

Systemic Leadership

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Introduction

To get straight to the point; systems lead. They lead the whole and they lead the individual. And can you lead something that leads itself? Yes and no. It's about leading and following, about knowing and acknowledging, about going with the flow and going against the flow.

Sometimes, it's necessary to swim against the current of life for a while, to find a meaningful source there and continue to float on the force of the organisational system.

This book doesn't aim to tell you how to go about it, systemic leadership. Once you understand and can feel your way through the basic principles that apply to systems, you will undoubtedly find ways to compose your own systemic leadership. The fact that you are in a function or position that requires your leadership, means that you possess the responsibility and power to make something of it.

What we can tell you, is what a system needs of leadership. We will do this by explaining the underlying principles and giving examples of them. Your systemic intelligence and creativity will do the rest. What this book is truly not about, is about you as a leader. Of course, because you are part of an organisation, you are part of a system and it is useful to be aware of your role. Because you are part of the organisation, you are part of the system. You also can't escape the fact that the patterns of all those systems that have made you who you are today, work through you and will affect your team and the organisation.

The message of this book, isn't that you have to work hard at yourself, at your personal leadership skills. We assume that this is something

you do often and automatically. That is what your position demands of you. What we do want to show you, is how organisations can blossom and flow, from a systemic perspective. And what leadership is needed to that avail.

The systemic perspective and systemic leadership aims to add to all those other, well known, ways to look at an organisation: legal, financial, business, psychological, organisational science, change management etc...

And: we deliberately speak of leadership. Not the leader him or herself. We explain what a system needs from leadership and what it can win from systemic awareness. With this, we are not saying who should take up the leadership role or where the systemic awareness could expand. Systemic leadership could lie with the leader of the organisation or with the team leader. But it could just as well be allocated to different places or people in the organisation. We can well imagine that an entire team ensures systemic leadership. In short, we disconnect what a system needs of leadership, from the leader himself.

Today, we constantly see a demand for new ways of organising and leading. Networking, self-directing, flat organisational structures and so on. Often, 'traditional organisations' are put opposite those. Often, the search for new forms of organisation is born out of a reaction against existing forms of organising. And that in itself has a systemic risk. The more you oppose 'traditional' organisations, the higher the chance that you will become like them. The other thing that happens when you 'oppose', is that the world is split into good and bad. We are caught in a polarity.

The good thing about wondering what a system needs in terms of leadership, is that it applies to any kind of system and to any kind of organisation. For large, hierarchically organised companies as well as for start-ups, fast growing companies and everything in between. Looking Systemically to what is asked of us in terms of leadership eliminates the division between old and new, large and small, hierarchical and flat, sexy and dull, flexible and rigid etcetcetc. Moreover, we might possibly move beyond these kinds of divisions.

On our way to new adventures! It's up to you, to all of you and to all of us to give this shape. Enjoy this book!

Jan Jacob Stam and Barbara Hoogenboom

Summary and Reader's guide

1

Summary

A team, collaboration, start-up, department or organisational system needs the following of leadership:

- That all members have a place and feel that they belong sufficiently so that they are able to do their work well.
- That it is clear-cut what the team as a whole, stands for and what their leading principles are.
- That every person's talent can prosper.
- That the whole of what the team produces can achieve something in the outside world, can reach a destination.
- That rebels are heard because they have important information about the system as a whole.
- That there is an order that provides for enough security, safety, clarity and guidance.
- That there is a good balance between yes and no.
- That it's clear what we do and what we don't.
- That there is enough autonomy for the team as a whole, without being separated from the rest of the organisation or the outside world.
- That there is enough connection, flow, inspiration and energy fuel inside the team.
- That there is discipline and willingness to investigate how problems are a systemic response first, before starting to look for solutions or treating the symptoms.
- That patterns rise to the surface from below which causes them to work for the system instead of against it. Especially with change and development.
- That the origins and history of the organisation are acknowledged, including the trauma's and events (instead of trying to forget the unsettling events).

- That a distinction is made between the future and the future as it approaches us. And is able to switch between the two adequately.
- That deep commitment is given to the transformational processes which ask enormous elasticity from leadership, with not knowing how the organisation will end up being.

Reader's Guide

We will do something here that we prefer not to do, we will be taking a detour. We would have preferred to tell you immediately in the first chapter what a system demands of leadership. But because organisational systems are such specific things, with sort of a will of their own, we can't escape building a robust stage about what systems are and how they behave in chapter 2 first.

