

Making the invisible visible: Sociodrama and systemic thinking in practice

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In this article I describe an example of my work to show how sociodrama and systemic thinking shape my practice. I present key moments from the coaching process I used with a manager who was referred by another manager who had employed her. I start with the initial briefing and contracting phase and describe the work I did in the first coaching session, highlighting aspects of psychodramatic theory I am applying.

Particular moments are looked at through both a sociodramatic lens and from a systemic mindset. The sociodramatic lens shifts attention beyond the individual to the wider social system, to the roles, relationships and the forces that shape the individual. The systemic mindset keeps in mind the systemic notions that all parts of a system are interdependent, that change in one part inevitably ripples through the whole, and that change often occurs in complex and unpredictable ways.

Briefing and contracting

Senior managers in most organisations carry substantial workloads, face significant time pressures, and may not be interested in, or capable of, developing staff. As a result they may choose approaches that are familiar to them, readily available, or fashionable. So, when a senior manager refers a staff member to me for coaching, my first step is to establish a clear foundation for the work. While coaching can be valuable, it may not necessarily be what is needed.

I take time to explore the manager's situation. Thinking about the context in which they work and what is likely to be contributing

to the current predicament the manager is in, I take a broad systemic perspective in order to find out what's going on, what the purpose or desired outcome is, and why they think coaching might be appropriate. I want to know the people involved, the key roles and relationships, what the core issues are. This information helps me clarify the purpose of the work, make an assessment of the potential scope of the work, possible constraints, risks and benefits. I also want to find out what has been done before and how this might assist or conflict with my approach.

In this particular case, the contract for the work was negotiated with a senior manager, who I will call Carol. I received the following briefing from her.

Carol had recruited Lisa nine months earlier from outside the organisation. She appointed her based on her track record of leading successful major organisational changes. Although she had concerns about her management style and unrealistic expectations of staff working hours, Carol was keen on Lisa expanding her role functioning.

Carol had recently received an email from one of Lisa's staff. The email was carefully worded to avoid being described as a formal complaint however it conveyed the anger Lisa's team of ten direct reports had with her way of issuing orders and micro-managing. Carol's view of the situation was that this well-established team was not coping with the change in manager from the previous manager who was hands-off, to Lisa's more involved approach.

I proposed that the purpose of coaching Lisa would be to help her see how her approach affected the team, and for her to find more collaborative and productive ways of working with them. Carol accepted this proposal, and we agreed to have three sessions, followed by a review to consider progress and options. She was open to me leading a session with Lisa's team if I thought that would help.

Receiving a briefing from a third party provides a useful context for the work, however people in different positions in an organisation will have differing relationships and perspectives. Anthony Williams' (1991) concept of perceptual sociometry is relevant to this. In this initial contracting phase I don't want to be overly influenced by the referring manager's perspective. I want to meet the person being coached without preconceptions. I want to work with them to uncover and explore the system they are part of and get to know their experience firsthand.

Another central factor in this contracting phase is to clarify my terms for doing the work. While the contract for work was made with and funded by the referring manager, I clarify the need for safeguarding confidentiality as Lisa needs to feel free to reveal herself in our sessions. Nothing would be shared from our sessions unless I discovered information that indicated real threat of harm to the individual or organisation e.g. suicide, illegal or unethical actions.

Warming up to the work

As I prepare for the work, I focus on my own warm-up. Music and physical movement often assist me to connect with and sustain myself as a spontaneous and creative director. I picture the working space as a stage and arrange it accordingly while also imagining myself stepping into the roles of the director. I recall Max Clayton's encouragement to connect with my purpose. I bring to mind the people I will be working with, the wider system they are part of, and what their experience might be. This focus on my own warm-up fills me with curiosity and openness to whatever emerges, and the anxiety that I won't know what to do, falls away. By the time I met with Lisa, I felt fully engaged and open to possibilities.

What follows is a description of how our work unfolded including sociodramatic and systemic thinking that guided my choices.

Beginning the working relationship

At the scheduled time, Lisa arrived at my office and introduced herself. She was around fifty, impeccably presented, and businesslike. Quite taken with her confidence I moved quickly to outline the coaching process I used. I asked her to let me know something about her situation and what she was hoping to get from our coaching sessions.

She reflected on her career presenting herself as a leader with a well-defined vision and exceptionally high standards for herself and her team. She not only cared about how well the job was done, but also how people carried it out and presented themselves. Decision-makers valued her achievements, and over time she stepped into increasingly senior roles, moving between organisations when new opportunities arose. She spoke about her current team and her having to spend significant time checking their work to ensure it met her standards. She was matter of fact about removing individuals who did not meet expectations. She hoped the coaching process would assist her to achieve the high flying team she envisioned.

