

# HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

# HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

**A systemic look into organisations**

**MARGREET OOSTENBRINK**





# Contents

---

## **PART I UNREST**

### **1 This isn't working**

- 1.1 Damn, it's not working...
- 1.2 Why simplicity is no longer enough
- 1.3 Leadership in the context of a persistent reality: a systemic approach

### **2 My own journey**

- 2.1 Then I put my systemic glasses on
- 2.2 Lessons learned: you don't have to make the mistakes that I did
- 2.3 My image of people: how do I see them now?
- 2.4 My leadership: how do I do it?

## **PART II A DIFFERENT LOOK**

### **3 The system**

- 3.1 Systems thinking
- 3.2 Human perception
- 3.3 Looking at the dynamics differently

### **4 A closer look**

- 4.1 The development of leadership
- 4.2 The systemic integration of leadership
- 4.3 Leadership in the system

## **PART III THE PREPARATION**

### **5 Explore**

- 5.1 Do you play your role from outside or inside?
- 5.2 The here-and-now nature of the system
- 5.3 What you are doing when you act from a systems-thinking perspective?
- 5.4 Action and reaction: learning to deal with patterns

5.5 The roadworthiness of your own system

## **6 Equipped**

6.1 The three forces that act on the system

6.2 Every situation calls for the appropriate behaviour

6.3 Creating additional perspectives

# **PART IV ON YOUR WAY**

## **7 Setting a course**

7.1 When a “normal” systemic perspective is simply not enough

7.2 Diving suit on, check, diving mask on, check: dive, dive, dive!

7.3 Theory U

7.4 Deep dives in practice: three case studies

7.5 Conscious confrontation

## **8 Full speed ahead**

8.1 Introduction

8.2 From leader to conductor: learning how to orchestrate energy

8.3 Your energy as a source of information

8.4 The energy of others

8.5 Managing your energy

8.6 Short circuit, the wrong number and the weakest link

8.7 Clearing bottlenecks

8.8 Movement and flow, two more working methods

## **9 The compass**

9.1 Introduction

9.2 Hats on: different types of energy and their impact on the system

9.3 Hats on, hats off?

9.4 Using the systemic leadership compass in practice, in the workplace

9.5 Under pressure

9.6 Communication associated with each of the four hats

## **10 The outlook**

10.1 Introduction

10.2 What if the system were to speak: synchronicity

10.3 Working on the maturity of your team

10.4 Systemic working in organisations and teams

10.5 Recognising patterns

10.6 How culture mirrors consciousness and needs

10.7 The perfect solution doesn't exist: learning to work with dilemmas

## PART V      A NEW DESTINATION

### 11 **Destiny**

11.1 King Arthur

11.2 A contemporary fairy tale, a real management job

11.3 The qualities of a new generation of leaders

11.4 What drives you?

11.5 Seeing, using and developing talent in an integrated way

11.6 Filling the box; energy layers and the energy pyramid

### 12 **A new existence**

12.1 Interpretations and expectations

12.2 Being awake means all your senses working overtime

12.3 Being awake in the here-and-now: avoiding switching times

12.4 Be awake and make contact

12.5 Awake to knowing where you want to go

12.6 Awake to keeping an eye on developing

### 13 **Home sweet home**

## **Acknowledgements**

## **References**

For every leader and professional who feels obstructed by a system that is supposed to help. And for everyone who **might think** they know the lay of the land, but not how to traverse it.

PART I

UNREST  
UNREST  
UNREST  
UNREST





# 1

## This isn't working

---

### 1.1 **Damn, it's not working...**

#### **From now on you'll do things very differently**

Picture this: you return from a management course full of energy, motivated and with your batteries recharged. You know exactly how you'll make the necessary changes. From now on, you're going to do things differently. Starting immediately.