In chapter 3, we can then mount the stage from the leaderships' perspective. What do systems require of leadership and how can you respond to that? A chapter to give you pause for thought as well as energy and ideas.

Chapter 4 zooms into the phenomenon of patterns in organisations. How do they arise, how you can recognise them and what you can do about or with them? It teaches you to better understand the 'below-the-surface-driving-forces' of your colleagues, your organisation and yourself.

Chapter 5 examines a few widespread organisational themes from a systemic perspective. To tickle systemic awareness a little but also to invite you to look at different situations, that you probably deal with at work on a regular basis, from a systemic perspective. It's possible that, after reading this section, you will think of things that are familiar to you in a different way altogether. 'Fuss' gets a whole new perspective.

Chapter 6 is, as far as we are concerned, cutting edge material: transformation. As we speak, the world is full of noise around transformation. And yet there are so few anchors. And you are not getting

anchors here either, but we will drench you with what transformation asks of leadership from a systemic perspective.

There where you read JJS and BH, it's about examples or comments of the authors Jan Jacob Stam (JJS) and Barbara Hoogenboom (BH). Other initials refer to a few guest authors, who have added some real-life examples. You can read more about them at the back of the book, where we mention our sources.

Constellations

Much of the knowledge you read in this book, was acquired over the course of eighteen years through the, now reasonably well-known, method of 'constellations'. This book is not about constellations. But there are, however, examples in the book where we draw on our experiences in constellations that we set up with clients. For that reason, we want to give you some context.

A constellation is a spatial representation of an organisational (or other) system. The parts that are relevant to the issue at hand, are set up: e.g. the board, the owner, the team, clients, the goal, the product. These elements are set up in the space either with objects (cups, glasses, post-its, wooden objects) or with people, in relation to each other according to an inner image. These people representing elements, we call representatives. They can also set-up themselves. Strangely enough, a constellation gives a very direct image once you are in it: a sensation of the relations and patterns above and below the surface in the organisation. It brings conscious as well as unconscious information from the system to light.

In consultation with the person asking the question, the person leading the constellation can test and intervene to find out what the systemic 'cause' could be of the present situation and what the system needs. A director recently turned to her team after the first constellation and said: "*This afternoon was worth more than six hundred hours of meetings together*". The impact of a constellation is often profound and long-lasting.

How a constellation works exactly, is still something we don't exactly know. That it works has been scientifically proven sufficiently.

Guiding a constellation is a specific craft and requires a high degree of professionalism. In the future, we don't see thousands of managers accompanying constellations during their team meetings. We do see thousands of managers, owners and employees apply systemic knowledge, as described in this book, in their daily work.

**What is
'systemic' all
about?**

2

Systemic is a word that we introduced years ago and today is widely used. What we mean by it, can best be explained using the following principles:

1. It is about systems;
2. Systems have (repeating) patterns;
3. Change starts with acknowledging the world as it is;
4. Problems are solutions;
5. Perceiving without judgment, in the present;
6. There are three survival mechanisms that operate in family, organisational and societal systems.

2.1 It is about systems

What is a system? This sounds so technical and abstract. Hardly human. But that is exactly what it is! Especially! A family unit constitutes a system. A school class constitutes a system. A team constitutes a system. An organisation constitutes a system. A region, country or society constitutes a system.

A system means that, beyond the boundaries of that system, things look different than they do on the inside. Things are different within the family unit of my neighbour than in ours. This is something you know instantly when shoes need to come off as you enter your neighbours' home. Or the type of jokes that you can't make any more in your new team. It takes a little time to figure out the written and unwritten rules. You can sense that the rules aren't your colleagues' rules or the rules of your team manager, no, they are the rules of the entire department, the system that together forms the department.

Barbara Hoogenboom

Our eldest son just started playing baseball. At the sports complex, the baseball field is directly adjacent to the football field. The first parent I met at the side of the field, immediately said: "Oh, you should

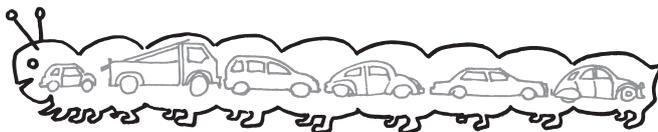
be so grateful that your son decided to play baseball instead of football! It's a world of difference what you hear and see there compared to what you see and hear here!"

