SYSTEMIC TEAM COACHING Circularity

A Practical Concept to redirect systemic interfaces and help transform teams profiles and organizational cultures

---

Creating circularity and working with circularity is a major systemic team coaching technique or tool. In fact the approach can help a manager, a coach or a consultant very precisely participate to develop system effectiveness in organizations and teams.

- **Caution:** Circularity concerned with what happens between people and places rather than within people and places. In this sense, circularity is an energy interface concept. It helps us focus on system internal and external *energy* exchange. Beware that circularity is not another psychological and relational concept.

In fact, this concept is more than useful because it is a very performing alternative to the classical model of working on relationships within teams. It suggests that coaches change focus and move towards improving operational interfaces that affect results. Circularity is also an excellent systemic team coaching model to understand open, ever-changing, flowing, network and virtual systems. Consequently, circularity awareness is extremely useful to develop systemic understanding of classical hierarchical systems, of project and network teams and of other much more fuzzy or apparently chaotic organizational cultures and systems.

- **Caution:** In the same way as traditional Chinese medicine has approached the human body, circularity in systemic team coaching or systemic organizational coaching can offer an opportunity to develop a new paradigm for understanding organizational cultures based on energy flows and exchanges rather than based on people, on physical structures and on operational flow charts.

How can systemic team coaches model the patterns of privileged systemic energy flows in organizational systems? How can they pinpoint or predict future gaps in pertinent operational interfaces and exchanges within corporate environments? How can they perceive and help modify hidden architectures that define and limit information flow and interfaces in organizations? How can systemic team coaches learn to perceive forms of organizational DNA which could help us predict behaviors and processes throughout a specific company, from top to bottom, and what has that to do with organizational cultures?

To begin answering some of these questions, this article develops what could be considered a practical energy concept for the systemic analysis, diagnosis and development of organizations. This approach also provides clear strategies to accompany the evolution and transformation of organizational cultures. In effect, the circularity concept presented below describes a variety of implicit cultural organizational architectures which influence energy flows. These range from different types of limiting polarities to optimized circularity.

In an executive team coaching context, the words "polarity" and “circularity” are applied to energy flow. The notion of circularity is not kin to circular, but is to be taken in the sense of "circulation" as in circulating from place to place. Using this simple and practical concept, this article aims to demonstrate that energy circularity in organizational interfacing can offer a new systemic perspective in a very practical systemic team coaching or organizational coaching approach to help transform system cultures.

CIRCULARITY WHEN COACHING TEAMS

Energy-centered circularity as a concept can be approached in an intellectual way or as a very practical diagnosis and intervention tool. Very practically speaking, all the members of a given organization can participate in a thousand and one creative ways to create or increase circularity. Furthermore, this can be done in a wide variety of organizations with very different types of cultures. A systemic team coach can provoke useful circularity in organizational meetings. Meetings are indeed one key area in which creativity has often taken place to increase circularity. Below, for example, are some of the easier techniques for developing circularity that been implemented in the realm of corporate meetings.

- Rather than always have a given team’s meeting in the same location, have each monthly meeting take place in a different room, building, department, alternately on and off property.

To perceive the effect of in-team circularity, suppose that each executive team member hosts each consecutive meeting within his or her department, property, division, country, etc. Suppose that executive meetings in headquarters are the exception rather than the rule. The obvious first results will be an accrued sense of organizational communication and awareness, of more operational co-responsibility within the team and a much higher visibility of the executive team by the rest of the organization. Symbolically, regularly bringing leadership and headquarters down into the organization and circulating within their system will have a very powerful effect modifying the culture, opening communication channels, developing both a sense of team and team member availability to the rest of the organizational system.

- **Question:** Why indeed, are all executive team meetings held in the same location, and more precisely on the top floor of centralizing headquarters? Systemic team coaches can indeed have their executive client teams seriously consider the pertinence and benefits of organizing each of their meetings in different distributed locations within the larger organization.

