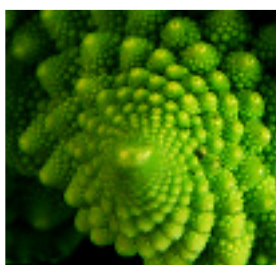


Editorial



I'd like to open this issue by thanking all of the contributors who have sent articles and items for inclusion. I take it as an indicator of the interest that there is in the SCiO community for sharing ideas and viewpoints. I hope that this will continue.

As the year moves on and the world economic crisis continues on its slow motion train crash trajectory, a friend reminded me that we are living a situation which is analogous to the dying days of the Belle Epoque. There is undoing and realignment, change and uncertainty. As human beings we crave certainty but we seem to be adept at creating ways of increasing it and there is a sense of the compression of cycles. This creates danger but also opportunity for people and organisations. What sort of tools do we have at our disposal for dealing with this? We need a range of tools and approaches as well as the

subtlety and craftsmanship to choose the right one for the situation.

In this issue, we have a good mix of contributions including book reviews, an update on the Professional Development Programme and a summary of the open day events for the April meeting. We also have a couple of longer articles on leadership and systemic failure as well as the first part of an article on systems thinking for adaptors and innovators. In "innovation as a political act" there is a consideration of the politics of systems interventions which is the often ignored aspect of systems interventions.

Remember, keep the contributions coming!

Happy reading!

Gordon



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Reflections on the year ahead

Patrick Hoverstadt

Looking forward, 2012 could be “living in interesting times” in the Chinese sense, and certainly there is a sense of unreality in seeing the attempts to prepare for cuts in the public sector that were very clearly flagged several years ago and are still being treated as unexpected. On the plus side of course the new chaos (is it actually any different from the old chaos?) and complexity offers lots of opportunity for deploying systems approaches on organisational problems. So for SCiO as a community of practitioners there has perhaps been no better opportunity to engage with organisational problems and no more fertile ground with organisations increasingly recognising the need for trying new approaches.

Last year saw us start running SCiO meetings in London as well as Manchester and this year we plan to regularise that with a progressive move towards holding meetings alternately north and south. After the AGM in April, the plan is to run professional development workshops in the south in those quarters where the open meetings are in north and reciprocally, to run professional development workshops in the north when open meetings are in the south. That way, there will be at least one event available to members in the north and south roughly each quarter.

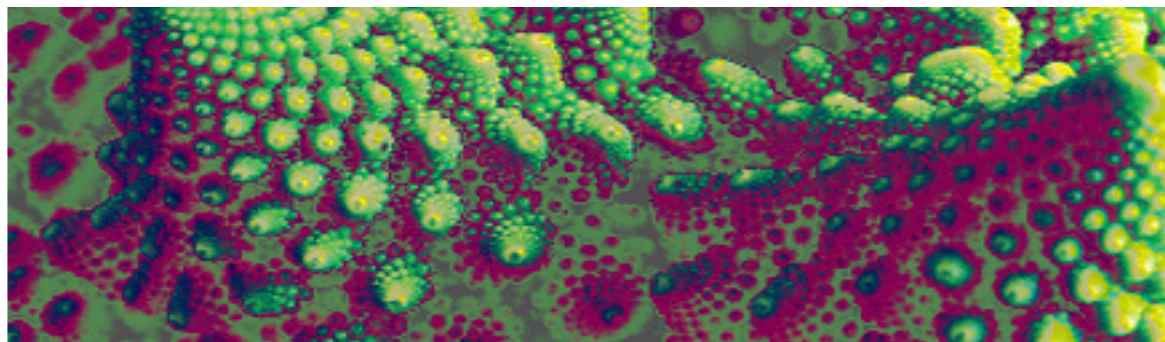
A new development, or rather a restoration of an old initiative will be the institution of a student prize. This will be available to any student at undergraduate or masters level presenting an academic assignment applying systems approaches to an organisational problem. Individual students can apply and we'll be contacting those course leaders that we know

about running relevant courses for them to put forward their pick of their students' projects that they think are most suitable.

April sees the AGM as part of the open meeting. Last year we ran a whole day decision conference for the AGM. This year the AGM will be restricted to a one hour meeting with a couple of key issues for members to vote on and for the election of the board. So the AGM part of the meeting will be short even if it isn't particularly sweet and then the rest of the day will carry on as a normal open meeting. The key issues that require a vote are: the proposed change of legal structure to make SCiO a charity and a change to the memorandum and articles of association to allow the board to introduce rule changes. The proposal around charitable status has several implications, it allows us to access a range of free or cheaper finance management tools, it has tax advantages and the board also felt that it more clearly defined SCiO's brand as a community of practice. The proposal to allow the board to introduce rule changes is intended to make change possible without the bureaucracy involved in having the change the memorandum and articles every time. Any proposed rule changes would be subject to veto by a majority of the membership. Both these proposed changes have the unanimous agreement of the board.

