

CENTRE FOR COACHING
IN ORGANISATIONS

White Paper
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Team coaching

What's *your* model?

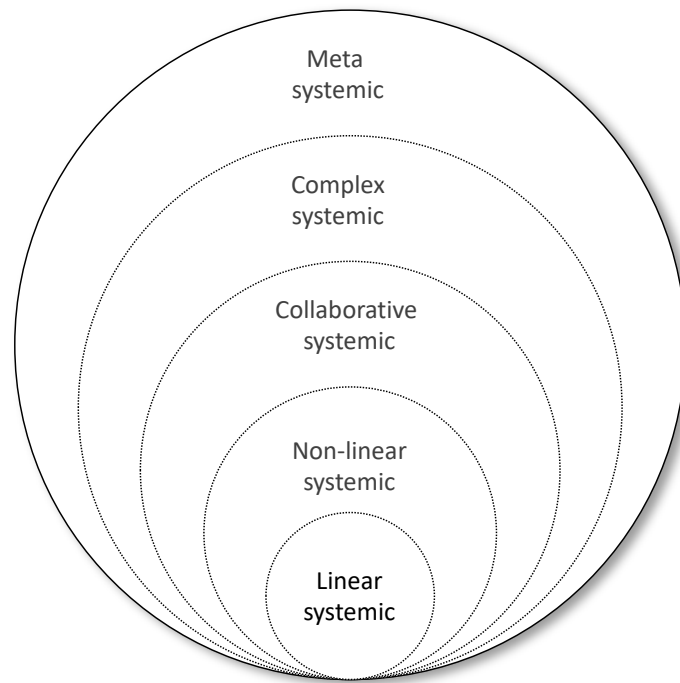
Many team coaches describe their work as 'systemic' without explaining what they mean. This is a problem because there are multiple ways of thinking about systems.

In our April 2021 White Paper, we challenged the way that many team coaches describe their work as 'systemic' without explaining what they mean. This is a problem because there are multiple ways of thinking about systems. Many of these perspectives are quite different, leading to contradictory opinions as to what team coaches should be doing. Without burrowing back into the core ideas and theories behind each way of coaching, it is hard to decide which make sense, and which don't. In this paper we encourage practitioners to start building their own team coaching models and we encourage purchasers of team coaching services to define their perspectives on team coaching, so enabling them to connect with team coaches who are most likely to add value to their organizations. We start by reminding you of the five ways of thinking systemically as they apply to team coaching. Then we pull apart existing team coaching models to show how we can get to the heart of different models and approaches. Finally, we refer to the 3Ps, a simple framework for building your own team coaching model.

Five ways of thinking about systems

The systems literature is vast and not always easy to understand. In an attempt to capture some of the essential differences between these theories, we talk about five ways of thinking about systems¹. Each can be then framed as a lens through which to consider different approaches to team coaching.

The linear systemic team coach works hard to clarify who is on the team and who isn't, may wait to begin their work until the team is clearly defined, and focuses on making sure the team has clear objectives and that everyone understands their role.



Linear systemic

Through this lens the coach regards the team as a machine, in which the relationship between components is simple and linear. A team coach looking through this lens regards the team as a real entity, a machine that works properly when all the components of the machine are working to the same ends. An effective team has a clearly designated leader and a group of people all of whom have clearly defined roles. The team coach works hard to clarify who is on the team and who isn't, may wait to begin their work until the team is clearly defined, and focuses on making sure the team has clear objectives and that everyone understands their role.

Non-linear systemic

Through this lens the coach is watching carefully for less obvious patterns of cause-and-effect. That includes circularity (when factor A has an impact on factor B which in turn has an impact on factor A) and delays in time between cause-and-effect. A team coach looking through this lens still regards the team as a machine and is still focused on ensuring everyone understands their role and is focused on the same objectives, but this coach recognises that the connections between events in different functions may be difficult to discern. She encourages the team to slow down and to be thoughtful and analytical.

