Applying Systems-Centered Theory (SCT) and Methods in Organizational Contexts: Putting SCT to Work

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ABSTRACT

Though initially applied in psychotherapy, a theory of living human systems (TLHS) and its systems-centered practice (SCT) offer a comprehensive conceptual framework replete with operational definitions and methods that is applicable in a wide range of contexts. This article elaborates the application of SCT in organizations by first summarizing systems-centered theory, its constructs and methods, and then using case examples to illustrate how SCT has been used in organizational and coaching contexts.

Envision the following scenarios, common ones throughout organizations, whether for-profit companies, non-profit agencies, educational systems, professional associations, co-housing communities, legal or medical practices, and others.
Scenario 1. The management team rarely makes decisions and has a hard time getting work done.

Scenario 2. Diane, who is part of a leadership team, tells her coach that the director has put her on notice for her attitude. She is concerned she will be terminated.

Scenario 3. John, the team leader, complains that his team underperforms and he is always having to push them to get their work done.

From a systems-centered perspective, there are several questions to explore:

- **Scenario 1**: The team is having a hard time getting work done.
  - Are the team goals clear?
  - Are the roles within the team clear? Do the roles support the team goals?
  - What is the team’s phase of development? Flight or fight phase?
  - What restraining forces will the team need to weaken in order to develop?
  - How is the team relating to the context of the larger organization?
- **Scenario 2**: Diane tells her coach about her concern she will be fired.
  - What is the phase of development of the team; for example, is the team in the fight phase?
  - Is Diane in the role of scapegoat? What does she do that may put her in this role?
  - Is Diane containing the authority issue for the team?
  - What opinion or feeling does Diane have that the team is not yet integrating?
- **Scenario 3**: The leader is always pushing the team.
  - What role relationship is the team and the leader enacting?
  - What does that role relationship contain for the team?
  - Is that role relationship a driving or restraining force for the team’s developing its capacity to work and getting its work done?
These questions and methods for approaching them come by applying a theory of living human systems (TLHS) and its systems-centered practice. Systems-centered theory (SCT) assumes that the system and its norms have more to do with how the people in it function than with the people themselves (i.e., personality). It is the system and its norms that shape the efficiency and effectiveness of teams and organizations, not just the talent of the people. And just as the system shapes the people, the people taking membership in the system shape the system and influence the system norms.

Systems-centered therapy and training was developed by Agazarian (1997) who was influenced by the American Group Psychotherapy Association’s (AGPA) General Systems Committee (Durkin, 1972) that applied general systems theory to group therapy. After this committee disbanded, Agazarian developed her comprehensive theory of living human systems and its SCT methods that put systems theory into practice. SCT initially focused more on clinical applications in group and individual therapy (Agazarian, 1997, 2012). In fact, my first training in SCT was in group therapy at AGPA conferences—this and my subsequent SCT group training laid an important foundation for my applying SCT with organizations. This paper summarizes TLHS and describes how SCT has been applied with organizations, in coaching, leadership development groups, and team development (Agazarian & Gantt, 2005; Gantt & Agazarian, 2004, 2007).

A THEORY OF LIVING HUMAN SYSTEMS

TLHS can be applied with any level of living human system, whether an individual, a dyad, a group or team, or a whole organization. TLHS assumes that the systems to which one belongs have more to do with how the people in it function than with the people themselves. System dynamics dictate for all of us what we can and cannot do.

A theory of living human systems “defines a hierarchy of isomorphic systems that are energy-organizing, goal-directed and system-correcting” (Agazarian, 1997). Understanding each construct and its operational definition builds a bridge for linking...
the theory to practice and lays the groundwork for applying SCT practice to organizations.

**Hierarchy**

Hierarchy defines a living human system as a set of three systems, where each exists in the context of the system above it and simultaneously is the context for the system below it in the hierarchy. Think of three concentric circles: the center circle is the person system; the middle, the member system; and the largest circle is the system-as-a-whole. The member system exists in the context of the system-as-a-whole and is the immediate context for the person system. When we see a person in terms of self or personality, we will have one view but a different view still when we view him or her as a member in the context of the whole system.

