

DEVELOPING RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Resources for Developing Reflexive Organizational Practices

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Table of Contents

Preface	ix
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PART 1: RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Tools for Thinking

Chapter 1:	
Information, Context and Connectedness	15
Chapter 2:	
Leadership, Language and Appreciation.....	43
Chapter 3:	
Creating an Interventional Interviewing Model.....	61
Chapter 4:	
Managing Coordination and Reflexive Positioning	77

PART 2: RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Tools for Action

Chapter 5:	
Relational Coaching and Managing Conflict.....	107
Chapter 6:	
Teams and Groups—A Relational Perspective	153
Chapter 7:	
Value, Vision, and Strategy Process.....	193
Endings are New Beginnings	213
References	215
About the Authors	221

PREFACE

This book has two general purposes. First and foremost, we see it as an inspiration for leaders and managers who work with a relational approach to leading, using systemic-constructionist ideas in their leadership and organizational practice. To us, the authors, the book represents a journey through systemic and constructionist theories and practice that constantly generates new ideas and inspiration. Our ambition was to create a book that would invite readers on this journey. Therefore, we hope that leaders and consultants will be able to relate to the ideas presented and that the book will make a difference in their practice. However, we underline the fact that the book is intended to be a comma, not a full stop. It is part of an ongoing journey.

Moreover, we wanted to write a textbook for those who are interested in systemic and constructionist ideas and want further inspiration for their practice. These individuals could be participants at our master and leader programs as well as people we meet in connection with our daily work as organization consultants. By testing our ideas, discussions, and feedback, many of these managers (and consultants) have been very important contributors to the book. We believe that this book will give us the opportunity

to acknowledge this input and hopefully repay the contributors by giving them new inspiration for their practice.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is what you traditionally would call the theoretical part. Inspired by Peter Lang, we have chosen to call it Tools for Thinking. The choice of the term is based on the idea that any solid leadership practice is and should be intellectually rooted. We believe a manager or a leader without a theoretically sound basis is like a headless person. The leader can very easily end up running around aimlessly. Therefore, our ambition with the first part of the book is to give the reader a basis via an insight into our understanding and interpretation of a systemic-constructionist mindset, a relational approach to working as a leader and manager. The second half of the book contains a number of examples of how you, as a leader, can use the systemic and constructionist ideas in practice. In relation to the main metaphor, a theory without practice might be described as a head without a body to take action. The head may very well have many exciting ideas and thoughts; however, in practice, they are very difficult to transform into action. When theory and practice are mutual preconditions, the next question will be, “In which order is it appropriate to read the book?” We put forward only one answer: “In the order that makes most sense to you!” Some readers prefer to become familiar with the theory before focusing on the practical side; others prefer it the other way round; still others might prefer to flick back and forth through the pages, as the need arises. It might be a good idea to start with the preface (what you are doing right now), proceed to the table of

contents, and use it as inspiration for exploring the parts of the book that arouse the most interest.

The present edition is a revised version of the original Danish book, which was first published in 2005. So far, the book has sold 20,000 copies in Denmark, and we are very pleased to see an increasing population of professional peers who are becoming familiar with these ideas. The book was created in a close and intense collaboration among the authors. The first steps were taken during a sunny week in the south of France in May 2003, after which the book slowly but steadily took shape during the short breaks between the many exciting tasks to which the authors attended. As authors, we incessantly seek to express our thoughts and ideas in writing because this presents a good opportunity to assume the position of observer within our own consulting practice. For this reason, we are very interested in hearing readers' comments on the book. Does the book give rise to new, reflective, acknowledging, and inquisitive leadership practice? Send your comments directly to the authors at caho@macmannberg.dk.

We hope you will enjoy reading the book!

PART 1
RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP
Tools for Thinking

Chapter 1

INFORMATION, CONTEXT AND CONNECTEDNESS

The major purpose of this chapter is to give the reader a general introduction to the systemic and constructionist multiverse with a focus on those who are involved in helping people develop in an organizational context. This chapter further serves as a theoretical foundation for the subsequent more practice-centered part of the book where we describe how to use some of the theoretical ideas in practice. We introduce some basic systemic thoughts, starting off with the ideas formulated by Humberto Maturana (Maturana & Varela 1987; Maturana & Poerksen 2004). First, we seek to unfold Maturana's thoughts on human beings as autopoietic, self-referring closed systems and open communicating systems, and link these thoughts to an organizational context. Second, we will look at Maturana's domain theory and how all-human collaboration and communication can be seen from three co-existing domains, each focusing on different elements of organizational life.

