

Reflexive coaching: linking meaning and action in the leadership system

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Introduction

This chapter will take a systemic approach to the coaching relationship and task. The relevance of a systemic orientation, a framework for understanding and methodological tools will be outlined and then applied to a case where an executive struggled with a leadership challenge. It is proposed that an understanding of theory enables a depth and breadth of practice, facilitating a second order approach to coaching whereby beliefs, assumptions and expectations about organizational interaction can be linked to leadership behaviour. This approach contrasts with coaching accounts that emphasize technique disconnected from theory. The account is aimed to facilitate the ability to make sense of and intervene in patterns of communication, both in the coaching relationship and leadership conversations for the coachee. A core skill of *reflexive agency* will be highlighted as crucial to the work of coaching where the aim is to help the coachee develop productive patterns with those in his or her network of business concern, conversation and relationship. This network can be thought of as the *communication system*.

A systemic orientation to coaching

The notion of system in the organisational literature has taken different forms (Pearce, 2007). It is used here to mean a focus on patterns of connection in communication – the patterns of our behaviour with others and the meanings we individually and collectively make of that experience (Bateson, 1972). The word ‘science’ etymologically means ‘to cut’ and conventionally the focus of science has been to separate out parts and analyse them. A systemic approach involves a paradigmatic shift from the ‘conventional’, inviting us to look for the relationships amongst the parts and the contexts they set for making meaning and deciding action. Inspired by and adapted from Systemic Family Therapy (Burnham, 1986, Dallos and Draper, 2005, Cecchin et al, 1987), systemic organisational approaches have drawn on Communication Theory (Cronen & Pearce, 1985, Barge & Oliver, 2003, Oliver, 2005) and Social Constructionist Theory (Campbell,

2000) to develop frameworks and tools to enrich organisational understanding and effectiveness, from the perspectives of both organisational participants and consultants. This chapter will apply that understanding to the work of the coach.

This approach emphasizes how communication is the medium through which we construct experience, knowledge, identity, relationship and culture. Language is treated less as a *representation* of reality and more as holding potential for *constructing* organizational realities. Communication, in these terms, is always unfinished but through conversation we create provisional boundaries around meaning. We become interested in the recursive relationship between how people live out their conversations in the organization and how narratives are facilitated to structure experience that fit and develop organizational purposes and visions. Since language is treated as significant, the interest develops as to how such narratives shape possibilities for effective action, for individuals and for the organization. The focus becomes conversation as performance, with the leader in a key legitimized role of influence.

In O'Neill's terms (2007, p.5) the executive has four core tasks: mapping the territory of the task for his or her team; building relationships and team performance; producing direct outcomes from his or her own efforts and facilitating the efforts of others. Conversation thus takes on a moral dimension because through its medium, leaders are positioned to facilitate or inhibit powers for self and others to act and, from this perspective, obliged to develop reflexive skills in noticing their assumptions and the effects of their behaviour. A coach, with the aim of facilitating *reflexive agency*, encourages a coachee to make conscious, situated choices and decisions that reflect and develop the complexity of business contexts that are being acted out of and into. Through connecting the contextual parts of a system, reflexivity is facilitated for leadership action. Van der Haar and Hosking (2004) distinguish constructivist from constructionist approaches to reflexivity. In the former, reflexivity is an intra-cognitive activity of an individual inquirer who separates him/herself from his/her own discourse, examining his/her own assumptions, similar to what Cooperider and Whitney (2000) refer to as the "metacognitive capacity of differential self-monitoring". In contrast, a

constructionist approach to reflexivity is socio-relational and focuses attention on processes of relating, with the inquirer seen as a participant in the discourse that s/he is co-constructing (Oliver, 2005, Oliver, Fitzgerald & Hoxsey, 2008). The systemically oriented coach will incorporate both approaches to reflexivity and work to encourage *reflexive agency* for and with the coachee. A framework for understanding the detailed focus for systemic curiosity and reflexivity will be articulated next.

