The Systems Approach in Coaching
developmental paper

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Who is the coach? The coach is the guy running up and down at the side of the football field trying to extort the win from the team without ever hitting the ball. So what (s)he does? The coach teaches her/his client. The coach deals with the processes and tries to teach her/his client by helping looking behind the processes. To be able to explain this properly, we need to revisit the very basis of system thinking. In this paper we will discuss and somewhat rearrange the layers of systems to reformulate how we see systems to finally make the role of the systemist clear.

Introduction

Roger Federer, when he was already celebrated as the best tennis player ever, hired a new coach saying that he wants to learn more. That he wants to become a better tennis player. Was he dissatisfied with his previous coach? – of course not. He was coached so well that he became the best of the best. To be sure this is not only up to the coach but it is impossible if the coach is not good.

This is precisely how we see the role of the coach in management. To use an example from another sport, the coach is the guy running up and down at the side of the football field trying to extort the win from the team without ever hitting the ball. How long (s)he stays with the team? For a few years at the maximum. The coach teaches the player all (s)he has to teach and then moves on. And the players hire another coach. That is how it is and how it should be. We caution against consultants who offer non-interfering-coaching, who promise not to give advices – they surely will not give you any advices, at least, no useful ones. These are coaches with empty bags. With Handy (2002b) we believe that all the coach has is her/his reputation and thus we believe that the non-interfering coaches will disappear – thus it is not worth dealing with them.

In the present paper we outline a revision of the system thinking of the coach. The role of the coach can be described in many ways; our description focuses on what the coach is doing with the processes. In particular how (s)he finds out which processes to automate and which to trust into human hands. The coach needs to recognize the role of the systemist and the implications of this role on the coach's work. We could say that this paper is coaching for coaches. We only want to teach the coaches what we have learned in our own coaching and then we shall move on.

Processes in systemic view

In this section we revisit some basic features of systems to find the real place for the processes in systemic view. Then we try to shed some light on the role of the systemist in coaching.

The first issue we want to put into order is the very nature of systems thinking. The systems approach is usually presented as the institutionalized holistic view as opposed to reductionism. (See e.g. Checkland, 1999a: A3) The holistic view emphasizes that the systems have emergent features not explainable on the basis of building blocks; that everything is interconnected. We completely agree with this view and acknowledge its important consequences, such as the ecological thinking, which most of the important system philosophers arrived at. (von Bertalanffy, 1969, 1981, Boulding, 1985, Capra, 1996, 1982, László, 2003) However, for the need of the coach this is too much. If (s)he attempts to consider the whole interconnected universe, her/his advices shall remain at the level of approach – there will be nothing to implement. Therefore, we suggest a new term: *wholism*; this would emphasize that the system cannot be reduced to components without loosing important things about the whole; but we do not take anything and everything into consideration rather only the system we are dealing with. Obviously, we do not claim credit for having this approach, it is adopted by many system thinkers; we only want to put additional emphasis on it by using a distinctive name to avoid pitfalls into which many coaches have fallen before.

The simplest definition of systems is that it is a set of elements standing in interrelation. (von Bertalanffy, 1969: 55). This means that we can separate a set of elements which interact with

each other significantly more than with anything else outside the set. The set is then the system and the outside is the environment. Flood and Jackson (2000) suggest that this would be enough to have the system defined, they only add the input and outputs to describe the mutual effects between the system and its environment. They (and many others) suggest that there may also be processes, which are supposed to be the activities of the interrelations. If we consider a complex system, we can expect that it is hierarchically built (e.g. Checkland, 1999b) and, according to the principle of near decomposability (e.g. Simon, 2002), this seems to be an indispensable feature of all complex systems. Now how these relate to each other in terms of complexity? It is clear that the simplest constituents are the elements, then we have to consider their relations. If the processes were the activities of the relations, they would be the next. However, it seems that this is not true.

In dynamic systems the interrelations of the elements are changing all the time and those that are somewhat stable form the structures (these correspond to the subsystems in the hierarchy). If we consider the structures being of higher complexity level than the processes we will try to build the structures first and only then the processes. Interestingly, the processes came into focus in two very different fields at nearly the same time: the quantum physicists are more and more keen to believe that the processes are primary to structures and in management we had several approaches/tools putting the processes into focus, such as the TQM and the various reengineering schools. If the processes were slow we might have the impression that the structures were stable and they regulated the processes. However, this was only true before the age of discontinuity (Drucker, 1969), before the age of unreason (Handy, 2002a), before the business became funky (Nordström and Ridderstråle, 2002). This also means that the processes are activities not of the relations but of structures.

