

Some key ideas from:

Context, Context, Context

**How Our Blindness to Context Cripples
Even the Smartest Organizations**

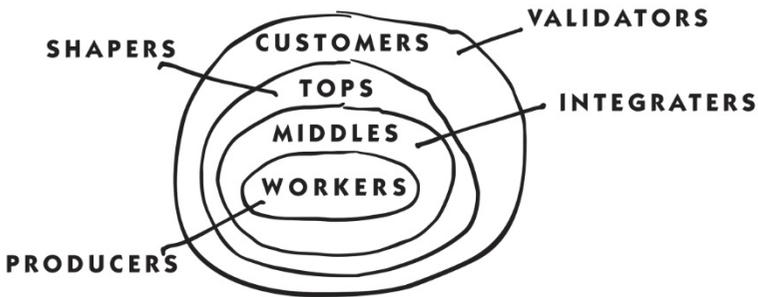
Barry Oshry

THE PLAN for total system empowerment

SHE: According to THE PLAN, all organizations, in fact all human systems, are organic entities engaging with ever-changing environments. In these environments, there are dangers to be avoided and opportunities to be taken advantage of. The fundamental business of all such systems is to survive in their environments and, if possible, thrive by successfully coping with dangers and prospecting among opportunities.

HE: Tell me more.

SHE: THE PLAN is based on the idea that each part of a system – Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer – because of its position, has a unique contribution it *can* make to the system's ability to survive and thrive.



SHE: According to THE PLAN, the system needs Tops to function as SYSTEM SHAPERS, Workers as SYSTEM PRODUCERS, Middles as SYSTEM INTEGRATORS, and Customers as SYSTEM VALIDATORS. When all this is happening, excellence is sure to follow.

HE: *When* all of this is happening.

SHE: That *is* the point.

Tops as System SHAPERS

- SHE: According to THE PLAN, Tops are uniquely positioned to function as the SHAPERS of the system. They do this by looking *outward*, scanning DU's environment: What are the dangers out there, present and emerging? And what are the possibilities, the opportunities, to be taken advantage of? And the Tops shape the system by looking *inward*, seeing that the system has the structure, processes, and resources for coping with the dangers and prospecting among possible opportunities.
- HE: So, as I understand it, this isn't necessarily what Tops do; it's what they *can* do.
- SHE: Exactly. Given their unique position, this is the contribution Tops *can* make to DU's ability to survive and thrive: Be the system's SHAPERS.

Workers as System PRODUCERS

- SHE: Workers are uniquely positioned to function as system PRODUCERS. As PRODUCERS, Workers are the expert resources regarding work, applying their creative energies to the work of the system, being responsible for the quality of work, finding ways of improving work, working closely with DU's customers. This is the unique contribution Workers can make to DU's ability to survive and thrive.

Middle as the System's INTEGRATING MECHANISM

- SHE: Middles are uniquely positioned to function as the integrating mechanism of the organization, like the integrating mechanisms of the human body: nervous, vascular, and hormonal systems that coordinate, balance, and integrate whole-body processes.
- HE: Aren't they supposed to lead or manage?
- SHE: They do that. They manage, supervise, coach, mentor. That's what they do *individually*. But their *collective* function, according to THE PLAN, is to integrate the system.

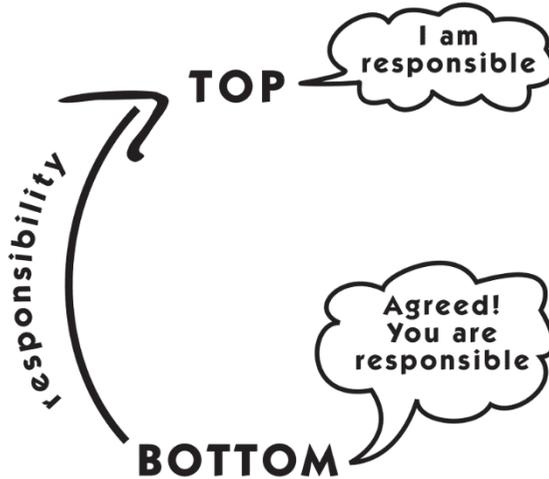
Top Complexity is compounded by the Dance of Blind Reflex