In the following section, we will present information and communication as content and processes. Based on Bateson's (1972) definition of information as a difference that makes a

difference, we will take a closer look at information and communication—two focus areas that are very important to leaders. Furthermore, in this section we will link these areas of focus to the world of leadership and organizational development, and during this process, we will include the concept of exformation coined by Tor Noerretranders (Noerretranders 2000). Subsequently, we will look at three other concepts from systemic theory—circularity, neutrality, and context. Here Bateson and Maturana are important sources of inspiration. Additional inspiration is drawn from cybernetics by von Glasserfeld and Cecchin’s systemic family therapy (Tomm 1988; Cecchin et al. 1992). In the next part of the chapter, we will focus on language. Inspired by, among others, Wittgenstein, Dewey, Lang, Cronen, and Gergen, we will unfold the importance of language for the systemic and constructionist-inspired leader. As a part of the systemic and constructionist multiverse, we want to acknowledge the theory and/or philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Whitney 2000). We have chosen to look at the origin of AI in Cooperrider and Srivastva’s (1987) ground-breaking work and to expand AI thinking and practice by connecting them to some of the key ideas of systemic and constructionist theory (Hornstrup & Loehr-Petersen 2003A).

The penultimate part of the chapter maintains the linguistic focus. Here we will take a closer look at how leaders, with the use of different question types, can develop more effective coaching tools. Here we have drawn inspiration from another family therapist, Karl Tomm. Once again we have processed the inspiration and transferred it to an organizational context in close

collaboration with Tomm (Tomm 1988; Hornstrup, Tomm & Johansen 2009). In the final section of the chapter, we will present our suggestion for an understanding of relational leadership. In this case, the main source of inspiration is Harré's (1989) thoughts on positioning. By replacing the notion of leader-role to leader position and positioning, we invite leaders to see leadership as a reflective response to the many aspects of leading.

Autopoiesis: An Open/Closed Dilemma of Human Communication

An essential element of systemic and constructionist theory can be described by the Chilean neurobiologist, Humberto Maturana's, idea that human (social) systems are autopoietic (Maturana & Varela 1987). This concept is derived from his research on the link between the organization of living creatures, their nervous systems, and their surroundings. In Maturana's use of the word, autopoiesis means self-creation (auto = self and poise = create), referring to the fact that the human realization process always takes place in a circularly closed nervous system. All our communication with the world around us is actually activated by the internal communication of our senses, nerve paths, and perception apparatus, or our internal interpretation of the impulses we receive from our surroundings.

On the mental level, one could say that we always communicate and understand our surroundings via the internal images we create of the world we are part of and the people we socialize with (Loehr-Petersen & Madsen 2004). Maturana's theory is that we can never completely understand the outside world, and

that, via our own structure of meaning, we communicatively link ourselves to the external world (Maturana 2002). The ability to create a communicative link between one's own structures of meaning and the external world becomes a fundamental condition of existence for all living systems. Maturana's work "*...is an invitation to refrain from the habit of falling into the temptation of certainty.*" (Maturana & Poerksen 2004).

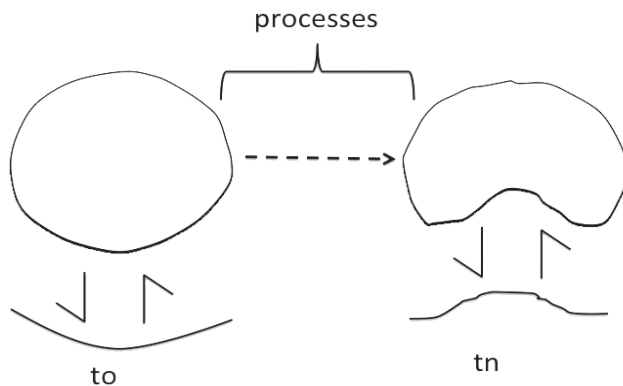
However, our mental structures of attitudes and meanings do not constitute a static or stable condition. Through interaction with the external world, the autopoietic system is constantly being influenced and developed. This means that, on the one hand, we are closed off to outside information while, on the other hand, we take part in a constant communicative exchange with the very same surroundings through internal adjustments of these structures of meaning (Opcit.). In the words of social constructionist Kenneth Gergen, you can choose to understand these structures of meaning as the human self-narrative, a linguistic construction co-created in the many different relations in which we engage (Gergen 1994). This means that our identity is in constant motion and development due to the influence and information we choose to receive from the surrounding system—a lifelong social dialogical process.

The identity we show others changes over time and from context to context. Another way of putting it is that we are created or shaped in collaboration with the system of which we are a part. Keeping in mind Maturana's thoughts, people can be described as organizations in constant motion (Schilling 2000). This perception of identity makes a decisive departure from the

traditional perception that human beings have only one identity. Instead, human beings have an ongoing potential or opportunity to use many different self-narratives in any relation. In other words, the self-narrative or identity is co-created in the relations that the human being is a part of at any given time: *“We behave, think and feel different depending on whom we are with, what we are doing, and why.”* (Gergen 1999: 25).