As she spoke I listened for more than the facts of her story. I used interviewing for a role and doubling to draw this out and to enhance her experience of herself. I noticed her self-assurance in the way she was expressing herself. I tuned in to my own response to her. She liked the roles I mirrored to her – the *gold standard service deliverer* conveying her dedication to her clients and the *knowledge keeper* showing her years of experience. During this early stage I focus primarily on establishing trust and strengthening connection. From my experience I knew building a mutual positive relationship is essential for the work ahead.

Mapping the work system

I am wired to think systemically. Growing up as the eldest of six sisters, I was constantly aware of how one person's mood, action, or absence rippled through the whole household. Later, as an avid reader, I found myself drawn to stories that revealed the interweaving of characters, events, and environments. These early experiences fostered in me a natural curiosity about how people and systems connect, adapt, and change. Systemic thinking has since become second nature and provides the lens through which I approach my work.

Sociodramatist Judith McMorland was, at one time, both my employer and mentor. I remember a weekend workshop where she set up an organisational system in the form of a restaurant, complete with staff, customers, and suppliers. To my surprise, the subgroups that emerged quickly lost sight of the importance of communicating with one another. Some clashed outright, while others operated in isolation, seemingly oblivious to the dramas unfolding across the whole system. That experience opened my eyes to the power of bringing systems to life: how subgroups interact, how easily blind spots arise, and how interventions can awaken awareness and generate fresh solutions. My training encouraged me to experiment with play and spontaneity, to remain attuned to the delicacy of the material we were working with, and to carefully gauge the robustness of each group.

Relating to the defining features of a system gives me a practical guide in my work. A system has a shared purpose, clear boundaries, takes in inputs, uses processes, and produces outputs. Because all parts are connected, a shift in one area inevitably affects the whole. A system's ability to adapt determines how relevant and effective it will be over time.

In this situation, Lisa's team is a system of people working

together towards a shared purpose. Each person has a role, and the way they interact shapes the team's overall performance. The team draws on resources and information as inputs, and uses processes like communication, collaboration, and decision-making to produce outputs such as decisions, services, or results. How well the team functions depend not only on individual capability but also on the quality of their connections, the clarity of roles, and how they respond to internal and external pressures.

I continued working with Lisa and, satisfied that she was adequately warmed up to me and the process, I suggested we map her work system.

Often organisational spaces are not conducive to working in action, so I have adapted the method making use of a whiteboard or tabletop as a substitute for the stage and whatever is at hand to concretise a situation. I typically warm the protagonist up to being a *participant observer* and when possible, invite them to take up or enact a role.

Using the whiteboard, I drew a circle in the centre for Lisa. I invited her to add the people she interacted with most. She began with her manager, adding a colleague, her team members and the leader of a productivity taskforce she was part of. As she spoke, I added each name to the map with their initials inside a circle and job titles above.

As Lisa described the people, she also commented on the nature and quality of the relationships revealing her perception of the sociometry in the system. The result was a map of the network of relationships highlighting which relationships were collegial, inspiring, supportive, difficult, frustrating and avoided.

We then mapped the pressures shaping these relationships, both external and internal. For example, for Lisa, external pressures included recent government legislation forcing a change to work practices for her team and rapidly changing client demands, and internal pressures were having to address on-going recruitment challenges and improve productivity.

I observed that she was a *quick analyst* and a *vigorous strategic thinker* which she liked hearing. I felt her warm more strongly to the process I was producing. I was pleased how collaborative we could be together. In my experience this quality of relationship deepens the client's readiness to explore and experiment with new approaches.

When the map was complete, I suggested that Lisa step back and get some distance on her situation. I invited her reflections, asking

her to comment on what she particularly noticed. With relief evident in her face and voice she noted the supportive and collegial relationships. Then, wrinkling her face and pursing her lips she pointed to her team and declared emphatically that things needed to change.

Deepening the warm up

I asked Lisa what recent situation with the team would be useful to look at. She recalled the last Monday morning team meeting with six of the team members. Two were on leave, one was seeing a client, and one had called in sick. As we mapped the six people present, Lisa described them as being consistently late, rude, poorly presented, and resistant to change. In the face of Lisa's criticism and negativity I started to feel despair, wondering whether anything new would be possible. I reminded myself to be curious about the picture she was painting.

I decided to expand the map of the system by bringing in the team's clients. To my surprise, Lisa reluctantly admitted that client feedback showed appreciation of the team's efforts to meet their needs. I felt my own spirits lift with this information, feeling a glimmer of hope that there was some progressive functioning in the system. From a systemic perspective this also is indicative of potential for change.

According to Lisa the time and resources the team took to meet client needs was not in line with the organisation's focus on productivity improvement and in some ways was against organisational policy.

Policy is a significant influence within a system as it usually contains the organisation's formal rules, standards and expected practices. Typically, people have varying relationships with policy, from those who tend to be very familiar with it, to those who pay no attention to it or find ways to get around it.

I could see that Lisa liked the clarity of rules and standards and proposed to her that she was a *rule upholder*. She agreed, adding that a couple of her team were *rule flouters* which really annoyed her. I sensed how draining it was for her having to keep watch for breaches. It took energy away from her focus on improvement.

