

Like a fish out of water

The impact of the 'systemic idea' on organisations

Each of us exists within a particular context which influences our behaviour. Like a fish out of water, when we change our context we change our behaviour. The context in our case is made up of many things, for example our colleagues, environment or competitors. But our context also includes things within us; our intent, our confidence and our memory. We find ourselves linked with our context through an array of connections' across past, present and future, producing a rich and interrelated web.

These connections are iterative. How we behave affects other people which in turn affects us in a self-referential pattern. For systems thinkers these patterns are loops of feedback, either amplifying or dampening changes. Observers such as Senge¹ have pointed to recurring patterns or 'system archetypes' which can be inferred and then predicted. The escalatory mechanics of the arms race appear obvious to us now but in 1960 they were invisible to the protagonists. The ability to 'read' what's happening below the surface in our organisations *in real time* is a powerful asset. If hindsight could be transformed into foresight how many business mistakes would be avoided?

The sometimes unseen connections between ourselves and the context around us limits the effectiveness of simple cause and effect analysis. Instead we have to look beyond the symptom to the underlying causes.

If hindsight could be transformed into foresight...

Until recently it was widely accepted that the way to find out about a phenomenon was to reduce it to its constituent parts for analysis. This linear scientific method came to be questioned when it was discovered that some phenomena exhibited properties that *only* emerged when viewed as a whole. The properties existed as a consequence of the interaction between the elements and so the whole amounted to more than the sum of its' parts. Further, the act of observing was found to have influence on what was being observed. As part of a living system we too lose our objective status as we routinely filter and interpret what we see and hear.

So if analysis gives only a partial picture, how do we look deeper? A step back reveals that the 'whole' is larger than often at first anticipated.

Stakeholders such as employees, suppliers and customers become included. The multiple perspectives of all of the 'parts' are allowed to be heard in dialogue rather than debate. The rush to measure outputs, often divisive, is replaced by an appreciation of what actually exists.

But without the 'order bringing' notion of objectivity what's to stop our systems spiralling into subjective, self-focused decay?

Removing the myth of objectivity decreases our reliance on dubious data

The regulatory process of *critical subjectivity* can provide a powerful replacement. Empathy is a familiar form of this regulation, seeing the world as *if* through the eyes of another. Neither view is 'objectively right' but when combined with several other views provide a richer, deeper picture of what is going on. Removing the myth of objectivity decreases our reliance on dubious data.

Initially this can be daunting as the complexity of problems can seem to increase. As we peel one layer off, another layer is found beneath. But with each layer we get closer to the heart of matter. Indeed we might find that we become part of the problem, with the corollary that we have to change something in ourselves in order for others to change themselves. In systemic thinking there are no neutral observers just participants, affecting and affected by other participants.

The move from linear to systemic thinking is not an incremental one. It is, as Thomas Kuhn² observed, a paradigm shift. Like oil and water the two do not mix. Many of today's initiatives such as involvement and empowerment stem from the work of systemic thinkers. But they are often implemented within a context of the old paradigm, where mechanical links of cause and effect produce a transactional culture. Like a fish out of water the initiative struggles to live because the context within which it finds itself is benignly hostile.

Because leaders are so influential in our organisations the 'paradigm in use' will stem largely from their world view. Before expending additional resources on the next improvement to your organisation ask yourself the following questions; What's the world view of the leaders in my organisation? What's my own philosophy? Is the water in this place conducive to healthy fish?

1 Peter Senge: The Fifth Discipline

2 See Fritjof Capra: The web of life - Part I