

Integrating Systems Thinking and Psychosynthesis in Coaching

By Peter Stonefield PhD

Some of the biggest challenges individuals, communities, organizations, nations and civilization face in today's rapidly converging world are ever increasing complexity, unproductive conflict, resistance to change and environmental sustainability. Psychosynthesis models and techniques integrated with Systems Thinking can assist Coaches in making a huge contribution towards co-creating a sustainable world that works for everyone.

Today, Systems Thinking is rapidly becoming the dominant intellectual framework for organizational and community development, environmental sustainability, health care, brain science, educational improvement, business consulting, information technology, network theory and bio-informatics. The ascendance of Systems Thinking comes from research and a desire to more accurately understand the ever increasing complex challenges we are confronted with in a world where everything is connected. We are going through the most integrative period in history. Everywhere you look individuals, organizations, countries, technologies, medical approaches, business strategies, even sciences are converging. Even long standing business competitors are forming strategic partnerships to provide the "integrative solutions" customers want. Tayloristic analytical methods that view organizations as event driven machines cannot grasp the complexity nor facilitate the necessary perceptual, cultural or psychological changes needed to facilitate systemic transformation.

Systems Thinking

One of the central models in Systems Thinking is Complex Adaptive Systems or CAS. All CAS's are self-regulating, self-correcting, self-sustaining and evolve towards increasing complexity. They are a dynamic network of nested sub-systems or parts that have inputs, processes, outputs and ongoing feedback among the various parts. The quality of the interactions determines the quality of the systems outcomes. Systems self-regulate, self-correct and sustain themselves by creating "negative balancing feedback loops" that reduce variation in established patterns of behavior and interactions with the environment. However, when the interactions between the system's parts change, generating some chaos, a creative self-organizing process kicks in and can produce a new pattern of expression or attractor. Through a short lived "positive reinforcing feedback" a new sub-system or part is created which alters the systems interactions with its environment. Human systems change and evolve through self-organizing processes.

Eric Jantsch, Physicist/Biologist and author of *The Self-Organizing Universe* states "self-organization is a phenomenon underlying all levels of structure and dynamics, perhaps the vital force of the cosmos." He used this theory to analyze everything from microscopic particles to molecular bio-systems, organ systems, humans, teams, organizations, societies, the evolving ecosystem and galaxies. He argued that through self-organization human kind would eventually end up as "spiritual man". He didn't offer a map or model of personality nor any tools or strategies for how to facilitate self-organization in human systems. Psychosynthesis viewed from a systems perspective has the necessary models and tools for Coaches to facilitate self-organization in human systems.

In Psychosynthesis, each of us self-organize multiple sub-personalities or sub-systems like the Techy, Manager, Perfectionist, Guardian, Critic, Mother, Father, Doer, Dreamer, Buddy, Pleaser etcetera. Similarly, family systems and organizational systems self-organize multiple sub-systems. In a family system there are parental sub-systems, sibling sub-systems and family player sub-systems. Each of these sub-systems is also made up of sub-systems, parts or roles like the Mover, Opposer, Follower, Bystander, Blamer, Placator, Commander and Distractor. In an organizational system there are also sub-systems that

take the form of processes for decision making and power sharing. There are also cultural values, a sense of the future, departments, functions and perceived historical success strategies like “bet the company on an innovation and depend on heroes to deliver”. Some of the family systems roles like Mover, Opposer, Blamer and Commander also show up as parts of many individual and organizational systems. Frequently, the beliefs and behaviors of some of these parts are the result of some form of individual or cultural wounding.

In Psychosynthesis and Systems Thinking everything self-organizes around identity. In Psychosynthesis, sub-personalities are self-organized through identification with an image, idea, belief or perceived way to satisfy a need or want in some context. In family and organizational systems we identify with social roles, cultural memes, beliefs, mental models and ways of doing things to form nested sub-systems.

As we move through our day we automatically identify with whatever sub-system, sub-personality, role, emotion, assumption or idea is associated with the context or has the greatest pull on our sense of “I” or self. We in effect “switch heads” without thinking about it. Our “I” or self moves from one consistently recurring sub-personality, sub-system, habit or aspect of our overall identity to another. Once we become identified with an idea, emotion, assumption or sub-personality we in effect put blinders on. We select out data or information and make inferences that are consistent with how that sub-personality or sub-system sees the world. It is through some part of our identity that we make sense of various situational contexts and the world. Systems Thinker, Margaret Wheatley puts it this way “in all human systems everything self-organizes around an attractor that someone identifies with, there is a ‘self’ that gets organized. Once this identity is set in motion, it becomes the sense-making process of the organization. In deciding what to do, a system will refer back to its sense of self. We all interpret events and data according to who we think we are. We never simply “know” the world; we create worlds based on the meaning we invest in the information we choose to notice. Thus, everything we know is determined by who we think we are.”

