CHAPTER ONE

The complexity of client

Who is the client?

Many authors (e.g., Brunning, 2006; Cavanagh, 2006; De Haan, 2008; Huffington, 2006; Kahn, 2011; Kemp, 2008; Kets de Vries et al., 2007; Passmore, 2007) have established the theoretical and practical foundations for a relational approach to business coaching in which success derives from the quality of the coaching relationship and the degree to which it aligns with the sponsoring organisation. In this view, business coaching is an engagement of relatedness more so than any one particular method or skill.

Central to this relational perspective of business coaching is the fact that both the organisation and the individual being coached are clients. Business coaching has the challenge of "always having two clients to serve: the individual or team that they are directly engaging with, and the organisation that is employing them to do the work" (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2010, p. 204), and each may differ in their expectations of the coaching. Coaches therefore need to attend to both of these client requirements as well as the relationship between them at the same time. Huffington (2006) puts it that in business coaching "there is always an implicit external context in view, [which is] the organisation from which

the client comes, in which she or he works, and which pays for the coaching" (p. 41). She calls for business coaches to engage in *dual listening* to both "the individual in the organisation" and "the organisation in the individual" (ibid., p. 44), and Kahn (2011) concludes that "successful approaches to business coaching incorporate significant consideration of the relational dynamics between the triad of coach, individual client and organisation, and focus on the coaching relationship and its systemic interface with the business environment" (p. 194).

This systemic perspective of business coaching is eloquently captured in The Worldwide Association of Business Coaches' original definition of the practice: "A process of engaging in meaningful communication with individuals in businesses, organisations, institutions or governments, with the goal of promoting success at all levels of the organisation by affecting the actions of those individuals." (Worldwide Association of Business Coaches, 2007). The idea that business coaching's ultimate purpose is the promotion of success *of the organisation at all levels* through the individual being coached is important. Notice how it is the organisation's success that is highlighted specifically, not only that of the individual. And many others (e.g., Huffington, 2006; Kahn, 2011; Kilburg, 2007; Right Management, 2009; Stout-Rostron, 2009) describe the practice similarly, for example: "Executive coaching is defined as a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve *a mutually identified set of goals* [i.e., between organisation and individual] to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently, to *improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation* within a formally defined coaching agreement" (Kilburg, 2007, p. 28). Right Management (2009) simply puts it that business coaching "needs to be regarded not only as an individual event but also as an organisational process driving systemic change" (p. 13).

This means that in business coaching there resides a deep complexity in that both the individual being coached and the sanctioning organisation are framed equally as clients. This differentiates business coaching from life coaching and counselling in a significant way. In the latter, the individual enjoys primacy as the client, and although associated others may form part of systemic considerations, the promotion of their

success is at best secondary to that of the individual being coached or counselled. In business coaching, this is not the case. The primary goal is the success of the organisation and the individual's success is inherently tied to the organisation's success. It is not one over the other. In fact, if the individual were to enjoy success that has no benefit to the organisation or vice versa, the other party would feel the coaching has failed to add value and deliver a return on investment. Both must feel success has been achieved.

However, from a historical and theoretical perspective, coaching has drawn heavily from the human sciences, where the individual tends to enjoy primacy, such as in psychotherapy and counselling (Gold et al., 2010; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007; Passmore, 2007; Stout-Rostron, 2009). Business coaching's early influences came from psychology mainly because coaching formed part of the general practice of psychologists and psychologically trained human resource professionals who conducted what was referred to as workplace or developmental counselling, the forerunner to workplace coaching (AMA, 2008; Brock, 2008; Gold et al., 2010). Subsequent influence from adult learning theory, organisational theory, and management practices meant that coaching only later developed beyond a single source foundation in psychology and beyond its curative and remedial associations, into the realm of potential, growth, and workplace productivity (ibid.).

Today, business coaching is a widespread service industry, with a myriad of theoretical and practical influences, open to anyone with few, if any, barriers to entry. Nevertheless, the field of psychology remains the primary influence for the practice, as many coaching offerings tend to be effective conversions from established psychotherapeutic approaches with "a focus on transferring a single model from its therapy origins to coaching" (Passmore, 2007, p. 68). Stout-Rostron (2009) explains: "Coaching does not yet meet the requirements for a 'true profession.' It is here that psychology and psychotherapy research offer much insight into the complexity of human behaviour and organisational systems for the business coach" (pp. 21–22). She references Peltier (2001), adding that a range of psychotherapy phenomena positively correlate with coaching interventions such as "insight, awareness of the goal, self-examination, intra-personal understanding, talking about things …, rapport building, and special relationship feedback from an impartial party within a confidential relationship" (p. 24), and this means that

"the basic ingredients of the executive coaching relationship are based on a few common themes from the psychology literature" (ibid.).