A framework for understanding

Within the systemic field, interconnecting parts of a system are often thought of in terms of people and relationships. O'Neill (2007, p.13), for instance, in a recent book offering a systems approach to coaching, advocates the executive coach focuses on “the system of human beings caught in a dilemma” but her framework for what counts as a system, represented in nested spheres moving from leadership traits and motivations to strategic alliances, global environment and economy is a little loose and imprecise. She acknowledges the lack of fluidity in the model. My observation is that there is a conceptual confusion in O'Neill's model, drawing insufficient distinction between the map and the territory. In other words, how are experiences and the narratives about those experiences distinguished and connected?

The word ‘system’ is used here to define the connections and distinctions between our *patterns* of experience and our *narratives* about those experiences. The *communication system* in focus for the coach and coachee, from this perspective, is the recursive relationship amongst an interconnecting network of experiences and narratives that relate to the coachee's sphere of leadership influence. These categories need greater elaboration.

Cronen & Pearce (1985), working to connect social constructionist and systemic theory and practice develop conceptualization of context and meaning in their work on Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory (CMM). They propose that contexts are multiple, multilayered and in circular relationship. From contextual experiences we construct contextual narratives from which to interpret future experiences. The framing

or narrative of a context shapes the way that meaning in a communication episode is interpreted, influencing emotional and behavioural responses which in their turn influence the experience and framing of contexts. While any context could be of influence, the contexts most likely to influence organizational and leadership narratives and patterns of behaviour are those of the wider business environment, organizational culture, relationship, identity and task definition. Further, the situational details of any leadership episode will give clues for making meaning and action. The coachee will be affected by what has gone immediately before in a leadership communication and expectations about what will follow. Thus the coachee's meaning making and decision making abilities are shaped by social processes, as are his/her ability to act with *reflexive agency*. Coaching, as another social process, can facilitate development of these abilities.

Secondly, Cronen and Pearce develop a vocabulary for considering our *responsibilities* for the ways we make meaning and take action. They point out that the contexts that shape meaning and action carry with them 'rules' for what counts as legitimate, obligatory, entitled and forbidden. For instance, a leader may feel it is appropriate to critique a subordinate's performance in the context of his or her obligations to the individual, the team and the organization but may feel less entitled to critique a peer if there is no legitimized culture or structure for such behaviour. These ways of constructing social reality will have been influenced by the contexts invoked above (and maybe others) and the ways that he or she takes up their responsibility for action will implicate future definitions and experience of task, identity, relationship and culture for self and other(s) in the *communication system*. Cronen and Pearce advocate that it is helpful in understanding communication to consider, what context is having the strongest influence in any given situation and how the contexts of influence relate to each other, to the episode and to the interaction in the episode.

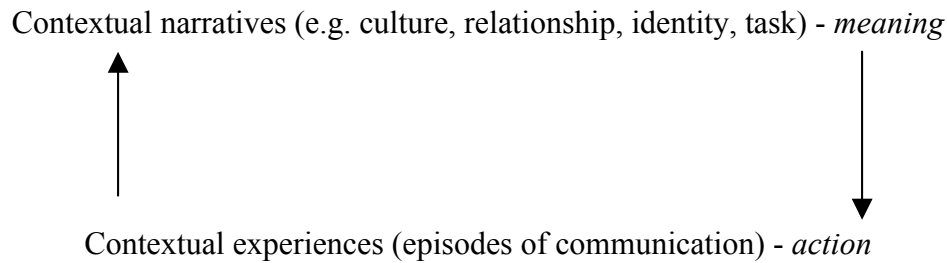


Figure 1: Leadership communication system

In a recent book (Oliver, 2005), I develop this model and introduce the notion of the *interpretive act* as a metaphorical place or space for exercising responsible reflexivity. Through this mechanism, reflexive consideration is invited of one's own and others' contextual narratives influencing communication episodes, our emotional responses to a communication, the meanings made of it, particularly in terms of what kind of rules are invoked, the imagined purposes of the next action, the choices that are possible and, the behavioral decision which then invites a response in turn from others in the system. In responding, we position others with opportunities and constraints to act. For instance, if a leader contextualizes an act of critique of a subordinate's performance with the statement, "I want to facilitate development of this particular aspect of your performance...", it is more likely that the subordinate will be clearer about the leader's intentions and aims and respond favorably, than if the critique had been made without contextualization. The interpretive act is shaped by a multiplicity of contexts as described above, and, in turn, shapes and reshapes further contexts for influencing emotion, meaning and action, identity, relationship and culture.

