

Functional Role-Taking in Organizations and Work Groups

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As far back as Senge's (1990) well-known work, *The Fifth Discipline*, there has been recognition of the importance of developing systems thinking in organizations. Yet, few methods have actually been developed that put systems thinking into organizational practice. Building on her work with the general systems committee of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (described in Agazarian & Gantt, 2000), Agazarian (1997) has introduced a theory of living human systems and developed methods from the theory that make systems thinking practical. This discussion describes functional role-taking, one of the systems-centered (SCT) models, that has proven useful in making a systems orientation practical for work groups.



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I will begin this discussion with an example of a work group meeting to develop its five year strategic plan. I had previously introduced the SCT idea of role to this work group and the members had learned the difference between what SCT calls one's personal response and one's member role. In member role, the challenge is to shift from a personal perspective to a systems perspective by bringing what is relevant from one's personal response into the work in a way that supports the goal of the work context.

In this particular meeting, the work group had been working on its strategic plan for 45 minutes or so when one member announced she was bored. Based on the training the group had had, she then asked "Is anyone else bored?" Asking "anyone else" implements the SCT method of functional subgrouping (Agazarian, 1997; Agazarian & Philibossian, 1998). Functional subgrouping, a conflict resolution method, organizes group communication so that all those with a similar experience talk together to learn what information they are holding for the work group. In turn, when the first subgroup has finished exploring the one side, another side is explored in a different subgroup. Using functional subgrouping, a work group explores differences in separate subgroups, with the subgroups continuing to work until the differences can be integrated in the whole group.

In this example, the "bored" member was joined by two others who acknowledged being bored as well. These three members (the "bored" subgroup) then talked together about their experience of being bored and discovered that what was missing for them was passion and excitement. They wanted a strategic plan they could put their heart into and it was not happening yet! As they talked, they also begin to recognize their responsibility for influencing the plan and the necessity of actively doing so. In effect, they recognized that the role of their subgroup in the work was to bring in their energy and passion so that it was included in the strategic plan. For the member who had initiated the discussion of boredom, she, as well as the others, had now effectively shifted from a personal experience (which she usually managed using her habitual personal role of withdrawing and "checking out") to recognizing how she and the rest of the subgroup wanted to take their member role in the group's work. Not surprisingly, the group was in fact very supportive of the subgroup's work and what the subgroup wanted and joined with them in pursuing such a plan.

Functional role-taking works with the idea that all of us have developed a number of roles in our lifetime, some of which are quite functional and others of which are not. In SCT, whether or not a role is functional is dependent on how the role

relates to the goal of the given context. In fact some roles are functional in one context and not in another. For example, the behaviors that go with the role of supervisor will not be very useful when the person is in the role of a member of a task force. Still, other roles, the "habit" roles are rarely functional in that they are roles developed earlier in one's life, and relate to the past rather than the current context.

Functional role-taking begins with taking one's member role. SCT introduces the idea that one's member role is the vehicle for importing one's personal resources into a system to support the goal of the system context. Changing one's role as the context and goal changes is the heart of functional role-taking. Thus, the SCT model for functional role taking links role to the goal of the context. Members learn to see themselves in the larger system context. In gaining this larger perspective, members gain freedom from the human tendency to take one's own responses just personally or manage them through habitual personal responses, like withdrawal when bored.

A brief note on the theory: the SCT model for functional role-taking comes from the operational definitions of the theory of living human systems (TLHS). TLHS "defines a hierarchy of isomorphic systems that are energy-organizing, self-correcting and goal-directed" (Agazarian, 1997). It is the construct of hierarchy that is most relevant in this brief discussion, as SCT defines hierarchy as a series of systems that always exists in the context of the larger system above it and always also exist as the context for the smaller system below it. In this discussion, role is a system that exists within the work group context (subgroups play a "role" for the group system) and role is the immediate context for the person (Agazarian & Gantt, 2005). The work group is a goal-directed system (Gantt & Agazarian, 2005). When roles are aligned with the goal of a context, it is relatively easy to identify the behavioral pathways for reaching the goal [SCT builds on Howard and Scott's (1965) and Lewin's (1951) idea of path to goal]. When a person can identify the behaviors that implement a role, it much easier to align their personal resources with the role. When a person can also align their values with the role, it is much easier to put one's heart in one's role. Thus role connects people to the goal of a context. And orienting to role, goal and context makes it more likely that all of us can move from a self-centered focus to a systems-centered focus. This is the heart of functional role-taking.

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