Bringing key knowledge from constellations to the work floor*

Siets Bakker & Leanne Steeghs

Photography: Espérance Blaauw

Translation by: Joscelyn Weychan, Bonnie McClellan-Broussard

Originally published under title: Systemisch Wijzer, Uitgeverij Thema, Zaltbommel, 2015

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ISBN 978-1973714231 (NUR 470)

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Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	3
1. The World of Systems	7
1.1. What “systemic” means	8
1.2. Systems of all types and sizes	13
1.3. Family systems	15
1.4. Organisational systems	18
1.5. Conscience: communicating with the larger whole	21
1.6. System energy: the nature of a system	25
1.7. Constellations and systemic work	30
2. Knowing	33
2.1. The life-giving forces of systems	35
2.2. Belonging	37
2.3. Order	42
2.4. Exchange	48
3. Feeling	55
3.1. Your body’s wisdom	56
3.2. The empty centre	62
3.3. Listening with your entire body	66
3.4. Your breathing directs your focus	72
3.5. Slowing down to hurry up	74
3.6. Your feet know the way	77
4. Asking	81
4.1. Systemic questions as a shortcut to the undercurrent	82
4.2. Universal systemic questions	88
4.3. Systemic questions from the life-giving forces	92
4.4. Systemic questions from professional perspectives	94

4.5. Systemic questions in collaborations	94
- <i>Working together</i>	98
- <i>Leading</i>	98
- <i>Consulting</i>	103
- <i>Coaching</i>	108
- <i>Undertaking</i>	113
5. Doing	119
5.1. Working with lines	121
5.2. The quadrilemma	124
5.3. The organisation chart	127
5.4. Table constellations	130
5.5. Resources	133
5.6. Description	134
5.7. Testing	137
5.8. Systemic intervision	139
A. Appendix	143
A.1. About Leanne Steeghs	144
A.2. About Siets Bakker	145
A.3. Sources for further reading	146

Foreword

“Would you like her to stand next to you?”, the therapist asked, and to give force to his words he moved the piece of paper that represented “her” a little closer. A warm feeling passed through my stomach. Yes, someone next to me, I liked that. In spite of the fact that I had been in a relationship for years, I knew what to do.