For example, in Scenario 2, Diane reported to her coach that she is at risk for being terminated: If the coach focuses with Diane on the person system level, the coaching skews toward how her work situation is a personal repetition for Diane (this might be important to her personally but is not relevant to the context of most organizational coaching). Shifting to seeing Diane as a member of her organizational system enables a different perspective. On the member level, SCT coaching links to the context: What happens in the team meetings that triggers Diane into personal reactions at the expense of her member role? How can she translate her personal reactions into a membership contribution to support the work?

Thinking systems hierarchy and context helps people shift from “person to member” as they relate to the organizational context (more on this later). In her coaching, Diane learned to see the context of her team, its phase of development, and the differences in her ideas that were hard for the team to integrate. She also learned to modify her communication pattern so that it was more similar to the team’s communication norms. Learning to see the team also strengthened her capacity for understanding the bigger picture rather than just her personal point of view.

Applying hierarchy to a team in conflict, SCT defines the three system levels as person, members who cluster into subgroups representing system differences (e.g., those in a team interested in...
the proposed change and those wanting to maintain the status quo), and the system-as-a-whole. Theoretically, intervening to the middle level of three has the greatest potential to change the other two levels, as its boundaries are contiguous with both. Thus, SCT organizational change strategies often intervene to the middle level system to maximize the change impact (Agazarian, 1997; Gantt & Agazarian, 2005). In the coaching example above, the middle system is the member, and for the team in conflict, it is the subgroup.

Thinking systems hierarchy has proved useful to SCT consultants in clarifying goals and intervention strategies: defining the hierarchy helps identify which subsystem to target to reach the consultation goals (Gantt & Agazarian, 2005). For example, when a company wants to increase customer satisfaction ratings by shifting the culture and attitude of employees who interface with the public, the first step is looking at the system hierarchies to see which system level(s) intervention will most effectively accomplish this goal.

Isomorphy

The next construct in TLHS is isomorphy. Drawing from von Bertalanffy (1968), Agazarian (1997) defined isomorphy as similarity in structure and function for systems in a defined hierarchy. Applying this, the system levels of person, member, and system-as-a-whole will be similar in structure and function. Knowledge of structure and function at one system level then helps to generate hypotheses about the other levels as well.

Structure and Boundaries. Structure is defined as boundaries. Boundaries organize energy/information for work and can be relatively permeable or impermeable to information/energy exchange. System boundaries can be so vague or poorly defined that it is difficult for the system to work. For example, teams that do not schedule regular meetings or do not start or stop on time or clarify who will be part of the meeting will be compromised in how they work and what work happens. Or when role boundaries are unclear such that no one knows who has the responsibility for what jobs, it is then hard for the individuals in the roles to take membership competently and relate to the larger organizational
context. Conversely, when boundaries are too impermeable, system boundaries can be so closed that no new information can cross them, making it difficult for a work team to innovate or change, as when a team becomes closed off to new ideas or new members or so closed that it cannot relate to the norms of the rest of the organization.

In some circumstances, it may be useful for a team to intentionally close its boundaries. For example, a team closed its boundaries to the norms of the larger organization in order to establish new norms within the team that helped it to work better. These new norms were then different from the larger organizational norms. In this case, members needed to learn to change their behaviors when their context changed from team to larger organizational meetings with a different set of norms (Agazarian & Philibossian, 1998; Gantt & Agazarian, 2005). SCT orients to setting boundaries that are appropriately permeable, that is, functional for the context, and that can open or close depending on the goal and context.

The nature of communications influences boundary permeability. Boundaries open to communications that are high on information and low on noise. In this formulation, Agazarian drew from the work of Shannon and Weaver (1964) who recognized the reciprocal relationship between noise in a communication channel and the transfer of information. Shannon and Weaver defined noise as ambiguity and redundancy. Simon and Agazarian (1967) added contradiction as a third source of noise in a communication channel. Thus, when communications are high on noise, boundaries will close and little of the information in the communication will be heard, as in the following message, “I think maybe, or at least sometimes it seems that way [high on ambiguity], but then maybe that is not true at all, but maybe it is [high on contradiction with ‘yes, but’ and redundant].” SCT consultants intervene in the communication process to modify the permeability of the boundaries at all system levels to the flow of energy and information. This process is informally referred to as taking the “noise” out of “talk” (Simon & Agazarian, 2000).