The *interpretive act* is broken down into three parts: emotional response, interpretation and action. This is not to suggest that these are separate dimensions of a response in any crude linear sense but only that they are useful lenses from which to examine the observations, interpretations and choices one makes in a leadership communicative episode. Through amplifying the detail of the *interpretive act* in this way, the potential

for *reflexive evaluation* is increased when one can become more conscious of the partiality and multiplicity of possibilities for interpretation and action.

Emotional response: at the point of receiving a communication, we are helped or hindered by our emotional responses in interpreting it. These responses are coloured by contextual experiences and narratives, both personal and professional. They are inevitably partial, both in the sense that we can never notice all there is to be noticed and in the sense that our contextual experiences can only provide us with a partial lens. The staff member whose performance has been critiqued may feel supported or stressed or have other feelings depending on his relationship with the leader, the culture of the organization and other contextual experiences and the narratives that emerge from them.

Interpretive response: our emotional responses contribute to meaning making at the interpretive level. In addition, our personal and professional contextual experiences and narratives tend to create habitual *rules for interpretation* which we draw on in leadership communication episodes. However, we can exercise conscious choice in interpreting and reflecting on our interpretations. We can frame the same episode of communication in many different ways, thereby unpacking the multiplicity of meanings that have potentially been conveyed. Reframing meaning where useful is a reflexive ability where it can generate new contexts for action. It is important to imagine what interpretation(s) best empower one's own response (and the potential for others to respond in their turn) in ways which develop leadership purposes and effectiveness.

To illustrate, the leader may interpret his team member's reluctance to accept critique as further evidence of poor performance which could lead him to critique further. However, his mode of feedback may shape the responses of the team member considerably, inviting an interpretation from the staff member of 'personal attack' and require reflexive consideration from the leader.

Action: our interpretation(s) of our own and another's meaning, motivation and purpose will shape the decision we make to act i.e. the next move in the conversation and

influence whether our decisions to act have a *reactive* or *reflexive* quality. We tend to invoke habitual *rules for action*, which are shaped by layers of contextual experience and current contexts of influence and manifested in what our emotions and interpretations tell us.

To illustrate, the *rule for action* that could be invoked for the leader in this case might be ‘when faced with unresponsive behaviour from a subordinate, I must retrieve power by showing my authority’. Thus a mutually reinforcing reactive pattern can be maintained, developed or transformed, depending on the conscious (or reflexive) choices made by the participants. Interpretive acts become patterns over time. In drawing attention to the reflexive opportunities in a communication, the aim is to encourage conscious purposeful communication and to develop effective patterns of leadership and team action through encouraging a reflexive relationship to past, present and anticipated future patterns.

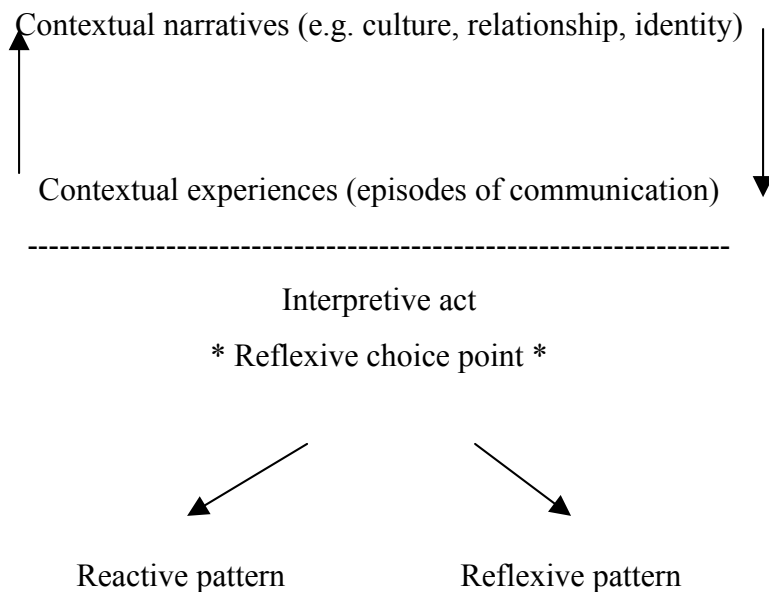


Figure 2: Reflexive Leadership Model

This chapter, in reflecting on a particular coaching episode will link hypotheses about contexts of influence to the interpretive acts of the coachee in his working context. A key moment is defined as one where the choice point in the interpretive act is felt to be

crucial in determining future contexts, either by reinforcing an unwanted reactive pattern or by providing opportunities for shaping a desired new reflexive pattern for the leadership system. Such moments are decided through an ongoing process of observation and hypothesizing about the links between contexts, patterns and interpretive acts within the leadership *communication system* and the coaching system.