Accordingly, virtually all resistance to change, greed, unsustainable habits and unproductive conflict are a result of over-identification with some aspect of identity. Once we become over-identified with some mental model, world view or belief, we can become so attached to it that different points of view are perceived as personal threats evoking a defensive reactive response. Our “I” or self gets pulled into defensive sub-personalities like the Judge, Fighter, Victim or Gossiper. From a Systems Thinking perspective our self-regulating “negative balancing feedback” loop goes into overdrive to defend and maintain the existing mental models or paradigms. In larger systems like families, organizations, cultures, countries and religions we see similar patterns. Some of these end up as wars.

Leverage Points in a System

One of the keys to improving the interactions of parts, overcoming resistance to change and facilitating system transformation is to discover the leverage points in the system. The most effective leverage point in any human system is the power to transcend paradigms or mental models. For example, many people today see Nature as a stock of resources to be converted for human purposes. Unless we transcend that paradigm we are in for an ecological and ultimately human disaster. Systems Thinking practitioners generally depend upon various forms of dialogue to gain awareness and transcend paradigms.

Psychosynthesis offers Coaches several techniques depending on the context. One technique is dis-identification which involves the discovery of the “I”, the center of awareness and will located in the middle unconscious of the Psychosynthesis egg diagram. The “I” in Psychosynthesis is different from all the many sub-personalities or sub-systems. The contentless “I” is independent of all the sub-personalities so it can become aware of what we are identified with in the moment enabling us to dis-identify or step back from and transcend the sub-system, paradigm, mental model, belief or reactive response through an act of will. Understanding the Psychosynthesis psychological laws that define the feedback relationships between sensations, thoughts, images and feelings enables individuals to leverage their will for greater

self-management. I call it iPower. With iPower we can wear our various “success strategies”, sub-systems, parts or paradigms as loosely fit clothing that we can be peripherally aware of, in the moment. This loose identification enables us to transcend paradigms, self-manage reactivity, increase role agility and deliberately self-organize new roles or sub-systems. A system that can see itself and act on what it sees is inherently more agile, effective and adaptive. In a Psychosynthesis coaching context people can be guided to discover this deeper “I” through skillful inquiry, inner dialogue, dis-identification exercises and gaining awareness of the various roles they play as they move throughout their day.

Understanding the stages of the act of will and translating them into a shared leadership and teamwork architecture enables people to align and strengthen their collective will and discover higher meaning in their work and lives.

Coaching Self-organization in Human Systems

In today’s rapidly changing world, there is always some new adaptive success strategy self-organizing in most living systems. Unfortunately, few people look for them until there is pain, trouble or chaos which tends to beckon more power than insight in an organizational context. Integrating Systems Thinking and Psychosynthesis can facilitate the self-organizing processes in human systems. In Systems Thinking, discovering what is self-organizing is called “Presencing” by Otto Scharmer. In “Presencing,” Systems Thinkers transcend current paradigms and discover or co-create next steps primarily through dialogue. Using Psychosynthesis guided imagery, creative thinking techniques and powerful questions, I facilitate a “self-organizing inquiry” in individuals and groups. It is a “back to the future” creative inquiry that loosens current identifications and reflects ‘on the system’ identifying past and emergent individual, organizational and cultural “success strategies.” Individuals and groups are transported to the edge of the system loosening their identifications and quickly self-discover insights into what is already trying to happen or self-organize in their higher unconscious minds.

In Psychosynthesis, the higher unconscious is the source of meta-motivation, meaning, life purpose, spirit and transcendent qualities like wisdom. I describe self-organization as a deeply creative evolutionary process. Carl Rogers put it this way, “The mainspring of creativity appears to be man’s tendency to actualize potentialities as the organism forms new relationships with the environment. This tendency may become deeply buried and awaits only the proper conditions to be released and expressed.” Self-discovered insights help both individuals and teams transcend current identifications and make shifts in mental models, behaviors and identity without lengthy discussions and unproductive conflict.

Coaching Self-Organization in Individuals

One of the biggest challenges in coaching individuals is a client’s over-identification with one or two major “success strategies” or sub-personalities like the “Commander”, “Know It All”, “The Greatest” and “Perfectionist”. Inquiring into where they want to go in their life or what’s next often leads to something that extends or amplifies their current major “success strategies”. They typically want to tweak or improve their major sub-personalities. Even when they choose something different, their over-identification with a dominant sub-personality holds them back. Without some dis-identification, people over-identified as “Commanders” typically want to become better at commanding. Getting better in this context often means getting rid of the complaints, gaining more control or some other way of getting things done. Facilitating a self-organizing inquiry transcends over-identification by moving people to the edge of their system and generating self-discovered insights that cuts through current mental models.