A key element in understanding the communicative and self-reflective system is that when we observe the world or the social system we are part of, we ourselves will always be part of the observation. Our understanding and our views are formed on the basis of the observations we make from a certain position: *“... as an autopoietic system, observing autopoietic systems, [we] cannot avoid gaining information about [ourselves].”* (Luhmann 1995:12).

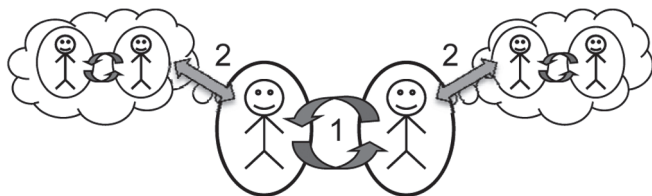
Figure 1.1. Maturana’s Illustration of Autopoiesis



In Figure 1.1, you can see Maturana’s own illustration of autopoiesis, and in Figure 1.2, we have reproduced Maturana’s

illustration in a human version. The autopoietic system (the circle) is structurally and communicatively linked (the lines/angles) to its surroundings (the curve). In Figure 1.2, we have illustrated our interpretation of autopoiesis in a human organizational context. First, Figure 1.2 illustrates that we each find ourselves in our own closed system and that we create our own image of the person with whom we are communicating. Second, Figure 1.2 illustrates that the communication we normally think of as an exchange between the two (arrows 1) actually, in most cases by far, is an internal communication or impulse and information processing that goes on within the two individual systems (arrows 2).

Figure 1.2. Our Interpretation of Autopoiesis



This view of the nature of communication presents the leader with some fundamental challenges. Often one of the central elements of being a leader is managing and developing the organization of which he or she is a part. In connection with such processes of development and change, it is quite common to hear about resistance against change from the employees. Keeping in mind Maturana's thoughts that living systems act on the basis of their own logic, it is understandable that the employees involved do not always subscribe to the management's image and understanding of the process of change. They can initially only see the case from

their own position. In this sense, the need for change can be seen and understood from two different positions. A constructive link between the views of the management and the employees can only be established if both sides are invited to actively co-create and co-interpret the purpose of the changes: *“If everyone is engaging in active co-creating of meaning.”* (Lang 2002).

An important point is that there are just as many valid descriptions of what is right as there are people involved in the situation. Everyone gives their suggestion on the basis of their autopoietic understanding, and in principle all understandings have the same value. In this context, Maturana has become famous for having said, *“Everything said is said by an observer to another observer—who might be himself or another observer.”* (Maturana & Varela 1987). This observer sees and applies meaning to what is observed on the basis of his or her own understanding. Any other observer would have his or her own understanding, which means that we must put objectivity into parenthesis (Maturana & Varela 1987). Studies of the human nervous system have, among other things, shown that the nervous system does not depict an objectively real world. On the contrary, our own senses construct the reality we experience.

Maturana (2002) speaks about a creative ontology. What the human being sees is an expression of choice and therefore, also an expression of the individual human being’s structure of meaning (Varela 1979). Furthermore, this entails that you no longer can speak about one reality, but a multitude of realities that are all equally valid. Maturana describes this as a transition from the idea of a universe to the idea of a multiverse. Therefore, inspired

by Maturana, one could say that everyone does his/her best on the basis of his/her own perspective and on the basis of his/her understanding of a given context. An important precondition for being able to influence or change a person or an organization is that we appreciate and respect the person or organization, and that from there, via our interventions, we co-create new perspectives.

Information: A Difference that Makes a Difference

Based on a variety of studies in different professional fields such as anthropological studies (tribal societies in New Guinea), zoological studies (dolphins), and working with mental health issues (mental hospitals), Bateson developed his rather complex theories of people-in-conversations-in-context.

As we previously noted, one of the important parts of Bateson's writings is his definition of information: "*Information is a difference that makes a difference.*" (Bateson 1972: 315). By viewing information as a difference that makes a difference, Bateson moves the focus from what we talk about to the way we choose to talk about it; he shifts the focus to meta-communication or the message about the message. This means that if we want to bring information, knowledge, or experiences from one person to another, it is important to be aware of both concepts that we want the other to learn: the content and the way we communicate our knowledge. In this light, establishing meaningful links between individuals and groups is an important precondition for meaningful communication.

