Organising and managing across boundaries

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Working across organisational boundaries

Shifting from complaining and blaming to problem-solving

Rowena Davis

Systems-Centred Training (SCT)[4] conceptualises boundaries within ourselves – intrapersonal boundaries – and between ourselves and others – interpersonal boundaries. SCT posits that differences are key to our survival, development and transformation. Our boundaries tend to open to similarities and close to differences. How the potentially useful information in differences crosses these boundaries is important to our ongoing survival, development and transformation. In this article, I highlight some of the key moments in a five-month assignment with managers in a large UK social care organisation, interspersed with how my thinking about boundaries from a Systems-Centered perspective guided my work and how I and the managers I worked with and made sense of what happened (Weick, 1995, 2001). I argue that when we see things only from an individual perspective, we lose the wider context and tend to blame ourselves or others (and feel anguished). The alternative of seeing the wider context – working across boundaries - helps to explore how we are all contributing to what is unfolding, and hence normalises our experience and gives us access to more potentially useful information.

Introduction

The theme of this issue of eO&P – Organising and Managing Across Organisational Boundaries – struck a chord with me when I first heard about it at an AMED Writer's Group meeting in May 2014. I had just finished five months' work with a team of managers in a large UK social care organisation. The work ended with the managers and their manager asking the question: 'How shall we communicate this work to others in the organisation?'

I highlight in the following pages some of the key moments of the work and how I and the managers made sense of what happened (Weick, 1995, 2001), interspersed with how my thinking about boundaries from a Systems-Centered perspective guided my thinking and what I did.

What do we mean by boundaries?

Commonly, we think of boundaries in terms of time and space. For example, we might say 'It's time to start'; or, 'We've crossed the border into Canada'. Boundaries also commonly delineate what is here from there and what is me or us from what is you or others. So we might say 'This is engineers' work not marketers'.

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One way of thinking about boundaries is that they help organise energy or information in human systems (Gantt, S.P. & Agazarian, Y.M. 2005: 12-13). From this Systems-Centered perspective, how information and energy cross boundaries is important if we are to develop and transform. We can be more or less open or closed to information. When our boundaries are closed, no new information comes in and the system (ourselves, a couple, a team, an organisation) stays static or stable. Think about how closed off you feel to what the other person is saying when you're arguing with each other. When our boundaries are too open or too much information comes in, the system is likely to become disorganised, chaotic, or flooded. Think about your experience when you get so upset that you are flooded with emotion, or when someone talks on and on; in both cases we tend to lose our ability to think. When our boundaries are appropriately permeable, we can take in new information and use it to develop and potentially transform. You may have experienced this in conversations which flow easily.

SCT conceptualises boundaries within ourselves – intrapersonal boundaries – and between ourselves and others – interpersonal boundaries. Within ourselves, we have different sources of information – our cognitive knowledge and our apprehensive or emotional knowledge, both of which are needed if we are to make decisions and act using our emotional intelligence (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000: 185; Damasio, 1994). We also often have different sub-groups within ourselves or in a team. For example, when deciding if we want to apply for a job, we are likely to have a part of us that does want to apply and another part of us that doesn't. In any group or team there are likely to be different subgroups holding different views on an issue, for example, those in favour of going one way and those against.

SCT posits that exploring the potentially useful information in the different subgroups, one at a time, is likely to be important for a solid decision which we are fully signed up to. SCT aims to create a climate in which this is possible and has methods, the major one of which is functional sub-grouping, to facilitate integrating differences (for a visual of how this works, see the short video Susan Gantt and I produced @ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A_ZsQgmbAM).

The Systems-centered notions outlined above were particularly important in guiding the work I describe in this article.

An email out of the blue

Mid-December 2013 I had an email from Alison[5], with whom I'd worked previously, asking me to link to one of her managers, Michael, about possible work with a team. I'd facilitated a couple of management development days with the senior team (which included Alison, Michael and Caroline, who reported to Michael) earlier in the year.

Michael's follow-up email described the project as

> *'essentially a support and challenge time limited intervention. In essence this is work with the management team to understand and change dynamics. We need to develop a culture which promotes consistent approaches across and between teams. Within this there is a likelihood we*

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[5] I have changed all the names in the narrative to preserve anonymity as requested by the team.

> *need some coaching for various members including Caroline the service manager. These need to be developed into a plan which Caroline and I will do but would welcome your thoughts.'*

He attached a five page document outlining his view of the issues.

I understood from this the key issue seemed to be about getting teams to work in consistent ways across organisational boundaries. I was struck by some of the language which seemed managerial and abstract – for example, *'time limited', 'consistent approaches'*. I wondered if this meant Michael (and the wider organisation) had a notion of 'best practice' and also a linear view of how change happens; did they support local adaptations to take account of different contexts? My experience is that change is emergent (a view supported by complexity theory and SCT as well as group dynamics) and, while we can have a plan or goal in mind, we can't control what happens or guarantee outcomes. We co-create change – and stability – as we interact daily and jointly make sense of what happens, through our everyday conversations with others and ourselves. Some of the best ways to solve problems is to allow people to come up with solutions that suit local conditions (Rodgers 2007; Stacey and Giffin, 2005).