Systemic methodological tools

A systemic orientation to coaching highlights the detail of coach/coachee conversation as a core site of interest and as the place for analysis and the beginnings of change. Thus conversation is seen as holding power to make or break leadership patterns and narratives. The framework of thinking offered so far stimulates the production of concrete tools for helping us to co-ordinate our thinking and action in conversation with those we coach. These tools are best described as forms of inquiry, reflection and formulation. Following formulation, the opportunity for decision for action is created. Coaching thus becomes a cycle of inquiry, reflection, formulation and decision.

Inquiry:

The systemic tradition has made a unique contribution to inquiry methodologies through its writings on circular and reflexive questioning (Cecchin et al, 1987, Penn, 1985, Tomm, 1985). The origins of the approach are in systemic psychotherapy but the principles and patterns of questioning can be developed in a coaching context, both one to one and in a group setting. Inquiry is not treated as prior to action but *as* action in the sense that narratives and patterns can be maintained or challenged through the ways that questions are posed or language is framed. The coach from this position asks him or herself – *what kind of development am I making possible through my intervention?* All communications from the coach are thought to have power for maintenance of or challenge to the leadership system in the ways they encourage or discourage reflexive leadership.

Different writers have offered a variety of categorizations for inquiry (Penn, 1982, Tomm, 1985). A sample is offered here of the kinds of questions that can be useful in

generating reflexive leadership action in a coaching context, referencing relevant contexts implied by the *Reflexive Leadership Model* to structure questions. These examples of questions represent a fraction of the potential for inquiry in a given situation. The example in relation to critique of a team member will be used to illustrate. Questions are focused on the coachee's experience (self); and the coachee's observations of the team member's experience (other), to enhance an observer perspective and encourage a distancing to 'fixed' reactive patterns. Questions are framed from a stance of 'authoritative doubt' (Mason, 2005), facilitating the 'right answer' to come from the coachee, not assumed by the coach. A spirit of 'discovery' is conveyed in the context of a questioning of taken for granted 'realities'. Taking a social constructionist position, 'realities' are assumed to be temporary, partial and emergent (Oliver, 2005).

Context:	culture	relationship	identity
Self	“How does the team <i>culture</i> provide possibilities for open and specific feedback and how do you influence that culture as leader?”	“In this <i>relationship</i> , where do you experience clarity and where is there confusion in your understanding of when it is appropriate to critique and when it is appropriate to offer some other form of leadership intervention?”	“When did you first experience <i>yourself</i> as finding critique a challenge with this particular member of your team?” “What might this say about your ideas about what counts as good leadership?”
Other(s)	“How might the team member describe significant <i>cultural</i> patterns in the organization that affect the ways he feels able to relate to you as leader?”	“How might the team member say you respond to his feedback to you on the impact of your leadership on the <i>relationship</i> and his ability to perform?”	“How might the team member describe his <i>role</i> and task?”

Figure 3: Reflexive Leadership Model: inquiry into contextual narratives

	Emotion	Interpretation	Action
Self	<p>When you received x communication from the team member, what did you feel? Have you felt that before in the team? What effect does your emotional response have on your ability to act? When have you noticed a different feeling?</p>	<p>How do feelings connect to thoughts? What choice do you have in how you are interpreting the situation? Where does your sense of obligation come from? How did your stories about the relationship affect the way you interpreted it?</p>	<p>How did your interpretation shape your action? When you act in that way, how does it affect the team member? What would you like to create? What new interpretation could enable different action? What interaction could help the organization?</p>
Other(s)	<p>What did you notice about your team member's body language? How did that affect your response? How might the cultural pressures in the organisation have shaped his feelings? If he were more open about his feelings, how might you be affected?</p>	<p>If you thought of him as vulnerable and acting out of a sense of obligation, how would you make sense of what happened? How do you think he interpreted your response? What choices might you say he had in his response?</p>	<p>How did your subordinate respond to your response? Was that the response you hoped for? How might you have acted differently if you felt you had more choice in creating the response that was best for the relationship (and the organization).</p>