- SHE: The Tops' situation is complicated by the power of the Dance of Blind Reflex with its endless opportunities for Tops to reflexively suck responsibility up to themselves and away from others, which only adds to their burden.
- HE: Whoa! Slow this down for me. What is this Dance of Blind Reflex?
- SHE: Not only are we blind to the context we are in, we are also blind to our *reactions* to context.
- HE: I need an example.
- SHE: Sure. In the face of all this complexity, there is something we do as Tops – not always, not everyone, but with great regularity. It becomes crystal clear to us that *we are responsible* for handling it all. It's not like a conscious choice we make; it simply happens, like a reflex. It's clear: *We are responsible*.
- HE: That can't help things.
- SHE: Right. It can only make things worse.
- HE: So, not only is their world complex, they add to the complexity by sucking responsibility up to themselves and away from others.
- SHE: The more complex their world, the more they suck it up, which increases complexity, and on and on it goes.
- HE: A vicious cycle.
- SHE: It surely is.

Sucking up responsibility is a poor strategy for reducing complexity

The Bottom Dance of Blind Reflex

SHE: In this environment of untended problems it's easy for Workers to fall into the Top/Bottom Dance of Blind Reflex, where they, as Workers, reflexively hold higher-ups responsible for their condition and for the condition of the system. They say "*It's their responsibility, not ours, to fix these problems.*"



The Top/Bottom responsibility dance

HE: This goes nicely with the Top part of the dance.

SHE: What are you seeing?

HE: Tops suck up responsibility to themselves, and Workers hold higher-ups responsible.

SHE: Exactly. That's what makes it such a neat dance. Everyone's in agreement. Tops are responsible, Workers not responsible. And once again, this is not a conscious choice that Workers make; it simply happens. It becomes crystal clear to DU's Workers that higher-ups are responsible for fixing the problems they are experiencing.

The Middle Dance of Blind Reflex

SHE: It's easy for Middles to fall into the End/Middle/End Dance of Blind Reflex.

HE: Go slow. Middle I understand. What's an End?

SHE: Middles don't exist in isolation. There are always two or more Ends – individuals or groups – with their often conflicting needs and priorities, pulling Middles in different directions. The Tops are one End, the Workers another. Customers may be an End. Other Middles may be Ends.

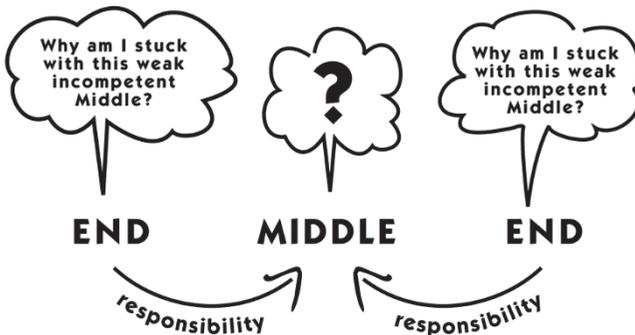


Middle between multiple Ends

HE: OK. So, what's the End/Middle/End dance?

SHE: Middles, without awareness or choice, reflexively slide in between the Ends' issues and conflicts, and now *they* feel responsible for solving the Ends' issues and problems.

And, what makes the Dance complete is that the Ends *also* hold Middles responsible. So, all are in agreement: Middles are responsible. And, if Middles fail, all are in agreement about that too. Middles are responsible. *Why did I get stuck with these weak, incompetent Middles?* Ah, such a perfect dance!



What Do Whole Systems Do?