To enhance interfaces with each hosting sub-system in turn, some organizations have arranged that their visiting executive team focus on the part of the organization that is hosting, in a number of special and prepared ways. A property visit, a yearly check-up and/or an evaluation of the local system's performance, a meeting with lower echelons or with important local clients in an open-door type of event, the launching of the year's local challenge or the delegation of a promising new project, can be examples of that type of action. All those actions in local settings can illustrate active development of executive proximity.

- **Question:** How can the executive team's active and focused presence best influence each local system for developing corporate awareness and a better results-oriented organizational culture?

To create internal circularity within the executive meeting process and within each monthly executive meeting, have the team members exchange a number of set meeting-process related roles on a rotational basis. Among others, the main meeting roles can be the moderator, the time keeper, the scribe, and as we have suggested above, the meeting host. In each meeting, each of these roles is to be held by a different executive to create in-team circularity. Of course, this meeting function circularity does not include the decision maker, already busy with permanent responsibilities.

Creating monthly meeting role circularity modifies systemic interfaces between the team members every month. Relational habits are modified before they even form, new interfaces are created, and every team member is permanently kept on his or her toes.

- **Question:** How can formally and systematically rotating meeting roles have a positive effect on the executive meeting's effectiveness?

Worldwide, systemic team coaches have long helped implement this rotating process in a large number of client teams. In time they have witnessed that these teams developed creativity in problem solving, co-responsibility, team empowerment, and a larger sense of organizational awareness. Furthermore, rotating meeting process roles creates a positive learning environment for all the team members. In time, the main effect has been to refocus energy away from the boss and more on lateral exchange between executive team members.

These are just a few introductory examples of how systemic team coaching can begin to create or increase system circularity. Operating such simple circularity processes within an executive team can have a major effect on the executive team, and in time on the organizational culture of the company it leads.

To read more on this see the delegated meeting processes article on this site.

- Within executive meetings, regularly surprise the team by modifying the physical meeting room layout.

Most rigid, structured or traditional organizations have their executive meetings in the same board room with the same people in the same roles, and with a very rigidly set room organization around a large oval table or a U-shaped configuration. The meeting process is generally as predictable as it is boring, focused on a succession of powerpoint shows. This reveals a conservative, ritualized underlying organizational architecture and a corresponding culture that favors analysis and predictability above all. Once these teams have arranged for everything to be totally ritualized, everyone in the system very earnestly wonders why it is so difficult to implement minor organizational change.

- **Question:** How can regularly modifying executive meeting room layout facilitate creativity, emerging processes, co-responsibility and team empowerment?

To practice meeting room circularity,

- The layout can each time be modified from a circle to a u-shape to a square to all team members facing one same direction, to sub-group work and smaller round tables, to a full circle again.
- Avoid "squats": people claiming territory by dumping their belongings on a chair with an obvious " I'm here to stay", "this is MY place" strategy.
- During breaks have someone liberate all the seats and clear the personal belongings onto surrounding tables judiciously placed along the room's walls.
- Use a larger room than necessary to permit emerging mobility.
- Avoid having the same people always sit side by side, thus creating visible clans or coalitions.
- From meeting to meeting, make sure the team leader's position circulates in the room layout.

Systemic team coaching can address such simple circularity tactics in meetings. That can do wonders to gradually and effortlessly modify organizational relational architecture, energy flow, and ultimately transform team and organizational culture. Team meeting circularity will open any willing team to adaptability, emerging strategies and creativity. Such circularity will help open each team member to other people, other realms of responsibility, other projects, departments and divisions.

In an indirect and general way, one of the main objectives of developing circularity in a team is to operate regular shifts, taking individual and collective attention and strategies away from territoriality towards greater interface creativity and energy-flow consciousness. Systemic team coaching thus accompanies very simple modifications of implicit meeting architectures. That is one easy method that most organizations can easily implement, in order to start changing energy flows and interfaces in their organization to ultimately modify the whole system's culture.

POLARITY

Any consequent amount of energy displayed in a given direction will automatically create corresponding energy in the opposite direction. This simple law of mechanical physics precisely describes the reason for electrical and relational resistance, on the one hand, and what happens in a large number of polarized relationships, on the other. Indeed, this well-known energy phenomena not only occurs in nature, but also in human communication.