I had some other questions: Was Caroline on board with this proposed work? What role did Michael want me to play? I was curious and decided to explore further to see if the resources I bring might be relevant to helping them achieve their goals. I knew that if our views seemed too far apart or if my resources didn't seem to match what they wanted, I would decline the offer.

I found parts of the document Michael sent hard to follow (in our first conversation I said this and we worked to clarify these). It contained several unexplained acronyms and several disjointed sentences with missing words. There was a lot of data and detail, with few 'so whats?' I wondered if time to think, clear communication and seeing the wood for the trees were uncommon in this organisation (as in many others I've worked in). Michael said he wanted *'a systems approach'* and a *'systems leader'* to do the work, without specifying what he meant by these. He described the communication patterns he observed between the team managers in terms of Obscuring and Competing behaviours rather than Resonating, Responding or Integrating. These are labels for some of the Squares on the SAVI[®6] (System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction) grid http://www.savicommunications.com/savi.html that I had introduced at the senior team development day.[7] I took all this to mean he wanted to draw on my Systems-Centered Training and SAVI knowledge.

I emailed him back suggesting that we speak to explore my questions and our ideas for how to do the work. I wanted to clarify if we thought we could work together and, if so, how.

The issues and the context for the work

From our conversation and Michael's document, I understood the issue was that the team managers (TMs) in the West of the region were not performing as well as their counterparts in the East. In Michael's words, the West delivery teams were taking *'too long'* to do their work and not meeting their *'targets for timeliness'*.

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[6] SAVI® and SAVI Grid® are registered trademarks of Yvonne Agazarian, Claudia Byram, Frances Carter and Anita Simon. ©.

[7] The SAVI grid can be used to map the communication patterns we co-create and to identify strategies to try out where these are 'stuck' or blocking communication. So we might shift from Yes-Butting each other (a Competing behaviour) to Paraphrasing and asking a Broad Question (both Responding behaviours) to explore our different views.

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A re-organisation 12 months previously had led to the West losing one Team Manager and two delivery staff posts. The West TMs did not regard this reallocation as *'reasonable'.* They also had higher work-loads than the East. In Michael's view, the West TMs had lost their capacity to *'problem-solve'* and had gone into *'complaining and blaming'.*

> *In SAVI, complaining and blaming are two Avoidant behaviours which get in the way of communicating information clearly – the complaint avoids saying what the person wants or how they might achieve this and signals a feeling of helplessness, without saying this directly. SAVI posits that Avoidant behaviours are 'noisy' (ambiguous, redundant or contradictory) and we experience frustration and stress in a 'noisy' climate (Agazarian and Gantt, 2000: 47-69). Complaining commonly tends to evoke in the listener a want to propose a solution (which the complainer tends to reject and instead continues complaining, thus creating a frustrating, redundant 'loop'); other common responses are for the listener to ignore the complaint or to attack the complainer. None of these surfaces the potentially useful information underneath the complaint.*

Michael reported that the West Service Manager, Caroline, had joined the complaining, and had become, in his view, *'too closely identified'* with the TMs. One of the Team Managers in particular was not meeting targets and was not supervising staff or recording outcomes in the expected way. As I listened to Michael, I wondered if he had joined the pattern of complaining and blaming – a common phenomenon in my experience, which highlights how strongly the climate or system dynamic influences individual behaviour (Agazarian and Gantt, 2000: 59). (I did not mention this at the time, guided by my sense I had already challenged several of his notions and I wanted to keep our communication open.)

Starting to build an open communication climate

What I did instead was to voice my concern about the potential for scape-goating or personalising (i.e. s/he is the problem) vs. seeing the pattern as something which we are co-creating and therefore can all potentially contribute to changing.

> *I was drawing on SCT's understanding about personalizing and scape-goating as common dynamics in human systems (groups, teams and organisations) (Agazarian & Gantt 2000: 65-69, 163, 202-203). This highlights that when we see things only from an individual perspective, we lose the wider context and tend to blame ourselves or others (and feel anguished). The alternative of seeing the wider context helps to explore how we are all contributing to what is unfolding and normalise our experience. Without a shift in our communication pattern (which is the output of the system dynamic in SCT theory - Agazarian & Gantt, 2000: 62), we can remove one scapegoat, only for the next one to appear soon after.*

In my experience, personalising and blaming individuals, with its concomitant climate of shaming and anxiety, is widespread in organisations and our wider society. The scrutiny of public sector workers in the UK makes it particularly prevalent here (Stacey & Griffin 2006).

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I said something like *'I'm wondering if there's a potential for scape-goating here. What do you think?'* I was aiming to use an open, neutral tone (as opposed, for example, to asking a leading question) and was curious to hear his response. I was aware of crossing from my internal conversation to the one with Michael and of bringing in something that he might find difficult to take in as too far from his view. Asking the question seemed appropriate from my consultant-to-the-organisation role; withholding it risked losing potentially valuable information. Michael agreed there was a risk of scape-goating and that he wanted to avoid this. I was relieved to hear this and said so.

