Our Fife Leadership Summit

Leading in Whole systems ….is it possible?

Focus for today

- What it means to lead across systems as well as lead in organisations and communities
- The dilemmas of leading systems – why its so exciting and yet why so hard to achieve
- Implications for shared leadership of place some practices tht can support working across boundaries

Agenda

- 2.00-2.30 -Leading in systems
- 2.30-2.50 - Discussion and questions
- 2.50 -3.10- Leadership implications
- 3.10 - 3.30 Plenary

Different types of leadership

Peter Senge – "The Dawn of System Leadership" https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership

- **Personal leadership:** influenced by individual style & personality; personal authority matters
- **Organisational/departmental/team/professional leadership:** partial role, agendas and purpose; often influenced and organised around hierarchy; positional authority matters
- **System leadership:** collective context influenced by shared purpose and ambition; generative conversations and co-creating the future. Personal authority, networks and interpersonal relationships matter.

Why is it so hard?!? The issue of mindset:

- We are wedded to an idea of ourselves/others/the context that may or may not be aligned with what is needed.

- We are using an out-dated mode of thinking, acting and being for todays context: eg using hierarchal and mechanistic/transactional models for dealing with complex, networked and human system challenges.

A crisis of perception...?

(From Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi: "The systems view of life")

The major problems of our time - energy, the environment, climate change, food security, financial security, cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems, which means they are all interconnected and interdependent.

Ultimately these problems must be seen as just different facets of one single crisis, which is largely ***a crisis of perception.*** It derives from the fact that most people in our modern society, especially our large social institutions, subscribe to an outdated world view, ***a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our complex overpopulated, interconnected world.***

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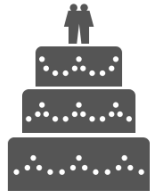


Obvious
Following a recipe

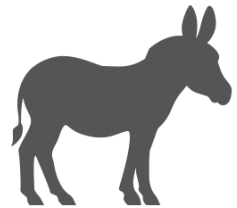
- The recipe is essential.
- Recipes are tested to ensure easy replication of success.
- No particular skill is required (though baking skills can increase success rate).
- Recipes produce standardised, predictable results each time.

Complicated
Sending a rocket to the moon

- Rigid protocols and formulas are necessary.
- Sending one rocket increases chances of future success as elements are replicable.
- High levels of expertise in a number of fields are necessary for success.
- Rockets are similar so there is a high degree of outcome predictability.

Complex
Raising a child

- Protocols rarely help; launch experiments to discover what works.
- Raising one child provides experience but no guarantee of future success.
- External expertise is helpful, but alone is insufficient to ensure success.
- Every child is unique.



Chaotic
Pin the tail on the donkey

- Rigid protocols may be counter-productive.
- Experience may help or hinder understanding and finding what works.
- Rapid action and improvisation can help, as can a network of on-the-ground know-how.
- As unknowables recede, novel patterns may emerge.

Adapted from: Glouberman, S. & Zimmerman, B. (2002). Complicated and Complex Systems: What Would Successful Reform of Medicare Look Like?. Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada: Discussion Paper No. 8. 8.

Complicated or Complex system?