Although extremely helpful, the formative influence of the human sciences, especially psychology, on the field of coaching presents important challenges for coaching in aligning its practice with the culture of business. Central to these challenges is the tendency for coaches to import the primacy of the individual, as opposed to the organisation, as the client, into the context of business. Seeing the individual as the primary client is an underlying assumption common to the culture of counselling and psychotherapy, with the possible exception of systemic family therapy (Becvar & Becvar, 1998). However, seeing the individual as primary over the group is foreign to the underlying practice of business.

When coaches import this "individual-centric" counselling notion into the workplace context, coaching can proceed with little dialogue with the organisation. In extreme cases, the individual being coached can be in session after session in the coaches' practice room (next to the quintessential pot plant, clock, and bookshelf—cultural icons of a counselling room) with only their fantasies about the business to work with, having not properly understood or aligned with business expectations or culture. When the individual is granted primary status over the organisation, the probability that business coaching will "promote success at all levels of the organisation" is significantly diminished. This is because, in such an arrangement, coaching occurs in a partial vacuum, standing outside of the organisational context, and ignoring the culture of business and the inherent complexity of client in business coaching practice.

This is not to say that the human sciences, especially psychology and counselling, are unhelpful to business coaches, on the contrary, they are critically important. First, they inform on human nature and behaviour and, second, provide a base of rich and deep theory and research from which coaching is able to draw and build. In many respects, it has been a true blessing that these fields preceded coaching and they continue to provide ongoing nourishment for understanding and progressing coaching practice. The point is that business coaching occurs within the culture of a marketplace not a counselling room or human science department, and thus business coaching should begin with business culture as the starting point informed by psychotherapy and other established fields, rather than the other way around (Kahn, 2011). What

is required is a significantly more complex orientation to this work than simply transferring therapy practices to a workplace context.

Understanding the duality of client

The departure point for effective business coaching should therefore begin with the inherent duality constellated between the individual being coached and the organisation sanctioning the service. Each has a set of expectations of the other, both interpret deliverables in their own way and both bring their history and memory to bear on their interactions. This duality continuously needs to be processed in the emergent coaching dialogue. The business coach's job is simultaneously to help both the individual and the organisation achieve greater success, where the value they receive from each other is maximised and/or transformed. In this view, what an individual says or does and what this elicits in the coach, as she or he listens and observes, needs to always have reference to the organisation, which is omnipresent and sometimes hidden (Huffington, 2006).

This "duality of client" may be understood through the concept of an organisational "role", where business coaching aims "to further the effectiveness of the client [individual] in his or her role in the organisation" (Huffington, 2006, p. 41). In this notion, a person enters into a contract with an organisation to occupy a role. The role requires the individual to perform tasks and in so doing add value to the business, in return the organisation provides reward. The reward is obviously financial but also non-financial in the form of recognition, job satisfaction and a sense of meaning and purpose. The term "role" also describes less visible forms of organisational relations that are important in the coaching context. Role is a psychosocial concept and exists in both overt and covert ways. Overt roles are part of the conscious organisation; these are negotiated and given labels, while covert roles are psychological in nature and constellated in the group dynamic common to organisational life. In line with this perspective, the role-consultancy approach (Armstrong, 2005; Newton et al., 2006) defines a role as "an idea or conception in the mind through which one manages oneself and one's behaviour in relation to the system in which one has position, so as to further its aims" (Roberts & Jarrett, 2006, p. 20).

For example, a person working in a bank may for instance fulfill the overt role of investment banker. This label carries with it a set of

tasks and responsibilities that are known and expected in relation to the activities of the overt organisation. The same person might also be the shoulder to cry on in the team or the one that challenges the status quo where others simply follow. These kinds of role boundaries are important phenomena because they demand time and energy from the individual and significantly impact the degree to which a person is able to exercise his or her talent in a given context (Struwig & Cilliers, 2012).