Only by communicating (how we say it) and conveying information (what we want the other to hear or learn) in a way that

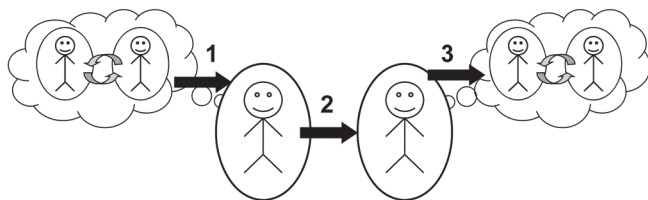
the receiver finds useful can we coordinate understandings and thus coordinate our actions. Inspired by Bateson, we see meta-communication as a very important factor in creating meaningful communicative connections. Instead of only focusing on the content of the message itself (i.e., what we are trying to convey), we focus on the way we communicate and the relations we create that influence whether the receiver will be able to understand the information. Thus, it is the context of the dialogue or information process (or meta-communication) that becomes decisive (word choice) for the receiver to understand the message.

Creating a link between Maturana's ideas on communicating autopoietic systems and Bateson's definition of information as meta-communication, the concept of exformation can be useful. Exformation refers to all the things we normally perceive as information, such as written, spoken, and nonverbal, as well as covering our knowledge, thoughts, and motives behind what we say, do, or write. In this sense, exformation can be defined as the sum of external influences such as writing, speech, and sensory perception, and the underlying thoughts and ideas of the sender/senders. From the viewpoint of the receiver, all of this is only potential information. What becomes actual useful information is what the receiver hears, sees, and in what he or she can find connections or relations. If we use the illustration from the description of autopoiesis, the different concepts can be summed up as follows: In Figure 1.3, we illustrate that the sender has a number of thoughts and ideas (arrow 1) that are converted into writing and/or speech and communicated to the receiver (arrow 2). This is what we call exformation. The receiver connects with

the message and interprets/creates his or her own understanding on the basis of personal experience and premises (arrow 3). This is what becomes information. The sender's personal preferences and his or her form of communication influence the way in which the receiver receives/interprets the message. In addition to this, the medium (e.g., oral, written, etc.) and context as well as the receiver's personal preferences are also important factors.

Based on this line of thought, we can redefine the term information society and call it exformation society, which is probably a more precise definition of the actual communication processes. In society, there is a great amount of exformation or potential information; nevertheless, only a fraction of it becomes actual information. In step with the increasing availability of all imaginable types of exformation, Bateson's focus on meta-communication (that which turns exformation into information) is becoming more and more relevant.

Figure 1.3. Autopoiesis, Exformation, and Information



This way of understanding information and information processes is a very decisive break with the traditional perception of information, a break that presents the leader with a number of communicative challenges. First, this means that when we communicate with other people, we actually communicate with our own image of these people. This is expressed in, among

other things, a frequently used sentence: I know what you mean. The implied meaning is that I understand or think the same as you. This apparent pre-understanding often has the effect that we disconnect, stop our curiosity, and carry on in our own autopoeitic world. Second, in a systemic-constructionist perspective, language is not a medium through which humans can reflect or pass along objective descriptions of reality. A leader's words or actions are, in other words, not controllable stimuli that evoke specific reactions from the employees.

The language the leader uses can be seen as a light, as it illuminates what we talk about and leaves other issues in the shadows or in the dark (Gergen 1994). In managerial and organizational communication and change processes, the challenge is to maintain an appreciative and curious state of mind. In a systemic-constructionist perspective, our coordinated views of what is real or not are what we call a social construction. It becomes something when we name it as such and when we agree upon it using our social conventions (Gergen 1994). Only through living dialogues can we create coordinated images and coordinated actions; we must keep the co-coordinated images alive through an ongoing communication processes. In other words: *"All those who think that their ideas are true in an absolute sense make a fundamental mistake—they confuse believing and knowing."* (Maturana & Poerksen 2004: 121) or in the words of Kenneth Gergen: *"...claiming the truth is like frozen language."* (Gergen 2009: 19).

In many organizations, information processes are still a source of astonishment and frustration. How do you make sure that managers and employees have the information they need to

do their tasks? Most organizations regularly examine their internal and external communication and information processes, among other things, via questionnaires and different types of interviews. Let us look at an example: In an organization where annual working-climate analyses were conducted, the information given to the employees was an important part of the analysis. Despite a very large effort from the managers, the question about how satisfied the employees were with the information level from the managers, for the third year in a row, scored the lowest on the satisfaction index among the employees. The question was, “Do you think that the information level in the company is satisfactory?” The employees used a scale from 1 (very unsatisfactory) to 5 (very satisfactory) to answer the question.