What you need to know about a system are two things:

1. The system as a whole has different characteristics than the sum of parts
2. A system is always part of a larger system

The system as a whole has different characteristics than the sum of parts

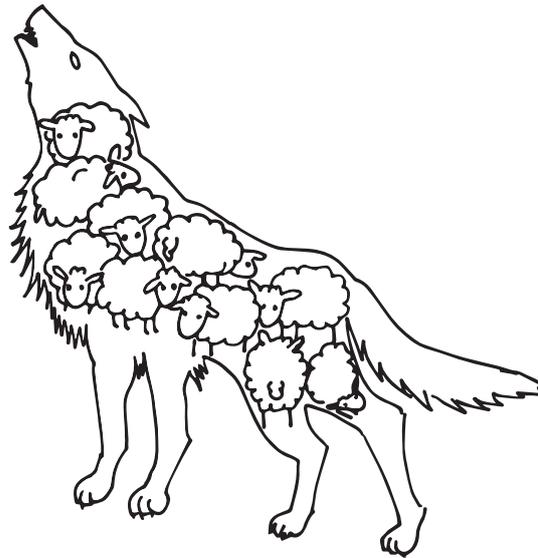
A so-called ghost-traffic jam on a motorway moves exactly in the opposite direction than the cars do, the individual parts. A traffic jam starts because it is busy on the motorway, someone breaks slightly too hard, the driver behind him has to break even harder because of the response time and a few cars down, traffic slowly comes to a halt and stops. Viewing this from the air (I was lucky to experience this once when circling above Schiphol airport) you can see that when the individual cars move in one direction, the entire caterpillar of the traffic jam moves exactly in the opposite direction. Indeed, at the front the traffic jam is dissolving and at the rear end the traffic jam is growing. The funny thing is that drivers who are actually in the traffic jam, often don't know how big the entire system is and that the system is moving in a different direction than they are. It works this way in families, organizations and societies too: the whole has different characteristics than the sum of parts.



The whole moves exactly in the opposite direction than the parts do.

Each of the team leaders in a tax department of a municipality, function perfectly well, but the whole, called the department management team, was stuck.

The whole behaves differently than the sum of parts. The question that immediately arises: should we intervene between the parts, the team leaders or do we intervene in the whole, called the Management team?



What next? Do we intervene on the parts or in the whole?

Think about it: if you are in a meeting, are you more inclined to intervene between the people involved or in the whole?

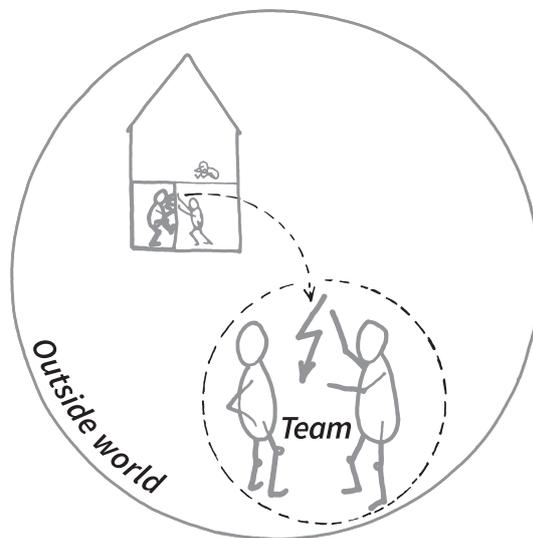
A system is always part of a larger system. Your function is part of a team. Your team is part of a department. The department is part of a business unit, and so on. It's vital to be aware of the fact that patterns in the larger systems often spill over to sub systems. This is often apparent in conflict. Most conflicts that we see in teams, are reflections of unsolved conflicts in the wider system around them. Like in a hologram.

Jan Jacob Stam

Recently, a woman, who works in a team that deals with domestic violence and child abuse, called me. "Our team works together wonderfully, we do good work. But somehow, we don't take good care

of ourselves. There are tensions within the team. Would you be willing to come and work with us?" *My response, after I let the situation lie for a while, was: "Have you ever stopped to think that it could be possible that the patterns of the families you work with are spilling over to your team and has grabbed hold of you?" For a second, it's quiet on the other side of the line: "Oh, would you please come see us just to tell us this? It's spot on!"*

It's the fastest contribution to systemic consciousness that I have ever made!