You know you've arrived when there's a series on the BBC about a systems practitioner. That's the good news. The bad news is that the systems practitioner in question is the bumbling “Dirk Gently – Holistic Detective Agency”, the System world's answer to Inspector Clouseau. Oh well we couldn't really expect the BBC to help us with brand image could we?

*The new chaos..
..offers lots of opportunities for deploying systems approaches.*



Evolving the Professional Development Programme in SCiO

Roger Duck and Elizabeth McDonnell

SCiO's Professional Development Programme (PDP) continues to evolve, with the introduction over the last year of a number of sessions delivered "by members for members". These complement established courses, which are open to members as well as anyone else with an interest in finding out more about systems thinking and practice, such as Patrick Hoverstadt's Organisational Structure and Organisational Dynamics Workshops that introduce the Viable System Model (VSM).

"By members for members" sessions so far have focused on the process of Action Learning, originally developed by Reg Revens, and also provided an opportunity to explore to use of Peter Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology (SSM).

Action Learning is, itself, an approach that can be used for personal and professional development. One of the Action Learning PDP sessions inspired the formation of a group bound together by an interest in applying the VSM to work with the voluntary and community sector (the Third Sector). The seven-member group has rather aptly become 'The Portico Group,' reflecting the pleasure of learning together in the wonderful surroundings of The Portico Library & Gallery in Manchester.

Discussions in the Portico Group have proved stimulating and encouraging for all, providing a safe environment for each member to explore and share their understandings, and misunderstandings (!) of the VSM and approaches to its use in real life situations.

Unexpected outcomes are arising. For instance, I (Elizabeth) found, without any original intention of doing so, that I am adopting an action research approach to our workings and learning in the Portico Group. I am taking the opportunity to note down and share thoughts and, importantly, compile our exchanges in some sort of record. And this is finding resonance for me in my study of the Open University Systems course, TU812 (Managing systemic change, inquiry, action and interaction). Reading Geoffrey Vicker's writing on appreciative systems, whereby he states that the very act of communicating that which is tacit and unexpressed changes it and our way of viewing that representation, is mirrored for me in our group. We have very different ways of knowing and are possibly also beginning to recognise our differing worldviews - the safety and confidentiality afforded to us within the Portico Group is allowing us to tease out, challenge and deepen our learning together. Other members have said that being part of the group is giving confidence and an incentive to share thinking with others, for example to offer a paper at a conference and to produce a paper from our own learning process in Portico.

It is recognised that there is a potentially underserved demand for professional development activity within SCiO. If you are interested in either attending, or facilitating, a session on any aspect of systems thinking and practice, please get in touch, and the SCiO board will make every effort to further develop the programme to bring together the skills, needs and interests of as wide a group of people as possible.

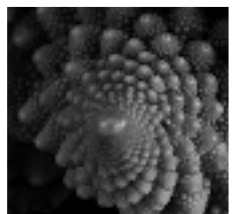
Bookworm

Learning for Action – A Short Definitive Account of Soft Systems Methodology and its use for Practitioners, Teachers and Students; Peter Checkland and John Poulter; Wiley, 2010 – ISBN 0-470-02554-9

As a relative novice to systems theory and viable organisations (I have read books and papers, tried to apply the learning but acknowledge I have a long way to go...) I was immediately drawn to this book as it had many of my key words in the title. Definitive, its use, Practitioners, Students and ~ of course ~ short. The book is 198 pages including appendices and has many hand drawn diagrams (the authors explain the psychology of hand drawn diagrams as an attempt to convey an organic rather than

mechanical impression and to underline that certainty is forever elusive in human affairs, they are working diagrams). The book definitely delivers on its stated intention – "to make SSM (Soft Systems Methodology) seem "obvious", so that gaining an understanding of it is made as comfortable a process as possible".

Checkland and Poulter define the aim of the SSM approach as "define and take action to improve". They do this by describing steps and creating a learning cycle; being aware at all times that the situation, the people, the "world views" change and this continuous flux creates new problematical situations making iterative improvement cycles never ending.



Bookworm contd.

