What is Systemic?

Understanding the Systemic Perspective in Leadership and Organizations

Introduction

The systemic perspective is a way of seeing and understanding the world around us. Rather than looking at isolated parts, a systemic perspective helps us recognize how everything is interconnected and how different elements influence one another. It is particularly valuable in leadership and organizations, where complex challenges often stem from the way we treat living social systems as if they were machines.

A systemic perspective invites us to step back and see the bigger picture. Instead of trying to fix individual problems without understanding their deeper causes, we learn to recognize patterns, understand relationships, and make interventions that work with the natural dynamics of a system rather than against them.

Why a Systemic Perspective Matters

Many of today's most complex challenges come from fragmented thinking. We try to break problems down into separate parts, assuming that fixing each issue individually will solve the whole. This approach has worked well for mechanical systems—like fixing a car engine. But it fails dramatically with living systems.

In organizations, we often address problems at the symptom level. A company has high turnover, so they replace employees. A team is not functioning well, so they bring in a single consultant. A family struggles with a child's behavior, so they treat the child individually. But a systemic perspective asks: What are the deeper patterns? How do the different parts relate to each other? What is really driving this behavior?

When we adopt a systemic perspective, we discover that lasting solutions require understanding the whole system, not just fixing isolated pieces.

What is a System?

A system is a set of elements that interact with each other. These elements can be people, but they can also be things, strategies, rules, or even past events. The key insight is that a system's behavior is not determined by the individual elements alone, but mainly by how they are connected and relate to each other.

We can distinguish two types of systems: Non-living (mechanical) systems like computers or cars work predictably—if you replace a broken component, the system functions as before. Living (social) systems like families, organizations, and teams are constantly adapting and evolving. They cannot simply be taken apart and reassembled without losing something essential because there is life, consciousness, and meaning in them.

The Hidden Layers of Systems

Like an iceberg, social systems have visible and invisible layers. The visible surface includes structure, roles, rules, and formal relationships. But there is much more below the surface—the 'undercurrent'—which includes unspoken agreements, unconscious patterns, emotional dynamics, historical events, and the way people truly relate to each other. This undercurrent is often what really drives a system's behavior.

A systemic perspective teaches us to look beneath the surface and recognize these patterns. This is where real change becomes possible.

The Three Basic Dynamics of Systems

Every healthy living system operates according to three fundamental dynamics. Understanding these helps us recognize what is working well and where disturbances or imbalances occur.

1. Who Belongs Here? (Belonging and Inclusion)

The first dynamic asks: Who belongs to this system? This is about recognizing and honoring all members who are part of the whole—including those who came before, those who came after, and those whose absence is present.

In a family system, this means acknowledging all family members across generations, including those who have died or left. In an organization, it means recognizing the founders, current members, and those who have moved on. When someone is excluded, denied, or forgotten, the system carries that wound. The excluded one still belongs at a deeper level, and that unresolved exclusion affects everyone.

When the first dynamic is healthy: There is a sense of belonging. All members know their place. There is respect for the whole, including gratitude for those who came before and what they have given. When this is disturbed: People feel invisible or rejected. There may be unexplained loyalty to someone outside the system, or resentment toward those who remain. The system carries hidden grief or unspoken secrets.

2. Balance of Giving and Taking (Reciprocity)

The second dynamic asks: Is there a healthy balance between giving and taking? Every healthy system operates on the principle of exchange. Something flows out, something flows in. There is a rhythm of giving and receiving.

In a family, parents give to children—care, protection, resources. Children receive. Later, this may reverse: adult children care for aging parents. In an organization, the company gives salary and opportunity; employees give their work and commitment. Clients give money; they receive products or services. When this balance is healthy, the system thrives.

When the second dynamic is healthy: There is gratitude and acknowledgment of what has been received. People willingly contribute and feel satisfied with the exchange. When this is disturbed: Someone gives too much and becomes resentful. Someone takes too much and feels indebted. There may be a pattern of sacrifice or entitlement. The system becomes stuck because the flow is blocked.