> Thus, a role is not merely *given* by the employing organisation; it is also *taken*—that is, the person in the role makes of it something personal, based on individual skills, ideals, beliefs, and their understanding of what is required. However, what one makes of the role is also influenced by the system, not only by tangible factors such as job descriptions, hierarchical position, and the resources one has access to, but also by other's expectations of the role and by the culture of the system. (Roberts & Jarrett, 2006, p. 20)

This means that the essential contract between a person and a company positions business coaching as a service that helps individuals take up overt roles and manage covert roles in the most effective way, thereby simultaneously promoting success for both them and their organisation. It is therefore useful to locate the focus point of business coaching at the *relational interface* constituted in an organisational role. This interface may be conceived of as an axis between the person being coached and his or her organisation, upon which rests the degree to which both the person and the organisation ultimately succeed or fail.

Figure 1 illustrates this *axial* notion, showing how business coaching is essentially a *relational engagement* focused on creating value by improving the relationship between the individual and his or her organisation. In this view, coaching interventions create relational bridges or *axes* between organisations and individuals which facilitate intersubjective story-making processes. These axes deliver value because they offer a unique place to co-create a shared success story; a story that emerges from a meeting of meaning between the individual and the organisation that is based in a sense of mutual responsibility for the business.

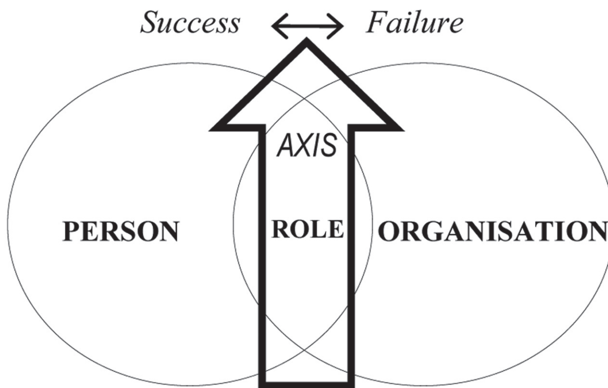

Figure 1. Coaching's *axial* orientation.
(Adapted from Brunning, 2006).

In this *axial* conception, the entire organisation is the client in as much a way as the individual being coached, and neither organisation (represented by manager, colleagues, stakeholders and customers) nor individual can be approached as completely separate entities. What is required is a way of working with all the parties in an interdependent web or matrix that is contemplated holistically without positioning one part as necessarily more important than another.

A philosophy that provides such a framework for business coaches can be found in the field of systems thinking and the remainder of this chapter offers an introduction to such with guidance for further learning.

Systems thinking

Systems thinking is not a single discipline but rather a gathering of a wide range of theories that share a set of underlying philosophical notions about reality. Systems thinking stretches from psychology and biology to engineering and ecology, and includes many theories that have been used to underpin services such as family therapy (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974), management consulting (e.g., Senge, 1990; Stapley, 2006) and coaching (e.g., Cavanagh, 2006; O'Neill, 2007). The field finds its origin in the study of biological systems. The biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy developed his general systems theory from the 1920s to the 1960s in an attempt to counteract the limitations of

reductionism in traditional science. Bertalanffy (1962, 1968) conceived the world as a whole and opposed atomistic or mechanical approaches to understanding. Thinking of this kind has been around since ancient times in Eastern philosophy (Allen et al., 2011), notably in the eternal Chinese text of the *Tao Te Ching* (Lao Tzu, 2002) and others such as the *Sun Tzu* or *Art of War* (Denma Translation Group, 2001), both written over two thousand years ago.

Simply put, a system "is a set of interacting units with relationships among them" and "in human systems these relations make the system self-organise into characteristic patterns of interaction" (Compernalle, 2007, p. 31). The whole system is different from the sum of its parts and a part of the system derives properties from the whole that it does not have in any other context (ibid., p. 32). Systems also compose subsystems as parts, and so, for example, a systemic view of an organisation allows us to zoom in and out to different levels of an organization, where each level is a subsystem of the next and suprasystem for the level below. As it says in the *Tao Te Ching*: "Man patterns himself on earth, earth patterns itself on heaven, heaven patterns itself on the Way, the Way patterns itself on nature" (Lao Tzu, Chapter Sixty-Two). To illustrate this, imagine zooming out from the biological level of the brain cell, to the brain, to the person, to the team, to the organisation, and then reversing the process by zooming back in (Compernalle, 2007). In systems thinking, "one is continually aware that different observations at each level lead to different theories, different hypotheses and different interventions" (ibid., p. 34).