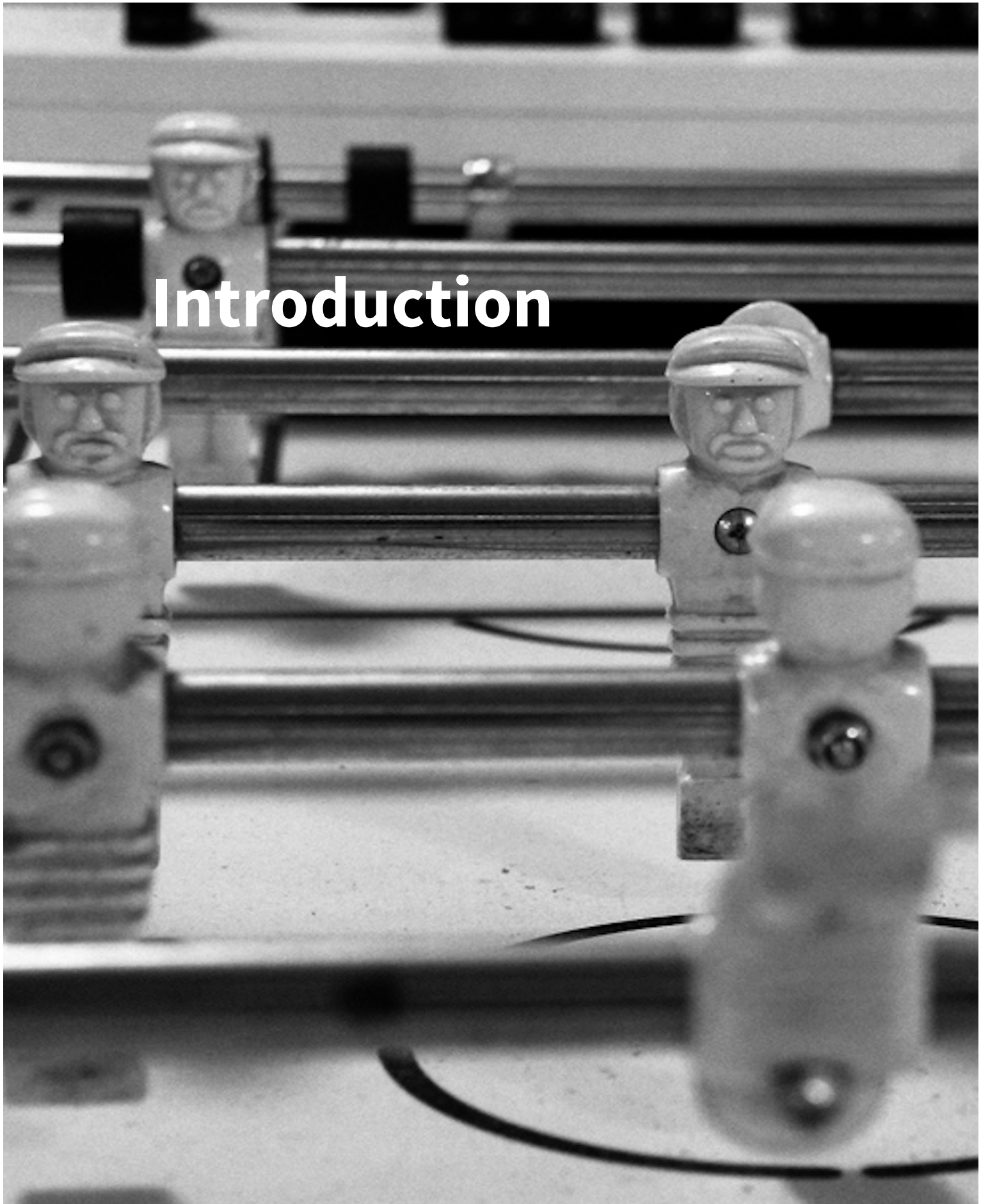
I could have hesitated for months and tried to reach a decent, rational decision through conversation, but secretly my body already knew the answer. Even though I, as a philosopher, have a rational mind, I dared to listen to my body. Fortunately so. That body and meaning are interwoven becomes clear from such words as “supressing”, “embracing” and “not looking forward to something”. These are physical terms that also have (been given) an abstract meaning. It is actually quite logical that my body “knows” profound, essential information about me; it is more surprising that my body seems capable of passing on that information to other bodies. I can tell others how I feel and what I am thinking about. I then use words in the hope that my thoughts and feelings are interpreted correctly by the other. However, I can also tell my story by holding on to the other, making him sit somewhere, lifting him up or pushing him away. It is amazing to experience how much you can convey this way and how much you can learn about yourself and others by doing so. I have no idea how it works exactly. I am averse to woolliness, and as scientific as a philosopher can be; however, I am sure that it works and I would love for everybody to experience it for themselves at least once.

Bas Haring
philosopher, writer of popular science literature and professor

The experience described by Bas is exactly the experience many people have when they come into contact with systemic work through a constellation, as did we. We wondered how this wisdom could be used and applied in everyday life. For example, in your work, close to your own experience. That is what this book is about.

Siets Bakker and Leanne Steeghs

Introduction





IN A workshop with a group of HR advisers I asked what the most

important competence was in their daily work. 'Persuading' was mentioned most often. Every time that someone gave this answer, my stomach clenched. I realised how tough the work of an HR advisor in this organisation must be if you spent all day persuading other people. My own body remembered how I had once worked in a similar setting, constantly in search of 'the best option'. Working from my systemic wisdom has made my life a great deal lighter. No longer do I always have to persuade people. I can increasingly work from the larger whole, without judging. I can simply follow the movement. The struggle is becoming less and less.



