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Organisational Coaching: Provoking Systemic Insights

By Vyla Rollins and Olivia Margo

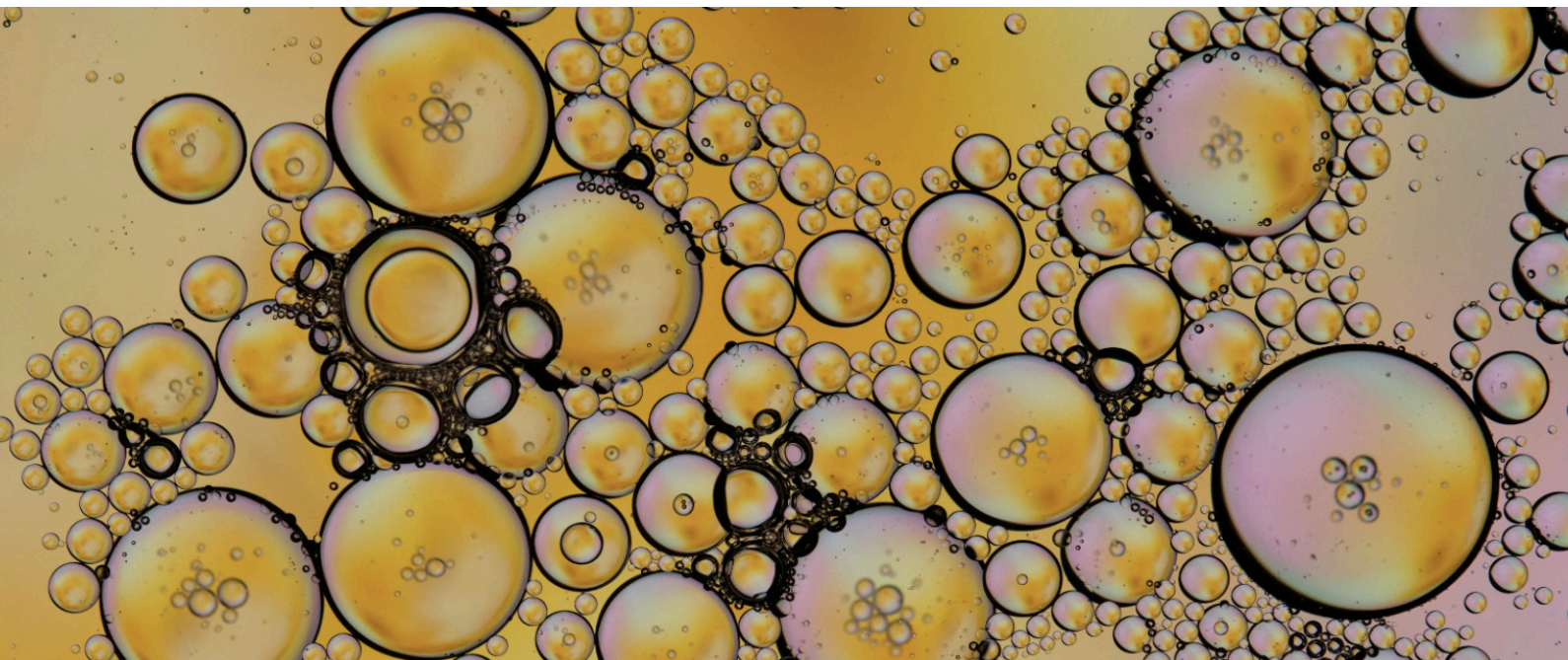


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The system of a person

The art of questioning is one of the key competencies of coaching.

Questions are used to activate a range of factors in our coaching relationships, including context and meaning for us as coaches, to test hypotheses, explore aspects of a coachee's experience/thinking/emotions we have a genuine curiosity about.

It can be easy to fall into the pattern of focusing on questions that focus on, for example, exploring factors that relate to an individual's personality characteristics, preferences, demographic, and personal development aspirations; questions that trigger an exploration of individual mindsets and beliefs that trigger actions and experiences.

These types of questions are about the person-as-a-system themselves and how they operate. However this approach alone, particularly in a complex organisational context, can limit the action and creative thinking available to a coachee. We exist in a dynamic relationship to our environment, and a systemic lens supports us to widen our view of what is happening, why it is happening, and how or where in the system we might be able to intervene. Coaching systemically illuminates a wider set of constructs to be explored that can unlock resourcefulness, effectiveness and creativity.

The person in a system

A person is a connected part of a wider system or 'eco-system': a family, a social group, a team, an organisation, a society. These parts 'talk' to each other in obvious and less obvious ways, consciously and unconsciously, just as the cells in your kidney pass information back and forth, in order to coordinate movement and allow for effective functioning. The muscles, tendons, and synapses in your somatic system work together to allow you to move your body through your life. We find ourselves having experiences and acting as agents in organisations in roles that may be unfamiliar and unusual to us. These are systemic phenomena.