It is interesting to consider how our world view is created and changes and the impact it has on all our thinking and the authors spend one page on defining this before then using it in their examples. In this book SSM is NOT steps or rules but a set of principles to be adopted and adapted. The core of systems thinking is described as communication processes, control processes, layered structure and emergent properties but the authors also make very clear that any model created can never be a description of the “real world”. Each only expresses one way of looking at and thinking about the real situation. Given the different world views there are many different models. It is therefore important to realise that changes proposed to improve the model must satisfy several criteria simultaneously.

Throughout the book Checkland and Poulter emphasise that SSM is not seeking “solutions” to “solve” real world problems. Given the real world cannot be captured in a single statement, SSM gives an organised way of thinking through those problematical situations and identifying elements which can change and then thinking through the impacts of those changes to ensure that the original situation has been improved. In itself that is worth a pause. How many times have organisations driven through change and the end result was no better than before? The

Learning to eat soup with a knife: John A Nagl.
University of Chicago Press ISBN-13 978 0 226 56770 9

There is a large amount of business literature referring to learning organisations, and it may come as a surprise to see the term cropping up in the military literature. In “Learning to eat soup with a knife” author John Nagl puts forward the thesis that armies must be learning organisations if they are to achieve the objectives which are set for them which are always political. He describes how armies can be learning organisations and how their capacity to learn is influenced as much by structure as culture using the contrasting experiences of the British and the Americans in Malaysia and Vietnam, respectively as they moved towards post-colonial independence. He asks the question why the Malaysian campaign allowed that country to become independent in a peaceful manner, whereas Vietnam was a military and political disaster.

The military campaign is the ultimate test of viability, however, this book isn’t about armies *per se* but how they are part of a political process and that is the key point. The main difference between Malaysia and Vietnam was how far the

book mentions the NHS yet was written before the current debate about structural changes to the way the NHS is fundamentally organised. Since David Cameron recently had his round table workshops without his biggest dissenters present was it likely to have been a whole system view?

The book is structured in three parts with Part One having the background and theory and Part Two having real Case Studies of SSM in action. These cover various areas and some of the diagrams are fascinating to study. Part Three is Summing Up and as well as appendices and further reading gives some pithy reminders of what the authors want us to have learned – and states “Given the frame of mind outlined above, any problematical situation in human affairs may be tackled with some confidence.” This is a bold statement but I think Checkland and Poulter do enough to be able to make it.

The book is ideal for a beginner but also has value to a seasoned professional who wants either a reminder of the seven principles and five actions or a nudge on diagrams. Highly recommended.

Anne Maguire

institutions involved (ie the political, military and security organs of the state) recognised this because this influenced how the problem of the insurgency was framed. Was it a military problem or a political problem in which the military had a role to play along with other institutional and non-institutional actors?

Nagl uses an organizational learning framework to analyse the two examples and highlights how the fundamental *raison d’être* of the armies had a major influence on whether they were able to listen to feedback from the local environment. There is an interesting discussion of how the US and British armies developed along very different paths leading to very different organisational worldviews. In Malaysia, the military response was constantly adapting in a tight tango with the developing political situation. This was in marked contrast to the vertically coordinated military solution applied in Vietnam in which decision-making was centralised in Washington and which actively filtered out feedback from the field. Despite all of the evidence to the contrary, the US military insisted on confronting Ho Chi Minh’s North Vietnamese Army as if it were the massed Red Army overrunning Western Europe.



Nagl points out that just as armies can learn, they can also forget as they adapt to perceived strategic threats that may never actually materialize and shed elements that had helped them adapt in the past. This is a problem in knowledge based industries where flexibility (sic) of the workforce is at odds with building up specialist knowledge within an organisation.

The book is well referenced throughout and if the acronyms get a bit much (particularly in the

sections on Vietnam), anyone with experience of big industries will recognise this as a sign of the complexity and it is worth persevering. The author's thesis is interesting and is well supported and although not specifically coming from a VSM point of view, the book is a useful substrate for thinking about how learning contributes in a strategic way to viability.

Gordon Kennedy

The Art of Keeping Your Organisation Alive

Frank Wood

In this article I write about the Viable Systems Model. It will be addressed to those of you who have never heard of it, or if you have you are somewhat mystified as to what the fuss is all about.

The best way to view Viable System Modeling is as a tool based on commonsense and not some mysterious way of getting things done that is only understood by the chosen few. Lets get started.

What do we mean by viable? We often hear people talking about something being viable and cringe. The term belongs in the same category as "best practice" and "ducks in a row" which is not very helpful.

A dictionary defines "viable" as "physically fitted to live" and "practicable, workable".

Both terms could be applied to a system, it would depend on what approach you are using.

For "system" we have a definition - an assemblage or combination of things or parts forming a complex or unitary whole.