With the to-and-fro of our questions and answers, clarifying where we weren't clear, agreeing or disagreeing openly with each other, and our exploratory tone, we were starting to create an open, reality-testing climate in this first conversation.

In so doing, we were stepping into the unknown, potentially creating something neither of us knew in advance. In other words, we were engaging in an emergent conversation which had an open, creative quality and which involved some risk as we crossed the boundary from inside ourselves to the outside.

Goals and Roles

I asked Michael what he wanted to see in terms of a change. I was thinking in terms of 'Role, Goal and Context', which is another Systems-Centered notion (Gantt, S.P., & Agazarian, Y.M. 2005: 8-9). I had some idea of the context and wanted to agree the goals and our different roles so that we could make a start, knowing that these might change as we worked.

I asked him to describe where the TMs sat in the formal organisational hierarchy. Below is the picture I drew after our conversation. This helped inform where to focus the work.

Diagram 1

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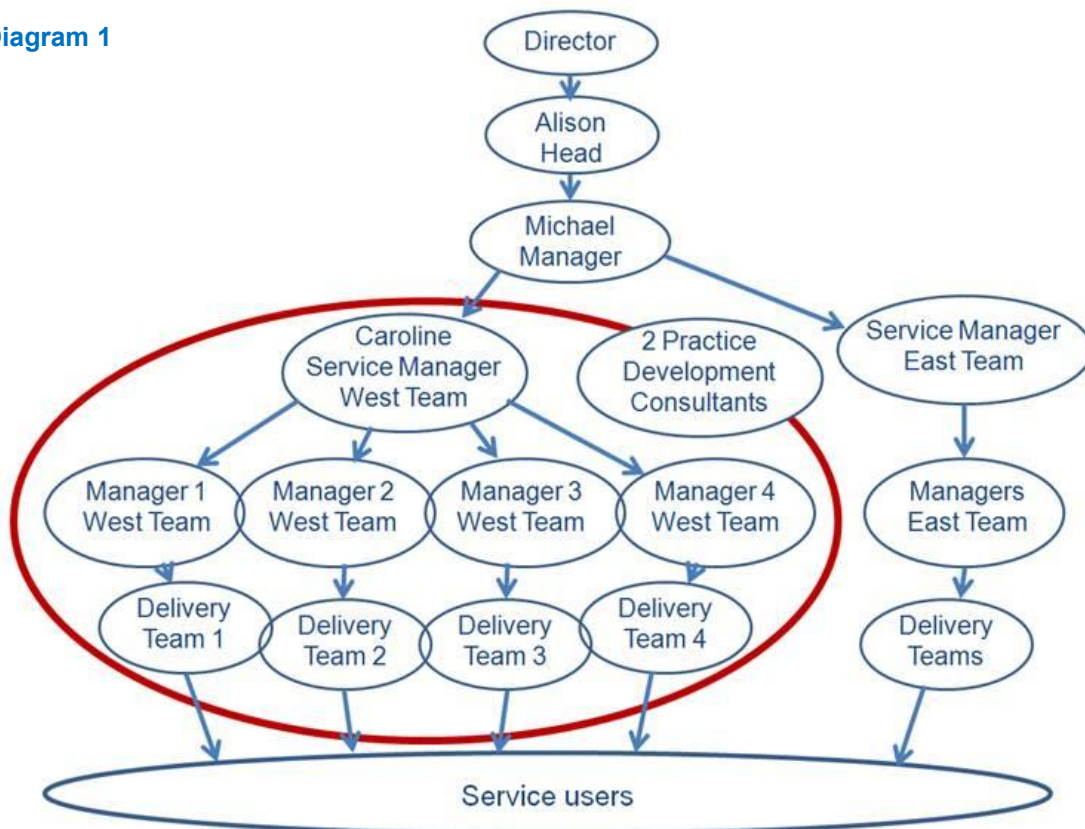
I said I could see several options regarding what we might do and where we might start: working with Caroline alone, Caroline and the TMs or just the TMs. We explored each of these in relation to the overall goals of the project and decided that I'd work with the system of the four TMs, the two Practice Development Consultants (a temporary resource supporting the TMs) and Caroline. (This is outlined in red in Diagram 1). Our criteria for starting here were: this was where the dynamic seemed most stuck; and this was likely to have an impact on the way Michael and Caroline worked together, as well as on the way the TMs worked with the Delivery Teams.

> *I was using the Systems-Centered notion (Gantt & Agazarian, 2005: 3-6) that, if you think of systems as coming in threes, the system in the middle is the one where you're likely to have most impact. A change in the middle can affect the systems above and below it in the hierarchy. Once the middle system changes, then the task is to see how the change can cross the boundaries. Paying attention to this crossing, by not bringing in too much difference or 'noise', is important for change to happen.*

We agreed the goals of the work were to:

- ▪ 'Identify what was helping and what was getting in the way of the West cooperating with delivering a similar service to the East and between West teams and specifically to shortening their delivery times

- ▪ Help the West team shift themselves from a non-problem solving communication pattern, to one where they see themselves as proactive agents and are able to engage in problem-solving and meeting their delivery goals.'

We also agreed these goals might change as we did the work and that we would start, see what happened and then decide what to do next. This gave us flexibility in adapting the work and also allowed for local solutions to emerge to meet the delivery times goal (see below).