During those three years, the management had, among other things, gone from monthly newsletters to a monthly newspaper; had introduced brief weekly newsletters; had put up a large number of information boards; and had introduced a number of information meetings. Nevertheless, the level of satisfaction among the employees had not risen; actually it had gone down slightly. During the entire process, the management’s efforts had been based on the hypothesis that the employees wanted more information. Thus the question they had asked themselves was: What information do the employees want? In connection with yet another revision of the information strategy, the management was faced with a new and different question: What is the objective of the company’s information and communication strategy?

Instead of focusing on the information itself, the focus was directed at the context of the information. After a long

discussion, the management agreed that the most important purpose of the information processes was to ensure that everyone had all the information necessary to ensure that the day-to-day activities could run smoothly, and subsequently, that everyone had the opportunity to get broad insight into how the company was doing. The conclusion of the discussion was that the purpose of the study was to examine whether everyone had the information necessary to do his or her tasks. Afterwards the question to the employees was, “Do you know where you can find the information necessary to do your tasks?” In addition to this, the information meetings were re-named information and question meetings. The purpose of these meetings was to adjust the information stream to two conditions:

1. The information the employees wanted to receive.
2. The information the management found necessary for the employees.

The example underlines some important points of a systemic-constructionist understanding of information. You cannot inform others, especially not by over-exforming them! However, by choosing a more focused way of informing people and activating the receiver, the chances for a successful information process increase. Here it is important to pay attention to the context, the framework, and the purpose of the information process, the language used, and the content of the information. If we do not know what we want, we will end up like Alice in Wonderland when she asked the cat which way she should choose:

The cat: *“That depends a good deal on where you want to go.”*

Alice: *“I don’t much care where.”*

The cat: *“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.”*

(From Carroll 1928).

In addition to on going attention to the content and context of the information and a constant curiosity related to the effect of these processes, understanding the circular nature of the communication process is an important element.

Circularity: Creating Patterns of Connectedness

In Maturana’s work with autopoiesis, Gergen’s work on relational psychology, and Bateson’s work on information, the relations between actions and persons are perceived as being circular. In practice, this means first and foremost, we have to focus on finding patterns and connections instead of looking for linear cause-and-effect chains. *“All our actions should be seen and understood as a part of a system of actions and relations. Our interpretation of a given action is thus influenced by what we actually say and do as well as by previous experience and our interpretation of the motive of the person speaking or taking action. The person who is speaking or taking action does not do so solely based on personal premises; a person also speaks and acts on the basis of expectations as to how a given statement or action will be received and interpreted by the receiver.”* (Hornstrup 2001: 131).

In his definition of information as the difference that makes a difference, Bateson draws on physicist Heinz von Foerster’s thoughts on second-order cybernetics (von Foerster 1984). Cybernetics means *“the science of regulating and controlling systems.”* (Oelgaard 1991:31). One of von Foerster’s important points is that it is impossible to observe a system without simultaneously

affecting the system you are observing. Maturana expands on this by pointing out that any observation includes self-observation. The observer will always use his or her own senses to observe; in the process of understanding what he or she has observed, prior experiences of the observer will affect the outcome (Maturana 2002). Therefore the observer must be included in the focus of the observation (Bateson 1972). This view is similar to Niels Bohr's thoughts from the world of physics that any measurement will affect the object being measured and thereby the result of the measurement. Working with and in organizations, the point is that just by observing a system you affect the system. This is not a new idea. In the classic "Hawthorne experiments" it became obvious that if the workers at a conveyor belt were the focus of attention, it had a positive effect on productivity even in connection with changes that, objectively speaking, had a negative effect on work conditions such as dimming the lights (Bakke & Fivesdal 2002). This research exemplified the notion of second-order cybernetics.

Cybernetic theory can be divided into two levels:

1. First-order cybernetics is the traditional perception that a system can be observed and thereby described independently by the system or person observing it. Therefore, the primary focus of first-order cybernetics is on the system being observed.
2. In second-order cybernetics, focus is directed at the observing system *and* the observer. With cybernetics as the basis, Bateson describes the connections between actions and persons as circular. This is a departure from the traditional linear causal understanding that characterizes our western culture.

By linear we mean that we perceive a series of occurrences as a chain of causes and effects. The cause is what comes first, and the effect is what follows. The difference between a linear and circular understanding is most easily explained by an example: A manager asks a group of employees to solve a task together. The employees receive brief instructions and get started on the assignment. An hour later the manager returns and asks how things are going. The group has not started because the individual members have understood the assignment differently. They need more information from the manager. The manager gets angry and tells them off for not being a little creative and finding a solution. From a linear school of thought, the case can be construed like this: The manager blames the employees for not completing the task they were given.