Putting the two definitions together we get:

"viable system" - an assemblage of things that can include people which forms a complex or unitary whole that is practicable and workable and/or physically fitted to live.

It's keeping a system viable that is the art and this is where Viable System Modeling comes into play. Now that we have definitions for systems and viable it's time to look at what a Viable Systems Model is.

The Viable System Model is a tool used to understand how people in an organization communicate and what blockages there are to those communications that might threaten the viability of the organization. It does this by understanding how an organization is structured

and how that structure can help or hinder the communications both within the organization and also outside the organization (the environment).

For instance within an organization, a lack of coordination in a production line can cause holdups in the process. Outside an organization, a lack of understanding of how the market has changed or of how various economic forces are now different can cause an organisation's demise.

Once a thorough map of how an organisation's communication structures and systems operate, then blockages and coordination problems can be identified and dealt with and any changes in the market etc outside can be understood and acted on.

So how will a Viable Systems Model help you to understand your organisation better?

In several ways:

- Provides a map of the communication channels of the organisation and flags up any problems
- Shows if the organisation is effectively adapting to the environment
- Enables independent units within the organisation to work together in a cohesive manner that is in line with the environment and the policy of the organisation
- Shows how, when and where independent units in the organisation should be monitored in order to keep them working in cohesion with other units and also in balance with both external and internal environments and the policies of the organisation
- Is a means of checking if policies are in line with the resources of the organisation and changing conditions of the environment such as regulatory authorities, the markets, competition

Obviously this list is not exhaustive.

So in a nutshell the Viable Systems Model is a way of finding out where your organisation is and where it will be and where it should be in order to survive.

VSM shows whether an organisation is effectively adapting to the environment

Innovation is a Political Act – Why Systemic Change Gets Eaten For Breakfast

Victor Newman

Innovation is about doing new things and learning to do old things in new ways to create new value. We need to understand why organisations become “sticky” under innovation pressure and the forms that this “stickiness” takes when innovators are trying to introduce new approaches to create new value through organisations.

- A culture is a by-product of a technology stabilization process, it is composed of the problem-solving experiences and processes involved in turning an invention into an innovation. All cultures are relatively “sticky” in the sense that they resist pressures to change.
- Strong cultures continually evolve new behaviours to block change, to maintain social stability and power structures based upon existing patterns and accumulated reserves of mutual Relational Capital.
- The greater the mutual Relational Capital in the network, the “stickier” the organisation. The stickier an organisation, the more pronounced its tendency to focus on the problems it can solve, rather than the problem it needs to solve (as a means of avoiding renegotiating existing stocks of Relational Capital).

Relational Capital is the social “capital” you build through establishing positive impressions and trusting relationships with key colleagues, stakeholders and potential internal customers, through trading and being able to bank favours at crucial times in the lifecycle of the business and personal careers. It explains the tendency within major corporations and political parties to

appoint that “safe pair of hands” who turns out to be a dangerous idiot (unable to recognise that the context has changed, old customers want new things and new customers have emerged) instead of appointing the innovator who wants to move the strategy in a new direction, to change the rules and create new value. That “safe pair of hands” is usually the manager who is owed the most in Relation Capital transactions, the value of which would disappear if the technology and direction of the business changed and made the existing transactions void.

This explains the tendency to optimise existing products, services and business models instead of moving into the territory of creating genuinely new value by focusing on becoming effective. If you hold a big account of Relational Capital, would you want to give it up? This also explains the 60-70% failure rate of systemic change programmes. When you change organisations, you make all current existing Relational Capital void.

We need to unpack the nature of this Relational Capital, explore and understand the forms it takes, and the conditions under which it be both open and closed, positive and negative. In other words: whether it can be positive and open (when you have an “open” approach to constructing Relational Capital that is inclusive) and whether a closed approach is always negative and defensive, a conscious option or merely a social reflex that we can influence by working with leaders and persuading them of the benefits of consciously managing their approach to Relational Capital.

email: knowledgeworks@aol.com

SCiO AGM & Open Day

Monday 16th April 2012 10am - 4.30pm Manchester Business School Penthouse West

AGM: Agenda to be sent later

Session 1: Addressing social return on investment with systems techniques: a British Waterways Programme - Jane Searles

In June 2012, British Waterways will move out of the public sector and become the Canal and River Trust (CRT) within the third sector. This has been their ambition since 2009, but government acceptance came with an extremely challenging timescale. The build up and deployment of a body of volunteers within their organisation was a key part of their change strategy.

Currently, the organisation’s KPIs: Volunteer time and Propensity to recommend are used to assess

If you hold a big account of Relational Capital, would you want to give it up?