Michael talked through the goals and the design with Caroline to check if she was on board with them.

Shifting to more open, problem-solving communication climates

Michael, Caroline and I met in early January to confirm the goals, our proposed design and to plan the first meeting with the TMs.

During this first face-to-face meeting which lasted 1.5 hours, Caroline started complaining about resources, using a whining tone. I asked her if she was aware of this (she was) and if she wanted to try an alternative (she did). I suggested she try using Facts and Figures (a specific SAVI category which brings in facts about the outside world that can be verified e.g. we now have one less Manager) and asking questions, both with a more neutral tone. She tried this. Michael responded with a Yes-But (a competing SAVI behaviour which gives a token acknowledgment of the previous speaker's point but focuses on getting across a different view and results in two monologues, rather than a dialogue). Caroline retorted with another Yes-But and a Complaint. So here we had a pattern going with very little sharing of information and frustration rising (theirs and mine!). I pointed this out to them and they agreed it was a common pattern in their conversations and one they wanted to change.

I then asked them if they would be willing to paraphrase each other and check if they'd done a good-enough paraphrase. They agreed. We were all moved by what happened next. Caroline felt that Michael had acknowledged, for first time, that the West had insufficient resources. She heard – again for the first time – that he was allocating extra ones. Her body visibly relaxed and her facial expression softened. She said she felt relieved. I asked Michael to paraphrase this too. He missed the feeling of relief which was important to Caroline. So he tried again and 'got it' this time. This seemed an important shift across an inter-personal boundary which freed them both up and led the way for feelings to be more openly acknowledged.

Meeting the TMs – exploring what was working well/less well

At the first meeting with the TMs Michael introduced the work. The TMs clarified some points with him about the wider context. He then left. The rest of the meeting included the TMs, Caroline and the one Practice Development (PD) Consultant who was at work that day.

One of the TMs asked what my background was (a very reasonable question I thought and said so, and one which we had not addressed). I answered this and added that I wanted to support them and work transparently with them. They said this was enough for the moment. This was an early example of the TMs asking openly what they were thinking in their internal conversation. (It was also likely a voicing of their anxiety about the work, which we did not explore at that point; instead I chose to focus more on the task. I had a sense that this would give them an experience of the work that hopefully would alleviate some of their fears.) In hindsight, I think the question and my open response set the tone for the rest of the meeting.

We then got into the heart of the meeting where I proposed we work with SCT's adaptation of Lewin's force-field (Gantt & Agazarian, 2005: 17-19) to gather information on what was helping and what was getting in the way of the TMs working productively together. Drawing on my SCT training (which like other disciplines e.g. Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Psychology, Strengths-Based Approaches, orients to strengths before tackling challenges), I deliberately asked them to start with the 'positives'. They contributed with energy and built easily on one another's contributions. After a while, as the pace slowed down, I asked if they were ready to move to what was getting in the way. They said they were and again people contributed with energy.

They were surprised and satisfied to see how much they were committed to working together. I was surprised and satisfied with their openness about the behaviours that were getting in the way. Caroline pioneered this openness by asking if her anxiety, which tended to increase when their case-loads rose, affected them. The TMs said that it did at times. They also said that she was sometimes vague, which made it hard to work out what she wanted.

They also identified that, by not finding a space to explore their feelings, these often spilled over into the teams that they led (another boundary being crossed with not such positive consequences this time).

Using Lewin's research (Lewin 1997) that it is easier to reduce restraining forces than increase driving forces, I asked them to choose the easiest thing to change among the factors that were getting in the way. They decided that they wanted to change the way they were processing their feelings. They wanted to take breaks and find a room to discuss difficult issues and feelings, and to support each other. Below is the force-field from the first meeting with the TMs.

Factors helping	Factors getting in the way
- Supporting & warmly welcoming new member - Supporting each other even when energy is low – keep problem solving & cover for each other - Share values to do best for end-users – keep these even when going gets tough - Able to be(mostly) open & honest with each other - Great wealth of experience & knowledge re. service area - All have experience of working & change within the organisation – shared history & commitment - Able to ask for specifics - Working in same space – spend lot of time together & meet face-to-face - Recognise each other's strengths & weaknesses & organise work around these - Keeping our sense of humour (just about) - Enjoy working together - Our reports tell us their 'moans' – don't hide these & we encourage this - Mostly able to keep our moans within the team - Choosing our moments to clarify & repair with each other - Being aware of what it means to take up our authority & roles	- Service manager's anxiety spilling over into the team - Knee-jerk reactions to messages from above leads to losing confidence in ourselves - Service manager not being specific re expectations - Not asking for clarification & thinking it's my fault/ something wrong with me – has led to friction between team members - Team members reacting to service manager's tone - At times we don't contain our body language / what we say in open plan office so spills over to others - Don't find space to deal with high emotion/stress out of earshot of the teams we lead - Service manager (& us with people we lead) trying too hard to make it 'comfortable' for the team & losing leadership role - Recently struggled to keep a 'smiley' face - Becoming 'robots' in how we respond even after positive rating of service - Losing our authority & our roles **Next steps** Agreed to give ourselves a break together to process feelings/experience as a way of acknowledging & containing these within the team & moving from complaining to problem solving how do we work within this reality

As I re-read this force-field, I was struck by how willing the TMs were to cross that intra-personal boundary between saying what one knows and staying silent for fear of the impact that this might have. My hypothesis is that this did not happen by chance. Rather, it emerged from the communication climate we built. In my facilitator role, I encouraged actively from the start asking and answering questions, listening to what people said, paraphrasing and asking for specific examples where we weren't clear or agreeing when we were, slowing down when people interrupted each other and checking to see everyone had an opportunity to say what they wanted to. This built an inquiring, open climate and increased trust.

