What is happening here? A systems view on organisational life

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Introduction

This article considers how our participation in organisations can be enhanced by a systems perspective. It draws key learnings from the literature to clarify how a systems view of life serves us and how it can easily fall out of awareness. J.L. Moreno's development of psychodrama as a systemic method is touched on.

There are several reasons to focus on a systems view of organisational life. Organisations shape our health, learning and beliefs from an early age. Organisations in which we work, and volunteer, give us opportunities to express our abilities and deeply held values and to get things done. These experiences can be satisfying and affirming. Sometimes they are disturbing, perplexing. While we might easily interpret these challenges as interpersonal or 'political', they can also be about systemic patterns outside our awareness.

This article aims to consolidate understanding of a systemic perspective rather than describe its application to my field of practice. It presents pointers from systems thinkers about organisational health and patterns we might pay more attention to as we ask ourselves "What is happening here?".

Systems thinking

Systems thinking is a lens, a way of looking at life. A systems view involves us in sensing and appreciating our connections to the wider whole: to humankind, all living beings, our shared environment. Donella Meadows, a scientist and leading systems thinker, captures

the large and small of it: she describes a system as a set of interconnected elements – such as people, cells, molecules – which are coherently organised in a way that achieves something. A system consists of three things: elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose (Meadows, 2008).

Applied to an organisation, this holistic view connects us to our shared purpose and our interdependence. Robert Louis Flood observes:

> *We can only meaningfully understand ourselves by contemplating the whole of which we are an integral part. Systemic thinking is the discipline which makes visible that our actions are interrelated to other people's actions in patterns of behaviour that are not merely isolated events*
>
> Flood, 1999, p. 2

Organisational scholar and author Peter Senge contrasts systems thinking with reductive thinking. He suggests that we pay a hidden and enormous price for our tendency to make complex tasks and subjects more manageable by breaking them down into pieces, no longer seeing the consequences of our actions or our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole (Senge, 1992).

Systems thinking comes naturally

If these aspects of systems thinking seem familiar, there are good reasons why. In many ways systems thinking comes naturally to us as human beings. As a species we have been immersed in the natural systems of the planet and the universe for tens of thousands of years. Indigenous philosophies recognise the universe as an interconnected life system and emphasise reciprocal relationships with all things in the universe (Arabena, 2015). Furthermore, each one of us *is* a living system and we each engage with complex systems. Donella Meadows observes that through this contact

> *we have built up intuitively, without analysis, often without words, a practical understanding of how these systems work, and how to work with them.*
>
> Meadows, 2008, p.3

Systems thinking may come naturally to those trained in psychodrama, too, because it is well embedded in the psychodrama method. For example, psychodramatists learn to view the unique

personality of each person as a dynamic and developing system of roles. We learn to perceive emerging role relationships and sociometric choices in interpersonal and intergroup relations. We investigate the impacts of religious, educational, cultural, economic and political systems on the functioning of individuals and groups in all sorts of settings. We come to appreciate that life is interactive and emergent. We take a holistic viewpoint, notice interconnections, and appreciate creative possibilities over singular and fixed 'solutions'. In this sense systems thinking is familiar ground.

J.L. Moreno lived existentially and saw the world holistically, introducing a paradigm change in psychology and social science, according to American psychodramatist, John Nolte (2014). Moreno saw humankind as a social and organic unity, everyone connected with everyone else. During his lifetime several scientific disciplines were engaging with the holistic notion that everything is connected, replacing the prevailing idea of a mechanical, cause and effect universe. A systemic perspective flowed through Moreno's work. For example, meaningful social research incorporated the subject as a key researcher; the therapeutic effect of interactions with other group members (not just the group leader) was recognised; and group psychotherapy was understood to treat the group itself, not only the individuals within it (Nolte, 2014).