Function. SCT posits that systems function to survive, develop, and transform from simpler to more complex through the processes of discriminating and integrating differences. Differences
come in all sizes and shapes. Sometimes, it is a difference in ideas or a different feeling, where one subgroup feels excited and the other anxious and worried. Or at other times, the difference may be in the tempo or pace of information processing, those that come in quickly and those who are slower, the “two-seconders and the ten-seconders.” Or the difference may be one of values. Differences are always a potential resource for development in an organization or team. When they can be integrated, they provide the energy for change and innovation. SCT introduces functional subgrouping, a method for working with differences, resolving conflicts, and making decisions that helps teams shift away from the human tendency to react adversely or defensively to differences. (This reactivity toward differences relates to our neurobiological orientation to scan for threats.) Instead, teams learn to explore and integrate the differences to use them in the service of the goal. In this way, the energy/information of the differences becomes a resource for the team rather than, as often happens, ammunition for fighting and splitting or politics and gossip.

**Energy-Organizing, Goal-Directed, and System-Correcting**

Returning to the TLHS definition of a “hierarchy of isomorphic systems that are energy-organizing, goal-directed and system-correcting,” the energy of living human systems is equated with information. Living human systems organize energy/information by opening and closing their boundaries to information. This titrates the differences that cross the boundary so that they can be integrated in the service of the system goals. When differences come in faster than they can be integrated, systems tend to stabilize either with the old by keeping out the new or de-differentiate and lose functional boundaries. This is important whenever there is a reorganization or merger between companies or even when new team members or new ideas are introduced. As discussed earlier, it is a different kind of problem when boundaries are too closed in that innovation and changes are inhibited.

All living human systems are goal-directed. The primary goal is survival, development and transformation from a simpler to a more complex level of organization. To the extent that a team integrates its differences, it survives, develops, and transforms in


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ways that support innovation and creativity. When a system is developing and transforming, it has more energy for its secondary or task goals. Supportive of this idea is Wheelan’s (2005) research demonstrating that teams that are further along in their phase of development actually rate higher on organizational measures of productivity.

TLHS also defines living human systems in terms of system-correction. System-correction happens whenever boundaries open or close to titrate the flow of energy and information, when a system corrects to reorient to its goal, or when functional subgrouping is used to resolve conflicts.

**APPLYING THE SYSTEMS-CENTERED METHODS TO ORGANIZATIONS**

SCT methods apply the TLHS to practice. This section elaborates key SCT methods that have been applied in organizational contexts to support the system development needed for increased organizational effectiveness.

**Functional Subgrouping**

The method of functional subgrouping is the heart of SCT practice and an essential tool in any consultation to teams, boards, or other work groups. Functional subgrouping operationally defines the theoretical construct of function: development as a process of discriminating and integrating differences. As a conflict resolution tool, functional subgrouping is used anytime a group has differences that are hard to integrate or in decision-making when there are two viable options to explore (see Figure 1).

Functional subgrouping is introduced by asking all those who see an issue one way to talk together to explore their view and, in turn, all those who see it differently to talk together (Figure 1b). This interrupts the typical social communication pattern—for example, “yes, but,”—of talking to the difference rather than the similarity. Most of us recognize these familiar social communication patterns of trying to rush past the others’ input and get to our own difference or trying to persuade “them” to our side. Instead, functional subgrouping encourages joining on a similarity and exploring all the variants and perspectives within the similar-
a. Group comes together

b. A difference emerges—represented here by round and square

c. In turn, each subgroup explores and discovers differences within its similarity

d. Discovering similarities across difference

e. Integration in the group-as-a-whole and greater complexity

FIGURE 1. Illustration of Functional Subgrouping © 2010 Susan Gantt. Adapted from Agazarian, 1997.
ity (Figure 1c). In the climate of similarity, boundaries are more open and small differences are more easily explored and accepted (Figure 1d). In turn, as both sides explore, the group increases in complexity and often spontaneously integrates the difference. Integration happens by discovering similarities in what was initially different, and thus establishes a basis for compromise or a hybrid solution or decision (see Figure 1e). These kinds of decisions are often more innovative and also have greater “buy-in” from the team.