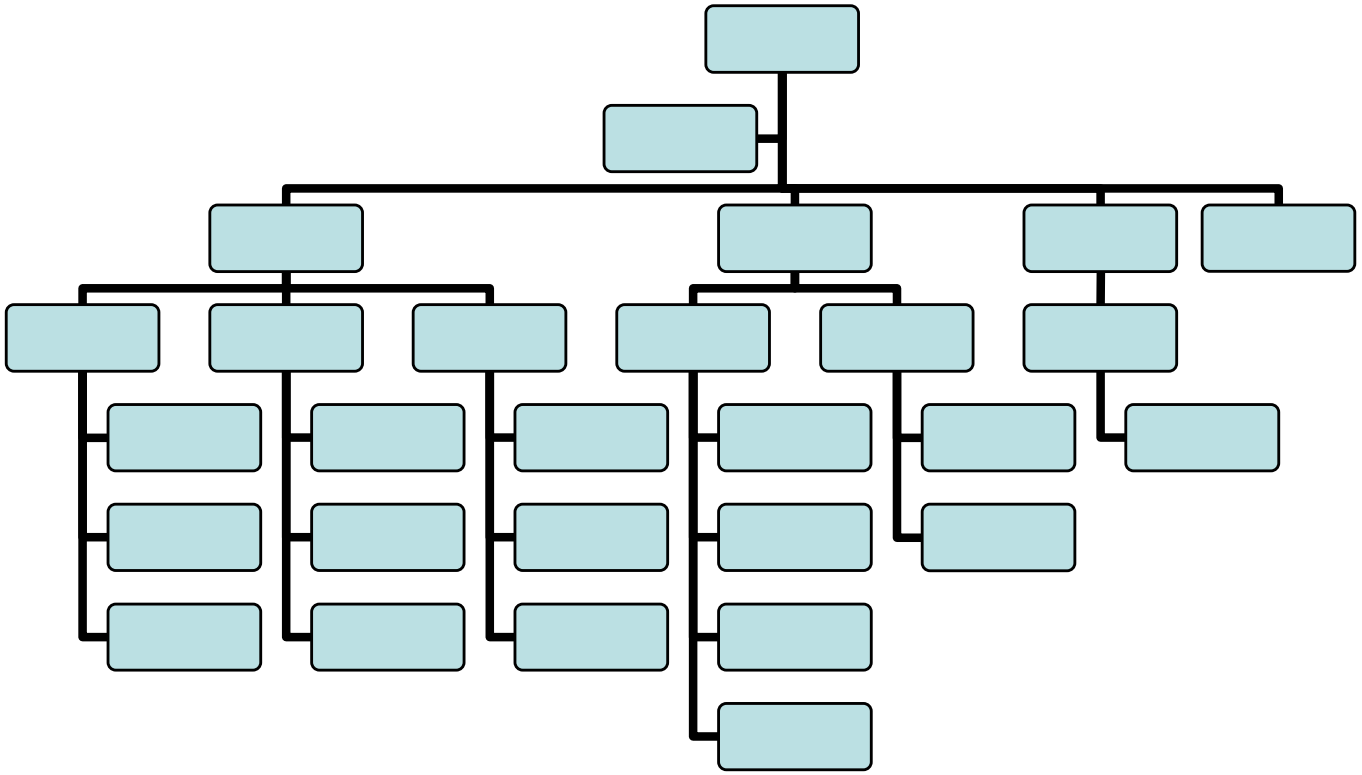
Complicated (Tame)

- Many small parts, all different but separate.
- Each part has its own role
- Purpose is ***separate***/ singular and is located in discrete actions or silos.
- What happens is predictable.
- The system is ***mechanical***