Systems theory is seen to be particularly appropriate for any discipline that studies human interaction (Hanson, 1995). In systems thinking, the whole, in terms of the dynamic interplay of the parts, is the object of inquiry. When one sees in wholes, rather than in parts, patterns appear that simple linear cause-and-effect models of reality fail to reveal. A systemic view conceptualises the world in terms of "relational wholes", and "is an alternative to more reductionistic or mechanical models that encourage study through dissection, then reconstitution, as is traditional in classical biology and medicine" (ibid., p. 27).

In systems theory, the individual is therefore viewed as part of a whole, and the experience of the individual is inherently entangled with their relational field. As Stapley (2006) explains: "There is no such thing as 'just an individual' … From birth onwards, we are in a constant state of relatedness to various other individuals and groups" (p. 5). He adds that as children we are dependent on our mothers for our very survival and, on the other end, our mothers are deeply

affected by us as they respond to our physical and psychological needs. This process of mutual influence between mother and child is the basic building block of relationship and continues with other people throughout our lives. "We may helpfully describe relatedness as the process of mutual influence between individual and individual, between individual and group, group and group, and group and organisation. Beyond that, we might consider the relatedness of organisation and the wider society … the process of mutual influence between individuals is an on-going process that will have an effect on nearly everything we do" (p. 6).

To appreciate this relational notion of being, it might be useful to consider whether or not a person is capable of having a completely original thought? What would that be? If this thought was tested in terms of its origin it would, no doubt, be discovered that many other ideas heavily influenced its birth, and that these ideas arose through exposure to others views in the first place. In fact, what may be deemed to be original thought actually belongs to a combination of others views the "originator" has been in relationship with (virtual or real). As the famous advertising executive Leo Burnett once said: "The secret of all effective originality in advertising is not the creation of new and tricky words and pictures, but one of putting familiar words and pictures into new relationships" (Quotes & Poems.com, 2012). How do we know what we know? It turns out that everything we believe comes from others' influence. Even if we think the opposite to what we have been told, our belief is a reaction and therefore still in relationship with the original influence.

In systems theory, the idea that one exists as an individual outside of a system is thus untenable. "The self does not reside in the individual as a fixed entity but is co-created in the web of relationships between individuals and in the narratives created by the individual and by others about them" (Hawkins & Schwenk, 2010, pp. 204–205). In other words, individuals exist in a web of relatedness from conception to death and are never separate, or as Stacey (2001) puts it: "The human self-conscious mind is not an 'it' located and stored in an individual. Rather, individual mind arises continuously and transiently in relationships between people" (p. 5). In this sense, we cannot escape relatedness. "Even if, as adults, we sit alone in the isolation of our own homes contemplating some problem or issue, we are never alone in our minds. We are still linked to many others in a state of relatedness and this will have an effect on our contemplation" (Stapley, 2006, p. 7).

This means that one's experience of others is constituted in the context of the relationships one has in the world, and particularly the set of relationships most closely associated with others in that moment. For example in a corporation, "marketing may see human resources as bureaucratic and unhelpful. Should that be the case, then any relationship between representatives [individuals] of these departments is likely to be affected by the intergroup political system … Each may be attributed the stereotype attached to his or her department" (ibid., p. 85). As Wilfred Bion (1961) put it: "In fact no individual, however isolated in time and space, should be regarded as outside of a group or lacking in active manifestations of group psychology" (p. 169).

Systems' thinking offers coaching a framework that allows for the conception of the component parts of a system (organisation) to be understood in the context of relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation (Allen et al., 2011). In so doing, from a theoretical point of view, it comfortably manages the complexity of a dual client in business coaching practice.

Holism

Common to all systemic approaches is that systems are holistic. The term "holism" was coined in 1926 by Jan Christiaan Smuts, a South African and British Commonwealth statesman, military leader, philosopher, and forefather of the United Nations, who defined it as: "The tendency in nature to form wholes that are greater than the sum of the parts through creative evolution" (Smuts, 1926, p. 88). This fundamental systemic concept means that in order to understand a system "one must stand back from the level of the particular, and examine a system in terms of what is created when the parts interact" (Cavanagh, 2006, p. 316). For example, a person cannot be understood as a collection of functioning organ systems without losing the essence of what it means to be human. A person is more than the sum of their functioning parts (ibid.). As discussed earlier, in organisational life an individual usually occupies a role that commonly predates the entry of that individual into the organisation. A systemic perspective allows for a view of that role and the individual in a holistic way, seeing them in a state of relatedness in the context of all the relationships of the system—which include the organisation's set of relations and history and also all those of the individual.