I typed up the force-field. We did not send this to Michael. We wanted to keep the boundary between the TMs and the rest of the organisation closed for the moment. Our aim was for the TMs to have the freedom to be as open as they wanted with each other.

Four more meetings

Over the following four months, we had four more meetings which included the TMs, Caroline and the Practice Development Consultants, each of 2.5 hours.

Before each of these, Caroline and I liaised by email and 'phone to catch up on any developments and think through how to structure the meetings and how to share our roles. Caroline then emailed the TMs with our outline plan and summarised our thinking.

Caroline took an increasingly active role leading the meetings on the Task or topic they were discussing and I gradually took more of a 'process' (Amado et al 2004) or coaching role whenever we got stuck; I wanted to support the work, or bring attention to what was happening in the moment. Typically, we started with reviewing what was working well and less well, and then chose an issue to focus on during the meeting.

After each meeting, Caroline and I met with Michael for an hour to let him know how we were doing and to explore the work we had done. We gave him broad details (without being specific about who had said what to keep this information within the TM boundary) and reviewed how we were doing in relation to the overall goals. We explored if we wanted to do anything different. After the second meeting, we agreed to add two more sessions to the original three as our sense was we needed more time to support the new ways the TMs were working on managing resources and workloads.

This sense-making time with Michael emerged spontaneously – we had not planned it at the beginning. After the first session, we decided to continue it. My experience was that it supported all of us as it crossed the boundary from the work with the TMs to the wider system, even if it was not always comfortable (see the description of the last meeting with Michael below).

During the five months of the work, the context continued to shift. The CEO and the Director of Service resigned and the work load continued to be high. The Head of Service, Alison, had said that, despite the uncertainty about the wider context, the TMs were to continue on their course, which they found helpful. I highlight below what seemed significant moments after the first meeting.

Stepping back – discriminating boundaries between what's my role and what's yours

After the first meeting, Caroline began to step back from detailed involvement in managing the service delivery, *'trying to manage but not be over-embroiled with the team'* as she put it. She let the TMs know that she wanted them to do more of the day-to-day decision-making (she stopped attending a weekly planning meeting, for example) and that they could come to her to consult on any issues that they weren't able to sort. This was working well for her and the team – she felt under less pressure and the TMs felt more trusted.

Reviewing what was working/not working

This became a regular feature of how the TMs assessed how they were working together outside of our meetings. As part of this, the two Practice Development consultants asked the Delivery Team members (i.e. the people the TMs managed) what was working and what was not working in organising the work-load. The Delivery Team members said they liked contributing to this – an example, of how the work in the TM meetings started to cross the boundary to the system below. The PD consultants also pulled together quantitative data used by the organisation to measure performance (e.g. how long it was taking to deliver services, work-loads and staff numbers). This report formed the basis for the TMs' proposed change to organising their workloads.

This highlights the fact that between the times I met with them, the TMs, Caroline and the PDs worked on addressing what was getting in the way. Our meetings increasingly became touch-points to reflect, practise new ways of communicating and plan what to do next. (In other words, we were engaging in learning on the job or action learning (McNiff, 2000).

Crossing the boundary from outside to inside the meeting

We started the second meeting with me asking everyone to take a moment and check if their energy was in the room, or if they were distracted by anything from the outside. This is a Systems-Centered centring practice (Agazarian 1997: 288) whose goal is to get our working energy into the here-and-now and to discriminate facts from feelings. It is similar to other practices e.g. Mindfulness and Embodied Leadership (Hamill P, 2013).

One of the TMs said he was distracted by the amount of work he had outside of our meeting. I asked him how he felt about this fact and he replied *'frustrated'*. I asked him to make space for his feeling of frustration. He responded: *'What is this? Re-birthing?'* My internal conversation was something like: *'Oops – looks like you've introduced too much of a difference. Try putting it in a way that seems more similar'*. I was thinking Systems-Centered Theory – boundaries close to too much difference (Gantt & Agazarian, 2005: 14-15) and that leaving the locus of the decision-making with the client is likely to facilitate more sustainable change. I responded with something like *'No – it's just making space for the feeling. Are you willing to see if it makes a difference to your energy?'* He agreed. I then asked him to make eye contact with everyone in the room and asked if he felt he was more present in the meeting, less present or the same. He said *'More'*. Interestingly, at the last meeting he was surprised he had asked if it was re-birthing and had no memory of it.