Moreno was not alone in adopting a systems view. Systems thinking gained prominence with the publication by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy of *The Theory of Open Systems in Physics and Biology* in 1950 and *General System Theory* in 1956. The latter took a meta view of phenomena across different scientific disciplines. Flood (1999) spotlights the work of several systems thinkers who have been influential in organisational development, including Stafford Beer's organisational cybernetics, Russell L. Ackoff's interactive planning, Peter B. Checkland's soft systems approach, C. West Churchman's critical systemic thinking and Jay Forrester 's systems dynamics popularised by Peter Senge. There are plenty of others in the 'who's who' of systems thinking, including the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) who significantly influenced a systems approach to family therapy (Carr, 2012) and the physicist Fritjof Capra (1982). I think we can conclude that the systems thinking of others likely influenced Moreno, and vice versa to some degree, and that the systems thinking field has expanded significantly since his time.

What gets in the way of systems thinking?

While systems thinking may come naturally, it can easily fall into the background. Systems thinking sits alongside, reinforces, contradicts, competes with and complements the other ways we have learned to see the world. These include the worldviews embedded in our cultural, religious and spiritual beliefs; political affiliations; fields of learning; and occupational specialisations, such as law, engineering, science, trades, education, and medicine. While an understanding of systems thinking has been developed by biologists and physicists, for example, science can also employ a mechanistic view. A mechanistic paradigm is said to derive from Newtonian physics and Descartes' view that the scientific method is the only valid approach to knowledge (Mink, Mink, Downes & Owen, 1994).

Donella Meadows observes

> *We have been taught to analyse, to use our rational ability, to trace direct paths from cause to effect, to look at things in small and understandable pieces, to solve problems by acting on or controlling the world around us.*
>
> What is more, she notes, *that training has become a source of much personal and societal power.*
>
> Meadows, 2008, p.3

There are also perceptual limits which can undermine our ability to see organisations holistically. Four forms of 'systems blindness' have been identified by Barry Oshry (1995). 'Temporal blindness' prevents us seeing the present in the context of the past (or the future). 'Spatial blindness' means we overlook the larger systems processes of which we are a part, seeing individuals within the system, but not the system as a whole. With 'relational blindness' we forget we exist in relationship with others and overlook our potential to create satisfying and productive partnerships. And when we suffer from 'process blindness', we overlook our own part in processes essential for the system's survival and development (Oshry,1995). In everyday organisational life, it seems, blind spots abound.

Systems complexity

An organisation has complex and dynamic relationships with its internal and external environment. As it takes initiatives and responds to events in its world, an organisation relies on feedback to

help maintain its current equilibrium and to adapt and grow. Initiatives may, or may not, achieve the intended outcomes, often producing unintended consequences as well. Quite a delay can occur between actions and impacts, leaving the impacts underestimated, overlooked or the action re-doubled on the assumption it didn't work the first time.

Nora Bateson (2023) describes how complexity makes such flow-on effects unknowable.

> *You do a thing, and then something happens so more things happen, mostly in ways that are impossible to track or correlate. The variables excite the other variables into incalculable storms of consequences, and consequences of consequences… It is no longer possible to count how many changes make other changes in how many contexts and directions.*
>
> *She invites us not to underestimate the recursive, looping, entangling, and always moving, conjoining processes that ecologies are.*
>
> Bateson, 2023, p. 9

Systems thinking, says Robert Louis Flood, is "a humble awakening to the realisation that really we don't know very much about anything and actually never will". Therefore, he suggests, that rather than struggling to 'manage over' things in organisations, we will manage within the unmanageable. Rather than 'organise the totality'

> *we will organise within the unorganisable. We will not simply know things, but we will know of the unknowable. Flood sees us living between mystery and mastery learning our way into the future.*
>
> Flood, 1999, pp. 192-193

In comprehending the complexity of systems, certainty and simplistic cause and effect narratives become insufficient. Life, and life in organisations, must be lived iteratively, noticing and attending to what is emerging, day to day. Flood suggests that the things we can really know about are local to us in time and place: those things we are immediately involved with and not very far into the future, or indeed the past (Flood, 1999). However, recognising the complexity of systems need not immobilise us or undermine our creativity. For, even in the thick of complexity there are characteristics and patterns we can look out for which will help us find our way.