In the Gestalt and Family Constellations disciplines we might refer to this as "The Field", and in psychodynamics we may refer to these phenomena as the "associative unconscious at work".

As Bazalgette writes: 'The concept of *'holon'* is important here: the part reflects the essence of the whole – for example, the holographic plate, from every fragment of which the whole image can be recovered'^[1].

In this sense an aspect of the wider system may be expressing itself through the person's experience, from the language they use to express their experience, the assumptions and mindsets they hold, and our own experience of them in the coaching relationship. As a coach we might ask ourselves 'what part of the system am I speaking to now?'

The dynamics and processes of the organisation come into starker view; the formal and informal relationships, the movement of power and authority, and the relationship between individuals and the organisation as an ecosystem. Many of the dynamics in organisations are unintentional and unconscious; however, the more options we have available to us to support the effectiveness and vitality of ourselves, those around us, and the wider organisational system.

Systemic questions can therefore help us work in partnership with coachees to illuminate and explore the multiple forces and factors at work in their experience-- both their own characteristics as well as the wider system. This presents them with new choices and ideas that might not have been available to them otherwise.

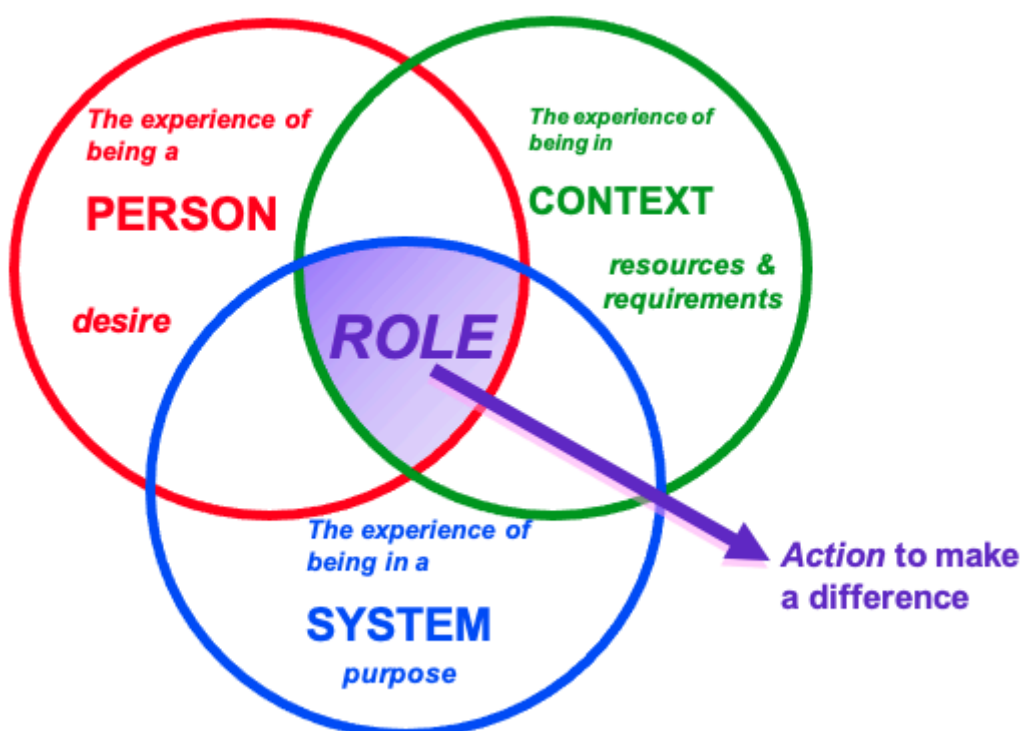
[1] Bazalgette J. L. (2008), 'Leadership: the full human being in role' in Aram E, Baxter R. & Nutkevitch A. (eds) *Belgirate II: Adaptation and Innovation Theory, Design and Role Taking in Group Relations Conferences and their Applications, Vol II*, Karnac Books, London

The system frame

There are a number of systemic coaching frameworks. Regardless of the frame you utilise, we encourage you to consciously and actively reflect on how you might utilise “systemic questions” to stimulate thinking in yourself and your client about the broader ecosystem they are situated in.

Working systemically is in essence to work with connectedness: the idea that an experience in one part of the organisation might be data about how it’s being experienced by another part of the organisation. That the experience of one person may give us data about the role of the function in which they sit, or how their expertise is valued by the organisation. And that the experience of our role is formed by not just the job position, but the beliefs and mental models we bring to it, as well as the organisation’s conception of what the role is for.