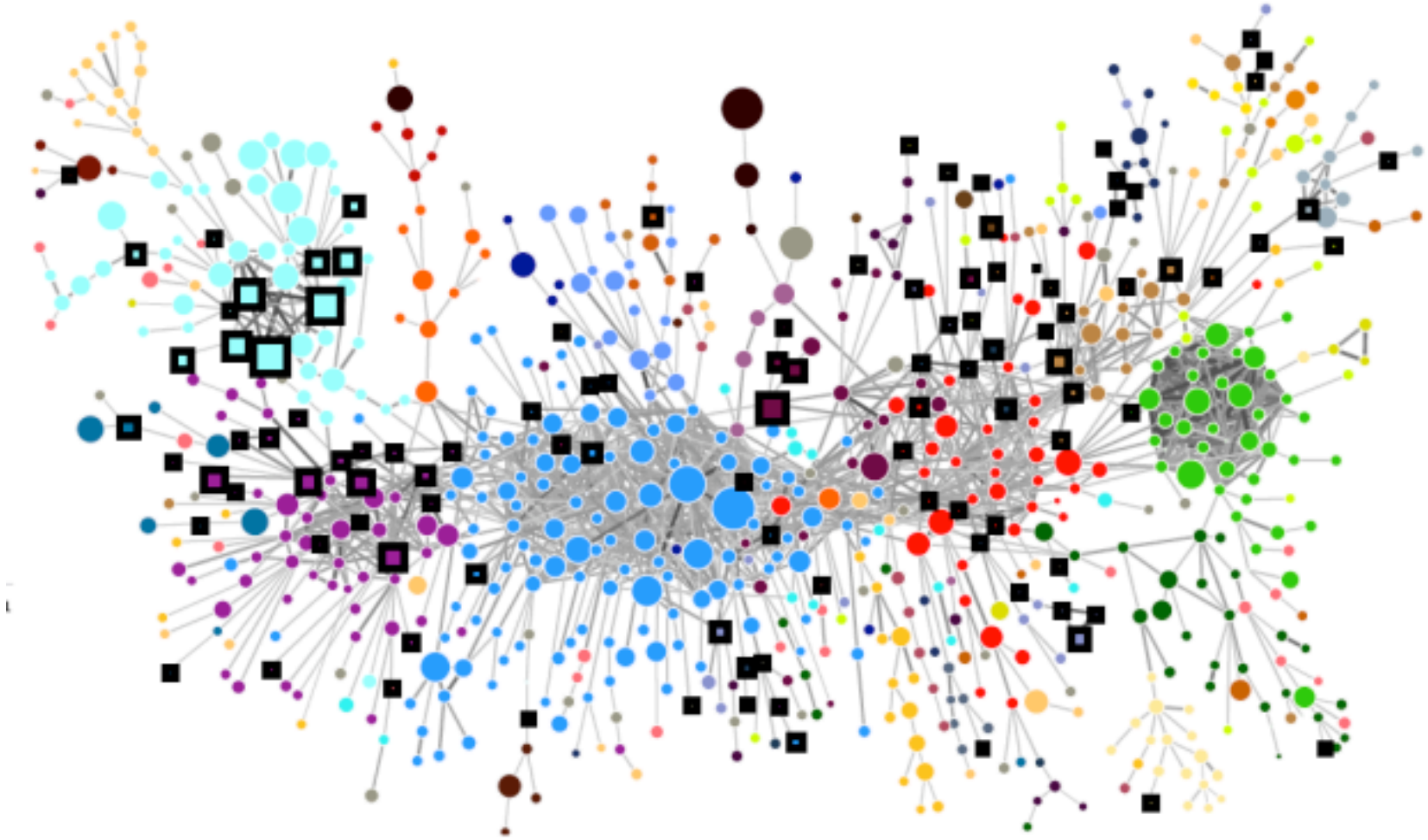
Complex (Wicked)

- Many small parts, all different but connected.
- Each part is interdependent
- Purpose is ***shared*** and is the result of interaction between the parts.
- What happens is unpredictable
- The system is ***living***

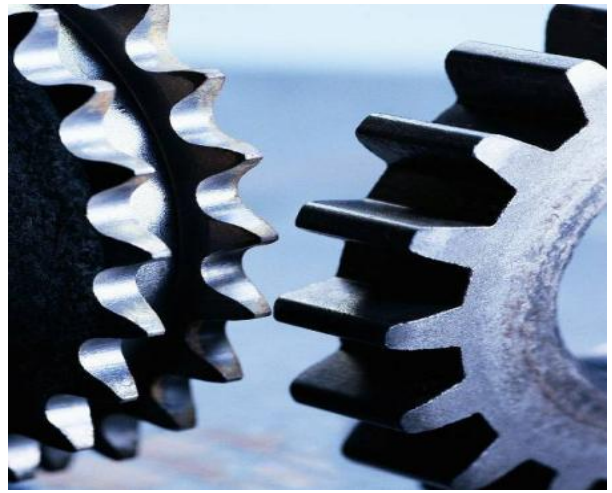
How we think human organisations look and work….



How complex systems look and work….



The Newtonian ‘mechanical’ paradigm was so successful it spilled over into management



Newton assumed: If you understand the parts you’ll understand the whole. Hence mechanical metaphors.