What we pay attention to

I have been learning about and working to integrate systems thinking into my practice for a number of years. I have found that reference points about what to pay attention to are needed to stabilise and orient myself and others when making sense of complex systems.

In 2024 my colleague Bev Hosking and I conducted a training workshop in Aotearoa New Zealand called *Navigating Social Systems*. In that workshop we drew on two useful reference points: the Open Organisation Model developed by Oscar Mink and his colleagues; and patterns identified by Barry Oshry which he discovered were largely out of awareness. These are described in more detail below. As workshop participants explored their experiences of social systems in which they lived and worked, we tested out the relevance of these resources. On several occasions we found that lifting our sights from interpersonal tensions to dynamics at the organisational and inter-organisational level enriched our appreciation of what was going on and our assessment of what else was needed.

Healthy organisations

The Open Organisation Model (Mink, Mink, Downes & Owen, 1994) describes elements of organisational health. In describing an open organisation, the model highlights three characteristics – unity, internal responsiveness and external responsiveness – as normal states for healthy systems, large and small. These characteristics are present and take different forms at individual, group and organisational levels and are inherently inter-related (Mink et al., 1994).

1. Unity

A unified organisation is integrated into a coherent working whole. Effort goes into defining and achieving the organisation's purpose and goals, rather than into power struggles. Individuals experience self-worth and self-esteem; they know who they are and appreciate their own uniqueness. Groups show commitment to their purpose, goals and tasks. The organisation's purpose is refined and achieved through information sharing, open discourse, transformational learning and activities which create consensus (Mink et al., 1994).

> *At an organisation level, unity involves rallying around a purpose – vision, mission, key goals – aligning values, and clarifying the organisation's strategic needs.*
>
> Mink et al., 1994, p. 20

2. Internal responsiveness

People in an internally responsive organisation align with and work together towards a common purpose. They are aware of their own wants and needs and able to act on them. This awareness and sensitivity extends to the wants and needs of others in their group. Efforts are made to support one another, give useful feedback, and work to maintain good relationships. Each person is accountable for their own behaviour. Different parts of the organisation willingly respond to each other rather than operating as separate empires. They share information, products and services and learn together. Internal responsiveness is built through collaboration, rather than through the use of authority (Mink et al., 1994).

3. External responsiveness

There is an easy flow of information into and out of an externally responsive organisation. Products, services and systems are adapted to take account of changes in the social, economic and technical environment. Initiatives are taken with outside groups to communicate the organisation's purposes and needs. Information and support are gathered to assist in problem solving, decision making and the refinement of goals. The organisation anticipates change and prepares for it, making decisions before crises develop (Mink et al., 1994).

Individuals engage with others to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes,

> *reaching out, listening, responding, being open and searching for new frames of reference, new premises and transforming experiences.*
>
> Mink et al., 1994, p.19

> Externally responsive *groups learn together and constantly improve.*
>
> Mink et al., 1994, p.20

This model of organisational health may sound idealised. In my work, I see a number of organisations functioning well and some scrambling to do so under great pressure. It is easy to overlook everything an organisation is doing well when we focus on the aspects which trouble the participants. In my own personal experience I find customer service is sometimes exceptional, and at other times I feel held at bay by unresponsive organisations which

make direct contact with someone who works there very hard to achieve. In my assessment, the Open Organisation Model is reality-based and draws from the authors' practice wisdom. It describes what healthy organisations look like, providing useful criteria with which to consider the system's overall functioning. It offers a map which can be used to identify strengths, absences, preoccupations and areas for development.

