A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT

There are many approaches to management ranging from a problem by problem solving style to strategizing change. Each approach has legitimacy in one context or another and none has legitimacy in the every context. This truism highlights the need for managers to be flexible and confident in a range of management approaches. When the context requires the manager to deal with significant levels of complexity and generate a learning attitude within their sphere of responsibility a systemic approach is especially relevant.

Six reasons for the systemic management approach.

- Issue complexity
- Cross “Silo” collaboration
- Strategic uncertainty
- Operational change
- Relational confusion
-Externally induced change

Questions to clarify need for a systemic approach

- Are there too many variables in the situation for any one person to grasp the significance or impact of each variable?
- Are current collaboration activities between different areas of the organisation, sufficient to achieve the organisation's purpose with respect to the issue?
- Is the strategic direction unclear and is a heightened sense of awareness of the organisation's environment required to detect the emergent opportunities?
- Are the existing ways of dealing with the issue inappropriate because of its changing context within the organisation?
- Are relationships and processes between distinct areas of the organisation currently inefficient or ineffective?
- Are unexpected external influences causing change within the operational processes of the organisation generating a greater sense of uncertainty amongst employees?

Techniques to develop a systemic approach to management.

Seeing issues as if they are a system

The purpose of an issue selected from participants’ work experience is first clarified and then the implied boundaries and stakeholders of a system, for the issue are identified. From this information a picture of the system’s environment can be articulated and impacts of the external influences on the system are identified and planned for. Similarly the activities of the sub-systems and the relationships between the sub-systems can be explored and fine-tuned. The different participants acting as sub-systems will have different knowledge about the environmental influences impacting on the system. Integrating the different learnings will maximize each subsystems value-adding performance and bottom-line results.

Fostering “experiential learning”.
Participants are divided into teams of 4 or 5. Each team member is given a specific task to perform in an activity that takes about an hour to complete and generates lots of contact with people not in the team (that is in the team’s environment). After the activities are completed the teams are debriefed to ascertain what they know about their team’s environment with respect to the activity. What did they learn individually, how much of that knowledge was shared and how was it utilised? Discussion about how more learning could have been obtained and the value the group gives to experiential learning is pursued. The group’s learning is mapped on an experiential learning model.

**Instigating “participatory leadership”**

The six faces of participatory leadership (enablement, engagement, empathy, ethics, enaction and enquiry) are introduced with participants sharing their experience of each to ensure there is mutual understanding about the concepts. Individuals then map on the “leadership hexagram” a number of recent activities they have been engaged in. The area of each of the hexagram segments being shades in according to the amount of that face the mapper believed occurred in the activity being mapped. Maps and activities are then discussed to ascertain how greater amounts of each leadership face can be contributed by different activity participants.

**Ensuring managed “improvement” is robust -- Critical Systems Heuristics**

In order to ensure the proposed improvement has validity it is a good idea to surface the underpinning boundary judgments and to trace their live practical implications for the different parties involved. A good plan for improvement should make its underlying boundary judgments explicit and point out how its concept of improvement might look different if alternative boundary judgments were chosen. The only methodology which systematically focuses a manager’s attention on boundary judgments is called Critical Systems Heuristics.

Critical Systems Heuristics uses a conceptual framework that consists, among other things, of a set of 12 basic types of boundary judgments. They can be put together in the form of a checklist of 12 boundary questions. Four basic boundary categories are included – “those who have the benefits”; “those who have to say”; “those who have to know how”; and “those who have the costs and side effects”.

By inquiring of these groups what “ought to be” the situation, and secondly what “is” the situation the robustness of the proposed improvement can be tested and directions of further improvement identified.

**Knowledge and skills required by managers to develop a systemic management approach can be acquired through either organisational workshops, individual mentoring or a combination of the two. SDI programs are customised for each organisation and are based on current and emerging management issues.**