The employees think that it is the manager's fault; he has not given them sufficient information to solve the assignment. If we look at the chain of events, both versions of the incident are true because they have chosen to each focus on their part of the chain. The manager looks at parts two and three; the employees have not done anything and therefore he tells them off. The employees, on the other hand, look at parts one and two; the manager has given them an assignment without sufficient information, and therefore they cannot do anything. Such a linear perception of the sequence of events can easily lead to an escalating conflict where each party sticks to its version, while both parties are right from their own choice of perspective.

On the other hand, we can look at the course of events from a circular point of view. By seeing the events from both per-

spectives, we get the opportunity for a coordinated understanding. From a circular perspective of thought, we can expand the sequence further. The way the manager formulates the task and his choice of which information to give the employees are based on the manager's accumulated experience from similar situations and not just the specific situation. He knows his employees and may have been in the same situation previously. Moreover, the manager knows his or her profession and how to accomplish the task. Based on these premises, he chooses to give a certain amount of information to the employees, while withholding other pieces of information. The employees may have previous experience working under this manager or other managers, and they too have knowledge of the profession. Therefore, they expect that there is a correct manner of solving the assignment. Because they fail to agree on the approach, they do what they believe to be the only right thing—they wait until the manager comes back.

The example illustrates that the way we understand a given amount of information does not depend exclusively on the specific situation. Our previous experience with similar assignments or situations has great influence on what we understand. Therefore, the systemic-constructionist practitioner is "*Searching for the pattern of relations, thoughts, and actions that all involved parties contribute to and thus are jointly responsible for.*" (Gottlieb & Hornstrup 1998: 34).

The challenge is that we all, including the observer, are part of the system of understanding which we are trying to describe. In relation to leadership, both the linear and circular ways of understanding are important. The linear understanding helps us gather

knowledge and data related to the task that is going to be initiated. Therefore, examining facts is based on a linear assumption and first-order cybernetics. The result of the research should illustrate the objective circumstances surrounding the task in relation to circumstances such as:

- How much time is set aside for the task?
- Which resources do we have at our disposal?
- Who is going to do the task?

The circular understanding focuses on relations, formation of opinion, and curiosity. Together the linear and circular approaches present us with the opportunity to create a connection between linear and objective circumstances such as resources and the circular communicative process. When viewing systems based on a circular understanding, the need arises to look closer at the traditional perception of neutrality and the possibility for a neutral managerial position.

Neutrality as an Invitation to Curiosity

When we look at the concept of neutrality as traditionally understood, the leader is seen as a third party, who, without bias, can assess a given case and give a neutral description of its various elements and, on this basis, present an appropriate solution. From a systemic-constructionist view, a neutral third-party position is not possible. The way in which we interpret what we see will always be based on our own conception, and, regardless of how much we try, what we know, think, and feel will influence what we see. Inspired by the Italian family [therapy] group in Milan, one can describe systemic neutrality as: "... *creating curiosity*

within the therapist (read: leader). Curiosity leads to exploring and inventing alternative points of view and actions, and, vice versa, different actions and points of view give rise to curiosity.” (Cecchin 1987: 2). Therefore, an important task for the systemic-constructionist practitioner is to work with neutrality based on the knowledge that personal ideas and attitudes influence what we see and do. One might say that, if you are going to help an employee move ahead, you must first meet him or her where he or she is and it is the employee who decides whether he or she has been met. *“Curiosity is the driving force of any study. If curiosity ceases, neutrality disappears.”* (Hornstrup 2001: 130).

Peter Lang clarifies Cecchin’s position by adding that the systemic neutral position, in addition to curiosity, also calls for involvement. The purpose of showing curiosity and involvement is to make the employee feel that he or she is being seen and understood on his or her own premises. *“The individual employee experiences that the leader is on his side without, at the same time, being against others.”* (Lang 2002).

One could say that it is the leader’s task to create a safe context for a free exchange of views and ideas. In continuation of this understanding of neutrality, it is easy to view the leader’s role as that of an active helper. It is the leader’s role to meet the employee where the employee is and thereby facilitate the creation of a coordinated understanding. The dilemma is that this understanding, when it arises, can also render the leader blind to other sides of the story.

Because the task of a systemic-constructionist inspired leader is to create reflection and development, a position of curiosity and

understanding is not adequate. Therefore, Cecchin expands the understanding of curiosity to include: “... *that which uncovers the structure of the system and paves the way for new alternatives and other angles on the problem.*” (Cecchin 1987: 2). In this sense, the leader’s task is to interact with the employees in order to create an interruption. This disruption presents the opportunity to see new connections and patterns and thereby new understandings of the context of the problem, which in turn gives rise to new options in the future. According to Cecchin, there are several possibilities for creating interruptions. One possibility would be to use circular questions in order to generate new hypotheses, ideas, understandings, and stories pertaining to the system and thereby to maintain the curiosity. “*The technique of asking circular questions is used to develop, refine, and reject hypotheses about the system, which is part of constructing a context of curiosity and neutrality.*” (Cecchin et al. 1992: 9). In the previous example, a circular question might be to ask the employees, “What do you think the manager thinks when he returns to find that you have not completed the task he set for you?”