Patterns outside awareness

There are patterns of functioning which people in organisations fall into repeatedly. They are out of awareness, arising in what Barry Oshry (1996) calls a 'dance of blind reflex'. Oshry draws from his practice over 30 years conducting immersive leadership development programs. This has included a program for executives, managers and workers to deepen their understanding of systems and their ability to work cooperatively with one another.

From this body of work Oshry highlights dynamics between people at different levels of the hierarchy; between peers; and with providers, such as suppliers of goods and services, and customers. He uses a shorthand of Tops, Middles, Bottoms, and so on, which I include here. In my view the persistence of hierarchies in organisational life makes the focus on job status relevant. It is likely that additional patterns arise in networked or collective organisations, although they are not addressed in this article. The patterns Oshry describes relate to responsibility, domination, differentiation, alienation, and group think.

1. Responsibility

Oshry has observed that people at the top of an organisation become increasingly responsible for the system, while people at the bottom become decreasingly responsible. The Tops fall into feeling burdened, and the Bottoms fall into feeling oppressed. Once aware of this dynamic, efforts to share responsibility more equitably can interrupt this dance (Oshry,1996).

At times two or more parties, Ends, with their separate, and sometimes conflicting agendas look to a common party, a Middle, to move their separate agendas ahead. This might be, for example, a middle manager caught in a conflict between their own staff and senior decision makers. In this dynamic Ends become decreasingly responsible for resolving their own concerns, while the Middle

becomes increasingly responsible for this. Resolution comes in getting the two ends into partnership around resolving their own issues (Oshry,1996).

Another dynamic emerges between the Provider and the Customer. As the provider becomes increasingly responsible for the delivery of the product or service, the customer becomes decreasingly responsible. This is relevant, for example, to contractors and consultants providing services to organisations. If they do not contract clearly to create a shared partnership with their client, delivery becomes the provider's job and entitlement becomes the customer's. Providers can end up being judged and customers end up being 'righteously done-to' (Oshry,1996).

2. Domination

The dance of the Dominant and the Dominated arises between groups who have historically been, or who are currently, over-represented and under-represented in the organisation and in decision making roles. Oshry depicts these dynamics in bald terms. The Dominated exist within the Dominant culture of the organisation; the Dominant's own culture is invisible to them; and they demean and trivialise the culture of the Dominated. The Dominated are faced with limited choices about whether to stay or go and how to be themselves in this environment (Oshry, 1996).

Having worked in the field of workplace diversity and inclusion for many years, and more recently on reconciliation with Australian organisations, this is familiar ground for me as a professional. In my view organisations vary greatly in how well they include and respect people of diverse occupations, genders and cultures, for example, yet I think few would want to be seen in the bald terms described above. Organisations committed to building respectful relationships and inter-cultural capabilities with staff and customers have come a long way. Yet organisations are embedded in wider social systems where overall change has been quite considerable, but is often slower, comes in bursts and has periods of regression. Social discourse is polarised in many countries right now, more closely matching Oshry's descriptions above.

Choosing to end this dance involves embracing the cultures of both the Dominant and the Dominated. Oshry observes that the Dominants will resist powerfully. They will wonder what the fuss is all about and be offended. Disruption of this familiar pattern brings the possibility of transformation into something new and unpredictable

(Oshry,1996). Acknowledgements, rituals, learning groups are all examples I have seen which replace this dance and generate new shared experiences and understandings.

3. Differentiation

At the senior level Tops have collective responsibility for the whole system. They divide this responsibility, each increasingly responsible for their own territory and decreasingly for the territory of others, and for the whole. Tops focus on what is good for their area more than the needs of the overall system. Instead of being in partnership with one another, Tops end up feeling they need to protect themselves from one another. Oshry calls this turf warfare: Tops get stuck on differentiation, become polarised and stereotype each other (Oshry,1996).