Figure 4: Reflexive Leadership Model: inquiry into the interpretive act

Reflection

Elkjaer (2001, p.440), writing about the learning organization, describes how John Dewey, the American pragmatist connected reflection processes with situated learning processes. Reflection, he argues, works creatively when it allows for inquiry into *situations of uncertainty*. He suggests that meaning is created when connections are made between experience and its consequences. Learning develops when those meanings are linked to present concerns. This connects with O'Neill's (2007) point that coaching is a conversation about conversations about leadership *challenges*.

From a systemic perspective, a reflective position in coaching is one that aims to encourage such learning through facilitating the development of the reflexive relationship of the coachee to his or her own behaviour, emotion, interpretation and contextual narratives and their effects on the leadership system. Raelin (2001) also argues for reflection as a basis for learning. "Reflection is the practice of ...stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and others in one's immediate environment about what has recently transpired" (p.11). In Raelin's terms, the coach can facilitate three levels of reflection on leadership and/or coaching experience: content (what can be learnt from what happened?); process (what can be learnt from how it happened?); and premise (what beliefs and assumptions influenced what happened?). This triangle is a helpful structure to assist in developing reflexive leadership. In this chapter, the language of contextual narratives will relate to the notion of premise; action will relate to content; and patterns of emotion, interpretation and action will relate to process

I propose that reflection within coaching facilitates meta-communicative learning i.e. learning about learning. Its benefits can be multi-levelled but in any given circumstance will have a specified focus and aim. The learning potential developed may be at levels of organizational culture, relationship and/or identity. At a cultural level, regular reflection practices can help to enhance a community of practice, challenging and enhancing cultural patterns and narratives (Lave & Wenger, 1991). At a relational level, learning

can occur about patterns of communication and effective processes developed. At an individual level, meaning can be opened up so that interpretive acts can be connected to social processes and narratives enriched through building patterns of connection.

One important source for inspiring reflection is the systemic psychotherapy tradition where particular rules have been developed to facilitate the opening up of meaning and the preservation and enhancement of the dignity of participants in a session. A reflection takes the form of a hypothesizing conversation about a conversation, where conscious links begin to get made. In the psychotherapy context, the therapist's team speak about the conversation the therapist has been having with the client, in front of the therapist and client(s), (Andersen, 1991). The conversation between therapist and client(s) then resumes, linking back to the reflection. In a coaching context, reflection can be used as a means to enhance dialogue, learning, leadership practices and relationships through the same means of a conversation about a conversation. This can be applied to the conversations within the leadership *communication system* and/or to the coaching conversations themselves, facilitating meta-communication. Reflection allows the coach to step out of the inquiry position and to collaborate with the coachee in explicit hypothesizing about the dilemmas or uncertainties faced. Alternatively some coaches working from a systemic perspective, work in pairs and reflect in front of the coachee who is then in a position to select the best of the reflected ideas presented. The added benefit of this structure is that the coachee, when placed in the third person position, is released from the obligation to respond immediately which is normally invoked in dialogue between first and second persons. The guidelines developed in the psychotherapy context are expanded below to fit a coaching context. They are linked to the coaching example that has been developed so far.

Guidelines for reflecting conversations:

- Decide the *focus* for reflection e.g. the obligations and entitlements imagined for leader and team member and how they link to contextual narratives.
- Decide how to *position* participants as speakers and listeners e.g. coach and coachee, following an inquiry process, could then reflect on aspects of the

material produced together, thus taking more of an observer position to the material.

- Position speakers and listeners in the reflection with a clear *purpose* e.g. to reflect on cultural and team patterns that shape the pattern of the relationship in order to help to make sense of the pattern.
- Assume that the coachee behaves as he or she does because she is lacking systemic information and needs to make links previously not made.
- Act reflexively, mindful of the effects of the use of verbal and non verbal language on coachee motivation and identity.