But before you can even begin, an email tells you that an incident has taken place and you're the one who has to clean up the mess. You have to placate a group of angry and disappointed employees. Slowly but surely, all your fresh ideas melt like snow in the morning sun. And before you know it, you're doing exactly what you told yourself you'll never do again.

Why is it that after immersing ourselves in leadership programmes and emerging from business schools highly motivated, we find ourselves unable to apply everything we've learned because our environment refuses to play ball.

This dynamic has always intrigued and irritated me in equal measures. I could never understand why my efforts were ineffective. Having turned myself inside out, I'd return to the office energised and with a fresh new perspective.

But once back at the office, all-too-often something very different happens than what you wanted. Sometimes, it's because your own manager has bypassed you with other agreements. Or you become the victim of decisions that you yourself would not have made. It's as if you are transmitting on a frequency on which your message becomes distorted, or even completely lost. Is this how it's supposed to work?

No. It can also be different. You can learn to understand how to exert influence on your environment. How to understand forces at play in the organisation that are greater than yourself. But what's in it for you? Well, you can learn to turn the resistance in the organisation to your advantage, while maintaining relationships and achieving results that are at least as good.

### 1.2 **Why simplicity is no longer enough**

**“Businesses and other human activities are systems. [...] Our actions are bound by invisible fabrics and it can often take years for the effect of one action to play out on the effect of another.”**

Peter Senge<sup>2</sup>

What can you do if you cannot control the things that happen?

First of all, you have to acknowledge that everything you do has consequences, some of which you will definitely not see coming. You could even find yourself as the victim of what you do, without realising it.

Sounds familiar? Then stop thinking that you're making it too complicated. Truth be told, you're probably not making it complicated enough. Our world is complex and interconnected. All our actions are part of a greater whole.

Not many people would argue with this, yet few will do anything about it. Attempts to control the big picture often run aground by oversimplifying things. Oversimplification can lead to crucial insights being overlooked. If we want to impact our environment, we must have an understanding of those insights, so that we know what will happen if we intervene. This calls for interest, understanding, insight, time, knowledge and ideas.

These are often lacking in an organisation, which is why people in the organisation will try to find an approach that makes complexity manageable, doable even. Yet they realise all too well that not everything is doable, particularly in the timeframe and for the budget that they might have in mind.

What they have to do is look at how things in and around the organisation are interconnected, and the interconnection with and between people. Only then can you get a handle on the forces, interests, assumptions and preferences that have to be taken into account in your environment. This has to be the departure point for your actions.

So why isn't that happening?

Because we spend most of our time managing things we think will produce tangible results, quickly. Take the vision and strategy of an organisation, for example. Good leaders can put these into words, with appealing imagery and obvious expectations. The mistake too many leaders tend to make is to fragment good ideas into simple goals that lack the connection with the kind of vision that will stimulate the enthusiasm of those around them. This is exactly where the mismatch between management and strategy and policy starts.

Consequently, the changes that leaders so much want to make are placed in the same environment they'd rather leave behind them. They become more of the same, but flavoured with a different strategy and policy.

But back to you, the leader who so desperately wants to do things differently. Your good intentions and knowledge become tangled in a web of informal working methods, agreements about tangible results, tight deadlines and a desire to steer clear of complexity. But the big picture stays obscured, and there's scant room for real innovation. Ideas are swallowed up in the daily grind, a succession of measures that can no longer even be extrapolated into a rational decision. Decisiveness and energy evaporate, to be replaced by lethargy. Before long, the willingness and ability to change are reduced to zero.

Why does all this happen? Because every organisation wants to make challenges manageable. We all want our organisation to be malleable, but that's not always possible. And we are kidding ourselves if we think we can reduce every problem to its simplest form. So a lot of what we'd rather not see we sweep under the carpet.

Before you know it, managers and employees will have woven an invisible tapestry of written and unwritten agreements that ultimately lead to inflexibility. A large part of it will be protected by what's loosely called organisational culture, and anyone trying to mess with it is gently shown the error of their ways. And persistence will get you branded as a troublemaker.