- step up a gear
- run like clockwork
- run like a well-oiled machine
- the machinery of government
- policy instruments
- policy levers

Mechanical’ management assumptions

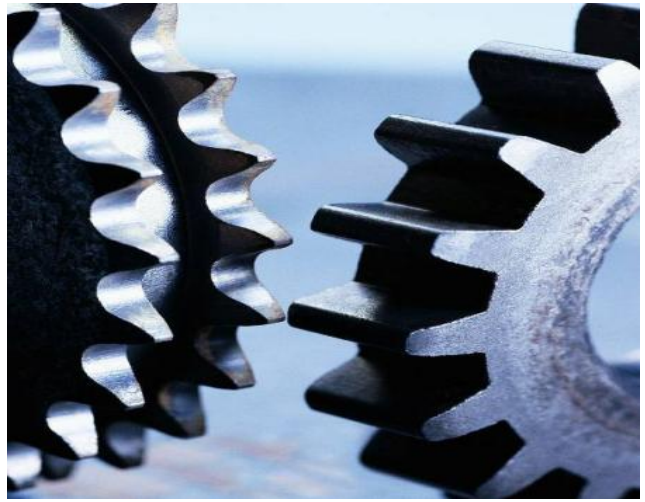
If you understand -

1. The Task
2. Hierarchies
3. Functions

You can-

- separate and reduce everything to its simplest component, then fix it.
- plan with certainty e.g. make timetables with penalties for non compliance.
- manage and discipline by replacing parts like worn out cogs.

Problem with the mechanical paradigm: people are not machines…



- People don’t obey instructions – they think, react, rebel, interpret!
- People make different assumptions; with different (conflicting) values , mental models and perspectives; one person’s knock down evidence is seen by another as irrelevant.
- Context varies: culture, history, allegiance, ideology, aspiration.
- People outcomes can’t be predicted, can’t be guaranteed.
- Increased communication technologies means knowledge and communication is global, accessible and potentially infinite.
- Doesn’t address the complexity of human life.

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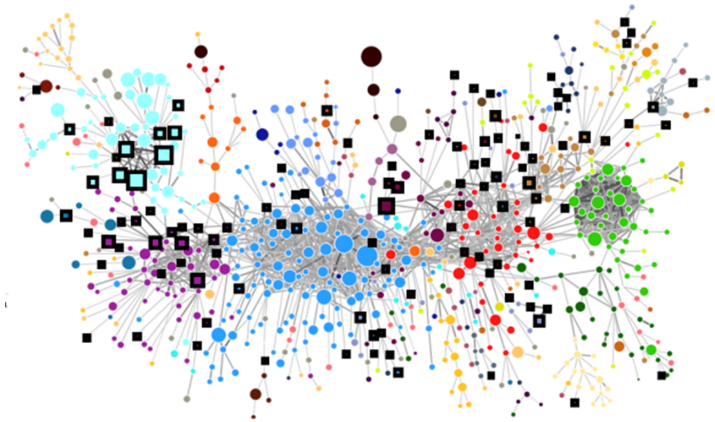
Human systems are complex, living, eco systems.

- **Key features:**
  - They are alive and dynamic; constantly changing; diverse and unpredictable**.**
  - They can’t be controlled, measured or fixed as if they were machines.
  - Uncertainty is a feature - certainty can’t be planned
  - Knowledge is emergent from the interactions between people, ideas and things.

Complex systems and leadership

System feature	What it looks like	Leadership practice
Synergy	Everything is connected and interdependent ,	Build relationships, broker connections, link perspectives. Notice patterns. Understand and work with connections. Move beyond either/or... to both/and….
Emergence	What happens (inc. new insights) emerges from the interactions between people (and ideas).	Sit lightly to determining outcomes or controlling process. Have a discovery mindset; allow knowledge to emerge; ask questions rather than provide answers;
Autopoiesis	Immunity to change and threat to identity - resistance is guaranteed and risk of systems recreating themselves. We see what we know; we recreate what we already have.	Notice our own framing assumptions and world views as these may be privileged; Allow and work with resistance as a source of learning. Notice how we frame others eg as difficult/challenging