It is also not possible to predict the behaviour of the system only with knowledge of its individual units because an understanding of the interactions, or the relationships between the units, is an essential component to appreciating the nature of the system (Compernalle, 2007). For example, one cannot tell whether or not two people will make a good couple based on prior knowledge about them as individuals, as we know, individually excellent people can make totally dysfunctional couples and vice versa because "the behaviour of couples and individuals is governed by totally different rules" (ibid., p. 31). This is naturally also true for groups and teams, "the functioning of an executive team cannot be predicted only on the basis of information and hypotheses about the individual executives. Again and again executives are hired who, when screened individually, seem excellent choices, but who do not function well in a particular team" (p. 32). Unfortunately, this commonly results in a perception that the executive is not competent in some way. The executive in question might complain that it is the team that is dysfunctional and not themselves and cite prior success in other teams or organisations as evidence. This dynamic of blame is the same as a romantic couple blaming each other for the dysfunction in their relationship and citing prior romantic successes with other partners as evidence for the apportionment of blame. Clearly, a system (couple or team) is unique by virtue of the interrelatedness of its parts (e.g., partners or team members) which come together in a particular time and context (e.g., marketplace or organisational reality, geography, or family setting) and set it apart from all other systems.

In other words, seeing a system as a whole, as opposed to as a sum of its parts, is the only way to fully appreciate it. As Peter Senge (1990) explains in his classic *The Fifth Discipline*, individuals can influence their organisations if they can "make a shift of mind from seeing parts to seeing wholes" (p. 69).

Circular causality

By seeing in wholes, a systemic approach avoids problematic "blame-game" dynamics typical in more linear cause–effect perspectives of organisational life, and in so doing provides for some liberation from remedial coaching orientations. Systems thinking "resists identifying a single element or person in a system as the root cause of a problem" (O'Neill, 2007, p. 49), and offers the principle of *circular* or *reciprocal*

causality (Hecker & Wetchler, 2003) as a means of appreciating cause. This principle views events as multicausal and reciprocal as opposed to *linear* (p. 49).

In other words, A does not simply cause B, but rather A and B are interrelated in a causal circle. For example, if a manager is described as disempowering and controlling by his staff, system thinkers will not accept this behaviour as causal on its own, they will want to understand the extent to which the interrelationship between the individuals gives rise to this behaviour. Perhaps they will find that staff are perceived by the manager as not fully competent or somewhat careless which in turn leads the manager to micromanage, which in turn results in staff not taking ownership of the tasks, which in turn results in poor task delivery, which in turn confirms the manager's original conceptions and reinforces the manager's controlling behaviour and so on, leading one to ask the question: Where is the original cause?

From a systemic perspective, a broader understanding of causality is possible which allows for solutions that are more sustainable and more likely to promote success for an organisation as a whole, but unfortunately as Senge (1990) says: "We tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved. Systems thinking … makes patterns clearer, and helps us see how to change them effectively" (p. 7). He asserts that real leverage lies in understanding dynamic complexity, not detailed complexity. "Reality is made up of circles, but we see straight lines. Herein lies the beginning of our limitation as systems thinkers" (pp. 72–73).

So the call to business coaches is to approach their work with systemic eyes and see past the simplistic lens of linear causality. Unfortunately, as Cavanagh (2006) points out, "as coaches we are often asked to treat system members as if they are isolated units. This is particularly true in situations involving remedial coaching. It is not unusual for individuals to be referred for coaching in the hope that they will be 'fixed' and that their negative impact on team or group performance might be alleviated" (p. 325). The idea that a single individual is responsible for a systems lack of performance is often based in simple linear cause–effect thinking which is analogous to the old tales of "cursed" men being made to walk the plank on old sailing ships to bring back the wind. This is why teams can sometimes blame their poor performance on the poorest performing member, or their leader, and push the organisation to eject them, only to find themselves repeatedly having to do the same several times before realising that

there is something systemic that they create together, as a team, that underpins their performance problems. Only once the team acknowledges a shared causal reality can it actually address the real business issues that are the source of its lacklustre. However, business coaches are often brought in to "deal with" the individual concerned before a systemic understanding is achieved, which, of course, is counterproductive for the business. Unfortunately, business coaches without a strong systemic orientation and influenced by the remedial culture of counselling and psychotherapy are prone to accepting a linear cause–effect contract without question.

This is not to say that a dysfunctional individual is never the cause of system problems, or for that matter that ejecting such a person from an organisation is not the right way to go. Sometimes replacing a poor leader with a good one is the most viable option for a system to address its failure to perform. Indeed, "individual actions within a system can have a significant impact, for good or ill, on the system as a whole" (Cavanagh, 2006, p. 325). Rather, it is important to understand why the system is failing or succeeding as a whole before assuming individual parts to be solely responsible.