We continued to check at the beginning of our meetings if everyone was present enough to start. My hypothesis is that centring helped us to integrate feelings and thoughts and to use more of our present experience to do our work.

Getting into reality – and moving from opinions about others to asking and answering questions

During the second meeting, I started to hear comments like *'I know you don't like doing that job'*. I pointed out that that was a thought about the other person and asked if they could check if it was true. In the back of my mind, I was applying the Systems-Centered technique for undoing Mind Reads (thoughts about others treated as if they are facts) which helps develop a reality-testing climate by enabling team members to cross the boundary from their opinions to checking reality with others. We undid lots of Mind Reads and had fun doing some of these. I was aware of how, at one level, this is so simple to do; at another, so much of our experience in organisations (and in our personal lives) is constructed from our thoughts. We often miss the step of crossing the boundary from our personal opinions to collecting reality-based data with others.

The rest of the second meeting focused on the task of how to improve the way that the work was managed.

As we worked, I asked the TMs to notice when they were getting 'wordy' or redundant and to say the heart of what they wanted to say to reduce 'noise'. When people interrupted or Yes-Butted each other, I asked them to slow down or first see if they or someone else could join the previous speaker's contribution before bringing in a difference.

> *I was using the Systems-Centered method of functional sub-grouping (Agazarian and Gantt 2000: 185 – 188) designed to interrupt Yes-butting patterns and instead explore the potentially useful information in differences. Systems-Centered Theory posits that, in a climate of similarity, we will discover just tolerable differences in what initially seemed only similar, and some similarities in what appeared to be only different. Functional sub-grouping, the SCT method for doing this, involves stating clearly when we have a difference, and agreeing to explore one side first, then the other. The theory posits this process of exploration is more likely to lead to integration and innovative outcomes (true in my and many others' experience).*

The work flowed easily. The TMs came up with three options to explore further. I saw the TMs and Caroline stepping into their roles with more confidence – speaking up, checking out their thoughts, asking and answering questions, building on each other, explicitly bringing in differences and getting specific about what the issues were.

One of their agreed Next Steps was *'Keep checking out, speaking directly, and being specific with each other.'* As we reviewed our experience in and learnings from the meeting, people reported feeling energised by the work, relieved and more trusting of each other.

Opening up to differences

After the second meeting, differences in the way the TMs worked started to emerge explicitly, leading to some tension and *'snipey'* comments (in Caroline's words during our pre-meeting catch up call). One TM *'worked fast'*, another was *'methodical'*, yet another was *'disorganised and not on top of the work'*, and the fourth was *'very focused'* and *'not pushy'*. This was a sign of development in SCT theory which, in common with many other theories of change (Wheelan, 2005), posits that teams and groups go through predictable (but not linear) phases of development. From this perspective, the TMs were moving from Flight (where we tend to move away from differences for fear of rocking the boat) to more Fight (where we can either fight about our differences or see them as potentially useful resources for the work)[8].

As long as they could listen to each other and keep focused on the goal of working together, this was another step towards working in reality, in other words, sounding out their thinking with each other and engaging with the reality in the team and the wider context, rather than what they wished for or imagined.

Integrating thinking and feeling

By the time of the last meeting, the TMs were openly acknowledging how they were feeling in relation to taking up their roles in the organisation. There is now a body of work to support the hypothesis that our emotional or intuitive information is an essential part of effective reasoning and decision-making (Damasio, 2006; Goleman, 1998; Hamill P, 2013). In my experience, the importance of integrating the rational and the emotional knowledge we hold is often ignored or dismissed in organisations in favour of the exclusively cognitive or rational.

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[8] Agazarian's unique contribution to Phases of Development is to have identified the typical behaviours that help and those that get in the way of change in each phase, and to propose that weakening the restraining behaviours facilitates development, cfr. Gantt, S.P. & Agazarian, Y.M. (2007).

An important moment had been during the fourth meeting when I asked the TMs to explore their experience of working in their roles. I normalised people's contributions and asked if anyone else shared the experience, by saying, for example, *'Sounds like a very normal response'* or *'Does anyone else have the experience of being frustrated with this situation?'*. Normalising and joining others so they are not left alone with their experience are SCT practices designed to reduce problematizing and personalising (Agazarian, Y.M. & Gantt, S.P., 2000: 132, 219).

Some were feeling frustrated that they didn't have more certainty about the wider service re-design. I said one way to see frustration is that it's just energy which doesn't yet have a goal (Agazarian, Y.M. & Gantt, S.P., 2000: 40, 192) and one TM said he felt relieved to hear this. Others were feeling *'drained of energy holding everyone's anxieties and questions if we plan now, will it be relevant?'* Others were angry that *'rumours were flying around'* about a staff promotion. Just naming the feelings and letting them be – not trying to 'do' something with them – was helpful.

During the last meeting, we revisited my point that these feelings are normal human responses to uncertainty (Systems-Centered Theory emphasises opening up to uncertainty with curiosity as an alternative to defending against our experience – see Agazarian & Gantt, 2000: 204). I drew a diagram on a flip chart where I pointed out, if we can notice the feelings in the moment, we can have more choice about how to react to them. I listed some common default responses (often learned in childhood) to managing uncertainty and the TMs built on these.