The next AGM and Open Day will be held on Monday the 16th April

SCiO AGM & Open Day contd...

this element of their change strategy. Volunteer's time is collected nationally, consisting of hours worked, volunteers' skill levels (unskilled, skilled, professional) and associated 'worth' of work done. These contribute towards demonstrating the value to the organisation but do not currently show the full value to the organisation, to society or to the volunteer. It is important to start to extend evaluation of the quality of volunteering work done as well as the quantity.

The first initiative in the programme, is a case study of volunteer lock keepers at Audlem on the Shropshire Union canal. This study is bringing together elements of Systems Practice and the government's Social Return On Investment (SROI) method to create an approach which will both address the wider effects of volunteering in that community and also be useful in informing managers at all levels of the value delivered by volunteers.

This session will look at the approach in more detail and report on progress to date.

Jane is a BW/CRT volunteer who has jointly developed the programme with the National Volunteering Manager and is currently undertaking the first initiative.

Jane is a Director of SCiO and a Systems Consultant, currently embracing the SCiO PDP approach involving action learning. Her recent focus has been on systems metrics.

Session 2: Craft Workshop: Below the Radar – harnessing Emotional Intelligence - Doug Haynes

When working with Systems, we tend to model our system-in-focus by identifying key stakeholder groups and their involvement with the system activity. For every individual involved, there will be observed performance, in terms of observed actions and behaviours, but also hidden brain activity including autonomous functions, emotional activity, and the workings of the unconscious mind - all active below the radar.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is an awareness-based capability. EI describes the ability to understand the needs and feelings of oneself and other people, to manage one's own feelings, and to respond to others in appropriate ways. It has been demonstrated that decisions cannot be made without reference to the limbic system, which is the emotional centre of the brain.

This craft workshop will look briefly at some of our behaviour preferences which operate below the radar. We will use a metaphor from nature, Tetrapap, to quickly characterize our behavior preferences, and then undertake a short project to use and reflect on the effectiveness of those behaviour preferences.

Doug is a founder member of SCiO and Director of EI4Change. His current focus is the enhancement of personal emotional intelligence in the workplace. www.ei4change.com

Session 3. Management research from a systems perspective - Nadine Andrews & Dr. Robin Asby

How do you know what you know? What we know depends on the questions we ask, and the kinds of questions we ask depends on our philosophical assumptions, which are often 'hidden'. How frequently do we hear that 'what gets measured gets done' but this assumes that the important things can be measured and that causality can be determined. Whether this assumption holds true for you depends on your view of the world - is there an external reality that we can objectively observe and accurately reflect? Or is our reality socially constructed, where things can't be known in themselves because they can't be separated from our knowledge of them? Or is it somehow a mix of both?

Using the recent government backed research into subjective wellbeing for public policy as a practical example, this interactive session will discuss different methods for gathering information and sense-making, locate the philosophical assumptions behind these methods (and locate your own assumptions), relate the methods and philosophy to systems theory, and explore the implications of these assumptions for research and for policy.

Nadine Andrews is a consultant, researcher and coach, currently studying for a PhD at HighWire DTC, Lancaster University and Robin is a Systems Thinker, Systems Consultant and Practitioner, author contributing to OU Systems Modules, School Governor, and a founding member of SCiO.

Leadership – a case of systemic failure?

William Tate

When systems fail, the public are usually fed a rotten argument: 'It's only one bad apple'. Think of the lone News of the World 'rogue' reporter who hacked celebrities' phones. This defensive balm (and barmy) response provides cover for the system. Apart from public and self-deception, an "individual acting alone" creates an easy target for media scapegoating. But if you Google, increasingly you find 'systems' and 'systemic' peppering commentators' and politicians' statements. Does this hint at a new level of maturity and awareness?

Systems operate at several levels. We read of Education Secretary Michael Gove wanting to speed up the system by which 'bad' teachers can be sacked. Cutting 'red tape', he claims, will allow head teachers to act more decisively. This performance system sits within the wider education system, which itself may be contributing to those 'bad teachers'. In parallel, a change in Ofsted's rating system during inspections elevates the criticality of teaching, creating an expectation that more teachers will be found 'not outstanding'.

In nursing, Prime Minister David Cameron claims: 'If we want dignity and respect, we need to focus on nurses and the care they deliver. Somewhere in the last decade the health system has conspired to undermine one of this country's greatest professions. It's not one problem in particular. It's the stifling bureaucracy'.