3. Everything Has Its Place (Order and Hierarchy)

The third dynamic asks: Is there a clear order and structure? Every system needs an order—not necessarily a rigid hierarchy, but a natural arrangement where everyone has their place and knows their role.

In a family, parents come before children. The parents have the authority and responsibility; children have the freedom to receive. In an organization, there is a structure and hierarchy—not to create domination, but to enable coordination and clarity. Someone is responsible for certain decisions. Someone leads. Someone follows. This is natural and healthy.

When the third dynamic is healthy: There is clarity about roles and responsibilities. People know who decides what. There is respect for leadership and structure. When this is disturbed: People are confused about roles. Authority is unclear or contested. Children try to lead parents. Employees undermine their managers. Or, conversely, rigid control and lack of freedom.

When All Three Dynamics Are Present

A healthy system has all three dynamics working together. Everyone belongs. The exchange of giving and taking is balanced. There is a clear order where everyone knows their place and can rest there.

In such a system, people feel secure, connected, and able to contribute. They know where they stand. They feel the support of the whole. They can relax and be themselves.

When Dynamics Are Disturbed

When one or more of these dynamics is out of balance, the system becomes stressed. Problems emerge—not because of bad intentions, but because the natural order has been violated.

For example: Someone is excluded from the family story, so their children unconsciously carry loyalty to them. An employee feels she has given more than she has received, so she becomes disengaged. A manager tries to be friends with their team instead of taking their rightful place, creating confusion about who is responsible.

A systemic approach recognizes these hidden disturbances and restores the natural order. This happens through awareness, acknowledgment, and alignment with the three basic dynamics.

Three Types of Social Systems

Origin Systems (Root Systems): Families and lineages. Here it is all about love, identity, and deep interconnectedness. Positions are often fixed—a father is father forever, a mother is mother forever. These are systems of belonging.

Task Systems: Organizations, teams, professional groups, associations. Here, responsibility, division of labor, and common interest are central. Relationships are more flexible and defined by agreements and roles. People can join and leave more easily.

Mixed Systems: Schools, healthcare institutions, family businesses, communities. These combine elements of both. There are formal structures and professional roles, but also deep emotional connections, dependencies, and unequal power relationships.

Systems Thinking vs. Systemic Perspective

Systems Thinking uses models and frameworks to map relationships and processes intellectually. Systemic Perspective goes deeper. It recognizes that social systems are living, and includes not just intellectual understanding but also felt experience, intuition, emotions, and the 'undercurrent' of relationships—the energy and patterns we cannot put into words.

What This Means for Leadership

A systemic perspective changes how we approach leadership and problem-solving. Instead of trying to control and fix, we learn to sense and work with the dynamics of the system. We recognize that our position shapes what we see. We become aware of who belongs, whether there is balance, and whether the natural order is honored.

Most importantly, we understand that everything is interconnected. Our actions ripple through the system in ways we cannot fully predict. Therefore, authentic leadership requires both awareness and humility—awareness of the whole system and humility about the limits of our understanding and control.

Reflection: Your Own Team and System

To deepen your understanding, reflect on your own team or organization through the lens of the three basic dynamics:

1. Who Belongs? Who are all the members of your system? Who has contributed and then left? Who is present but often forgotten or excluded? What happens when you acknowledge everyone who belongs?

2. Is There Balance? What is being given to whom? What is being received? Is there gratitude for what has been received? Is there resentment about what is being given? Where is the flow stuck?

3. Is There Order? Does everyone know their place? Is leadership clear? Do people respect the structure, or is it contested? Can people rest in their role? What happens when you acknowledge the natural order?

Understanding your team or organization as a system that operates through these three dynamics is the first step toward authentic systemic leadership. When all three are present and honored, the system naturally becomes more coherent, creative, and resilient.

References

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