We identified making negative predictions about the future; over-structuring and micro-managing tasks (which struck a chord with Caroline as her default mode); joking around; going it alone or becoming alienated from others (a response in the TMs when they weren't sharing the impact of the work openly). The TMs felt relieved to say these out loud and see them as normal responses. We brainstormed alternative strategies including slowing down, breathing, taking a break, relating to each other, collecting data by asking and answering questions and checking if it was anxiety or excitement they were experiencing.
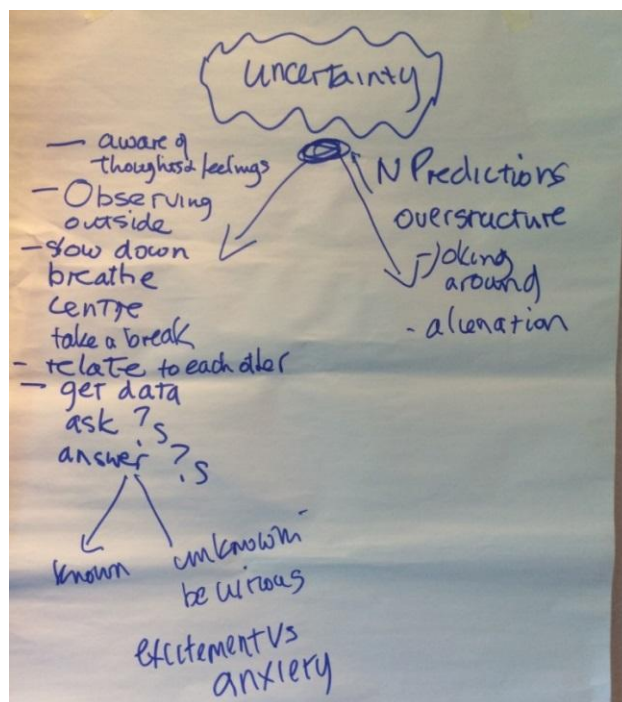
At this point, I suggested having compassion for ourselves and others as we have these normal human reactions. Compassion is an important – indeed some would say essential – component in change in many practices, including Buddhism and SCT. I like this quote from the Dalai Lama (2009): *'If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.'* This seemed important for the TMs. As one person said: '*We have compassion for [our clients], but not for ourselves'*.

What did we achieve?

The TMs described what changed as a result of our work in two ways. These highlight a boundary between the 'process' (how we and the TMs worked together through the communication climate we co-created) and the 'task' we had been set (the explicit goals of the work – i.e. improving delivery times and the way the TMs were organising their teams).

Process

Process-wise, we achieved a shift in the way the TMs and Caroline were taking up their leadership roles and how they were working together. They reported having more confidence, communicating more openly and using each other as a resource, both when things were working smoothly and when they got stuck. (I noted down the following comments during our last meeting while the TMs described the work to Michael. I was largely an observer and hence able to take notes.) *'We have learnt relatedness and coming together; we're more open and less defensive; we've learnt how to check out our mind-reads of each other; we are more saying how we are feeling in the moment; all of this has increased our sense of trust and safety and our ability to solve problems.'*

At the end of the final meeting, Michael acknowledged the process shift and said: *'There's clearly a very powerful shift in the way you're functioning together and with Caroline. There's a quiet purposefulness and sense of being 'lighter'. You're still clearly very busy. The [delivery teams] appear to be more positive. What you're doing is remarkable in shifting from one way of working to another after working together for such a long time [in the old way of working]. It's inspiring and I want to think how to use this way of working in other parts of the organisation. It has happened in a relatively short space of time.'* This was evidence that Michael had seen changes and was explicitly supporting these – a first step in crossing the boundary from the TMs to the wider organisation.

In the last meeting, the TMs rated their Satisfaction, on a scale of 0 to 10, at being a member of the team and their Energy for the work. They compared these with the way they remembered feeling at the start of our work (the numbers in brackets). Here are the scores. The one TM whose scores had dropped was feeling drained by what they experienced as others' negativity.

Satisfaction	Energy
5 (1)	7 (4)
5 (2)	6.5 (3)
6 (7)	5 (8)
6.5 (1)	6.5 (2.5)
7 (3.5)	8 (3.5)

We explored how they could bring this in and ask for support from the other TMs. So here was a boundary that still needed crossing.

Task

In terms of the 'task', the TMs had produced a proposal for how to re-organise their resources. They had found that simply being told to match what was being done in the East didn't work for them. They had been freed up when they heard that they could develop their own model. They used the performance data that the PD consultants had compiled and they consulted with their Delivery Teams to get ideas and refine the plan. The major change was to have TMs working as *'twins'* (their phrase), instead of individually, when they were on duty. They acknowledged that there would be some differences *'due to personality and skills'* in the way

that the different twins worked with the plan. They felt confident they could manage the differences, as long as they communicated these honestly and that if, the twins couldn't manage, they'd go to the other two TMs and then to Caroline.

They put the proposal to Michael during our final meeting. His response was *'It sounds like a really strong model'* and he said he supported it.