To illustrate this using the previous example, irrespective of whether or not removal of a poor performer helps a team perform better, the team needs to understand and take responsibility for the extent to which it, as a system, creates conditions for poor performance that make it difficult for certain individuals to succeed. This will ensure that the next poor performer in the team does not experience the same attack, for if this occurs repeatedly the team may develop a culture in which it is not safe to "have a few bad days" which can result in dysfunctional overall team behaviour not conducive to productivity. Another example is when a company performs poorly and the board fires the CEO. In these cases, irrespective of whether or not it is actually necessary to change CEOs, the system needs to understand and own how it came to appoint such a leader in the first place and how it will not repeat the same again. It also needs to determine the veracity of the idea that the CEO was so powerful a figure as to have negatively impacted performance to such an extent or whether, once again, a person is being made to walk the plank to bring back the wind.

Unfortunately, the notion of a single person as the cause of a business wide problem or success can be reassuring for an organisation. This is because it gives people heroes and scapegoats and explains outcomes in a way that does not call for personal change on the part of

others (Cavanagh, 2006). "While locating causality in the individual may protect system members from having to face their complicity in the outcome, in the long run it fails to address problematic system patterns. Colluding with this avoidance serves to undermine the coaching engagement and weaken both the client and the organisation" (p. 326).

Homeostasis

The tendency of individuals in a system to resist change does not usually stem from a malicious or ignorant predisposition on the part of the person. Self-regulating systems have a powerful tendency to create environments that drive individuals within them to protect the status quo and perpetuate the existing systemic reality. Systems thinkers call this phenomenon *homeostasis* (Hecker & Wetchler, 2003) and define it as the tendency for all systems to sustain predictable patterns of interaction over time so as to maintain system equilibrium (stability) and survive.

Imagine if organisations did not strive to sustain predictable patterns of interaction inside of a rapidly changing marketplace? One day the company targets a certain type of customer and the next day they ignore them in favour of another kind of customer? One day an employee is required to sell items in a shop front as part of her role and the next day the same employee is required to write software for the IT department. One day payments are processed electronically and the next day manually. Such a degree of unpredictability would cause chaos, create instability and threaten the survival of the business. Predictability and replication within a system result in system strength and ultimately underpin sustainability. However, an organisation must also simultaneously be sensitive to change as the environment around it changes. What if the customer base no longer supported the company product due to changes in society, in this case it would indeed be necessary for the survival of the company to target a new type of customer. What if a competitor introduces a superior product or service? Failure to continually adjust to environmental change also threatens the survival of an organisation. Homeostasis is therefore the balancing act between staying stable through creating predictable and replicating patterns and at the same time continually changing to adapt to dynamic environmental conditions. This balancing act reflects the degree to which a system is closed or open to feedback from other systems. The more open, the

more receptive to feedback and adaptation, the more closed, the more resistant to feedback and therefore change.

Systems continually reestablish homeostasis, making repeated adjustments by interacting or communicating with each other through feedback. A simple example is the way a person maintains their balance whilst standing upright. This requires thousands of minor adjustments in muscles that counteract many environmental forces such as gravity, wind and obstacles. Other systems are also involved in this feedback process, for example the ear detects body position in relation to gravity. Patches of hair cells in the inner ear are attached to thousands of tiny spheres of calcium carbonate and are pulled downward by the force of gravity thereby providing the brain with feedback of any change in position such as a tilting of the head. The brain in turn instructs muscles to countermove accordingly and ensures balance is sustained (Schnupp et al., 2011). In this way, a continual process of feedback facilitates ongoing homeostasis.

However, it is important to understand that homeostasis is not synonymous with perfect health, functioning or comfort. Just because a system is homeostatic does not mean it is free from dysfunction, discomfort or pain. Figure 2 illustrates two physical homeostatic states of a person standing and maintaining balance. In both states,

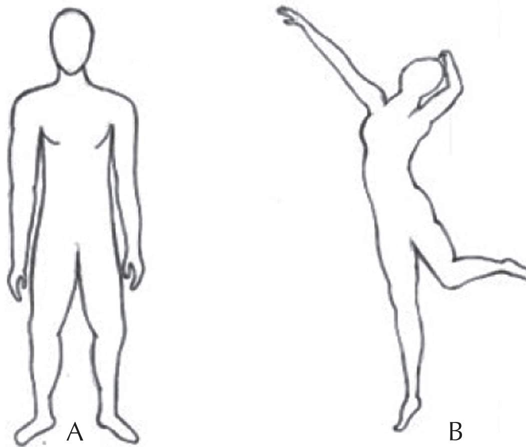

Figure 2. Posture's A and B.
(Images © K. Kahn).

