

Systemic Board - a Soft Tool for Team-Coachings

In project teams, team members are supposed to bring in their individual personalities, their abilities and specific know-how adding up to something which should be more than the sum of its individual parts. How well this ideal actually corresponds to reality depends on factors as diverse as individual willingness to work in a team, leadership of the project managers, quality of relationship between particular team members and many other things. As long as the team is humming along smoothly, nobody really worries about why this is so.

However, as soon as problems appear, people from inside and outside of the team start to make all sorts of guesses, presume why this person and that group most likely do not function as they should and so on. At this moment it is felt instinctively that a team really is a very complex ensemble of people, relationships, influences, interests, power, interdependences and what have you. The more people continue to argue, the more they are entangled within these components and if at that state somebody starts to intervene actively it is more than likely that things deteriorate rather than improve.

In project coaching this is a very familiar starting situation and fortunately, there is a soft tool which under the guidance of an experienced team coach is powerful enough to not only enable the coachee(s) to sort out the most critical elements of a given problematic situation, but also to show the way to new solutions and to give indications as to how these solutions might be reliably implemented.



fig. 1: a systemic board as used in team coachings and project coachings

This tool, called systemic board, a square wooden board of size approx. 20x20 up to 40x40cm as shown in fig. 1, is a means to project complex relationships onto 2 dimensions, thereby abstracting or even neglecting unnecessary details and thus making a concise solution-focused discussion of the actual situation possible. The relevant human actors, but also entire organisational units, interests, internal and external influences or even

beliefs and cultural values are represented by wooden blocks, each carrying a very simple, neutrally looking face.

Thus, even non-human factors within a team or project acquire human qualities, re-introducing perspectives which usually have gone astray in the turmoil of a project crisis: Everybody knows how, for example, abstract numbers like headcount, or somebody's attempt not to lose her face, may develop its own and out-of-proportion dynamic, totally overshadowing a long term influence like know-how or a specific, and most relevant, customer relationship. Here, on the systemic board, these influences have the abilities to see, to hear, to feel and, in particular, to speak up for themselves, to defend their own interests as if being human.

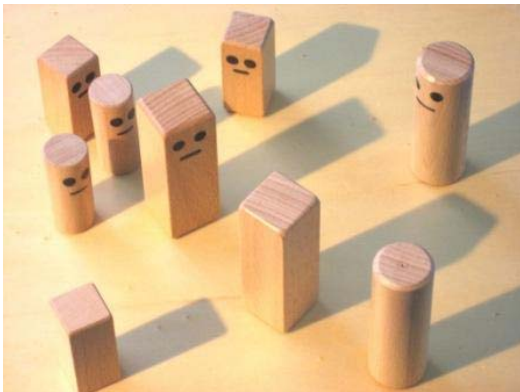


fig. 2: representing influences in a project using a systemic board

The blocks are first arranged by the coachee(s) - usually the leading project manager(s), i.e. leading team members strongly involved AND interested in finding a solution - to represent the actual situation and the coach first checks for completeness and whether the symbolic constellation found in this first step really represents the problem under discussion, see fig. 2.

Then, a diagnostic process starts. The coach asks how, and what, different actors in this constellation might feel, implying thereby frequent changes in perspective up to having the coachee(s) role playing different actors, or even opponents in an acute conflict. This usually widens the field of perception so much that underlying causes of specific behaviors and conflicts come into view. Many surprising and revealing insights may follow. Not being involved in the project, not knowing too much about underlying influences enables the coach to ask seemingly innocent but all the more powerful questions – inducing the dearly wanted aha-effects on the side of the coachee(s).

The realization of previously hidden facts, causes, relations etc. almost inexorably leads to first ideas for possible solutions, changes necessary to improve relationships, to lending support where necessary, to unveiling new resources. By well conceived questions the coach utilizes these ideas to help the coachee(s) developing others, finding new structures, organizing their actors in the project anew etc.

Simultaneously, as the solution is under progress, the coach more and more focuses the attention of the coachee(s) on implementation: Which steps will be necessary, which actions might be helpful, and how will the coachee(s) actually recognize whether their interventions are successful or not? This is the reason why in project coaching, and using a systemic board, leading team members are needed: only they have the power to introduce the necessary changes within the team organisation. And only by these interventions will the newly designed solution readily lead to a conclusive, sustainable change in the project.

Clearly this tool may also find useful application in organisational development and change management where complex relational questions are being analysed to find suitable answers.

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