Formulation:

The linking of contextual narratives and contextual experience will begin in the coaching session but is always emergent and open to new shaping as new information is created. However, it is the coach's responsibility to create punctuations of clarity to facilitate new forms of thinking and behaviour. Such linkages may occur in between sessions and are part of the ongoing coaching narrative.

Decision:

The task of decision is for the coachee; the role of the coach is to *facilitate* appropriate and creative decisions for action. Potential interventions will either be at the level of meaning (contextual narrative) or action (contextual experience). In other words, the coachee may decide to explore, develop or challenge his or others' narratives about their experience or may actually try to do something differently within experience. The latter may include exiting a pattern, constructing a reflexive pattern or even continuing a pattern may be a good judgment when all relevant contexts are taken into account. Continuing a pattern for wider contextual reasons in a context of self awareness will invariably change the dynamic and outcome as consciousness facilitates choice.

Case study

This illustration, adapted from the coaching practice of Business Therapy (Oliver and Clarke, 2008) will attempt to show some links between inquiry, formulation and decision.

The example is from a coaching session with Bart, head of research in a credit management company (CMC). The senior management team has five members, two of whom are co-founders and chief executives of the company and own a greater proportion of shares. Bart's role is to mediate and coordinate activity between traders and researchers in the company. In an early coaching session, Bart shared how challenging he experienced his role. He was also concerned about how one of the chief executives treated him. He felt undermined by his dismissive and aggressive behaviour. Traders and researchers were in a conflicted and competitive dynamic with each side disqualifying the other through their behaviour. This dynamic undermined the potential for creative outcomes. Bart found that much of his time was spent attempting to pacify either 'side' and/or overcompensating for his identification with the researchers by supporting the traders. He found it very hard to maintain a grounded leadership position, with sufficient leverage for effective leadership action.

Inquiry:

Some key questions were asked in an attempt to explore links between contextual narratives and experience.

Context:	culture	relationship	identity
Self	How does the culture of the business environment encourage or discourage appropriate competition and collaboration? How does your behaviour support or challenge that culture?	How does the relationship of the chief executives shape communication possibilities within CCM? What is their perception of how you enact your role?	“How does the perception of the chief executives shape your perception of your abilities as leader? If you felt more confident, how might that show itself in your behaviour and how might that affect the relationship between traders and researchers?”
Other(s)	“What culture is created through the way the leadership team relates to the chief executives and what would be their perspectives on the culture created?”	“How would you describe team motivation and morale? How is this affected by the relational pattern between the CEOs?”	“What does the CEO do to influence your feeling undermined? What do you imagine are the pressures for the chief executive you find difficult? What do you imagine has influenced his pattern of leadership?”

Figure 5: case example

Reflection:

The inquiry produced some responses which coach and coachee reflected upon. It emerged that Bart felt he was in an oscillating, unstable pattern with the CEOs, whereby in one episode he would feel micro-managed and in the next he would feel abandoned, interpreting their treatment of him as bullying yet feeling no entitlement to comment on the pattern. This had the effect on him of feeling like giving up at times but at other times, feeling anxiously connected to work. This reinforced a feeling of insecurity yet he had felt obliged to engage in this oscillating reactive pattern. He believed this pattern was a cultural phenomenon, not just peculiar to his experience. Coach and coachee reflected how core communicative patterns may be compromising the broader leadership and communication system of CMC. Significantly, as these patterns were catalyzed within the system they were becoming ingested within CMC culture. These self limiting patterns were devaluing work satisfaction, team and individual performance and negatively constructing the ‘communication identity’ of CMC, compromising interface with stakeholder partners, clients and the market and also, inhibiting the business from maximizing the potential of its core proposition and brand promise, in the sector it operated within.

The following formulation emerged, linking contextual narratives with experience.

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Formulation:

The *market*: an environment of loss, fear and extreme competition shapes...

An organizational *culture*: that could be described as ‘zero sum game’ or a ‘win/lose’ communicative system – a culture where the only two positions possible are ‘winners’ and ‘losers’; blame is a central dynamic. This dynamic is compounded by...