There are currently reforms to the legal, educational, health, welfare system, and so on. In the case of local authorities' child protection, the government is offering greater decentralisation. At the same time, local authorities' responsibility for schools is being withdrawn. High-level leadership makes system changes that it hopes will liberate leadership and management action at another level. But there is more to systems and leadership than examples such as these. There are wider and deeper issues concerning systems that need to be understood and mastered by every manager.

Systemic failure and the default model

When thinking about an organisation's management and leadership competence (individual, collective and systemic), it is the individual who inevitably becomes the first port of call. That metaphor is apposite right now. The Costa Concordia's captain, Francesco Schettino was immediately blamed for the cruise liner's

foundering on rocks near the Tuscan coast. From the way the 'abandon ship' process was handled, Schettino appeared not to fit the heroic leader model. But why was the liner so close to the shore? Was Schettino making a personal 'salute' to the island, perhaps to one of the company's past masters who lived there?

When the outcome of the enquiry emerges, among the siren voices we may find that the organisation and its cultural traditions played a role in the decision to steer a risky course. Schettino has reportedly told the investigating judge that there was 'insistence' by the firm on carrying out such manoeuvres because it was a good way to promote its cruises. But was personal hubris playing a part too? What mix of forces were at work in Schettino's psychological and physical hinterland?

Be on the lookout for systemic causes

Look out for systemic elements as well as rocks in these choppy waters – individual, team and beyond. When disaster strikes, and individuals are assumed to be at fault, a variety of systemic explanations begin to emerge and contribute to the wider picture.

Consider the three Edexcel examiners who were suspended in December 2011 and an inquiry launched into the exam system in England after discovering that teachers were given secret advice on how to improve their pupils' results? It then emerges that the country's three exam boards are in competition with each other to increase their market share of schools buying their exams. Those boards' existence depends on schools achieving good results. A little cheating helps all the parties. In other words, there are hidden incentives in the system. Who knows what words of advice are passed down to the individual examiners? Try to imagine the examiners' appraisal if 'their' schools produce poor results. Will they be assessed as upholding high standards, or of failing to understand their employer's commercial interest?

Again, there is a system operating here, buried within the wider examinations system. Is Edexcel's leadership's role to slap down the three bad apples and reassure the public, or is there something more systemic going on? And what is the government's responsibility for the dysfunctional examinations system and for reforming it?

Take the case of the Virgin high-speed Pendolino train from Euston to Glasgow which derailed on

...if you Google, increasingly you find 'systems' and 'systemic' peppering commentators' and politicians' statements. Does this hint at a new level of maturity and awareness?



Leadership – a case of systemic failure contd...

the west coast mainline near Grayrigg in Cumbria in February 2007, killing an 84-year-old woman and injuring 86 other passengers. Network Rail's David Lewis admitted having failed to check the points that day. It looked like an individual human fault, where blame could easily be allocated.

But at the coroner's inquest, Lewis, who was also the track supervisor, said that his team had been understaffed and that workers were not given the right tools or sufficient time to check and maintain the lines. There were said to be 'bully boy' tactics from management, who told them to get on with the job. It turns out that Lewis had sent an email to his bosses one year before the crash telling them to "stop ducking the issue and sort out this shambles once and for all". The Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) has accordingly taken criminal proceedings against Network Rail, which has admitted liability. Yet the trade union leader involved claims that "There remain systemic problems which have failed to be addressed since this derailment and they have been compounded by the ORR-driven cuts regime". Metaphorically, there are wheels within wheels, and systems within systems. There always are.

In cases such as these, what are the leadership issues? How do organisations view the matter of leadership? What should leadership have done, do and be doing? What is its role in learning and implementing lessons, and in ensuring a functioning channel for critical feedback? How is the leadership capacity of individuals, teams and the organisation developed, expanded and released? What is the leadership culture? And how is leadership spotlighted and held to account?

What we find when we explore systems

When you dig down, what you find in every system – school examinations, rail, banking, defence procurement – are other less obvious and less talked about systems that are very powerful in determining how the organisation performs. These systems enjoy a two-way relationship with leadership action. So while leadership should be applied outwardly, it must also examine itself and consider how its own process is working and how it too needs to learn, improve and enhance its capability.

Systems often constrain managers when they attempt to take on a leadership role. Think of the case where police were prevented from rescuing

a drowning child in shallow water, and could only stand by while they waited for fully trained and equipped fire and rescue service officers to arrive.