- **Example:** To illustrate a simple sequence in a meeting, should any team member hold a strong position in almost any domain, one will often observe the almost automatic appearance of active or passive resistance to that position.

This will quickly create a system equilibrium within the team. This process is called a polarity. It will potentially bring all the team energy to a passive stalemate. Consequently, polarities in team and organization interfacing are not the most effective and productive types of interaction.

With simple systemic team coaching techniques, much more flowing and creative types of interfacing such as circularity can very easily and usefully replace polarities in teams and organizations in order to gradually modify their type of culture.

FROM POLARITY TO CIRCULARITY

Circularity is a form of hidden or implicit organization architecture that fits in to a larger energy-focused concept. This larger concept can be used as a very fine tool for team and organizational diagnosis and development. Managers, consultants and systemic team coaches can use it to better comprehend and simply modify communication flow between individuals, within intact teams, and ultimately between teams. One needs to keep in mind that modifying the architecture of communication flows and interfaces ultimately modifies the more tangible aspects of organizational cultures, and has a huge influence on their results.

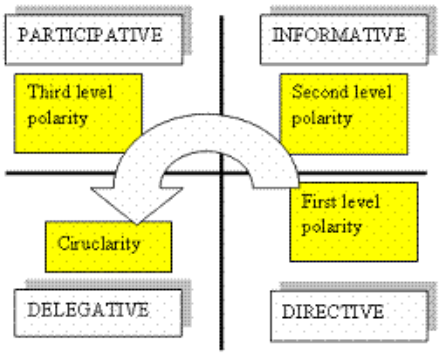
Systemic team coaching experience using polarity and circularity concepts in the ways presented below has occurred both during systemic team coaching events and during team meeting supervisions within executive teams and on all other organizational levels. The tool is so simple that it can be rapidly integrated and used by any aware systemic coach, individual or team.

Very synthetically, observing circularity in team meetings consists in carefully observing who speaks after whom and for how long, no matter the subject. The next step will be to gradually and consciously modify these interfacing processes through coaching and other communication tactics, to increase the creative flow of interpersonal exchange towards more circularity.

- **Example:** Consider that whenever anyone offers any input in a meeting, he or she should not input again until 5 (or7..) other participants have given their input.

More precisely, a large part of the communication flow in formal systems usually operates by following patterns described as one of several levels of "polarity". These interfacing processes illustrate, reveal or confirm underlying polarized team structure and organizational culture.

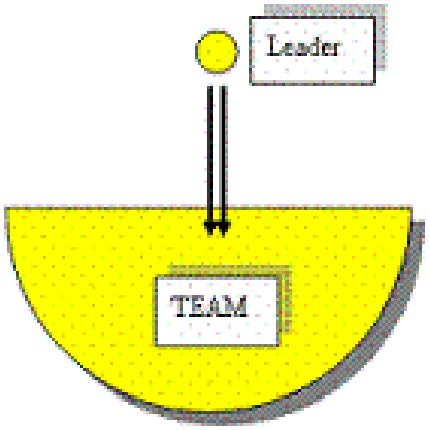
There are notable differences between three different types of polarized team relational architectures, or levels of team polarity. We have also observed that these different levels of polarity can all lead to circularity when a team chooses to increase it's energy flow and reactivity. These simple observations are central when systemic team coaches accompany teams and networks.



Note: We have chosen to display this concept in the above way to make obvious links with other organizational concepts such as management styles, team profiles and organizational cultures presented in other theories and models (Blake and Mouton, Hersey and Blanchard, PCM. etc).

FIRST LEVEL DIRECTIVE POLARITY

First type of polarity occurs when organizational or team members excessively focus on their leader. In turn, those leaders play a very central role by choosing to input very frequently, if not all the time. This type of cultural architecture is revealed when leaders initiates lengthy one-way formal speeches such as during public addresses and conventions, while all listen, relatively passively, delegating responsibility upwards. The preferred room layout for this type of relational architecture is when all are facing forward as in a theater or classroom, and is typically reinforced with a podium for the speaker. In this setting typical of some organizational cultures, the orator or orators deliver their speech at the whole undifferentiated assistance as if it were one single collective person or entity.