the person is balancing, and many sub-systems are working together through feedback to maintain this balance. Posture A is comfortable and easier to maintain. Posture B is very difficult to maintain and strains the body, even though the dancer chooses and probably enjoys the position. Also, Posture A is a functional posture for everyday life, whereas Posture B is functional in the context of a dance but dysfunctional for everyday life. Repeated use of Posture B may result in physiological pain and dysfunction; nevertheless, the dancer may persist in using it and find ways to manage the biological suffering. Both physical postures reflect states of homeostasis. Posture B also illustrates that even when a system is experiencing pain or in a state of dysfunction, it may still work to sustain its current state and resist change.

There is a somewhat paradoxical reality to system homeostasis in that for a complex system to endure it must also adapt to a changing external environment. This is because the external environment is also a system—systems within systems—and feedback must also happen between the system in question and its supra-system. So in a sense, continuous adaptation to the supra-system may be seen as a form of on-going change for the system, but is itself another level of maintaining homeostasis.

For example, a business works hard to maintain consistent and predictable operations (as previously discussed), possibly mechanising or digitising them to ensure repeated accuracy and reliability in the way they communicate and interact with each other. This ensures a cost effective, reliable, and accurate service to the customer and in this sense is a form of homeostasis. However, when the market changes and competitors employ new and better technology, or a new generation of customer emerges that calls for new types of products or services, the operational homeostasis must change in order to service the new market differently. This type of homeostasis can be seen as a kind of second order change, sometimes referred to as *autopoiesis* (Maturana & Varela, 1987), in which a system repeatedly readjusts its internal homeostasis as necessary, reestablishing new boundaries to sustain itself within the suprasystem. “Firms can be regarded as *autopoietic* systems that continuously reproduce themselves … [through] continual learning and renewal in [a] changing business environment” (Maula, 2000, p. 157).

Valence

As previously discussed, business coaching is commonly employed to help an individual assume and manage overt and covert roles inside an organisation in the most successful way. From the individual's point of view, a systemic perspective enables the coach to work with the individual as part of the organisational system by facilitating awareness of the systemic roles that are at play in that person's relational field. The concept of *valence* is a powerful idea that coaches can use to understand this interplay.

The term *valence* was first used by the pioneer of social psychology, Kurt Lewin, in the 1930s. He offered the systemic equation: $B = f(P, E)$ (behaviour is a function of the person in his or her environment) and was one of the first psychologists to suggest that neither nature nor nurture drives behaviour, but that both interact in shaping human beings. Lewin wrote in 1931: "Only by the concrete whole which comprises the object and the situation, are vectors which determine the dynamics of the event defined" (in Sansone et al., 2003, p. 119). He used the term *valence* to refer to the intrinsic attraction (positive valence) or aversion (negative valence) of an event, object, or situation for a specific individual. For Lewin, valence "indicates that, for whatever reason, at the present time and for this specific individual, a tendency exists to act in direction toward this region [situation or object] or away from it" (Lewin, 1938, p. 88). In other words, valence is an unconscious predisposition or tendency for an individual to repeatedly choose to behave in particular ways when placed in provoking contexts.

The concept of valence was adopted by the influential British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1961) who focused his work on understanding group dynamics. He was particularly interested in the way human beings manage anxiety in organisational contexts. His theories fathered the field known today as systems psychodynamics that emerged from the group relations programme of the Tavistock Institute in London (Fraher, 2004). Systems psychodynamics is based on the Institute's innovative work in bringing together open systems thinking and psychodynamic perspectives to the study of group and organisational processes (ibid.). More recently, it is being applied in business coaching (Brunning, 2006; Cilliers, 2005; Cilliers & Terblanche, 2010; de Vries et al., 2007).