I begin the self-organizing inquiry process by asking individuals to reflect on their past. All the information is utilized in a creative guided imagery process generating images that reflect old and current major “success strategies”. Once the images are interpreted, the inquiry moves towards the future. An environmental scan identifies the current and emerging challenges of the context or organization they are

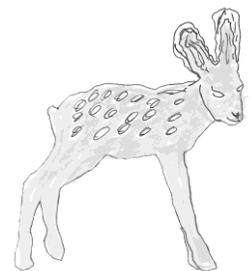
embedded in. The creative guided imagery process is repeated. The outcome is a next-step image, idea or “attractor” that metaphorically suggests what is emergent or self-organizing in their higher unconscious mind. Frequently, what emerges is the opposite of what they are currently over-identified with. This pattern reflects the philosophy of what is referred to in Psychosynthesis as the balancing and synthesis of opposites. <http://aap-psychosynthesis.org/the-balancing-and-synthesis-of-the-opposites/> The following examples are illustrative.

Joe M, a senior engineer for a major computer company, was focused and passionate about improving system reliability. He was recognized for his extraordinary technical skills and his ability to deliver results. When faced with obstacles, he intellectually and passionately overpowered anything in his path. Several years ago, Joe came face to face with the new complex world. New strategic partners, technologies and other organizational changes introduced new complexities and challenges to his work. Joe’s success now depended much more on his ability to engage engineers throughout the company and its partners to follow his technical lead. As Joe quickly discovered, the engineers and managers of those other groups often had different priorities. Overpowering passion, no matter how brilliant, was no longer viable. Joe had to adapt to thrive.

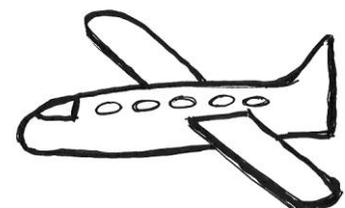
Using guided imagery, I guided Joe into his creative higher unconscious mind to discover what was already self-organizing. The metaphorical image of his current “success strategy” was a fire breathing “Tyrannosaurus Rex” flaming anything in his path. As the “T REX”, he demanded more of himself and others, and wouldn’t take no for an answer. His “T REX’s” mantra, “There is always a way to get it done. I have no time for idiotic politics and little patience with engineers who can’t grasp high level technical analysis.” Drawing the image brought a smile of knowing and enabled some loosening of his attachment.



The metaphorical image for his emergent adaptive “success strategy” was a “Deer” in the woods acutely aware of its surroundings. Before meetings he would imaginatively identify with the image of the “Deer”. Guided by the image, he began to spend time sensing the challenges and priorities of other groups and relating his proposals to their challenges. He told me, “at first the focus on understanding other people’s world felt awkward and foreign-not like me. My impatient “T REX” often flamed the “Deer”. However, as other groups started to show more interest and began to invite my participation, my “T REX” became more manageable.” Learning theorist Albert Bandura views symbols as vehicles of thought that enable people to store the information required to guide future behaviors. Identifying with the symbol turns it into an “attractor” that seeks relevant knowledge and organizes the various means of the mind to its ends. With a little positive feedback, it takes on a life of its own and over time becomes just another role, sub-personality or self. Joe now has the passion of the “T REX” and the sensitive mindset and quickness of the “Deer.” A few months later, people started to experience Joe differently. They began to respect and appreciate the drive of his “T REX.” Some were even drawn to it. “T REX” and the “Deer” became the platform for his new roles as Collaborative Leader, Thought Leader and Knowledge Coach.



Engineering Manager, Miguel O’s image for his current “success strategy” was an airplane. He associated this with a past role as technology coach and trainer. When the company was changing over to a new technology he went around the world training peers in the new technology. He loved and mastered role. He described it as, “learning a lot about how to be a culturally sensitive “Diplomat” and avoid unnecessary problems.”



The image for his new complementary next step was a fierce cartoon like mouth with “Big Teeth” stating “I want it done now.” He recognized the implications immediately. As a manager, he was very diplomatic and sensitive to relationships. In fact, he was reluctant to take a promotion because he was anxious about changing relationships. He projected this sensitivity onto his group and was reluctant to confront problem behaviors and make changes that would disturb relationships. He saw “Big Teeth” as developing his ability to passionately direct and make things happen when necessary. With “Big Teeth” and the “Diplomat”, he now could be passionately direct and demanding one moment and very diplomatic the next.



Another Manager, Henry M’s image of his current “success strategy” was two baseball diamonds. One of the games was the real game; the other was the expectations game in his head. As the coach at work, he was extremely impatient with mistakes in “fundamentals”. He also projected the cause of all difficulties onto other departments. People saw him as driven to win at all costs.