Lisa agreed with my assessment that she was a *determined change maker*. I asked her to locate on the map we'd created where she experienced the most resistance to change. She identified three team members as *dogged tradition keepers*. She grimaced when I

asked her who was the strongest, pointing to Kerry, a long-standing employee who she found the most challenging.

Lisa explained that she had begun holding weekly one-on-one meetings to closely monitor Kerry's performance. Her tone suggested to me Lisa was taking a disciplinary rather than coaching approach. Their most recent meeting, held earlier that week, had clearly unsettled her. She described it as dreadful, admitting that she had lost her temper, raised her voice, and told him he had to do what she wanted. In response, Kerry had dug his heels in and accused her of bullying. Despite Kerry's significant experience in the team, his reportedly good rapport with clients, and difficulties recruiting new staff, Lisa made it clear to me that she would like him to leave.

Given that Lisa was well warmed up, I decided this was the perfect moment to explore further in the hope that she might gain new insights about the system and potentially expand her roles. I felt excited at what might emerge and had a sense that I needed to move slowly to maintain our mutuality and purpose. I decided to explore the interaction through concretisation and role reversal

Developing a broad perspective

I took two mugs from the shelf above my desk and placed them on the table between us. I invited Lisa to use the mugs to concretise herself and Kerry during the meeting. As she positioned them, I warmed her up to the particular time and place of the meeting. I asked her to sit and warm up to her feeling. She sat very upright, jaw clenched, a pen tightly grasped in her right hand. She turned Kerry's mug sideways saying that he had refused to look at her. Kerry's body was stiff, with his arms folded across his chest.

We moved to the moment she had lost her temper. Raising her voice she said, "This isn't good enough Kerry. You've had plenty of chances to do it right and you just keep failing to do what I want." At this moment I was thinking sociodramatically, relating to the forces she had already identified that affected her i.e. doing things to a high standard, finding fault, wanting to sort things out, and getting rid of problems. I asked her to bring out what she wasn't saying. "I'm thinking, why don't you just go and make room for someone who can do the job properly?" I then asked what she was feeling. "I'm angry and frustrated."

As Kerry, she expressed resentment and a determination to do what he believed was right and accused her of bullying. In this tense

situation Lisa's capacity to role reverse was limited. She found it difficult to work out what Kerry might have been thinking or feeling.

Thinking sociodramatically I aim for role reversal throughout a system. Doing this enables a person to get firsthand experience from someone else's perspective and from this can develop appreciation, understanding and insight.

I encouraged Lisa as a participant observer to examine the roles evoked in the interaction between these two people in the system. The mapping, concretisation and brief enactment have provided considerable information about the actions, feelings, and previously unspoken thoughts, revealing a clash of world views between Lisa and Kerry.

I pointed out the symmetrical nature of their functioning. Both driven by a need to control and not seeming to have much tolerance for difference and lashing out when confronted with it. To my astonishment and relief Lisa laughed, recognising herself as a *control freak*. Until now she hadn't seen this similarity between her and Kerry. We both relaxed a little. I knew we could do a bit more.

I invited Lisa to step back and consider Kerry's world in more detail. From a systemic perspective, tuning into his worldview was essential if she was to develop her relationships with team members and work towards their shared goals. Exploring Kerry's beliefs, values and the pressures he faced could assist her to see him in a broader frame.

Thinking systemically, means recognising that every system exists within, and is connected to, other systems. In this case, the team is a system within the wider organisation, and each person's role in the team expresses only a part of who they are. To expand Lisa's perspective, I encouraged her to build a picture of Kerry's day as a whole, what might have shaped his state of mind before their meeting, and what demands or challenges might follow afterwards.

I could see Lisa begin to soften, especially when she shared that Kerry had unsuccessfully applied for her job. She could relate to the failure and shame he must have experienced when she, the outsider, got the job he thought was his. She also acknowledged how much clients appreciated how he worked with them. I considered these to be valuable insights for building Lisa's capacity to reverse roles with Kerry and a beginning in her developing her approach as a team manager. By the end of the session both Lisa and I felt very satisfied with what we had done together. We looked forward to further sessions to focus more specifically on Lisa's role development.

In conclusion

From my initial briefing for the work and in the interventions with a client I am constantly thinking from a sociodramatic and systemic perspective. This enables clients to become aware of things that have previously been invisible to them and provides the foundation for new insights, role development and the potential for organisational or systemic change. Uncovering the roles, relationships, and wider forces at play in a work setting in this initial session brought to light Lisa's drive to control and find fault with her team members, and that this was also apparent as a trait shared within the team. Lisa gained a new appreciation of the experience of one particular staff member who she regarded as a problem. Through the experience of uncovering, exploring and experimenting with the systems that she was part of she was able to warm up again. Lisa was ready for change.

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