At the same time, it is important that, as a leader, one continuously tries to be aware of the assumptions behind one’s personal actions and those of others as these assumptions create the perceived reality. They also establish premises for the future development of other realities and constructions (Schilling 2000). In relation to the task of creating interruptions, Cecchin also introduces the concept of irreverence (Cecchin et al. 1992). Irreverence should be understood as an invitation to challenge the different stories or grand narratives of individuals and the organization,

and look for other stories than the ones that have been told and retold, or the obvious ones. It is an invitation to de-construct the old stories and re- or co-construct new stories, which allow new understandings to arise (Gergen 2009).

A new example: A leader was supposed to coach a team that often got stuck under pressure. The leader as well as the team described it in this way: “The team works very well when it is business as usual; i.e., when the situation is relatively calm. However, when something unexpected turns up, or when somebody doesn’t show up, we become stressed, and all hell breaks loose.” At the first meeting with the team, the leader opened by examining and clarifying a couple of situations in which problems had arisen. The conclusion was, “We look after ourselves instead of helping each other as we usually do.” Subsequently, the leader asked the team to imagine a similar situation in the future when a colleague would be absent and asked them, “Which specific things from the two problematic situations we just spoke about are important that you also could do in future situations?” Initially, the dialogue was slow, and the problems were the easiest thing to spot. Yet, as the leader insisted that they look for the things that had worked, more and more ideas surfaced. Gradually it became easier, and they mapped out a number of circumstances that had worked well in previous problematic situations. Afterwards, they discussed what should be handled differently—either developed or phased out—so the group would be better at handling similar situations in the future.

The conclusion of the interview was that by far most of what they were doing in pressured situations should not be changed.

In general they were good at redistributing the tasks, so the most important steps were taken. There were just a few areas where adjustment was needed, mainly allotting more time for the meetings in which the team was to exchange experience and knowledge, as opposed to the previous practice of tending to cut these meetings very short or entirely leaving them out. During the process of being met where they were and mapping out the problems together, the team experienced a coordinated context. This coordinated context created security and trust: “You understand that we have a hard time in those situations. Trust was important because it gave us the opportunity to see situations from other perspectives and look at the elements that were working.”

In conclusion, one could say that by starting off being neutral and irreverent, by understanding the team and meeting them where they were, a context was created where it was possible for them to leave behind the deadlocked stress stories and investigate other elements of the experiences.

Another, and maybe the most important part of irreverence, is that the leader must assume a critical approach to his or her own personal ideas and thoughts (Haslebo & Nielsen 2000; Haslebo 2004). Irreverence can be seen as a commitment to actively researching how one’s personal knowledge or lack of knowledge, prejudice, ideas, etc. may be influencing the way he or she sees the situation. In the spirit of irreverence, a manager might say to a group of employees in a frustrated moment, “I sound like a broken record, saying the same things over and over. Maybe I should shut up for awhile.” There is a touch of humor in this self-deprecating remark, which interrupts the ongoing flow of negative energy.

In the everyday life of the organization, it is often the case that individuals or groups have come to a fixed understanding of what the correct story is and have thereby become blind to alternative understandings. This fixed understanding can be enhanced by the fact that the story they have chosen to tell is often a critical one focusing on problems, mistakes, and shortcomings. If we as leaders insist on understanding a case or problem one-dimensionally and stay true to this perspective, we take part in locking the person or group in a specific understanding and thus further strengthen the deadlocked action position. Through irreverence one can take part in creating new understandings and thereby also options. A possible means of doing so is using paradoxes, which we will look at now.

A newly appointed member of a team complained about the way he had been received. The leader spoke with the new member while the other team members were observing the dialogue. The new team member explained, “I did not get my own office or desk on my first day, and I did not get a precise description of my tasks or times and dates for the meetings I was supposed to take part in.” After a few clarifying questions from the leader, the colleagues got the opportunity to reflect on what they had heard: “It sounds as though we have given our new colleague a perfect reception—we have shown him very clearly how the team works in practice. You personally have space and opportunity to create your own position within the team.” The new team member was asked what he now thought about his situation, “*(Laughs) ... it is completely clear that my task is to create my own place in the team*” (example from Lang 2002).