> Systems psychodynamic coaching is a multi-factorial, multi-layered process that primarily addresses itself to the person-in-the-role and the multiple organizational and social fields that comprise the context in which work with the client takes place … by virtue of working with and making links across person-role-system boundaries, this is a powerful, robust approach to the practice of executive coaching. (Brunning, 2006, pp. xxvii–xxviii)

In systems psychodynamics, Lewin's concept of valence is used to specifically refer to an individual's predisposition to reproduce particular patterns of behaviour in the form of roles in group contexts when presented with anxiety. For example, people tend to take up similar roles across different group contexts, where, for instance, they are regularly described as the "quiet one" or the "challenger" or the "mediator", and they can't help repeatedly and consistently repeating this behaviour in group after group. This is because they have valence for this role-based behaviour. One can say for example: "I have *valence* for taking up the role of a 'rescuer.' I often seem to be the first one to console or defend a group member in need and I do it without thinking, I just feel compelled." Such an individual is taking up the "rescuer role" despite themselves, so to speak, as a repeated and compulsive pattern of responding across group contexts in which they experience anxiety when they witness another member in a state of difficulty.

To help understand this, Bion (1961) explains that within every group there are two realities, the first is more conscious, metaphorically above the surface, which he called the *work group* and the second is more unconscious, metaphorically below the surface, which he called the *basic assumption group*. The work group is occupied with the primary task—the conscious and rational reason or aim of the group. In contrast, the basic assumption group is preoccupied with anxieties based on maladaptive assumptions about the group which are usually unconscious and interfere with the primary task the work group is trying to accomplish.

Bion (1961) identified three maladaptive basic assumptions: *dependency*, *fight–flight*, and *pairing*. He theorised that human beings tend to unconsciously adopt these basic assumptions in order to manage anxiety (basic assumption group), but this in turn tends to derail the group's primary work tasks (work group). He suggested that

interpretation of the underlying assumptions for the group would create insight for the members, who would then be more able to effectively focus on the primary task. He postulated that lack of awareness of the underlying assumptions in a group generate off-task or anti-task behaviour which is generally unproductive and sometimes destructive (Green & Molenkamp, 2005; Rioch, 1970). "In a group taken over by basic assumption mentality, the formation and continuance of the group becomes an end in itself … members … are likely to lose their ability to think and act effectively … as [they] become more absorbed with their relationship to the group than with their work task" (Stokes, 1994, p. 26). Bion (1961) explained his three basic assumptions as follows:

- *Dependency* refers to a dynamic where group members seek to attain security and protection from the group leader. In these contexts, members tend to be passive and idealise the leader as all-knowing or all-powerful, which ultimately sets the leader up for failure and the group for disappointment.
- *Fight–flight* refers to the underlying assumption that the group exists to ensure the preservation of its members at all costs. In these contexts, members believe that this is achieved by running away from, or fighting against, someone or something. Flight behaviour can be observed when the group members avoid the primary task through unproductive or disruptive behaviour, whereas fight behaviour often appears in the form of hostility and aggression where there is little tolerance for weakness. The leader in this group context is expected to inspire courage, self-sacrifice, and spearhead the metaphorical attack or retreat. In addition, the group often selects a scapegoat that becomes the object of attack.
- *Pairing* refers to the underlying assumption that the group exists to afford the opportunity for pairing between two of its members. Originally this was conceived as sexual for purposes of reproduction, but the theory was expanded to include more metaphorical applications and include same-sex pairs. Members tend to have a fantasy that a pair in the group will produce a member who will bring forth the realisation of all their projections and dreams. In the work context, this dynamic often manifests when "two individuals within a group are looked upon as the sole hope of creating a solution to the groups' problems" (Minahan & Hutton, 2004, p. 1).

Valence is then an individual's "propensity to take up a particular role in a group or *to adopt a particular basic assumption*" (Huffington et al., 2004, p. 229; italics added). From a business coaching point of view, it is therefore important to explore the degree to which individuals unconsciously participate in basic assumption mentality. In particular, an understanding of what they hold or contain for the group by virtue of their valence is seminal to promoting success for the organisation.

In summary, a systemically orientated business coaching dialogue explores the way the team or organisation "pulls" the individual, as a consequence of their valence, into roles (overt and covert) for the group (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004), thereby derailing or delaying the delivery of primary business tasks. When this becomes conscious in the dialogue, options for action arise that may return the individual (and the group) towards focusing on the work task rather than cycling in the unproductive dynamic of one or other underlying assumption. Adopting this view enables the promotion of success for an organisation by affecting the actions of individuals. For a coach to work like this, he or she is required to manage the inherent and complex duality of client, and adopt a systemic appreciation of the organisational context. This means that causality is seen as circular inside of a holistic appreciation of the environment within which an individual exists. This also ensures a relational orientation, where the primacy of the individual as client, something core to the practice of counselling and psychotherapy, is avoided in business coaching practice.