In this type of system polarity, the team or organization is treated as one ensemble. Much as when one speaks to a "public" or a "floor", individuals in the crowd are not expected to exist and input during such meetings. Kin to when attending Sunday sermon, the group is treated as an undifferentiated mass. Importance is given to the subjects or themes chosen and treated by the leader. Importance is not given to team members as individuals. They are to align. In these settings and in the organizational cultures that they reflect, normal members are rarely given the opportunity to speak, especially not to differ. They are expected to give their approval if not to applaud.

This “public speaking” level of polarity is commonly experienced in formal, traditional family-type, conservative, quality or product oriented and rather directive organizational cultures. This meeting format reveals a hidden architecture common to many of that type of organization's interfaces. Consequently, these organizations are often micro-managed by the owner, founder or president who holds most of the vital information and makes most decisions. That leader is expected to inspire, define direction, program, etc. If coaching is ever considered in these organizations, it will concern coaching strategic legal and financial issues with the CEO and it will occur in a strictly confidential setting. These organizations often call on public speakers who reinforce their underlying organizational culture by proceeding in an identical fashion with the employees, with one-way motivational speeches.

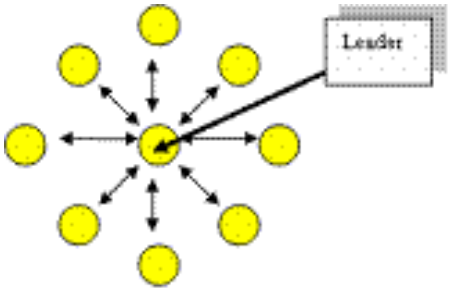
Meetings displaying a first-level polarity will often induce different forms of passivity among team members in the assistance. The latter rarely respond publicly, but will choose to share their perceptions or deal with their issues later, in one-on-one relationship with the boss behind closed doors or more rebelliously, with others behind the boss's back. All delegation in these organizational cultures flows up towards the boss who is expected to decide on everything.

First level polarity interfacing and the corresponding hidden architecture often occurs in stable, traditional, provincial and conservative organizational cultures. These organizations generally keep predictability at a high level and change is considered dangerous. Obviously, its capacity to react to a rapidly changing environment and to implement creative collaborative and teamwork is rather low. Incidentally, becoming aware of the passivity induced by first level polarity reveals the fundamental discrepancy between public speaking and coaching.

To acquire a KINDLE book on Team and Organizational Systemic Coaching

SECOND LEVEL INFORMATIONAL POLARITY

Second-level meeting polarity takes place in organizational cultures where the leader publicly discusses issues with each one of the team members in turn. Occasionally, the same centralized one-on-one process can occur within the team with another person temporarily holding the leader's central position. The resulting interfaces can be illustrated as a star-shaped structure with one central expert or the leader positioned in the middle or acting as a hub.



In these informational polarities, we have often noticed that the discussion content and tone may often be argumentative between one central "expert" person and each one of the other team members. In effect, the central person (A) will propose a comment. When someone answers, A argues back with the same position,. Then another comments and A speaks again reconfirming the same idea. Then another comments, and A speaks again, etc. These systems spend less time conversing or in dialogue than they do convincing, arguing, and debating around a central controlling hub. The meeting process in this type of organizational culture reveals that the key concern for the central members is control.

The energetic result indeed keeps the formal or informal leader in a controlling and content-oriented central position. The team's basic assumption is that to impose your decisions in a given field and within the competition, one needs to display over-detailed expertise with over-detailed convincing arguments. Obviously, these organizational cultures generally favor Powerpoint presentations delivered by very well prepared and overbearingly competent experts, in U-shaped room layouts .

Consequently, informational polarities occur during meetings within control-oriented, defensive or offensive, competition-centered, centralized organizational cultures intently focused on developing their market shares with roll-out strategies implemented by their personnel in a quasi-military fashion. Within this type of push strategy and organizational architecture, most of the system's decisions and information takes place in one-on-one competitive relationships. Predictably, teamwork is low in these systems, just as territorial feuds are very common.