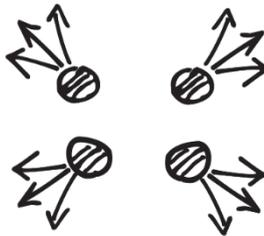
I. Individuation and Integration

SHE: To understand whole systems you'll need to adopt the position of the observer, the one who stands apart from whole systems and notices what they are doing.

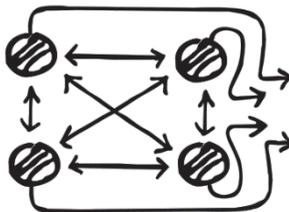
HE: Like observing the movement of bees as they dance around the hive.

SHE: Exactly. Only now you are standing apart and observing your own family as a whole system, or your work team, or the divisions in an organization, or the nations of the world. And here's what you'll notice.

Whole systems INDIVIDUATE, with the parts – individuals and groups – operating independently of one another, going their own way, doing their own thing, functioning as independent wholes.



And whole systems INTEGRATE, with the parts functioning together as interdependent components of a larger whole.

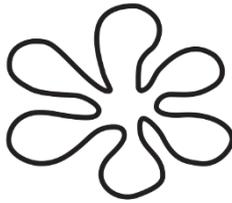


Apart, together. Separate, connected. Independent, interdependent.

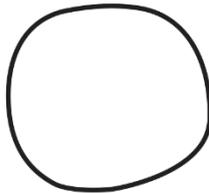
What Do Whole Systems Do?

II. Differentiation and Homogenization

SHE: Whole systems DIFFERENTIATE. They develop specialized forms and functions. The parts of the system elaborate their differences from one another, with each part serving its specialized function.



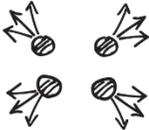
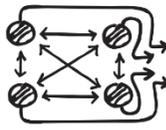
And whole systems HOMOGENIZE, with the parts developing or maintaining their commonality with one another, sharing common information, knowledge, and capacity.



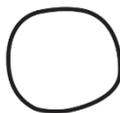
HE: Difference and commonality. They seem fundamental.

Love and Power: The Yin and Yang of Organic Systems

SHE: We've been viewing the four building blocks as processes in tension with one another: Individuation – separateness – is in tension with Integration – togetherness.

	
<p>Members functioning independently of one another</p>	<p>Members functioning as connecting parts of an integrated whole</p>

Differentiation – difference – is in tension with Homogenization – sameness.

	
<p>A system elaborating its differences</p>	<p>A system elaborating commonality throughout</p>

In day-to-day system life, these processes tend to function in different configurations.

Individuation and differentiation tend to operate together.

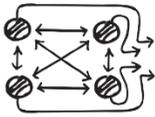
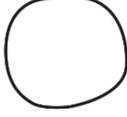
You can think of this combination (individuation + differentiation) as the system's Power processes: parts operating independently of one another. Parts elaborating their difference from other parts. Together these express the *outgoing* aspect of systems.

And integration and homogenization tend to operate together.

You can think of this combination (integration + homogenization) as the system's Love processes: parts connecting with one another. Parts elaborating their commonality with one another. Together these express the *inward* aspect of systems.

The Indispensable Language of Whole Systems

Summary

IND Individuation	INT Integration	DIF Differentiation	HOM Homogenization
Separate	Together	Differing	Commonality
			

- ❖ All whole organic systems individuate, integrate, differentiate, and homogenize.
- ❖ Systems vary in the balance of these processes and the intensity and mindfulness with which they are expressed.
- ❖ Robust systems are systems whose energy comes from the zestful expression of all four processes.
- ❖ Systems express their Power potential by mindfully and zestfully individuating and differentiating.
- ❖ Systems express their Love potential by mindfully and zestfully integrating and homogenizing.
- ❖ And most importantly: All systems – Top, Middle, Bottom – have the potential for being Robust systems, systems of Power and Love.