In one example using functional subgrouping with a team deciding what structure to use for their meetings, the team identified two different points of view. One subgroup wanted to decide the structure at the beginning of each meeting and valued the flexibility of this approach. The other subgroup wanted to decide a structure and then use it each time. This second subgroup saw a defined structure as a solution to managing the frustration they felt at the start of each meeting. As each worked in turn, they discovered small differences within each subgroup. Those wanting flexibility discovered different variants of flexibility: some wanted limits on it, others wanted unbridled flexibility. Those wanting clear structure discovered both those wanting to lower frustration and those who wanted to increase efficiency.

Jane: I propose we make a decision today about what structure to use for our meetings and then stick to it.

Tom: I would rather decide each time.

Consultant: This might be a good time to use functional subgrouping to explore first one side and then the other. Which subgroup has the energy to work first?

Jane: We do; who else has this side too?

Sally: I do. I think it is best for us overall not to have to spend time each meeting solving our structure. We will work better if we set it. Anyone else?

Jeff: I like that, too. I am tired of all our going back and forth at the start of each meeting. I get so frustrated.

Pause.

Consultant: Does the pause mean we are ready for the other side to explore?


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Members nodding “yes.”

Deannie: I can start the other side. I don’t want to be constricted by a structure that may not fit every time; that seems rigid to me. Anyone else?

Scott: Yes, I agree. I am surprised I am saying this, but I want to stay flexible and see what fits each time.

Deannie: Yea, flexibility, and I wouldn’t mind if we could set it without so much frustration and back and forth.

Scott: Yes, that would be nice, too; maybe have a set plan and also a few options that we choose from whenever we want flexibility.

Jeff (from the first subgroup): I want to add here, I like having a set plan and then a few options if we decide to deviate, which keeps some flexibility, anyone else? [the beginning of integration across the differences].

In this example, functional subgrouping enabled a process for discriminating and integrating differences, differences in the apparently similar and similarities in the apparently different. As this subgrouping continued, the team discriminated criteria for the decision, distinguishing between personal preferences versus criteria related to the group’s functioning. SCT’s model of “person to member” has been important in facilitating this kind of shift.

**Person to Member**

Learning to shift from one’s person system to one’s member system is essential for maximizing or improving organizational functioning. Membership starts with seeing the bigger picture, relating to the context and its goal. As a member, one transports one’s personal resources into the context in a way they can be useful to the context, which at times is different from what is personally gratifying. This contrasts with being in a person system where the only context is oneself and one’s personal goals. Shifting from one’s person system to one’s member system or role is often challenging but also rewarding as one learns how to contribute to the context.

In the management team in Scenario 2, Diane consistently made critical remarks about the team in team meetings and ini-
tially felt satisfied that she was expressing herself. Only later did she understand that expressing herself this way without an eye on its impact on the context meant that others often took offense and stopped listening to her. This was hurtful to her personally and lowered her effectiveness in contributing to the team. Once she was able to see what was happening in the team when she had the impulse to criticize, she contributed in a way that the information she held could be more useful in support of the goals of the team.

Another example came from a consulting session with a department of 25 members in an educational organization where there was an active working subgroup and a quiet subgroup. When the SCT consultant asked the group if there were restraining forces blocking the quiet subgroup from bringing in information, the quiet subgroup identified frustration and irritation with the consultant. The initial personalized response in this subgroup had been to withdraw, which deprived the system of its resources. This personalized solution resulted in a passive acting out of the authority issue rather than actively contributing as members to influence the group to solve its problem. The membership challenge was to bring in the information from the frustration so it could become a group resource and to surface the authority issue so that it could be worked through rather than enacted. Equally important for SCT consultants when the authority issue is active is to work with the leader to stay in his or her member role, as leadership includes containing the anger and hatred in the authority issue and not taking others’ feelings just personally.

**Role, Goal, and Context**

The SCT model of role, goal, and context builds on the work of shifting from person to member and also links to the construct of hierarchy discussed earlier. In SCT, every system context is defined in terms of its goal and the roles that support the goal of the context (see Figure 2).