As a consequence of low teamwork, both executives and middle management will favor one-on-one coaching rather than any team coaching approach which would have them question and remodel their implicit territorial architecture. In these systems, we have observed that an overwhelming amount of time and energy can be spent in territorial defensive or offensive power games.

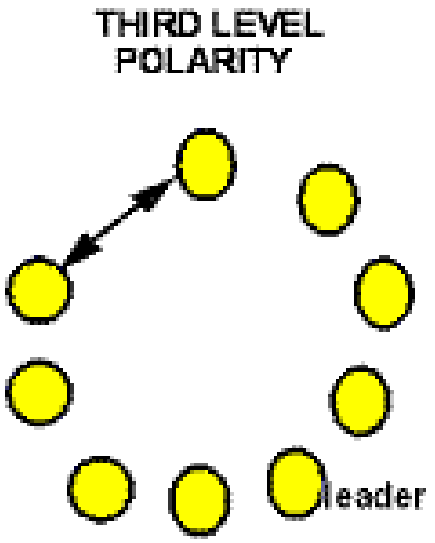
When this type of polarity takes place around the leader in a central position, the effect is that each team member is only focused on working with the boss. None of the team members really and effectively work together. Consequently, the organizational culture and architecture is vertically centralized, has non-cooperative territorial divisions, departments, services, and people. The caricature of this type of centralized system is illustrated in so-called matrix organizations where in effect, all departments report directly to headquarters rather than be allowed to implement lateral cooperation within local teams. In this way, matrix systems originally designed to increase lateral communication actually serve to give headquarters more control.

THIRD LEVEL RELATIONAL POLARITY

Third level polarities usually take place on two subtly different energy planes. On the one hand, a conflict or argument is played out between two team members as if they were on stage vying for attention, and on the other, the rest of the team is collectively put in a passive position observing that central unproductive relationship.

- On the first energy plane occurs a series of exchanges between two fighting members of the team. On the second energy plane, the rest of the assistance, often including the boss, will be invited to be passive witnesses to the conflict.

Third-level polarity is an offshoot of second level polarity as if the star system around one person has slipped into a competition between two people vying for the team's support, affection, emotional attention or approval. The underlying question put to the team and its leader is who is right, or more precisely who do you prefer? The team, and more particularly the leader is expected to choose between the two opponents. As the choice generally cannot be made, the two continue their stalemate-fight while the team and the boss get stuck in collective passivity.



While the conflict often concerns a professional issue, the real question put to the team, the organization and the boss is "who do you prefer". The system gets stuck because the problem is more of emotional or relational in nature than strictly technical or professional. Third level polarities often take place in clan-laden organizational cultures with two powerful old timer or barons having it out for collective attention, each entertaining hidden coalitions and behind-the-scenes manipulation strategies.

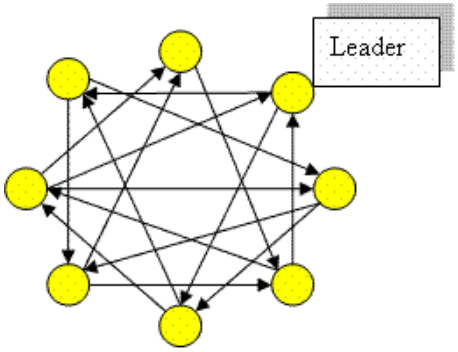
This repetitious process is therefore passivity inducing, pushing the team and the boss into an observer's or voyeur's position as the two leading actors have it out. We have observed this process in teams and systems that display a high quantity of relational interactions with emotional-laden history.

We could formulate the interpretation that the central relationship between the two polarized individuals is used to concentrate all the team's and leader's energy. The underlying objective may often be to render the team inefficient to avoid facing future-oriented professional challenges and change. This type of organizational culture and relational architecture is more common in mature organizations with heavy history that privilege participation and approaches designed to reach consensus decisions through lengthy consulting processes.