There is only one thing remaining from the list, the environment. What is usually considered under the environment can be represented but the input-output relations, so these are also processes. However, there is another aspect of the environment, the environment also determines the validity of the system. If we think of quantum physics, the four force fields are the validity, these determine the quantum processes, which determine the structures, which determine the relations which determine the elements. Similarly in management the business environment, turbulent and ever-changing as it is, will define the business processes, etc. Yet, the validity is not entirely determined by the environment; the other factor to be considered in validity is the 'systemist'. Flood and Jackson (op. cit.) emphasized that a system is not the reality but our knowledge of that reality. However, it is not only the knowledge of the systemist that we need to take into consideration. Checkland (Checkland and Scholes, 1999) also speaks of the importance of the worldview of the systemist but so far the systemist has not been explicitly included in the system models. (Figure 1)

We have found that there are three aspects of the systemist that should be included: the paradigm, the values, and the language. It is easy to realize that the knowledge of the systemist is important and it is becoming more and more accepted. However, as many physicists, since Heisenberg (1962), argue that the observer should explicitly included into models of quantum systems, we argue that the systemist should be explicitly included into the business models of the coach. The reason for this is almost trivial: if we find a solution of a model (regardless if we use calculations or some softer methods) it will not be the solution for the reality but for the system as interpreted by the systemist.
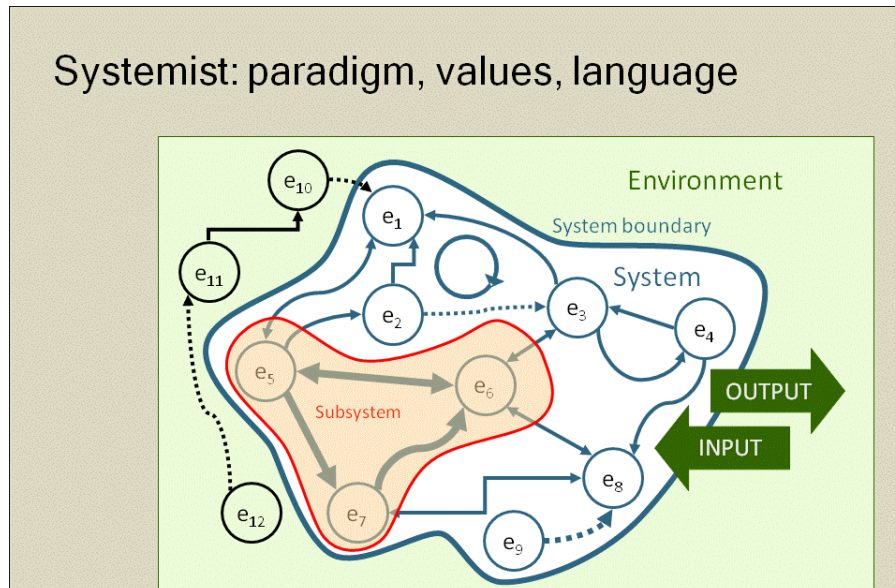
Figure 1: Layers of Systems

Discussion and further work

We have already said that what the coach does is teaching her/his clients. Today the knowledge increase is dictated not by the personal knowledge of the teacher (now the coach) but by the personal knowledge of the learner (now the client of the coach). This partly explains why the coaches come and go. The coach teaches her/his client what (s)he can absorb into her/his personal knowledge and then leaves. The other reason is that, if staying too long, the coach would also become a part of the system.

A coach always deals with processes. The elements are too small and thus can only be meaningfully modified using deep knowledge. If during the coaching the need for this appears, the coach uses the expert from the client organization. The coach cannot influence that part of the validity which comes from the environment. So the coach focuses on processes and changes the part of the validity that is embodied in the systemist's paradigm, values, and language. We could express this with Senge's (1990: 57) story:

"Once there was a rug merchant who saw that his most beautiful carpet had a large bump in its center. He stepped on the bump to flatten it out – and succeeded. But the bump reappeared in a new spot not far away. He jumped on the bump again, and it disappeared – for a moment, until it emerged once more in a new place. Again and again he jumped, scuffing and mangling the rug in his frustration; until finally he lifted one corner of the carpet and an angry snake slithered out."

This paper contains only a very brief and somewhat vague description of our ideas due to obvious space limitations. For the conference we plan to provide anecdotal evidence explaining why the three features of the systemist we included are exactly the paradigm, the values, and the language. We had some failed coach work until we realized that these are what we need to account for. There is a specially interesting story of how we realized that the language is an important aspect.

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