Transactional Analysis: caring and understanding communication impact in a systems context

Systems Thinking

Open mind; new thinking and shared thinking

Open heart; deep genuine empathy for the whole system

Open will; practical application in the whole system

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Systems Thinking

When Peter Senge one of the academics behind the theory and practice of systems thinking in organisations was asked to describe 'Systems Thinking' he said: 'Are you part of a family?'

This response is why I think it's helpful to align the work on Transactional Analysis with Systems Thinking and Organisational Culture. The latter is ostensibly how the 'system' responds on a regular basis, its patterns of belonging and expectation, how it enables or disables trust, truth and safety. It's about how things feel, not how things are portrayed in the policies and procedures, it's what it's really like to work in this organisation.

A healthy organisational system is comfortable with ambiguity, is diverse and inclusive, and works from the basis of collective intelligence. In this organisation you could expect to see a lot of Nurturing Parent, Adult and Natural Child Communication. An unhealthy system is the opposite and works on the basis that knowledge and position are power, it has exclusive groups and norms. In this organisation you could expect to see a lot of Controlling Parent and Adapted Child.

Think about these questions:

If you were invited to produce a health check on your organisation what would it say?

What really needs to change to improve the health of your organisation?

What would you really say to senior leaders if there was no negative recourse?

When thinking about your responses in the context of Transactional Analysis what are you discovering?

Why is this relevant?

Having systemic awareness about yourself, your team, your organisation and the communities you serve allows you as a leader to tune into the hidden dynamics, patterns and energy. This can help you to tap into change and possibilities.

To be this kind of leader requires opening of self and letting go of long-held patterns of convictions and stories. It requires you to co-create an environment of belonging and growth and dare I say open yourself to being vulnerable, wrong and not knowing.

Wendy Palmer defines three creative abilities of great leaders:

- Inclusiveness: the ability to use their presence in a non-verbal way to say; 'we are all in this together' (Nurturing Parent and Adult)
- Centred-Listening: listen for the whole, without interrupting, suspending personal feelings (Nurturing Parent and Adult)
- Speaking-Up: the ability to speak one's truth with clarity and precision (Adult) - without aggression (Controlling Parent) or collapse (Adapted Child).

Think about these questions:

- How inclusive are you and what gets in the way of you being more inclusive?
- How well do you listen, especially to difference?
- Are you assertive?
- How would the person you trust the most respond to 'seeing you' in these questions?
- When thinking about your responses in the context of Transactional Analysis what are you discovering?

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First Systems First

We are all part of different systems. Going back to the family as a system, what do you see in those webs of relationships? Undoubtedly you will have contributed to results that nobody wanted, you will have misread situations, you will have behaved in a specific way because that's 'your place' or that's 'what's expected'. When you belong in a system there are unspoken rules, things it's ok to talk about, things it's ok to do and the opposite. These expectations create patterns and these patterns inform thinking, communication and the inner voices of fear, judgement and cynicism. This is all related to what Eric Berne called Ego States, specifically to the Parent ego state; 'life as it was taught' and the Child ego state; 'life as it was felt'.

Think about these questions:

- What emotions were/are allowed in your family of origin?
- What were/ are the work ethics and values in your family of origin?
- How do you show up physically and emotionally in your family of origin?
- How does all of the above impact how you show up in your 'work/professional' system?
- When thinking about your responses in the context of Transactional Analysis what are you discovering?

Organisational Systems: Joining, Belonging, Leaving

As we 'join' a new system we come into what was already in place and we bring the impact, learning and assumptions of every system that we have ever been part of into that space. As we 'belong' in a system we learn what the rules of belonging are and whether or not they are conflicting or comforting to us. As we 'leave' a system we leave our impact, our legacy behind, we may have 'left' the building!' but we will always be part of the story of that system. This is the emotional Parent and Child ego states and is all about emotions and feelings. All of this is somehow held in the invisible memory and information fields of the organisation. We will almost all of us have experienced this through our intuitive sense; something that is invisible and unsaid in our relationships, our teams and in the wider organisation.

Think about these questions:

- Think about a time when you felt really safe in your workplace (eg: safe to speak up, share a different view, challenge the boss). What conditions enabled you to feel this way?
- Think about a time when you felt really trusted in your workplace (eg: trusted to self-manage, trusted to take the initiative, trusted to take the lead) What conditions enabled you to feel this way?
- Thinking about these situations, how would you connect your responses to the idea of truth?
- When thinking about your responses in the context of Transactional Analysis what are you discovering?

What does this mean in the context of leadership?

The invitation is to see the unseen, feel what is going on as well as see what is obvious. Engage your emotional senses and your felt senses. The days of ascribed leadership power are over, the future calls for a new kind of leadership.

There are three core capabilities that system leaders develop in order to foster collective leadership. The first is the ability to see the larger system. In any complex setting, people typically focus their attention on the parts of the system most visible from their own vantage point. This usually results in arguments about who has the right perspective on the problem. Helping people see the larger system is essential to building a shared understanding of complex problems. This understanding enables collaborating organisations to jointly develop solutions not evident to any of them individually and to work together for the health of the whole system rather than just pursue symptomatic fixes to individual pieces.

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The second capability involves fostering reflection and more generative conversations. Reflection means thinking about our thinking, holding up the mirror to see the taken-for-granted assumptions we carry into any conversation and appreciating how our mental models may limit us. Deep, shared reflection is a critical step in enabling groups of organisations and individuals to actually 'hear' a point of view different from their own and to appreciate emotionally as well as cognitively each other's reality. This is an essential doorway for building trust where distrust had prevailed and for fostering collective creativity.

The third capability centres on shifting the collective focus from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future. Change often starts with conditions that are undesirable, but artful system leaders help people move beyond just reacting to these problems to building positive visions for the future. This typically happens gradually as leaders help people articulate their deeper aspirations and build confidence based on tangible accomplishments achieved together. This shift involves not just building inspiring visions but facing difficult truths about the present reality and learning how to use the tension between vision and reality to inspire a truly new approach.

Finally, for now:

- When thinking about the above three paragraphs in the context of Transactional Analysis what are you discovering?
- What does all of this mean in the context of shifting your thinking, behaviour and feeling about leadership?

Make some notes about the sense this has made and the questions you are left with.