To illustrate, I recall working with senior leaders of sales and marketing as they grappled with this dynamic. The sales team was being rewarded for selling computers, 'boxes', and the marketing team were trying to sell something more customised and sophisticated, 'solutions'. The more sales rewarded their team for selling boxes, the more the marketing team felt undermined. Interventions needed to end this dance are efforts to maintain and strengthen commonality (Oshry,1996).

4. Alienation

Oshry identifies how those in the middle of a hierarchy can end up experiencing alienation. He sees Middles getting stuck on individuation, becoming a collection of independent 'I's, isolated from each other. They value their own team members over their peers. They lack a common sense of purpose and aren't interested in being together. Symptoms of this dynamic include competition and quick, surface level judgements of each other. Efforts to integrate this group won't just happen naturally. They include building a compelling mission; getting to know each other's personal interests and projects; regular information sharing and offering mutual support (Oshry,1996).

5. Groupthink

Groupthink arises in many situations, but Oshry locates it particularly with those at the bottom of an organisation. Bottom group members become a cohesive entity, falling into pressuring one another into

conformity or groupthink. They closely identify with one another on the basis of a common cause, purpose or identity. They draw clear boundaries between the We and all the others, Them. Members feel and exert on one another a pressure to maintain unity within the group (Oshry,1996)

The group develops a high and sometimes inflated sense of their own value in comparison to Them. There is pressure to conform and those who deviate too far may be exiled. Sometimes irreconcilable factions develop in the group, which split off and treat one another as Thems. To maintain their place in the group, some members hide their differences, going along with the group's views. Sometimes diverging members are kept in the group but ignored (Oshry,1996).

There is a shared belief that diverging views can't be tolerated – that they will destroy the We. However, another kind of strength comes from valuing different views, bringing richer and more widely satisfying results (Oshry,1996).

I find the systemic patterns identified by Oshry are particularly useful because they are observable in everyday experiences of organisational life. They throw light on visible human functioning, and they fall within our sphere of influence. They can be discussed, considered and recognised by organisational participants themselves and in conversation with their consultants, coaches and counsellors. This gives them an excellent practicality.

Systems archetypes

There are other patterns we may be equally unaware of in organisational functioning. Senge identified about twelve types of recurring patterns which he called 'systems archetypes'. Awareness of these archetypes can help us see opportunities for improvement, called points of leverage. Meadows (2008) identifies the points at which to intervene in a system and ranks them on their relative effectiveness. This provides a great resource for those managing change. The impact of these archetypes in the broader spheres of public policy, economics and politics has been described by Donella Meadows and David Peter Stroh. While further exploration is beyond the scope of this article, the systems archetypes are named here. They include: seeking the wrong goals; treating symptoms rather than causes; policy resistance; rule beating; escalation; limits to growth; eroding goals; success to the successful; and the tragedy of the commons (Senge, 1992; Meadows 2008; Stroh, 2015).

Capabilities

This article has addressed systemic thinking and patterns to pay attention to. The capabilities needed to complement this way of seeing organisational life have been touched on, such as collaboration and building partnerships. Several writers have elaborated on these capabilities further. Peter Senge described four disciplines which sit alongside systems thinking to anchor it in our patterns of working and in our relationships. They are personal mastery, knowing what mental models we are using (reflexivity), building a shared vision, and entering into dialogue in such a way that we can think together. In addition, Margaret Wheatley shows how a systemic perspective calls for major changes in how we understand leadership (Wheatley, 2006). Her view, put succinctly, is that leaders need to give up the illusion that they are in control of systems.

Conclusion

The complex and dynamic functioning of systems reminds us that life is mysterious. Systems have a life of their own and only some of it is knowable. We can become more familiar with the aspects which are local to us in time and place, particularly if we know what to pay attention to. Taking a systemic view can shed new light on what is happening in organisations. It can help us make sense of our experiences, re-engage with our purpose, refresh our connections and find ways to contribute more effectively together. Above all, a systems perspective invites us to take another look at what is happening and to stay openminded about the sense we are making of it.

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