Systemic questions, broadly defined, are questions that relate to exploring issues holistically and without prejudice across the three domains of Person, System, and Context.



Below are some “systemic themes, questions, and issues” one might look to explore with coachees across the three domains of Person, System, and Context:

Person-in-role:

- What are the desires and assumptions the coachee brings to the purpose of the role and how it is intended to function, be utilised, and perform in the organisation?
- What previous roles have they taken up both in terms of formal professional roles, and informal social roles? For example, are they often the task master, the peacemaker, the coordinator, the joker, etc.
- What hopes and aspirations did the coachee have upon receiving the job offer, however long ago? What is their metaphor or picture-in-the-mind of what the role would, should, or could be like?
- What is the history of the role in the organisation and the stories and narratives of how the role has been experienced previously? What happened to the previous role-holder?
- What is the stated purpose of the role and is this congruent with the authority, resources, and responsibility attributed to it?

Person-in-role-in-system:

- What are the beliefs or assumptions a coachee holds in regard to their relationships with others in the system (for example bosses, immediate peers and peers at the same level across the organisation) that might be related to factors relating to authority, power, influence manifesting in those relationships?
- Thinking about how various functional or operational groups may be impacting on the coachee's experience in the system and what they could explore that might make their interactions with these groups more effective and fruitful, for example relating to "communication patterns, flows of information, levels of conflict and trust, and relational/workstyles.
- What is the stated purpose of the organisational system, and how is the coachee and other significant people enacting this sense of shared purpose? Where is there incongruence in the understanding of what their purpose is? E.g. the stated purpose is different to the lived experience, or different to the ideal purpose
- What function is the coachee in, and how might their experience be a reflection of the experience of the function they represent in the organisation? For example, if they are a member of the IT function and experiencing conflict with someone from HR, in what way is this inter-personal experience an enactment of the way in which IT and HR relate to one another? How are goals and objectives aligned in service of the organisation?
- In what way is the coachee's experience absolutely perfect? As in, fit-for-purpose for the role they are in, and providing them critical insight and information to support them to adapt their approach?
- If a coachee is experiencing conflict with another person, what would a benign interpretation of their behaviour be? In what way are all parties in this conflict "*right*?" That is to say, each person is reflecting something critical and true about the nature of their role in the organisation that must not be stifled or 'fixed', but understood and worked with in order to evolve.

Person-in-role-in-Context:

- What formal role is the coachee in, and what does this role represent to the organisation? For example, if they are a project manager, how is the training of project managers thought about, and related to in the organisation? How might this affect how the coachee is being related to by others?
- What demographic does the person represent from society? E.g. race and ethnicity, religious or spiritual community, gender identity, political party, wealth and class, educational background and privilege, geographic and linguistic identity (e.g. accents), and so on. How might this be playing out in their experience?
- What professional or educational training and background does the coachee have, and how is that perceived in the organisation? For example, what types of education are valued in this system and sector, such as university, apprenticeships, graduate training etc. What types of higher educational institutes are valued over others?
- What profession is the coachee representing? For example, how are HR professionals related to in the banking sector; what stories are there about Sales Directors that might be impacting this person's experience?

System-in-Context:

- What is happening in the industry/ community /society/ government / environment of the organisation that might be reflected in the coachee's dilemma or experience?
- What role does the organisation currently take up in the market? Is it a leader, competitor? What tensions are arising in the sector that might be currently reflected internally?
- What regulatory challenges are being faced that might be playing out internally and manifesting in the coachee's experience?
- What is the current environment around customer satisfaction and loyalty, and how might that be reflected in the coachee's experience?
- How permeable is the organisation's boundaries with its context? For example is security too tight, or not tight enough, creating feelings of *insecurity* in the organisation? Is expenditure managed appropriately or is it unclear how much money is being spent on what? Is the talent pool and new starters managed in a fit-for-purpose way, or are new incumbents either brought in too quickly or left waiting for too long?

The exploration of systemic themes, questions and/or issues can provoke possibilities and reflections on how an individual could influence and constructively shape the system they are a part of. They also prompt coaches to explore, recognise and understand the interplay of their actions in a dynamic relationship with their wider environment. One final thought to consider: When an individual enquires "is it me or the system?", we might say that it is almost always both. The question is what level of agency might we choose or not choose to exercise (and why) in the ecosystems we are a part of.

Vyla Rollins is an award-winning Organisational Psychologist and Executive Coach, who has worked as a Strategic Organisational Effectiveness consultant for over 30 years. Vyla is also a coach, coaching supervisor, and OD practitioner, who has experience in design, delivery, learning facilitation and coaching for globally recognised business schools and public, private and third sector organisations. She is a former Strategic Advisor for Tavistock Consultancy Services, the organisational consulting arm of the Tavistock Clinic.

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References and further reading

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