The TMs were clear that paying attention to the 'process' part of how they worked had enabled them to do the 'task' part of the work – i.e. come up with a plan. The TM who had been the most sceptical at the start, and who questioned the value of what we were doing, said at the end: *'We couldn't have done the plan without the process bit.'*

On reflection, I think that the crucial piece was opening up the boundaries within the TM system as we worked over the five meetings. Gradually, the information that people were holding was seen as just that – information that was potentially useful to the work of the team. I encouraged them to put it in a factual or enquiring way, make it brief and clear. They discovered that this made it easier to listen to than if it was complaining or blaming, long-winded or ambiguous. I did hypothesise at the start (based on my experience using SAVI and SCT) that getting a clearer, less 'noisy' communication climate would shift the dynamic but was not sure how it would play out in *this particular context*.

Crossing the boundary between organisational levels – work in progress

One of the Next Steps that came from the final meeting was how to cross from the TM system to the wider organisation – particularly up the hierarchy to Alison. The TMs had already started to communicate successfully and enact their changed ways of working with the Delivery Teams who reported to them. We agreed that one option was to present the new plan and talk through what they had learnt from the process of our work with Alison.

At the final review session with Michael and Caroline, we bumped up against a closed boundary again. Caroline was describing what she had learnt from the process. This included her shift from 'micro-managing' the TMs to trusting them more. She said she might want Michael's help if she reverted back to being more controlling in the future. Michael didn't seem to hear this and instead started asking her several questions about what she'd learnt. I noticed Caroline's body posture slump, her eyes look down and her facial expression change from smiling and lively to blank. I had the bodily experience of shock. I felt 'jumbled 'and on high alert (this is the Flight/Fight/Freeze response that gets activated in 10-12 milliseconds – Le Doux 2010). I wondered if this was what Caroline was experiencing and I asked if she felt put on the spot. She said *'Yes'.* Michael was also shocked and confused how this had happened. We made sense of this later as potentially useful information about how the organisation might try to relate to Caroline and the TMs 'as if' nothing had changed. This is a normal response for keeping things as they are and for getting rid of differences that are too different (Agazarian,1997: 19). Michael and Caroline reflected that they were able to notice this better now and had strategies for how to deal with it, e.g. stop the conversation and ask what was happening; ask the other to paraphrase what had been said; bring in their experience in the moment, and see what sense they could jointly make of it.

This last piece highlights the fact that the work is still in process – in the words of one of the TMs during the last meeting *'We are only mid-way and it will take all our energy to keep going.'*

Conclusion

As I left and travelled back to London, I was aware of how fresh and potentially vulnerable the team and Caroline were in their new ways of relating and working. I was dissatisfied we had not paid more attention to how to communicate the changes across the organisational boundaries and felt regret that the work was not finished. As I thought about this, I saw that work is always ongoing and I sent an email to Caroline and Michael with my reflections. Caroline responded that they were feeling confident they could take the work forward. They planned to invite Alison to a meeting to describe the new model and the work we'd done. She ended by saying *'It is important to convey that rather than being at the end of our work, we are really at the beginning of the next phase and that we need to keep working on our new confidences to provide the best possible leadership for our staff.'*

In terms of my learning about using SCT in my practice, I see the work as supporting the theory statement that *'All living human systems survive, develop and transform from simple to complex through an ongoing process of recognizing differences and integrating them'* (Agazarian, 1997: 41) and that *'boundaries open to similarities and close to difference'* (ibid: 19). I did not explicitly teach SCT or SAVI to the people I worked with as that was not the goal of the work. Rather, I used both SCT and SAVI to guide my work and found them invaluable maps in moments when I was trying to make sense of what was happening or to decide what to do. I introduced bits of theory when I sensed they might help understand what was happening (for example, the notions of integrating thinking and feeling, boundary permeability and 'noise') and adapted the methods (mostly successfully) e.g. undoing Mind Reads. I was not so successful in introducing Centring the first time (and did self-correct once I realised I'd introduced too much of a difference). As mentioned, we did not pay enough attention to how to cross the boundary up the hierarchy before the work ended. Mostly, I am left with admiration for and feel moved by the amount of change the TMs achieved with relatively little help. This reinforces my experience of SCT as an effective and efficient method for change. Like all skills and practices worth their salt, it also requires discipline to master and takes time to be able to integrate fluidly into one's practice http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence .

About six weeks later, when I asked Michael and Caroline to comment on the first draft of this article, Caroline responded:

> *'I have now read through your article and found myself quite moved by our story and I want to say thank you (again) for your experienced and wise guidance through a difficult time. I am very happy with it and pleased (not sure if that is the best word) that we reached such a positive conclusion. We haven't managed to find a date to meet with 'Alison' and now it seems hard to make it a priority when there is so much going on. However, I think we should, so I will renew my energy to do this, even if it feels a bit later than would be ideal. Our 5th TM has joined us and we are producing some very positive results in terms of our performance against timescales. There is a positive atmosphere in the team and on the whole, the managers are working well together. I retain my 'can-do/want-to' approach and 'Michael' and I have [sic] are benefitting from productive communication. All in all, things are good. Masses of change going on, and I feel we are in a good place to rise to the challenges.'*

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Acknowledgements

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