Summary: ways of thinking about systems

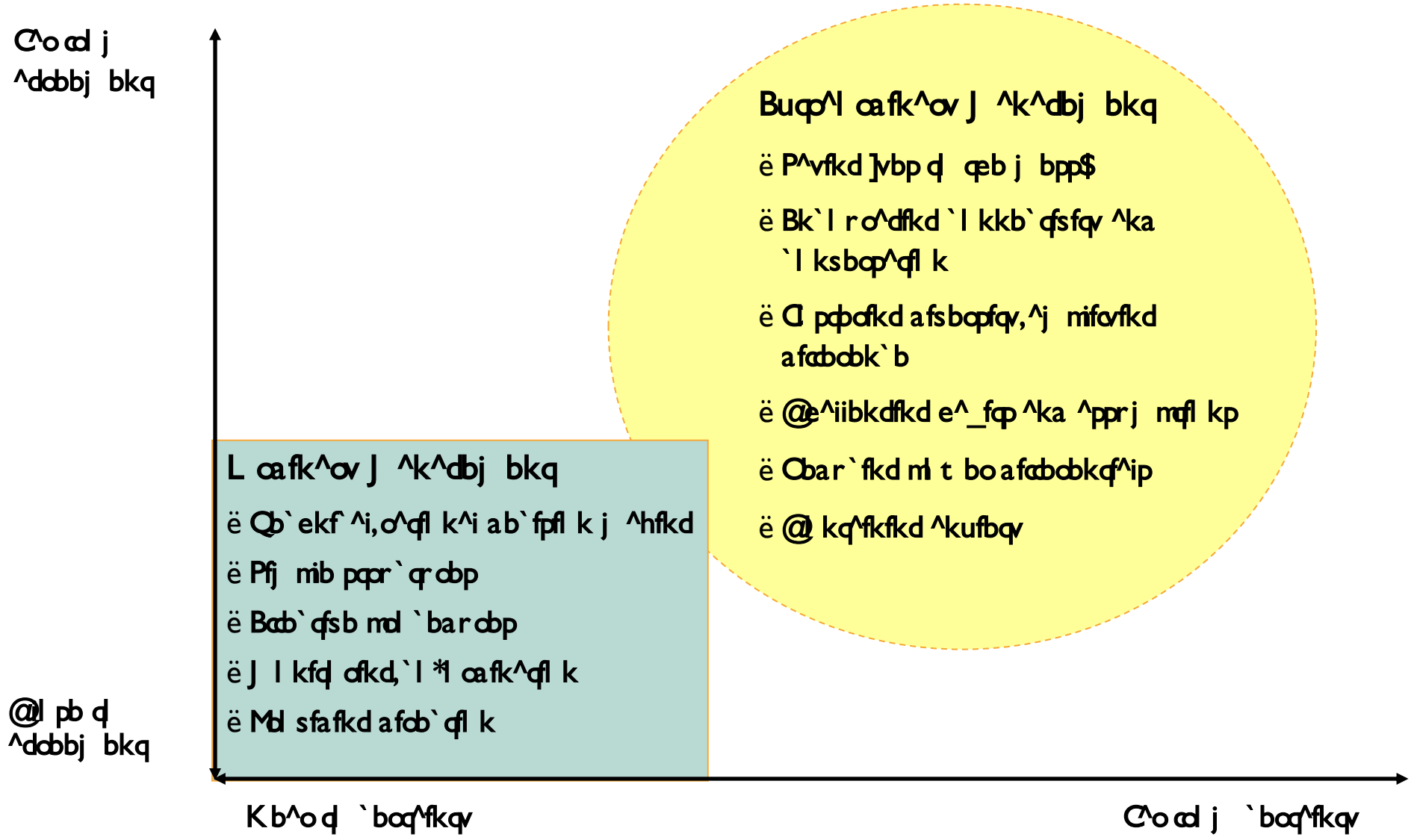


- Human systems are complex living systems not simple mechanical systems
- Everything is connected to everything else and the interdependencies matter
- Change is constant and unpredictable
- Living systems are wired to recreate themselves
- Resistance is guaranteed and is a resource for learning
- A system that knows itself can change

Implications for leaders

How do we need to be ….?