**It's not about where to be different; it's about starting differently.**

By learning to see and understand what's already there, then learning to work from that departure point. Irrespective of whether you're a manager, director or professional, your leadership can provide guidance and support, and thus make all the difference.

Just how complex can it be to expose such an invisible system? Exhausting, and something you shouldn't really worry about, because you'll end up undermining your own results? I often hear managers and professionals sigh audibly and see them shy away as soon as this topic arises.

Until, that is, they see how harmful a system can be. And how results can be improved in the long run, for less energy and lower costs. Managing and steering

the system by people is a more sustainable way of working. By investing in knowledge and acquiring insights you'll create awareness and increase the value of the organisation. Surely, that should be the ambition of every leader?

It's not about keeping an unchangeable system running as smoothly as possible, however hard change might be needed. If you have confidence in your own ability, knowledge, experience, insights and motivation to increase value, then you'll make a difference. What's more, it's enriching; it brings peace of mind and gives you confidence in yourself and your surroundings.

### **1.3 Leadership in the context of a persistent reality: a systemic approach**

Managers' and executives' experiences with change can be compared with repairing an older car. Install a new battery and the starter motor starts playing up. Replace the starter motor and then the exhaust fails. A repair can trigger a chain reaction throughout the vehicle, whose parts are already in need of maintenance anyway. Tinkering in one area can often have negative repercussions for other interconnected parts. It's the same when you introduce change into a system. Such an initiative, or intervention, will permeate the whole organisation and bring about things you don't expect. The most important lesson here is that if you identify a weakness in the organisation, you can safely assume that many other areas of that organisation are also affected.

The theory of systems thinking connects everything that influences someone's functioning as a person, manager and leader. If you want to do things differently in an organisation, you'll need insights into where a system can create bottlenecks. The first thing you need to realise is that systems in an organisation revolve around people. And people don't come with part numbers that enable you to source a replacement from the warehouse. Positioning people in a system is an altogether more subtle game. People don't necessarily do what's expected of them; they do what they think they should.

Incidentally, do you know what happens when people do exactly what their job descriptions say? They do anything and everything that they shouldn't really be doing. They know it. Do you?

People are individual parts of a bigger picture. It starts with the family that you were born into and it continues in the work situation. The stronger the bond between the people, or parts, in an organisation, the better an organisation can respond to events. The proper functioning of a team is not down to a single member of that team; its success depends on the chemistry between the various members and what the context calls for. As organisational guru Peter Rombouts explains, it's like an empty space that cannot be pigeonholed in processes, job profiles or team assignments.

But how does one deal with that empty space between people? Take a closer look, and you'll see that it's full of patterns and dynamics. As a leader, you need to learn what occupies this space. And understand what's going on in it. To exert any influence you must dare to enter that space and see which patterns and dynamics need to be addressed. In what order are they? What purpose do those patterns serve? Which balls do they keep up in the air, frenetically or otherwise? What is obvious and what is subtly concealed? Which of the dynamics are carefully maintained on a daily basis because people are proud of them, and which ones are battered and bruised and thus kept under wraps? It's in that space that you might be able to learn whether an intervention will be successful.

Another precondition is being willing to step into your own empty space and confronting the cracks and gaps in it that make you what you are. This will enable you to show the kind of leadership that will balance the system. Taking a systemic view will develop your ability to carry out effective interventions. Learn to see the bigger picture, understand the role of the undercurrent and learn to recognise the patterns.

”A system comprises a multitude of particles, all of which are interconnected and ‘communicate’ with one another. In a system there is always an order of what comes first and what follows and there will be an invisible dynamic that tries to bring it all back into balance.

A systemic leader recognises and understands that the patterns of a system have a self-organising and self-directing mechanism.”

Lia Genee (1953), behavioural scientist and owner of Passerel<sup>3</sup>