This model has proved useful in organizations because people are changing contexts all the time. Each context will have its own goal, and each time we change contexts, our roles change as well. Being able to orient or re-orient oneself to one’s role, goal, and...
context is enormously useful in lowering the tendency to personalize, common to all human beings. Learning to take one’s role to support the goal of the context is essential in ongoing work in organizations.

Taking one’s role in context requires understanding the goal of the context. In many organizations, goals are not clear, nor is it clear how the goal of one subsystem in the organization differs from another. In one small company, the owners had little sense of a clear goal in their role as owners. Though the company was profitable, this lack of goal clarity contributed to frustration between the owners and within other components of the company. Without goal clarity, it was also very difficult for the owners to take authority in their owner role. A role without a clear connection to the goal of the context is like a ship without a rudder, and the work is then unnecessarily difficult for the people involved. In this example, frustration was discharged in blaming: for some, blaming themselves and for others, blaming everyone else. It would have been very easy to see those doing the blaming as the problem and make it a personnel issue. This is a good example of how often what are viewed as personnel problems are actually the result of system problems that only become visible in the behavior of the people, similarly to how we “see” wind when the leaves in the trees rustle.
The Force Field of Driving and Restraining Forces

SCT also uses the force field to map where a system is in its movement toward its goal. SCT is strongly influenced by Lewin (1951), who formulated the idea of a field of driving and restraining forces in relation to a goal. Further, he demonstrated that change is easier and more sustainable when the restraining forces are weakened, thereby releasing the inherent driving forces within the system. Releasing the system’s own driving forces makes it much more likely that the changes will be sustainable. This orientation is central in SCT where the consultant or coach works with the team or client to identify the driving and restraining forces in the force field, then to identify the easiest-to-weaken restraining forces, and to practice weakening them.

Below is a force field developed by the management team in Scenario 1, identifying their driving forces in relation to decision-making (what they did that helped them make decisions) and their restraining forces (what stopped them or impaired their decision-making) (see Figure 3).

SCT uses the force field as an ongoing way to track a team’s work and how it is managing its task and its process in the service of task. Using the force field fosters system-correction and develops the team’s capacity to monitor its own development and identify its next steps in change. For consultants, the force field is also used to diagnose the team’s phase of development, which then provides a guide for intervening in a way that is congruent with the phase by weakening the restraining forces relevant for each phase.

FIGURE 3. Force Field Done by the Management Team on Their Decision-Making (Scenario 1)

The Force Field of Driving and Restraining Forces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRIVING FORCES</th>
<th>RESTRAINING FORCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking our time and being thorough</td>
<td>Taking too much time, not giving ourselves a deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When we know it is our decision to make</td>
<td>Assuming that leadership has already made a decision and that our discussion is pro forma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring who has the authority for this decision</td>
<td>Not being clear whether or not it is our decision to make</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting the information we need to make a decision and having it ahead of time</td>
<td>Vague information or lack of information about the choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushing to clarify the criteria for what decisions we are given</td>
<td>Frustrated that we are asked to decide things we do not know about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase of Development</td>
<td>DRIVING FORCES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority Phase</td>
<td>Developmental Goal: Create reality-testing culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forming functional subgroups, asking “Anyone else?”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploring</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specificity, bottom line</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data, reality-testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight Subphase</td>
<td>Developmental Goal: Explore differences in context of the work focus</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subgrouping around differences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recognizing and acknowledging frustrations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collecting data about hesitations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Making alternative proposals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fight Subphase</td>
<td>Developmental Goal: Develop functional work role relationships with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clarifying work role relationships with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Descriptive language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Locks with Peers Subphase</td>
<td>Developmental Goal: Make a working relationship with one’s leader and discover one’s own authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clarifying differential role responsibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning to work with the leader one has</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Giving and taking authority</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bring in what one knows &amp; negotiate with leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration Phase</td>
<td>Developmental Goal: Use differential resources of members while working in an interdependent zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contribute to positive work climate while exploring differences in the apparently similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploiting similarities in the apparently different and work out a functional collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Take up team role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration Phase</td>
<td>Developmental Goal: Work in role, goal &amp; context</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with common sense and emotional intelligence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working in role &amp; contributing to the goal &amp; climate of the context</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using emotional and intellectual intelligence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Common sense reality-testing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintaining a sense of humor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Seeing the bigger picture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Using emotional knowledge in decision-making</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Using the spirit of the law</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**FIGURE 4. SCT Phases of Development in Work Groups: Force Field of Driving and Restraining Forces**