'Police officers in one of Britain's biggest forces have been warned not to hold out a hand to drowning swimmers - in case they are pulled into the water themselves. The guidance is contained in a health and safety policy document which says officers should also think twice before throwing a lifebelt, 'New safety rules tell police not to hold their hand out to drowning swimmers.' (Daily Mail, 1 October 2007)

There are at least five important factors affecting this case. First, an organisation that is risk averse. Secondly, uniformed police in close radio contact with their control room about the situation they find themselves in. Thirdly, a bank of controllers whose advice to officers is governed by a manual of standard operating procedures. Fourthly, a perceived risk of a policeman (assuming a male) or his widow losing her rights if her husband is injured or loses his life in an incident where he has acted in breach of standard operating procedures. And fifthly, a quasi-military structure where the first commandment is that the hierarchy must be preserved. In such organisations – as Lawrence Peter (of The Peter Principle fame) put it – "super-competence in an employee is more likely to result in dismissal than promotion, a feature of poor organisations, which cannot handle the disruption. A super-competent employee violates the first commandment" (Peter & Hull, 1969:47). The deadly combination of factors in the policeman's system makes it difficult for an otherwise courageous officer to use personal discretion to waive the rules and use initiative. In the public mind this looks like a lack of leadership; but in the blame game, it is the system that is to blame.

Shifting a long-standing traditional culture is hugely difficult, though not impossible. One can take steps to weaken hierarchy, replace a manual of rules with guidance (as I did in British Airways), expect and reward discretionary decision-making, and so on. But the starting point is to develop system awareness.

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.....Super-competence in an employee is more likely to result in dismissal than promotion, a feature of poor organisations, which cannot handle the disruption.

Systems Thinking for Adaptors and Innovators - Part 1

Geoff Elliott & Roger James

Abstract

In our consulting and teaching work we are challenged to meet a pressing requirement to increase the adoption of Systems Thinking to current societal challenges. As students of the pioneering thinkers in management, Beer, Ackoff and Deming we now see the struggles as their holistic emergent thinking is applied narrowly and formulaically.

Using information from occupational preferences we recognise the difficulty of Systems Thinking for the adaptor personality: a profile of tool users, of reductionist thinking and checklist methodologies.

It is perhaps a mixed blessing that we are seeing a growing interest in Systems Thinking as organisations in the public and private sectors both require better techniques to cope with pace and complexity of change. But this interest is being met with a mixed response from those providing answers and solutions. Systems Thinking is at the tipping point – where great work can re-establish the importance of Systems Thinking in the portfolio of interventions, or where the influx of ill-advised applications led by a coterie of poor consultants guarantees it is seen as a short term fad.

Our point of view comes from working as both practitioners and academics and working for 30 years. Avoiding age related dogmatism - the rigid orthodoxy of approach – we believe we approach assignments as open minded but not empty headed. We have built a perspective across many techniques, grounded in the past and challenged by the future. It spans the classic works of Ackoff, Beer and Deming developed in the factory and manufacturing but now applied to the global, technology led, knowledge industries. It is an era during which the use of information has been revolutionised from the slim pickings used for the elegant theories in Operations Research to the brute force of big data and model-less heuristics.

The practice of Systems Thinking has been adversely affected by the schism that appeared in Operations Research: in the early 1980's the discipline split. The chasm was between the methods for simple problems deemed incapable of dealing with complex social problems, and the methods for complex social problems too academic and obtuse for every day needs. The pragmatic middle, delivering practical solutions for difficult problems, became a barren area for academic research yet a significant area of our

real world assignments and practice.

Boisot and McKelvey have developed their own critique of the difficulty of organisational science – Management scholars thus face a stark choice: (a) either say something that practitioners want to hear but do so through narratives in which rhetorically dramatic effects are achieved at the expense of academic rigor or (b) maintain academic integrity by sacrificing perceived practitioner relevance. They are trapped between the characteristics of idea propagation which demand wide applicability and the need for idea novelty which demands academic purity. In Systems Thinking this is a specifically acute problem – real world problems, the wicked problems of Rittel and Webber ..., often produce hybrid even mongrel solutions. The pure meme-otype, beloved of academic research, is seldom encountered in practice despite its prevalence in case studies. Real solutions and the real world often involves fuzzy boundaries, purposeful agents and things that cheat.

Current practice in ST appears caught between the over-simple and over-elaborate. In the former critical elements and behaviours of the systems are ignored and simple solutions are forcibly applied, in the latter the complexity and detail of the technique appears out of line with a practical parsimonious solution. Either way ST stands to fail.

There is great variety in Systems Thinking Approach or as they are called methodologies . It is easy to know how to use each approach but the struggle comes with knowing why to use a technique or when to use it. Alternatively, we invent specific approaches, the latest being lean systems thinking, in ignorance of what has gone before in the belief of the new universal answer [the curse of the management fad].