AT THE postgraduate training institute for coaches I meet lots of enthusiastic

participants who are extremely eager to learn. It sometimes happens that I'm not able to answer their questions straight away. In the beginning, when I had just started working there, I struggled with not being able to know everything; it made me feel slightly embarrassed, especially here, as a teacher at this level. The result was that I did my utmost to find a fitting answer or perform a smart intervention, but that only caused me to get more stuck in my head. Now that I have better access to my systemic wisdom I have increasingly fewer issues with staying in the area of 'not knowing'. I can now deal with the uncomfortable feeling that accompanies this. In the meantime the deep trust I've developed together with countless experiences have shown me that an answer or a direction will always emerge.

We coined the term “systemic wisdom” from the philosophy of systemic work together with family and organisational constellations. We translated this philosophy into an everyday practicable form. This ensures that after you read this book you will not only have gained knowledge, but that you can actually benefit from it in your everyday work and life.

Rarely do you have to accept the words or the terminology used as an absolute truth. We describe systemic concepts, principles and uses from our own knowledge. We do not follow the principles of a single training institute or movement. We have consciously used varied terms and terminology in order to acknowledge everything. These terms can be similar and sometimes they emphasise a slightly different aspect. Choosing a single word or term would detract from the space and depth of systemic work.

Systemic wisdom is certainly not something that has to be developed or created. It is already there. In you as an individual, but also in the groups, teams, and organisations you are a part of. It is an enormous source of information that we all could use much more often, also in our culture and education.

By “turning on” your own systemic wisdom, you can tap into an entirely new source of information. Without having to work very hard, you will be able to connect to a larger whole and access a deeper level of “knowing”. The gateway to your systemic wisdom is your own body. We have become so accustomed to acquiring knowledge through our brains that our systemic wisdom is often less (consciously) developed. Becoming systemically wiser is learning to feel, to trust and daring to act on the signals made available by your surroundings and by your body. Reading a book about it is an excellent start!

In this book we share our insights and experiences with the intention to stimulate you as a reader to make more use of your own systemic wisdom. Our experience has taught us that your entire consciousness increases when you learn to trust your systemic observations. This helps you recognise what is truly going on in a situation more quickly. You will also notice an increased sharpness in your observations and an improved sensitivity for nuances. This clarity will make it easier to rely on your “internal compass” in your life and work, simply because it will become easier to trust your sense of what feels right and what does not. Your reach will widen and you will receive more opportunities, without even having to try very hard!

You will read how to incorporate systemic work into your own life, as an individual and as a professional. This does not mean that non-systemic work is wrong or, even worse, no longer advisable. We are of the opinion that adding possibilities to your current resources is always positive. This book is definitely not a plea to start approaching everything in a systemic way from now on. Throughout the whole book you will find examples and exercises in which we share our own experiences. This shows that developing your systemic wisdom is simple and accessible to anyone. In the final chapter we have included several methods to enable you to experiment and practice with the material you have read and learnt.

Avoid working too hard whilst reading this book. There is no need to retain or record anything. Some theoretical knowledge is required, but it will not make the difference. Allow yourself to go with the flow during reading. You will automatically notice what grabs your attention and what “sticks”.

Trust that you will pick up on what you currently need most. That is enough. If you read the book again in a few years’ time, you might pick up on entirely different things.

Siets Bakker and Leanne Steeghs



The World of Systems

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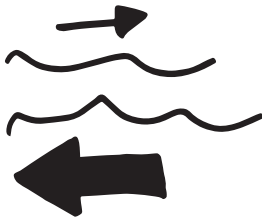
1.1 What “systemic” means

“Systemic” is something of a strange word in English. It is a German concept that is difficult to translate. The term was introduced by Gunthard Weber, one of the first people to do constellations within organisations. It translates roughly as “relating to a whole system”. Even though systemic is not originally an English word, the concept has been fully accepted. Systemic is by no means a corruption of the word “systematic”.