**Map of Phases of System Development**

Agazarian (1997) drew from Bennis and Shepard (1956) in formulating the phases of system development. Applying TLHS and seeing each phase of development as a distinctive system with a characteristic structure, function, and developmental goal, Agazarian operationally defined each phase as a force field of system


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vectors moving toward or away from the primary system goals of survival, development, and transformation as detailed in Figure 4.

This phase map serves as a guide to SCT consultants and coaches for intervening to weaken the phase-relevant restraining forces. Most organizations function primarily in the authority phase concerned with issues of power and control. Knowing the team’s phase enables a consultant to work with the team’s reality. This lowers the frustration that accrues when teams are asked to make changes that are incongruent with their phase resources.

**Taking the Noise Out of Talk**

SCT weakens the restraining forces in communication by taking the noise out of talk. SCT uses SAVI (System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction) for mapping communication patterns as to whether they approach or avoid the goal of communication. SAVI helps teams and individuals to identify and modify their communication patterns in the direction of greater information transfer (Simon & Agazarian, 2000). Identifying the SAVI communication pattern also helps in recognizing the phase of system development as each phase has a characteristic communication pattern. For example, the fight phase is replete with “yes, but” communications and complaints and blaming.

SAVI is also useful in demonstrating that the group pattern dominates over individual patterns, laying the foundation for changing the communication norms in a team rather than trying to change individuals. In one study, Agazarian used SAVI to code communication patterns in a therapy group during four quartiles of the group. Though individual SAVI patterns changed from quartile to quartile, they changed in such a way that the whole group pattern remained the same. Most dramatically, at one point, the therapist communication pattern kept the group in flight (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000).

**Putting SCT to Work: Four Case Studies**

*Leadership Training for Managers.* A five-day organizational training with middle managers in an international company was designed to increase managers’ effectiveness in how they took up...
their various leadership roles. The training introduced a series of exercises in which participants rotated from the leadership role to a membership role in small teams. This provided a live example for exploring the challenges participants experienced in changing roles in a work setting. As the training progressed, the exploration also focused on recognizing when they fell out of member and into their own personalized role responses in each of the major subphases of the authority phase: flight, fight, role locks with each other, and role locks with the leader (see Figure 4). In the flight subphase, participants discovered their passivity and withdrawal from engaging in their membership roles and learned how to reduce vagueness and lack of reality orientation in their communications. In the fight subphase, the group recognized their “yes, but” communication pattern as indicative of fight energy. They discovered how often they were caught “fighting” or “arguing” for what they wanted, rather than taking membership roles both to help build the system’s capacity to use the resource of its differences and to support the system’s task and problem-solving as it explored its differences. In the role locks subphase, participants discovered that in just a few days they had effectively established roles and role locks with each other—for example, one member dominating and the other behaving submissively—that were inhibiting the development of their teams. Recognizing this pattern enabled the teams to find alternatives that were more functional for their work. In exploring roles and role locks with leaders, the group identified a pull toward either compliance or defiance in relationship to the leadership and recognized the impact the roles had on their team’s work.

The last segment of the training applied these learnings by role-playing common work scenarios. In one particularly useful role-play, the group simulated a performance appraisal review (a common event that easily elicits authority conflicts), alternating who took the role of the leader conducting the appraisal and who took the role of the employee being evaluated. In the three days prior, the group had developed into a working group, by weakening its restraining forces in the early subphases, and had a good climate for learning and exploring together with very little personalizing. This enabled the “leader” and “employee” to recognize the personalized roles each went into as they entered the


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role-play and took up the performance appraisal task. The first “leader” went into a one-up, dominant role and the “employee” into a one-down, submissive role. With this recognition, the role-play resumed, and each participant was able to change behaviors and assume functional roles together to do the task. The “leader” invited the employee to collaborate with him in the appraisal. The “employee” actively introduced what he was interested in reviewing. The entire group felt the success of being able to make the system-corrections, and in turn, others took up roles in the role-playing with similar learnings. And importantly, the group discovered that taking membership to support system-correction was actually more useful for their learning system than a personal preoccupation with trying to get it “right.”

