



the 3 stages of development of the systemic coach

There is a burgeoning interest in systemic coaching these days. In part, this is fuelled by increasing interest in Constellations work. I know from my own learning journey with this work that there are developmental thresholds to cross. For example, it is normal at the beginning of the learning journey to understand that a systemic stance is a holistic and relational orientation, interested in recurring patterns of behaviours and outcomes. Yet understanding leads to integration only gradually. So what is the point of systemic coaching?

“the point of systemic coaching is to catalyse a developmental shift in the system. Not in the individual coachee.”

For me, the point of systemic coaching is to catalyse a developmental shift in the system. Not in the individual coachee. Yet all too often, I believe that our attention as coaches is still on the presenting client – be that an individual or a team. The shift of the whole system is often unintentionally overlooked in our framing of our coaching work...

In my supervision work and teaching, I see many coaches espousing a systemic stance, and yet not working towards the development of the system as a whole. Instead, the focus of outcomes remains on the coaching client in a way that is abstracted from the wider system. While good coaching still occurs and while there are still undeniably good outcomes, I believe that we are ‘missing a beat’ and – out of awareness – limiting the potential impact of systemic coaching.

I was talking over a coffee with a colleague recently – an executive coach who is new to systemic work. He was describing a client issue where his client – a company director – wanted help to get faster results for his team. His approach was to take this

issue at face value and find ways to squeeze more performance from the director and the team. Here, the focus is on the problem and the coach frames his work as enabling his client to find a solution to this problem. I'm sure we've all been there - I know I have!

I think that this orientation represents the first of three developmental stages as a systemic practitioner. I see these 3 stages as follows:

1. Addressing the client's problems as given.

The assumption of the coach here is that the client's framing of the issue s/he is grappling with is correct. For me, this orientation comes from a kind of scientific rationalism and from the all-pervading individualist paradigm of our culture. From this perspective, we can legitimately abstract the client and the problem from the wider field of influences at play. We imagine that there is a causal relationship between problem and solution and that our client is simply not seeing what to do yet or how to do it. The coach's focus here is on technique - how to craft an approach that could help.

Inevitably the coach also focuses on a fixed outcome. It is not that this is wrong - for some sorts of problems, this approach might well have a constructive impact. But let's not pretend that this is a relational or systemic approach.

I believe that it is important for the systemic coach to not accept the client's framing of the situation. If we buy in to the client's narrative we see things from the client's perspective and can become as stuck as s/he is. It behoves us to cultivate disbelief and to look for alternative framings. This is the beginning of a more systemic awareness...

2. Exploring the underlying patterns & dynamics of the client's presenting challenge, & bringing illumination of these dynamics to awareness.

I think that this approach represents a real shift in the coach's systemic practice. The coach is actively looking more deeply at reframing the situation and making connections, inter-relationships and interactions between parts visible to the client. The focus here is less on technique and more on inter-relations between parts.

Constellations as a coaching methodology is remarkably powerful in this regard, as the process of representing parts of the issue vividly dramatises the nature of interconnectedness and entanglement. Because the coach is enlarging the client's frame of reference around the presenting issue, the client might well have a 'lightbulb moment' as any way of opening to a bigger perspective is immensely useful. Outcomes are less important to the coach than insights. However, the 'solution' still remains in the domain of cognitive understanding. While definitely 'systemic,' this is still not as transformational as it could be.

3. Exploring 'the givens of the situation' and supporting a degree of embodied 'shift of being' in the client.

At this developmental stage, the systemic coach is not operating from a problem -> solution mindset. The focus here is on presence, on 'holding space' for unimaginable solutions to show themselves. There is 'creative indifference' to outcomes which leaves the field of action possibilities more open for the client. While there is still an attention to interconnections and relationships, the coach pays more attention to what is happening in the client's body and in her/his own body.

Most of the people I work with who have had some training in constellations pay more attention to the constellation than to the client's embodied process. Yet what happens in the constellation is not as important as what happens in the client's body! It is not important to 'complete' a constellation, but it is important to track and support information and perspectives landing at a deeper level in the client's experience. The transformational shift has to happen at a cellular level if a solution is to have any possibility of impacting the client's wider system. It is the resolution in the client's body that I believe supports the developmental shift of the field as a whole...

“It is the whole situation that seeks a resolution, not just the presenting part.”

I think that there are important thresholds or 'turnings' between these three stages. At the first stage, it is natural - especially when learning a new skill such as constellating - that the coach's focus is on technique. Mastering the 'machinery' of the constellation takes time. Yet the art of constellating and coaching requires us to explore the more important elements that lie beyond our usual ways of looking at skills as learned capabilities, to the more demanding orientation of stilling the mind and becoming more exquisitely attuned to what is trying to emerge. So the first turning is the turning from outcomes to insights; from goal orientation to trust orientation; and towards patterns rather than symptoms.

The second turning is the turning from patterns to presence. This requires that we forget what we know and cultivate an intentionless silence. At this turning, it is not that the pattern should change - if we try to make something happen we can become entangled. It is more a case of seeing something as though it could be a resource, of looking beyond the client and opening to the emergent forces of the wider system. This is the opposite of technical work.

In my recent webinar, I referred to an image my first Constellations teacher – the late Hunter Beaumont – offered, which was for me a simple but profound description of seeing systemically. He referred to an image of a tree that grows straight, tall and lush in a meadow. Then he contrasted this to a tree that grows crooked, distorted and sparse on a rocky mountain cleft.

Both are beautiful trees. But the shape of each tree is determined by the combination of forces in each environment. The 'symptom' - for example, crookedness - is a relational adjustment and not pathology. Not seeing the tree (or a client issue) abstracted from its context but as a feature of its context is crucial to the systemic stance. It is the whole situation that seeks a resolution, not just the presenting part.

Bearing in mind that it is the system as a whole that is seeking a developmental shift, could transform our systemic practice...

DOES SYSTEMIC COACHING MISS THE POINT?

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