The complex systemic team coach encourages team members to engage in dialogue and enquiry, and to develop the capacity to better manage the quality of their interaction.

Collaborative systemic

Second order systems theories recognise that the world is too “complex, problematical and mysterious” for humans to understandⁱⁱ, and that we all observe events through a subjective lens. This philosophy requires us to be humble, and to be genuinely committed to collaborating with others. The team coach working through this lens still believes teams are real entities, comparable to a system, but doubts the capacity of any one individual (including the team leader) to be able to establish what is going on, and what intervention to deploy. The coach encourages team members to engage in enquiry and dialogue, and pays attention to the way team members relate with each other and with others, because quality of interaction is important. The coach encourages the team to explore other stakeholder’s perspectives and to beware over-privileging its own collective view of the workings of the organisation.

Complex systemic

Theories of complex adaptive systems (CAS) recognise that agents in a system operate according to local rules. People make sense of broader events together, in their local environments, and from those local sense-making processes emerge local insights, beliefs and intentions. The leader of an organisation cannot dictate or control the emergence of change, but she can influence it, by engaging personally in conversation. What happens in these local sub-systems is subject to feedback from the broader system and the sub-system responds accordingly. Interaction at the local level therefore continues to evolve as local agents seek to survive in the broader system, and local rules continue to emerge and evolve. The team coach looking at life through this lens recognises that team objectives emerge from social interactions, including interactions with people outside the team. She recognises that the team leader cannot control events, but can influence events, as does everyone in the system, in some small way at least. She recognises that purpose, objectives and roles are all fluid and constantly shaping and re-shaping. She encourages team members to engage in dialogue and enquiry, and to develop the capacity to better manage the quality of their interaction. She helps the team understand how it comes up with its intentions. Developing a better understanding of its own process helps it to better understand the functioning of the rest of the organization, including identified key stakeholders.

Not all 'systemic' team coaches attempt to explain what they mean. Some do – here are some examples.

Meta systemic

Human beings and their behaviours may ultimately be un-modellable such that the system metaphor may not be usefulⁱⁱⁱ. Ralph Stacey and Chris Mowles suggest that there is no useful analogy between systems and social networks, because to portray the organisation as a system inevitably directs the practitioner to ascribing simple rules to the behaviour of people and humans don't abide by simple rules. Organisations are imaginary constructs; they are not real, which means the boundaries between different parts of the organisation are not real, which implies that teams are not real either; they too are imaginary constructs. The systems metaphor may be helpful sometimes, and sometimes it may not. It may not be helpful if coach and team over-privilege the boundaries they imagine themselves to working within. Team coaches working through this lens recognize that teams are not real; that they are social constructs that enable people to feel an affinity with others. When working with a 'team' the team coach regards everyone in the room (including herself) as part of a broader social network. All conversations have an impact, including conversations that take place outside the confines of the team. If we define teams as groups of people working to common objectives, then the composition of the 'team' is likely to be in a state of constant flux. This team coach is agile, nimble and comfortable working with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Unpacking existing models

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Hackman and Wageman

Hackman and Wageman^{iv} encourage us to focus only on "full-fledged" teams with clear boundaries and differentiated team roles. They discourage team coaches from spending too much time focusing on the quality of relationships between team members, citing evidence that "in some circumstances" performance drives interpersonal relationships rather than the other way around. They cite the work of Connie Gersick, who claimed that team coaches should focus their efforts on the beginning, middle and end of a team's life cycle. This perspective would appear to be based on a linear systemic way of thinking, in that the authors appear to be basing their views on a search for simple linear cause and effect. How *do* we work with teams whose boundaries are not clear? What if there *is* a relationship between performance and interpersonal relationships, a complex relationship? They place a lot of emphasis on Gersick's work conducted with project teams. What about teams whose evolution can't be plotted so clearly?

The purpose of a constellation is to restore system coherence so that everyone and everything is given its place and is free to operate at its best, from that place.