*SCT Organizational Coaching and More from Scenario 2.* The major goal of SCT coaching is to enable clients to take up their roles in their organizational contexts. The SCT model of role, goal, and context is central in SCT coaching. In fact, the early work in coaching is to identify and clarify the client’s goals as related to their organizational role, goal, and context. The work then centers on identifying the force field of driving and restraining forces relevant to the goal. It is also useful to note what SCT coaching is not: It is not psychotherapy which focuses on the person system challenges, and it is not for exploring the history of personalized roles. SCT coaching is for learning to shift out of personalized roles into one’s functional work roles. While both therapy and coaching orient to supporting survival, development, and transformation, the goal of therapy is the development of the person system while in an organizational context, the goal of coaching is to develop and strengthen the member system and the functional work roles that support the organization’s goals (which often does have the side effect of developing the person system).

*Revisiting Scenario 2.* Diane reported to her coach that the director put her on notice for her attitude. She is concerned she will be terminated. The coach worked with her to establish the goal she has for her coaching. Diane’s first iteration of this: I don’t want to lose my job. The coach understood her personal concern and at the same time began to work with her as to how she would need to take her role to keep her job. This enabled her to begin shifting from a preoccupation with her personal focus.
to recognizing the role expectations in her context: How would she need to take her work role differently to be successful in it and not get fired? This question both linked to her personal goal and enabled her to shift to looking at her role in her work context. Over time, it became clear that she had taken on the roles of “arguing” with the director and “defying” her, personalized roles that were restraining forces for her work role. “Defying” and “arguing” were related to her personal history and also contained and were stimulated by the leadership team’s developmental phase and its dynamics (role locks with the leader). Going into her “arguing” role competed with taking her member role to support the goal of her team. While the origin of her tendency to take this “arguing” role was not relevant to the consultation, her awareness of the role and its cost to her and her work setting allowed her to develop the alternative behaviors that freed her resources for work. This enabled her to begin learning how to work with and support her leader, even when she wanted him to lead differently.

Working with the Authority Issue in a Team. In Scenario 3, John, the team leader, complained that his team underperformed and he constantly had to push them to get their work done. In SCT consulting with John and the team, the work first weakened the restraining forces in flight, then fight, then role locks with each other (see Figure 4). The team then developed to the subphase of being able to work with the role lock between the team and the leader: in the role lock, John took the role of “pusher” and the team the role of “foot dragging.” It is not uncommon to find either a variant of a passive, resistant role in relationship to authority that is paired with a dominating leader or a “rebel” role that is paired with the leader in a defiant, challenging pattern. The emergence of roles or role locks in relationship to the leader or authority is the hallmark of the authority issue. These restraining roles sabotage developing a functional role relationship with the leader and instead orient to complaining about or acting out because the leader is not the leader one wants.

The work with the team in the authority phase began with the team’s constructing a force field of how the team and leader work together. This inevitably surfaced complaints about the leader as restraining forces. The work was first for the team to
explore how they worked with John’s leadership that was either driving or restraining to John succeeding in his role, especially how they worked with him when they experienced his leadership as restraining. This supports the team’s learning to take its own authority in context, and with a recognition that the team’s job is to support its leader. The leader’s job is to contain the anger, blaming, and complaining that the team feels toward authority until the team learns to take its own authority. It is also likely that, in this work, the leader will learn more effective ways to lead as he or she hears the feedback.

Process in the Service of Task. This last example describes a one-day consultation with a medium-sized company. The group’s goal was to work as a more unified company. Notably, in this system there were five subsystems, geographically and fiscally separate, each functioning independently. They rarely worked together as a whole system, although they operated under the same brand name that they owned jointly. In this consultation, there were new members, for whom this meeting was their first with the larger company. Equally important, there was a subgroup of long-time members, some of whom were also leaders in the subsystems.