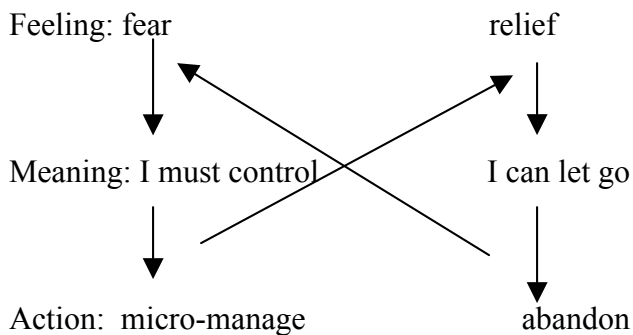
The *relational* style of the chief executives which was described as ‘oppositional’ and ‘neutralizing’, reinforcing the ‘win/lose’ dynamic; public conflict between them imposes a disturbing leadership effect on team culture and behaviour...

The *relational* style of traders and analysts has historically been shaped by this pattern and reinforced it, though there has been some recent success in Bart challenging this relational pattern to a more consensual dynamic ...

Key individuals, including Bart and the 'difficult' CEO bring their own patterns of *identity* into the picture where, for different reasons, there are stories of insecurity and lack of confidence. These vulnerabilities contribute to a culture of blame and fear.

In these contexts, individuals within communication *episodes* show a preoccupation with performance but team performance becomes a casualty to an individual 'win' or 'lose' mentality. The system is rife for the emergence of paradoxical patterns which approximate to the form below (Cronen et al, 1982, Oliver et al, 2003):

Leadership culture:



This pattern has ripple effects on team culture which stimulate stuck defensive behaviour. There is a sense of a lack of forward movement:

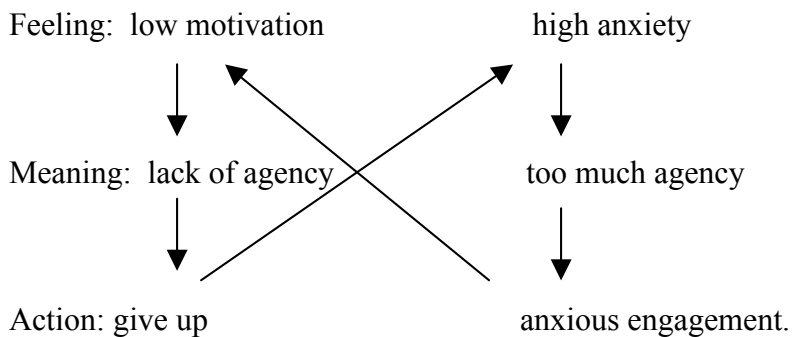


Figure 6: Paradoxical reactive patterns

Decision:

The formulation above illustrates paradoxical patterns for both leadership and team culture as a consequence of the contextual influences of culture, relationship and identity and the choices made (interpretive acts) within episodes of communication. Coach and coachee needed to consider whether the coachee could or should exit the pattern, continue the pattern or whether there was a possibility for transformation through reflexive action. In this case the coachee decided that he would take a courageous step and share his insights with the senior team and invite them to work together on thinking about how to change the dynamic. With regard to his own behaviour, Bart made the decision to neither 'give up' nor to anxiously engage but he began to realize that if he acted with confidence even when there was an environment of instability, the message he gave both his team and his CEOs would be more likely to facilitate a constructive spiral of communication and morale.

Conclusion

This chapter has conceptualized the coaching relationship from a systemic perspective, emphasizing the value of *reflexive agency* for the coachee within their *communication system*. A *reflexive leadership model* has been offered which links *contextual narratives* to *contextual experiences* and provides possibilities for making sense of these connections and the patterns that emerge from them. It has been proposed that it is useful to think in terms of reactive or reflexive patterns and that the coaching process can facilitate inquiry, reflection and formulation about past, present and future patterns so that the coachee can make an informed decision about his or her action in the leadership *communication system*.

Discussion points

1. Consider an episode of communication within your organization (e.g. university) and hypothesize about the contextual narratives and experiences for yourself and another party.
2. What might you hypothesize could be the reflexive choice points within interpretive acts within the episode of communication described?
3. In the context of coaching, what do you imagine might be dilemmas for the coach in exercising his or her own reflexive agency?
4. How might you know when there is a paradoxical pattern operating within a communication system?

Suggested further reading

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