In our education and daily work we mainly use our analytical skills. In short, the term analytical implies thinking in terms of direct cause and effect. The systemic approach is phenomenological instead of analytical.

Phenomenological means studying situations in their original context: you allow the phenomena to speak for themselves, without wanting to add or change something. Instead of breaking the system down into separate parts, you look at the larger whole. You constantly question which larger whole causes the current situation or problem.

In systemic logic you assume that reality has multiple layers. This layered structure is present always and everywhere. We call the explicitly visible layers at the surface the “overcurrent”. The overcurrent can be observed through the symptoms at the surface. Symptoms can take the form of problems or certain (unwanted) behaviour. In organisations, these are the symptoms that call for intervention. However, there are also pleasant or desired symptoms, such as flow, fun and innovation. Strangely enough, these symptoms are hardly ever a reason to start an investigation. We only start researching once something goes wrong or an unwanted situation arises. Initially, we intervene in the overcurrent. These interventions at symptom level usually concern the contents or the procedures. Sometimes this is sufficient to solve a problem or achieve a change in behaviour.



Mariska is a receptionist. She has the habit of arriving at work ten minutes late every day. After a while it starts to annoy her colleagues. They have to cover for her if the telephone rings early in the morning. What annoys them in particular is that Mariska takes it for granted that they will answer the phone for her. When the team manager addresses the issue he finds out that Mariska is always late, not just to work. She experiences

difficulty in managing her time. They agree that she will attend a time management course. If she is late more than three times in the coming year, her contract will be terminated. Mariska got the message, took the necessary steps and did not arrive late again.

Unfortunately, reality is often more complicated. An intervention in the overcurrent does not always have the desired effect. If that is the case, symptoms often recur. Problems arise again. Or people, teams and organisations relapse into old habits once the pressure of the intervention disappears. In such cases of “repetitive patterns” it can pay off to investigate the undercurrent. Instead of only tackling the symptoms, you look into the roots of the problem or the behaviour. Interventions in the undercurrent often concern interactions or feelings that are present, but are not discussed because they are taboo, or only latently or subconsciously present. From twenty years of experience with systemic work and constellations, three life-giving forces have been formulated that apply to each system: belonging, order and exchange. These three life-giving forces in the undercurrent of all systems are universal and timeless. That also makes them older than systemic work itself! Being aware of the life-giving forces feels like having an extra sensor, enabling you to intervene more effectively and efficiently than before.

Peter is a mechanic. He often arrives late at work. His colleagues complain about him because productive working time is lost and their entire schedule gets mixed up. The team manager addresses this issue and looks into the problem. Before the reorganisation – five years ago – Peter was never late. The team manager notices how Peter starts to light up when he talks about the past. Peter still feels that something was taken from him and that he has received nothing in return. The team manager says he can imagine that this affects Peter. A deep sigh follows. Peter realises how important it is to feel acknowledged. He seems relieved and says: “*Well, life goes on.*” With these words Peter closes a chapter. Together they “*negotiate*” about the new balance: what are the possibilities and what is expected of Peter? Ever since Peter has arrived on time. He offers plenty of ideas during work meetings and is actively involved with the team.

Symptoms in the overcurrent – such as problems or certain behaviour – can act as a signal for what is happening in the undercurrent. The symptom points out to the system that there is a disturbance (one or more) in the life-giving forces in the undercurrent. Becoming systemically wiser is also about developing a language for these life-giving forces so that you can express what you always sensed.

It is up to you how you approach a situation. The way you define a problem determines which solutions are possible. We tend to zoom in on a problem and then think of a solution. It can be sufficient to tackle symptoms in this way. However, if a problem is recurrent or shows up in several areas, it can be worthwhile to look at it in a systemic way. From a systemic perspective you can define a problem as a part of a larger system. You assume that incidents rarely have a straightforward cause-effect relationship. On the contrary: sometimes very persistent patterns underlie them, possibly beyond the conscious awareness of the people involved. If you work at a systemic level you also work with the mutual relationships and the energy of that system. You realise that you will see roughly the same patterns in the larger system if you look at an incident from a distance. Think of it as a hologram: each part contains the features of the whole.