Another phenomenon that can be part of keeping both leaders and employees locked in a specific understanding is the Grand Narrative. Grand Narratives are powerful universal stories or truths and, as a leader, one often encounters such truths when working with development initiatives. (Lang 2002) When the employees are asked to give their suggestion about which steps must be taken in order for them to work even better or work more effectively, the answer is typically, “More information from the management.” The truth that implicitly lies in the request for more information is that it is the management’s responsibility to ensure that everyone is informed, that the leader can convey knowledge to the employees typically in the form of one-way communication.

When the leader then gives the employees more and more information, the demand for information grows, as shown in the previous example. In such a case, looking at the assumptions behind the demand for more information, and what it means to be informed, will often have greater effect on solving the Gordian information knot. Instead of the widespread interpretation, one could interpret it as follows: I am informed when I know where I can find the relevant information, or when I know who can help me find the information I need when I need it. By doing so, one can break with two of the three assumptions of the Grand Narrative of information which are:

1. It is the management’s role to ensure that everyone is informed, and
2. It is possible to inform others.

Instead we present these two new assumptions:

1. It is the leader's task to make the necessary information available, and
2. Information is an asset when we need it and when we actively search for it.

Another point, which also can be illustrated by the information example, is that what constitutes informing and being informed depends on the context. Using Bateson's thoughts on information as a difference that makes a difference and Maturana's thoughts on autopoiesis as a starting point, one must always view information as a process that takes place within a given frame or context. Moreover, the frame or context is an important co-player in our understanding of what we observe.

Clarifying the Context of Communication, Meaning, and Action

The concept of context is an important part of systemic-constructionist theory and vital for the use of systemic-constructionist ideas in practice. One of Bateson's important focus areas is how we can understand a given act or experience. Here the basic idea is that any act or episode can only be understood and thus interpreted by looking at the context in which the act or episode took place. Our understanding of the content changes with our understanding of the context (Bateson 1972). For this reason, the basis for creating coordinated understandings and coherence among people as well as within groups or organizations is that the context of the act is clear to everyone involved. On the theoretical level, you can speak of the context as a meta framework or meta communication (communication about the communication) that is at a different logical

level than the episode being researched. By clarifying the context, the leader communicates the intentions with and conditions for the subsequent communication and action. In the previous example in which the employees felt that there was a lack of information, the leaders chose to focus on the context, in this case the intention with the information, instead of just focusing on the content.

One of the important inspirations from Bateson is that to understand the meaning of a message we have to be observing from a different perspective. In our organizational practice, logical levels can be translated into viewing a given action from a distance. By doing so, one can see the action as an element in a larger context—as a part of a larger system of people in communication—and thereby qualify one's knowledge about both the context and the content of the message.

It is important for leaders to focus on the concept of context in order to note how a given message or action is connected to (affected by and how it is affecting) the larger organizational context; this is a key part of being able to collaborate and coordinate our actions. Nonetheless, there is always more than one context or more than one interpretation of the context linked to understanding any communication or action. Each participant has his or her own individual (autopoietic) understanding of the context, and in the meeting between the individual interpretations, we need to coordinate these different understandings of the context by clarifying or negotiating the individual contexts. The leader often plays an important role in establishing the coordination of the different understandings of the context. The more important

it is to coordinate meaning and action, the more important it is for leaders to actively initiate or engage in the dialogic processes. However, this gives rise to a new dilemma (cf. the description of people as autopoietic closed systems): “*We cannot understand the understanding of others, but by sharing our stories we can coordinate our individual understandings.*” (Cronen 2003: 12). In the different dialogic processes it is important to be aware that language is not a passive describer: “*A meaning of a word is in its use in language.*” (Wittgenstein 1958: 43 & 47).

In saying so, Wittgenstein emphasizes that speaking a language is part of a linguistic game, an activity or form of life, guided by rules, which takes place in a given context. From a constructionist view, we create the world we experience through the language games in which we engage (Gergen 2009). Language is not a passive describer of the world from a distance; we are actively creating the world we experience through the language (games) we use. It is through taking part in the different language games that people are connected. Therefore, being a leader or manager, our language games and ability to actively engage in the different language games and create new ones with other people is very important if we want to coordinate activities and develop or innovate new ones (Gergen 1994).

Bateson (1972) pointed out that any action (language game) is performed in a context and that the way we perceive the context or context markers is framing how we understand the action. Looking a bit closer, the Latin meaning of the word ‘context’ is ‘to weave’ (Lang et al. 1990). Sticking with this metaphor, we can

coordinate stories and understandings through language by weaving mutual patterns through conversations. In this way, the language managers (and employees) use and the way they use it is, to a large extent, what creates the context of their actions. Language becomes a link between the actions and understandings of the members of the organization and thereby of the inter-personal relations they co-create within the organization (Gergen 2009).