

APPENDIX 2:

ADVICE FOR SYSTEMIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPERS, CONSULTANTS AND COACHES

Key question

Remember the question that lies at the heart of the systemic leadership approach: ‘How can you best understand, expand, release, promote, improve and apply leadership capability?’.

Available levers

- Develop the organisation’s leadership capability.
- Expand the organisation’s leadership capacity.
- Link leadership development to business aims and objectives.
- Align leadership with where the organisation is going.
- Unite and build corporate leadership cohesion and spirit.
- Address conflicting perceptions of leadership in the organisation.
- Join up disconnected HR levers at the service of improved leadership.
- Cement leaders’ individual and collective accountability.
- Solve thorny leadership problems, combining supply push with demand pull.
- Stop the waste of leadership.

Core principles

Kee in mind these core principles about systemic leadership:

‘Think of one’s client in terms of where you add most value – that is in the spaces’
(W. Warner Burke).

- Performance escapes down all manner of gaps. *Identify, bridge and fill them.*
- What happens at the edge of a job matters more to organisational effectiveness than what happens at the heart of the job. *Concentrate on the periphery, interfaces and interactions.*
- The competence of individuals isn’t the prime factor that determines the organisation’s performance. *Improve the system.*

Most leadership improvement is to be found in what surrounds people in ‘the system’.

The challenge facing leadership coaches

The systemic focus presents both an opportunity and a challenge for leadership coaches, who are usually contracted to work with individual leaders. To be successful, they need to understand and call upon the systemic leadership model, both privately for their own use, and explicitly with their client.

Because of their privileged position and access at senior levels, leadership coaches have a special opportunity to unlock the mindset held by most individual leaders about the traditional, individualistic leadership model.

Relatively few top executives will read the book *The Search for Leadership: An Organisational Perspective*, so opportunities to persuade such leaders that here is something they need to learn are limited, other than via a coach who they already trust. Coaches can open the door to systemic leadership interventions in the organisation in a way that few others can.

In doing so, coaches must learn to unpack the box marked 'context' and consider:

- What the organisation wants and needs (its purpose, direction, goals, success measures, etc.), and whether these are clearly communicated, understood and respected.
- The particular urgent and important current and future challenges facing the organisation and the executive.
- The organisation's culture – its values, beliefs, traditions and norms – what it's like round here (e.g. its degree of centralisation and control).
- How the organisation is expected to function (its hierarchical structure, policies, processes, rules, protocols, accountability framework, reward and promotion system, feedback provision, spending levels).
- Colleagues, and their feedback, whose support can enable, or if unknowing or withheld, can frustrate the executive's plans.
- Undiscussibles.

(Corporate Research Forum, 2006)

Coaches need to understand the nature and potency of the organisation's shadow side: its political nature, social hierarchy, bullying, power bases and struggles, turf wars, morality, favourite sons, level of toxicity, messiness and craziness, and the undiscussed, undiscussible and unmentionable.

Coaches need to understand the 'fundamental attribution error' and the Basic Assumption Dependency. (See extracts below from *The Search for Leadership: An Organisational Perspective*.)

Fundamental Attribution Error

'The tendency [is] for people to over-emphasize personality-based explanations for behaviours, while under-emphasizing the role and power of situational influences. In other words, people assume that what a person does is based more on what kind of person he or she is, rather than the social and environmental forces at work on that person.' (Anne Scoular, Corporate Research Forum, 2006)

'It is what surrounds managers that has such a powerful influence – internal social and environmental forces in the organisation's culture, systems, policies, climate and protocol.'

Basic Assumption Dependency

‘The belief that people on top are “in control” and responsible for everything can be gratifying, partly because it is reassuring to know that at least *somebody* is in control in this world. ... Equating leadership with leaders reflects this kind of dependency, for it locates excessive responsibility at the top. The tendency for groups to believe in the unrealistic power and knowledge of their leaders is what Bion (1959) termed Basic Assumption Dependency, one of the main unconscious strategies employed to bind the troubling anxieties that arise in work situations.’ (James Krantz, 1990)

‘Pierre Turquet (1974) observed that leaders are active targets for other members’ projection of love, hate, responsibility and blame, and are thus profoundly influenced by their followers. Thus are the seeds of a cult sown.’

Professional supervision

Coaches should ideally have in place professional supervision arrangements appropriate to systemic leadership.