INTERRUPTIVE ENERGY CIRCULARITY

Circularity has already been briefly introduced in this article's introduction. IIdeally, circularity takes place in a team or communication system when the discussion or information flows freely and rapidly in all directions and between all of its members.

At any one point in time, it could seem that circularity is similar to first level polarity: one person is speaking and all are listening. The difference is that the speaker does not deliver a long speech, but makes a very brief comment, getting right to the point. Then another participant follows, and another, and another within an unpredictable or emerging and flowing pattern.



In circularity processes, it often seems that each emitted information bit is not aimed at one person in particular, but directed to the center or to all the team members simultaneously and equally. The organizational culture and interactive architecture or interfacing structure resulting from this communication process could be qualified as a real "network-system" such as in some creative start-up companies. It could be illustrated as follows: A-all, D-all, F-all, B-all, etc.

Luckily in mature systems, all this rapid information exchange is not happening completely simultaneously. Each short emission to all is followed by another and another. The result is rapid and multi-direction flowing energy that elicits unpredictable reactivity in an apparently very simple and spontaneous exchange process. In different organizational cultures, this can of course be either completely chaotic or extremely constructive.

Comments that are offered in positive circularity-type dialogue often seem to follow a constructive or building pattern, such as "yes, I agree, and we

could...". These comments replace the more limiting "yes, but..." characteristic of competitive systems, or "I have another idea..." illustrative of more contradictory interpersonal stances which would characterize negative circularity.

In positive circularity processes, complete participation from all members of the team in apparent disorder often takes the discussion into unexpected directions. This is often a good indicator of creativity and shared responsibility for the problem at hand. Of course, to arrive at positive productivity, team members need to have developed a minimum of maturity shared on common knowledge or understanding, tools and objectives.

For a SELF-COACHING journey on your manager and/or coach skills in polarities or circularity: Just register, and answer the questionnaire + small fee for the complete report!

THE CASE FOR CIRCULARITY IN TEAMS

This systemic team coaching article obviously presents a bias for circularity in the above presentation of complementary organizational cultures and architectures. In fact, in all teams and organizations, there is a time for each type of polarity. Public speaking is a useful example of the first level polarity, and debating of the second level. All these communication forms or processes have their place with obvious advantages and limits.

Developing circularity as a cultural architecture for teams, organizations and human systems is a useful tool for very specific reasons. Indeed, the circulation of energy as proposed by the circularity model is one easy and practical way to increase creativity, empowerment and reactivity in most organizational cultures Furthermore, this type of organizational architecture is most in synch with the information age and closest to what could be identified as a very creative start-up or network type of structure.

Should a system believe that the way to success is through a culture allowing better delegation, more real sharing of responsibilities, more interpersonal problem solving and commitment, better creativity, shared local empowerment, then developing team circularity will definitely help. Furthermore, opposing circularity processes as "better" than various polarities would be a polarity in itself. It is more useful to propose circularity as a means to develop more fluid organizational networks by initiating change in a practical way.

The ways to do this are quite simple and behavioral, and can be listed as the following list of dos and donts;

- DO feel responsible for the meeting process and results, no matter your position or role. A successful meeting is everyone's responsibility, not only the moderator's or leader's.
- When speaking DO look at everyone and not only at the one person you wish to interest or convince. No need to only consider the team leader or a favorite sparring partner.
- DON'T abuse of anecdotes and historical or contextual explanations to illustrate your position. Long filibustering developments cut the dynamic flow of collective dialogue.
- DO get to the point quickly, real energy flies in sparks.
- DON'T dwell on a joke or crack another one right after one is told. Humor is fun, and a quick funny comment works wonders if you don't lose focus on the matter at hand.
- DO express your feelings if you are bored or when lost. There's a good chance that several other team members feel the same.
- DON'T slouch, but sit on the edge of your chair to express energy and interest. Energy is known to flow much better in straight spinal columns
- When someone contradicts you or openly suggests an idea that is different from yours, DON'T immediately jump in to defend your point of view, but look at other team members and wait for third, fourth and fifth opinions.
- If a debate is taking place between two people DO open the discussion to others, by asking for third, fourth and fifth opinions.
- If you have several interesting thoughts on a subject, DON'T present them all at once thereby monopolizing the discussion. Just present one idea and save the rest for later, after other people have reacted and also volunteered their ideas.
- If some team members have developed the bad habit of making long electoral filibustering speeches, DO tell them to get to the point. In such cases, an "underdog" type of intervention is best, such as by playing "Stupid": "I'm sorry, you've lost me, can you tell me in simple terms what you're driving at?".
- When someone is hogging the stage, DO invite him or her to sit down and relax for awhile.
- When a discussion seems to slow down or get stuck, DO ask someone new for their input: "what do you think Joe?" The bored-looking participants will usually give good insight as to what's going on and throw the subject or discussion on a different loop.
- When things look really stuck, DO call for a U.N.-style diplomatic break, and try to work out the process stalemate off-stage.
- Etc.