Principled Cheating

Anyone familiar with Ackoff's work will recall his example of the mirror in the lift as a way of 'solving' the engineering of the slow lift – the shortest version of this comes from Re-designing Society and simply states "Complaints of occupants of an office building about slow elevator service were dissolved not by speeding up or adding elevators but by putting mirrors on the walls of the waiting areas. This occupied those waiting in looking at each other or themselves without appearing to do so. Then time passed quickly". Much longer, more elaborate and suitably embroidered versions of

Current practice in ST appears caught between the over-simple and over-elaborate.



Systems Thinking for Adaptors and Innovators - Part 1

this story appear in his other books – amplified to meet the sense of drama and pathos required of the academic writer.

In a practical engineering sense the mirror solution is no solution at all, but in the complex, real social system it is a clever and dramatic intervention. We teach the rock and bird metaphor: imagine trying to throw either into a waste paper basket at the far end of the room. Both obey the laws of physics – such that ballistics, gravity and aerodynamics are applicable to the trajectory of either. For the rock we could write a case study of formulating the problem, of solving the range of differential equations and of the training required of the thrower – all finishing with the event where the Olympic standard athlete hits the target: a perfect solution for an unreal and restrictive problem. Contrast this with the bird: here to achieve the objective the best solution cunning replaces athleticism. Simply place bird food in the wastepaper bin and without the need for the big equations, or the hero athlete we produce a much more applicable, scalable and robust solution.

People Cheating

Guilfoyle from the perspective of a serving police officer presents an excellent critique of the manic marriage of targets and deliverology so characteristic of the recent government agenda. The strength of the critique makes the case for authentic systems thinking but sadly here no answers are provided.

At the core of the criticism of the theory of governance by targets lies two overriding flaws with the reliance upon:

- ‘Synecdoche’—taking a part to represent the whole. In performance terms, this is where one takes the performance of a part of the system and interprets it as a surrogate measure of the whole system’s performance; and
- The assumption that governance by targets can ever be immune to ‘gaming’.

It is ironic that the biggest critics of deliverology fall into the trap of synecdoche in their own critique in denouncing all targets un-categorically, without understanding the difference between good targets and bad targets.

The challenge lies in discriminating between good and bad, not in decrying targets.

These criticisms are addressed by the appropriate use of Systems Thinking approaches: they are based on holism and address purposefulness.

Sharp Tools: Blunt minds

The pioneers of Systems Thinking ranging from Beer to Boulding or Deming would not fall into this trap; they understood the characteristics of the human world and the complexities that lie within. They had time to think – from the period where there were few one-size-fits-all solutions and where an elegance of ideas had to compensate for a shortage of data.

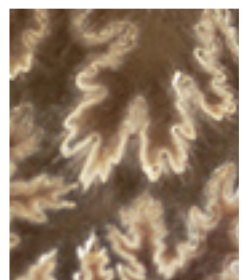
Socrates in his teaching had a strong distrust of writing suggesting that “it will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory”. Whilst Boulding encouraged the use of techniques he was equally guarded:-

“By means of mathematics we purchase a great ease of manipulation at the cost of a certain loss of complexity of content. If we forget this costs, and it is easy for it to fall to the back of our minds, then the very ease with which we manipulate symbols may be our undoing. All I am saying is that mathematics in any of its applied fields is a wonderful servant but a very bad master: it is so good a servant that there is a tendency for it to become an unjust steward and usurp the master’s place”

It is simple human nature to apply what we know, in contrast to what is needed. This is evident in the current fixation on lean methods as the one solution to improving efficiency; without asking questions of effectiveness. We need to understand where, when and if this is an appropriate response. Many excellent ST approaches are featured in the academic literature; such as Systems Dynamics, Senge’s organisational learning school or the interest in wicked messy problems.

Learning Management

Socrates in his teaching had a strong distrust of writing suggesting that “it will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory”.



Calendar

Dates for your diary

Please contact the PDP Team if you are interested in attending one of the Level One courses which are currently held in Manchester or Milton Keynes SC101 Viable System Structures SC103 The Systems Minefield SC102 Viable system Model – Dynamics

2012

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|-----------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Sun. 15th April | SCiO Development Day | Manchester |
| Mon. 16th April | SCiO Open Meeting & AGM | Manchester |
| Sun 1st July | SCiO Development Day | Manchester |
| Mon. 9th July | SCiO Open Meeting | London |
| Sun 7th Oct | SCiO Development Day | Manchester |
| Mon 8th Oct | SCiO Open Meeting | Manchester |

SCiO Board 2011

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Elections are underway for the board for 2012.

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