The image for his new “success strategy” was a single baseball diamond where he saw himself inclined on a Coaches bench occasionally looking at the sky and wondering where the “game” was going and how to develop his players. From this place, he surmised, he can foster a desire to win and a sense of urgency. But, instead of focusing exclusively on fundamentals and mistakes, he can lead by focusing on the big picture, facilitating collaboration and learning from outcomes rather than blaming. Repeated identification with the image and positive feedback turned it into a new “success strategy” that evolved his leadership. For more examples check out <http://www.slgllc.com/LeadershipAsStagePlay.pdf>

Coaching Self-organization in Larger Human Systems

Integrating Psychosynthesis and Systems Thinking models can also be extremely valuable in facilitating the transformation of larger human systems. Transforming larger human systems also involves the evolution of identity. However, in larger systems, it requires co-evolving multiple aspects of identity. In most situations it involves co-evolving the organizational culture, organizational success strategies and the leadership. The key is creating a context where the members of the organization can loosen their current identifications and transcends the current paradigm, world views, assumptions and mental models.

Similar to the individual self-organizing inquiry, I use a “back to the future” creative inquiry that reflects ‘on the system’ and identifies past and then emergent individual, organizational and cultural “success strategies. What makes the process so effective and time efficient is that the creative process cuts through positions, verbal jousting, hidden agendas and rationalizations to quickly establish a true spirit of inquiry, anticipation and exploration—a moment in time when people transcend their ordinary thought processes and discover and entirely new way of thinking together. The spontaneous and complimentary alignment of their insights immediately begins to align their subjective relationship with each other. It is almost as if some “whole”, some here to fore unrecognized connection between them becomes visible and starts to take form. Old conflicts start to heal and new appreciation for each other springs forth. Real dialogue emerges naturally. As one Director from an engineering organization put it, “the mutual respect was awesome.”

Creative insights, in the form of images and symbols emerge and become narratives that have immediate psychological traction as illustrated in <http://www.slgllc.com/SelfOrganizingInquirySunMicrosystems.pdf>

Given the mental models and paradigms of most organizational systems, they are not consciously searching for spirit. However, the influence of the Psychosynthesis Higher Self or spiritual dimension frequently shows up in their emergent images or “attractors”.

Evolving Consciousness

Integrating Psychosynthesis and Systems Thinking models can also be extremely valuable in facilitating the evolution of individual and group consciousness. Multiple studies have shown that less than 15% of the general population and less than 5% of managers have achieved the Inter-individualistic level of development characterized by growing self-knowledge, an increased concern for interpersonal relationships, greater mutuality, growing appreciation of uniqueness and strategic systemic thinking. This evolution from You to Me to We thinking is explained more fully in <http://aap-psychosynthesis.org/pre-conference/>.

Integrating Psychosynthesis and Systems Thinking provides powerful mental models and techniques that enable anyone interested in coaching to assist people in discovering where they want to go and how to get there. And do it in a way that heals wounds, resolves conflict, facilitates organizational and cultural transformation and accelerates the evolution of consciousness. All of which can accelerate the shift to a sustainable world that works for everyone.

Stonefield, Peter, 1992 Natural Leadership, *Association for Quality and Participation Journal*.

Stonefield, Peter, 2008 Transformational Change-Co-evolving Strategy, Culture and Leadership, *San Jose Business Journal*

Stonefield, Peter, 2010 “YOU” to “ME” to “WE”, Association for the Advancement of Psychosynthesis <http://aap-psychosynthesis.org/>

Scharmer, Otto, 2009 Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges

Wheatley, Margaret, 2000 Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World

Assagioli, Roberto, 2000 Psychosynthesis: A Collection of Basic Writings

Walsh, Greg, 2004 Creative Self-organizing Inquiry - Architecture for Teamwork, *Sun Microsystems*



Peter Stonefield, BSEE, MA, PhD. is President of Stonefield Learning Group. <http://www.slglc.com/> He was an electronic systems engineer before becoming a psychologist.

He completed over 200 consulting engagements and coached over 300 executives and engineers. Some of the training programs he developed are Managing Innovation, TQM, Agile Leadership, Knowledge Management, Managing Change, Creative Thinking and Architecture for Teamwork. He also facilitated the development of 20 global “Communities of Practice”. His client list includes Apple Computer, Baxter Laboratories, Dow Chemical, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Intel, Stanford University, Sun Microsystems and several agencies of the US Government. He was the principal consultant to the winner of the US President's Quality Award for Managing Change in government and the GSA Administrators Award for Managing Change. e-mail: peter@SLGLLC.com