***“ Instead of zooming in on a problem,
you zoom out to see the bigger picture. ”***

It is the opposite of what we are told in today's era of individualism, in which you as an individual have full control over your fate. You can do everything, as long as you really want to and your achievements can only be attributed to yourself. Systemically you could say that every person – but also a product, concept or organisation – is connected by intangible strings. Connected to other systems, to long forgotten events and intentions. Acknowledging the existence of these connections asks for a different, less individual approach. Instead of zooming in on a problem or person, you zoom out when looking at a situation in a systemic way. For example, what can you see when you zoom out from the issue around self-employed people? Maybe you are self-employed yourself and you might feel that it is a completely individual and personal choice. From a systemic perspective you might wonder what solution self-employment provides and why so many people choose self-employment.

“ *Work with the whole to influence the parts.* ”

People generally think in a linear or circular way. Linear thinking is thinking in terms of cause and effect. Circular thinking zooms in on repetitive patterns, in which the one is the logical consequence of the other. In a systemic approach, you do not use either linear or circular thinking. You approach what you see, hear, feel and think as a whole. Everything that is possible, exists simultaneously. The past is now. The future is now. This is how events from the past still affect our daily lives, especially when people or organisations pretend they never existed.

My nine-year-old son has a school subject called “news awareness”. It’s a mix between history and biology with a link to current events. Every now and then, the children receive an information sheet to take home and learn by heart. One day he came home with a sheet about “time”. The sheet stated that time was linear. There is a past, a present and a future. Everything that exists today finds its roots in the past. He also learnt that there are seasons that follow each other. Like a circle, with a fixed order. A never-ending cycle, without a beginning and without an end. In the phenomenological approach, that includes systemic wisdom, time does not play a role. Everything exists simultaneously.

SB

Traumatic or negative experiences are stored in the system and affect the present and the future. They are passed on through generations, without people even being aware of this. The same goes for positive experiences. However, these do not affect us negatively and are thus less visible in the present. These positive experiences from the past can be strong sources in the here and now. Systemically speaking, a person’s behaviour is not a single person’s behaviour but rather an indication of what is happening on a systemic level. It is as if that person is “employed” by the greater whole to do or represent something, without being conscious of it.

LS

My parents both come from large catholic farming families with lots of children. Every penny was counted, especially in my mother’s family. The land and the cattle owned by my mother’s family were barely enough to feed eleven children. Nothing was wasted, old clothing was mended and burnt potatoes were eaten too. My brother and I had a very different childhood. Our fridge was always full. When there was a reason to celebrate there was always plenty of cake. Even so my parents did teach me to be economical. In my own way I pass that on to my own children. For example, I come up with meals prepared with yesterday’s leftovers, so nothing goes to waste. I might seem economical and I am sure that my children are also economical, in their own way. Not because it is part of my or their nature, but because we are part of a system in which being economical was of vital importance.

The systemic approach is fundamentally different from the linear and circular approaches. Systemically seen, everything exists at the same time and everything is possible. What you see depends on what you zoom in on and from which perspective you look. Just like in a kaleidoscope or a hologram, every part of the system – whether it is an organisation, a team or a family – consists of the properties of the whole.

“ Everything that is possible exists simultaneously. ”

In general, a team or a department acts the same way as the organisation does. The manifestations are different but essentially the patterns are the same. The effects of the behaviour are also different, because the reach of a team is smaller than that of a whole organisation. You can see individual team members demonstrate the same characteristics as the organisation. An organisation often subconsciously selects its employees by these characteristics, giving them priority over knowledge and experience: *“Does this person suit us? Does this person match our attitude, behaviours and ‘mores’?”* The system you are dealing with shows the same pattern every time, only on a different scale.