

## Open or Closed?

### What difference can a word make to systemic thinking?

In systemic thinking there is sometimes a distinction made between open systems and closed systems. Whilst appearing a small detail (after all it's all systems thinking isn't it?) the distinction runs far deeper than a matter of semantics. The implications for how you think about organisational change are both profound and fateful.

Systems thinking began life in the post war period with the study of Cybernetics, which looked at issues of control and feedback in models and machines. Today we are surrounded by sophisticated examples of cybernetic systems from our heating systems to our computers.

Put simply a system is laid out into its constituent parts (thermostat, boiler, pipes, radiators etc.) and cause and effect relationships that link the parts together are mapped. The boundaries of the system are clear and therefore can be readily understood and defined. This finite nature leads to the label of a 'closed' system.

The difference between one system and another is then quantitative. One is simply a more complex version of rules and relationships than the other. Not surprisingly this 'cybernetic' approach has found its way into models of organisational improvement and change. If we can map all the parts and define what they do in relation to one another, (goes the thinking) we can define and bring about changes to our organisations with target setting and monitoring activities.

It has an elegant and compelling logic that allows us to feel control over our organisations. But the lack of evidence that it works and the mounting evidence of frustration felt by members of such organisations provides pause for thought. Is there something in the assumptions of the cybernetic or 'closed' system approach that is inherently limiting? Is it an attractive but dangerous illusion?

Consider this. When I turn down the thermostat in my heating system, am I outside the system acting on it or am I part of the system acting within it? If the latter, then do those things that affect me also become part of the system? When two or more people get together, in an office for example, does one's preference for cold, fresh air collide with another's need for warmth? The relatively simple heating system becomes complicated by the wider social system of which it is itself a part.

So complicated in fact that it becomes impossible (not just difficult) to predict.

***“am I outside the system acting on it or am I part of the system acting within it?”***

Change processes are subject to the same confusion. What appears clear and logical often masks the unpredictable nature of what people experience. So we are left with a choice. Do we continue to view our organisations as closed systems, subject to our design and control; or do we see them as open systems that can be influenced but not controlled? And if we accept the latter, then how do we go about the process of leading our organisations forward?

The open system perspective requires an increase in our tolerance of ambiguity. Moreover it challenges us to seek it out. To invite it through wider involvement, to resist the temptation to remove it, long enough for us to learn what we can, before finally moving to decisive action.

This is often a difficult step to take because it clashes with one of the favoured leadership myths i.e. that leaders are paid to know the answers. Breaking this myth is likely to disappoint some and delight others. It creates a vacuum that begs to be filled. Initially some will step forward whilst others step away. As a leader, the questions you ask may be more powerful than the answers you give. Each and every time we offer a genuine choice we create the space for others to step into. Every time we make a choice we withdraw that space.

***“the questions you ask may be more powerful than the answers you give”***

Even in the smallest of these exchanges lies the co-creation of your organisation's culture. Ask yourself what sort of organisation are you making as you interact with colleagues? How might you offer small but genuine choices on a daily, even hourly basis to those whom you influence? And just how far does your influence reach? In a closed system it's easy to isolate the effects of one action on another. In an open system, our influence spreads far and wide, making us more powerful than we might ever have imagined possible.

The terms with which we think about the world shape the sort of leader we become. Our organisations echo to some extent our own style. How many of your organisation's processes mirror open thinking and how many reveal an underlying assumption of system that is closed?