CIRCULARITY FOR SYSTEMIC TEAM COACHES AND LEADERS

Although each also reflects large organizational cultures and implicit architectures, all types of energy exchange from polarities to circularity take place during team meetings, both between the team members and with the team leader. Very naturally, depending on their training and personal style, team leaders will be pulled into team processes, either in a central position, valued for his or her bright speeches (star system), or contested, or drawn into arguments and conflict with one or several preferred partners. In more mature team and organizational cultures, a natural form of circularity is quickly and naturally installed and everyone including the team leader learns and grows together.

- It is often observed that team leaders very easily slip into first or second level polarities If this occurs too often, the process will unfortunately reinforce centralized communication processes within their teams.

One of the fundamental competencies of a systemic team coach, a manager or leader consists in modeling different types of communication modes, and stretching the team into other modes of interaction, ultimately towards a more fluid circularity process. In this case one's objective is to get the system to practice circularity as often as possible so as to install a more open and dynamic team interface architecture.

To achieve this goal several strategies are at hand:

- The systemic team coach or leader can avoid all central geographic positions, such as facing the group or standing up on a podium. A preferred place would be to direct the team's interactive fluidity from within the group, holding a position similar to that of any other team member.
- The systemic team coach or leader can also avoid presenting and arguing his or her own models and point of view in a lengthy and convincing way. This especially holds when facing a rebellious or contradictory team or team member.
- In the event of a disagreement, the discussion is to be delegated into the team, eliciting other ideas, dialogues, new positions, different points of view. Total participation from everyone is the objective rather than a verbal joust between hard-headed tenors and "to the finish". In those cases, nobody wins.
- It will be useful for the systemic team coaches and leaders to limit personal interventions to just clarify or reformulate each team member's input. Better leave discussion to the team itself, and speak no more than any other team member, if that much.
- It will be likewise useful to delegate facilitation or writing on the paperboard and avoid holding the floor. The systemic team coach or leader will let the team moderate its own work with an occasional rotating "facilitator" chosen among the other team members.
- The systemic team coach or leader will also use subtle gestures and body language to elicit silent team members' comments, to open the discussion to new and different points of view whenever "old timers" and "barons" seem to take over the floor and hold it for too long.

These simple strategies will be used as modeling techniques throughout team meetings. They are in keeping with the strategy of delegating team process to team members themselves as the meeting is taking place. The objective is to bring the team to perceive the leader or coach as just another team member, who will bring in an occasional personal precise question or change in point of view, much like anyone else, in a strategic and opportune time. And of course, the leader will make decisions, whenever necessary.

This fluid position held by the leader within a circularity process will help the team gradually modify its systemic communication process and operational interfaces. By modifying the communication process, through interpersonal interaction, the objective is to increase the team energy fluidity and develop the responsibility of each team member and the system as a whole. This process aims to increase personal commitment of all team members and increase the maturity of the ensemble.

This systemic team coaching gradual learning process simultaneously develops team co-responsibility, creativity, delegation, empowerment, reactivity and motivation and rapidly influence team results for the better.

To acquire a KINDLE book on Team and Organizational Systemic Coaching

Copyright 2008. www.metasysteme-coaching.eu Alain Cardon