Patterns form the outside world, that you deal with in your work, can spill over to the team. This usually happens unconsciously.

2.2 Systems have (repeating) patterns

A pattern is an unconscious, repetitive set of actions or relations to each other that has to do with people's positions in a system.

The consultancy where I used to be partner, had a pattern that people felt better than management. Openly, we would always emphasize that we were looking to work together with the management of

Jan Jacob Stam

our clients, but in the undercurrent, we always felt better than management. So, with every new client, the recurring pattern would be that we took up position above the client and not next to the client or under the client. That was the pattern in relation to our clients. And yes, our expertise was to know what was good for the organisation, and then suddenly, you find yourself above it.

Repetitive patterns are the phenomenon that a pattern repeats itself in more than one sub-system.

Jan Jacob Stam

Within our consultancy, there was always the hidden tendency to feel better than your colleague, even if you there was openness about working and learning together.

This pattern was found amongst the peers of the consultancy that entered at the same time, but also amongst the seniors that wanted to become partner. And within the partnership.

It won't surprise you that, when recruiting new colleagues, there was an unconscious selection of people that were familiar with this pattern of 'putting yourself above another or above something'.

Systemic work is often about making unconscious patterns visible. It is about being conscious where patterns are functional and where they can be damaging. And obviously, about what you can then do with those patterns.

Patterns aren't always enjoyable, because they can be confronting and tough. They also bring predictability and continuity. If you think your organisation could benefit from a deeper knowledge of systems, chapter 4 awaits you.

2.3 Change starts with acknowledging the world as it is

There are hundreds of theories on change. For many of these theories, the starting point is that something needs to change. That the world, an organisation, a person can't be accepted as it is today.

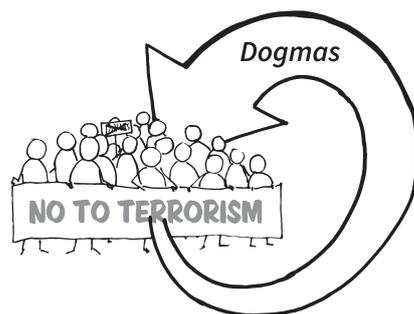
Using the systemic perspective, the starting point for change is: acknowledging the world as it is. This is a fundamental difference. Not better or worse than the other change-approaches, but different. Because 'acknowledging the world as it is', has far reaching consequences for the attitude of the leader and of leadership.

There are a few simple reasons why it is important to acknowledge the world as it is:

- You become what you try to avoid
- Acknowledgment is one of the most healing movement in systems

2.3.1 You become what you try to avoid

What you fight, will detour and return back into the system. This is how systems work. What you don't accept as part of the world, comes back into your school, team, organisation like a boomerang. The more you don't want to become like your mother, the greater the chance you will become like her. We all know that systemic principle.



What you want to get rid of, easily comes back in through the back door.

We have had the opportunity to work for peace-organisations a few times where the complaint was: it's war in the boardroom. Think about what your organisation is trying to fight. What is not allowed to be?

Jan Jacob Stam

A man is founding an addiction rehabilitation centre. He is driven. And yet, it's not going so well. I wonder if his drive stems from his own attempts to accomplish something or because he is trying to keep something at bay. It feels like the latter. So, I ask him: "Is addiction allowed to be?" His answer, soft: "No..." Immediately, he feels where the problem lies. We don't need any further talking. Immediately, it is as if you can see him drop into himself and go through a layer and he suddenly finds solid ground beneath him. Addiction is part of this world.

2.3.2 Acknowledging the, sometimes raw, reality is the most healing movement in systems

Acknowledging is admitting to yourself and others that reality is the way it is.

Acknowledging that the accident at work is now forever part of the history of the organisation. Stop wanting that it had never happened. Stop not wanting to see it because it is painful. In chapter 4 you will read that, not-acknowledging, hiding away the event or situation because it is too painful, is what causes a pattern, to remind the system of the events.

Under all of this is the deep realisation: it is reality that heals, not our dreams, wishes and expectations. Contact with reality brings us back to earth and gives us ground. Literally, ground your very existence.

Barbara Hoogenboom

The question put forward for the constellation, was the director of an international organisation that had been owned by a parent company for years. When he said: "I wish the parent company would