Fortunately, for the goal of developing a more unified system, one subsystem brought in an example of innovation early in our meeting. This raised questions in the branded company as to whether or not the innovations were within the bounds of the brand. This was very useful, as it provided the system with an actual task that was relevant to the context of the system-as-a-whole. It also enabled the system to actually experience the function of the whole system and to learn to take this larger system role to clarify whether the innovations fit the vision and mission of the brand.

The group quickly recalled its values and mission. Serving as consultant, I then suggested they formulate questions to operationally define their values and mission in a way that would enable them to query and explore with the innovating subsystem. Just as we started on this task, a senior member proposed that the group first revisit the details of the work it had done some months earlier on its mission and values. I clarified that this introduced a different direction for the group and, if that were the intention,
to find out if the group supported the change in direction. This let the group choose which direction to follow. (SCT calls this the fork-in-the-road of choice so that clients determine where to direct their energy.) The group supported the new direction. From my SCT perspective, I could see some merit in both sides of the fork: having more information on the mission and values might make formulating the questions easier, though the spirit of the mission and values seemed clear enough for the group to work. I also wondered whether this proposal was a flight from the work that had just started as well as serving the implicit, ever-present goal of “older” members to maintain the status quo and keep out newer and different energy that may “rock the boat.” I supported the group’s choice.

The group read through its mission and values, elaborating on what each meant. With my hypothesis about the new and the old, I then suggested they use functional subgrouping to clarify the information so that the group could integrate the newer and older members. One subgroup worked hard on this, with a few members doing the work, mostly long-term members. I used this exploration as a time to reiterate the norms of functional subgrouping, training members to first reflect and paraphrase what the previous speaker had said before adding their own “build” to the whole of the group. I had the newer members in mind in emphasizing the steps in functional subgrouping, that is, training the group so that the entire group had a common method to work with and the newer members would be less different and therefore less likely to be excluded. After a while, the energy began to go down. A large subgroup sat silently. Curious about what difference was not being voiced, I asked the silent subgroup what restraining forces blocked their energy/information coming into the work. They surfaced frustration over losing the excitement of the initial task as well as irritation with my leadership (that I was taking the group too much into process and not enough into the goal and task of the day). Surfacing the authority issue and what subsequently happened at the break freed enough of the energy for the group to work with its task in the afternoon.

At the break, I was approached by leaders from three of the subsystems who voiced more of their concern with my process focus. They were unaware of how their contributions had taken...
the group into a different direction, one that re-established dominance of the old over the new, which then necessitated more process work. I described the two examples of this and clarified the use of process in the service of task, not in place of task. I also told them I did have my eye on the goal and suggested they see how to take their membership in support of my leadership.

After the break, the group took up their task energetically, first formulating their questions and then dialoguing with the “innovating” subsystem using their questions as their guide. They were able to see compatibility between the innovation and the mission and values and also raised important questions for the innovating subsystem to consider. The innovating subsystem was pleased and felt supported by the work and less alone.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights SCT theory and some of its methods that are being applied to organizations. SCT has been used in a wide range of organizational contexts, those highlighted here as well as those in massive reorganizations and traumatized organizations (Gantt & Hopper, 2008a, 2008b). It is only with clear goals, functional structure, a method for integrating differences, and developing the leadership and system capacity to contain the inevitable frustration and hatred engendered in working with human differences that the system energy can be used creatively for innovation and ongoing transformation. It has been important for us in SCT to take to heart our maxim, “different in different contexts,” so that we do not ask organizational groups to do work for the goal of personal development, even though personal development is sometimes a side effect of organizational development. This means understanding what work a context supports and what work is relevant to its goals, and not doing work that the context does not support. It also means recognizing the impact of system dynamics on human beings. The essential work is then influencing the system and its norms rather than working at the level of personal exploration for the service of personal development.

SCT consultation requires an understanding and attunement to containing hatred, recognizing the stimulus for splitting and
its impact in organizations, working with differences, and the inevitable reactions to difference. All require an understanding of the system dynamics and dimensions that potentiate or restrict the development of the system and the capacity of the people in it. It is this that SCT offers most strongly: an understanding of both the system dynamics that produce the human behaviors and the models for influencing the system variables that maintain or modify system dynamics in the direction of development and transformation. Organizational life is endemic for us all. We all belong to organizations, and how we take our membership influences the organization and its norms—which in turn influences us.

REFERENCES


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