Whittington

In his book about constellations, John Whittington^v refers to ‘natural orders’ or ‘organizing principles’ that underpin human relationship systems. These organizing forces exist “*to sustain a dynamic balance in systems*”. Systemic coaching “*is that which acknowledges, illuminates and releases the system dynamics so each element can function with ease.*” In the constellation work he describes, clients are encouraged to “*face directly into the truths*” of the system, truths that are difficult to discern. The purpose of a constellation is to restore system coherence so that everyone and everything is given its place and is free to operate at its best, from that place. This account of the functioning of a system feels collaborative systemic - the author is suggesting the system is real but governed by somewhat mysterious forces whose functioning can only be hypothesized. It is best hypothesized by gathering a group to work together.

Hawkins

Peter Hawkins^{vi} perspective on systems seems to have changed over the years. Ten years ago, he defined a version of systemic team coaching in which the team coach was counselled not to “*become caught up in the team culture or dynamic*”, implying that the team coach could stand aside from the dynamics of others in the room and observe events objectively. This feels linear systemic or non-linear systemic. By 2020, in contrast, he writes that “*we are part of, and affect, all systems we observe and engage with.*” By 2017 his thinking does seem to be leaning more toward the complex systemic, in that he wrote about the need to focus on the relationship between the team and its environment. In 2019 he built on this theme, contrasting ‘entity thinking’ whereby the coach focuses on the individual, team, or organization, and ‘systemic thinking’ whereby the coach focuses on the relationships between entities.

It isn’t always easy to understand exactly what Hawkins is thinking. For example, Hawkins and Turner (2020) say that “*systems are not things*” whilst at the same time commending the reader to regard teams as sub-nested systems. To focus on the relationship between entities rather than the entities themselves, after all, does not preclude the existence of entities. His description of ecosystemic team coaching as distinct from systemic team coaching is also unclear. Ecosystemic team coaching appears to be different in that it explicitly acknowledges the ecology as well as communities and culture, but this difference appears to be more a matter of scope than underlying philosophy.

For those coaches thinking to work with teams for the first time, there is a temptation to go on a course, learn a methodology, then go out and implement that approach. This may form an excellent basis for starting out as a team coach but is unlikely to be sufficient.

What's your team coaching model?

For those coaches thinking to work with teams for the first time, there is a temptation to go on a course, learn a methodology, then go out and implement that approach. This may form an excellent basis for starting out as a team coach, but is unlikely to be sufficient. Before we can go out and implement a methodology with confidence, we need to understand its underpinnings, else what do we do when the methodology doesn't work as it supposed to, or someone challenges it? We need to understand why we do what we do.

The 3Ps model^{vii} provides us a simple framework to define, refine and constantly reevaluate who we are as team coaches. It poses us three questions:

1. What is my **Philosophy**? In other words - what are my favourite theories, frameworks and models? Which best resonate with my experiences, beliefs and values?
2. What is my **Purpose** as a team coach? Why do I do the work I do?
3. How would a fly on the wall view my **Practice**? What would it see me do?

The models and frameworks we learn on courses are a version of Practice- the focus is on the doing. But in the same way we started to unpack the work of Hackman & Wageman, Whittington and Hawkins, what is the underlying Philosophy lying beneath that Practice? What Purpose is at play?

To the 3Ps we can add a fourth P – **Progress**. How will you continue to grow and develop as a team coach? Your Progress plan may include some of the following:

- Continuing to explore existing team coaching models, breaking them down in terms of Philosophy, Purpose & Practice
- Starting to build your own team coaching model, shamelessly taking bits of other people's models and incorporating them into your own.
- Getting out there and doing the work, making time to reflect on an ongoing basis – what do your adventures tell you about your model – what works well? What do you want to change?

You might also choose to ask a supervisor to accompany you on your journey, someone able to provide a reflective space in which you can revisit what happened, contemplate why you coached the way that you coached, and

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Notes & Acknowledgments

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