A complexity approach



After Ralph Stacey

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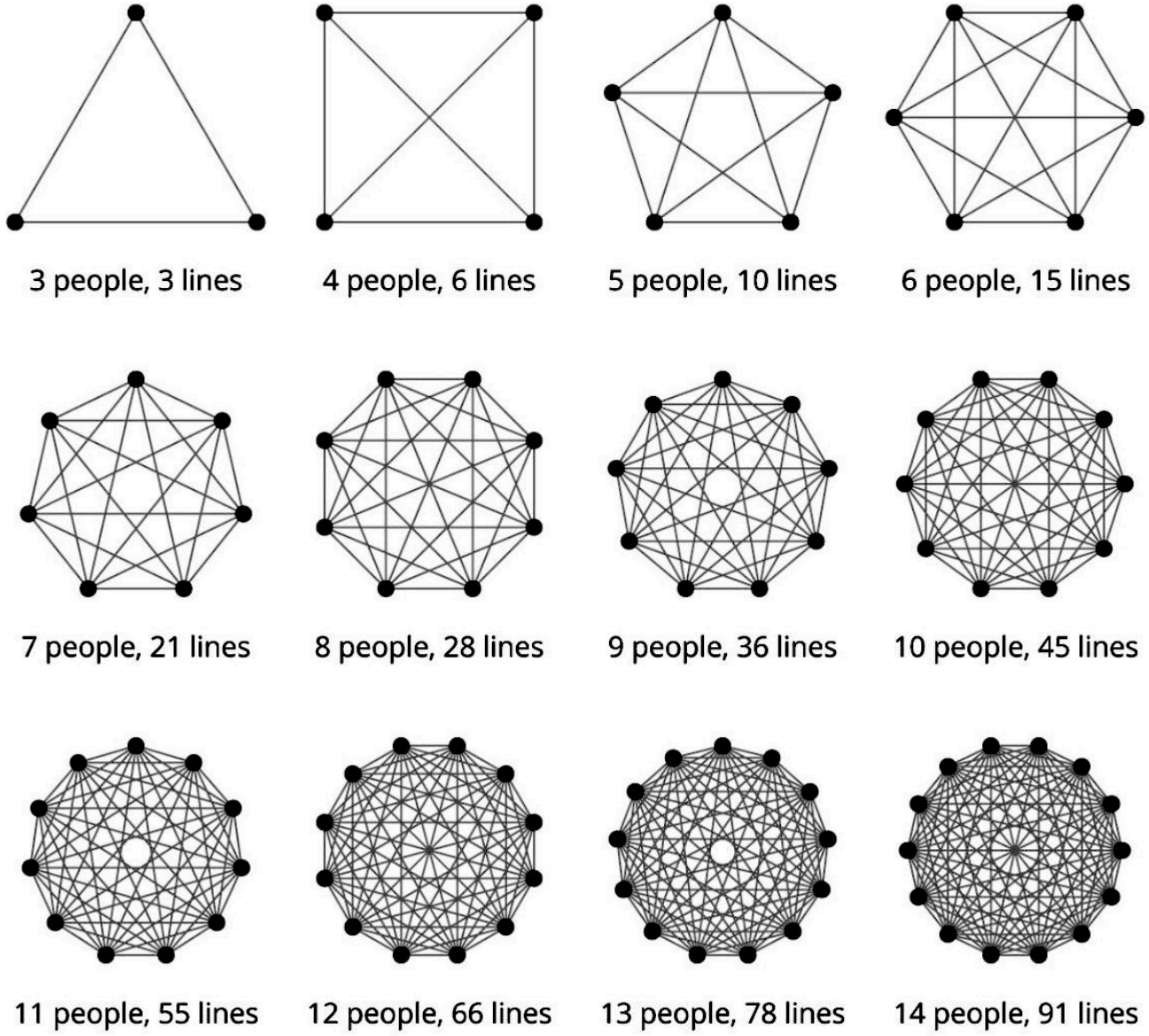
"Excellent meeting. I loved the quick fixes, the simple solutions, and the easy answers."

Communication complexity

The diagram opposite shows the reality of communication in groups of different sizes.

More members = greater relational complexity and lines of communication.



The Nature of Relatedness…

What goes on between us is not neutral - relatedness is a source of data about me, the other, us, the system a

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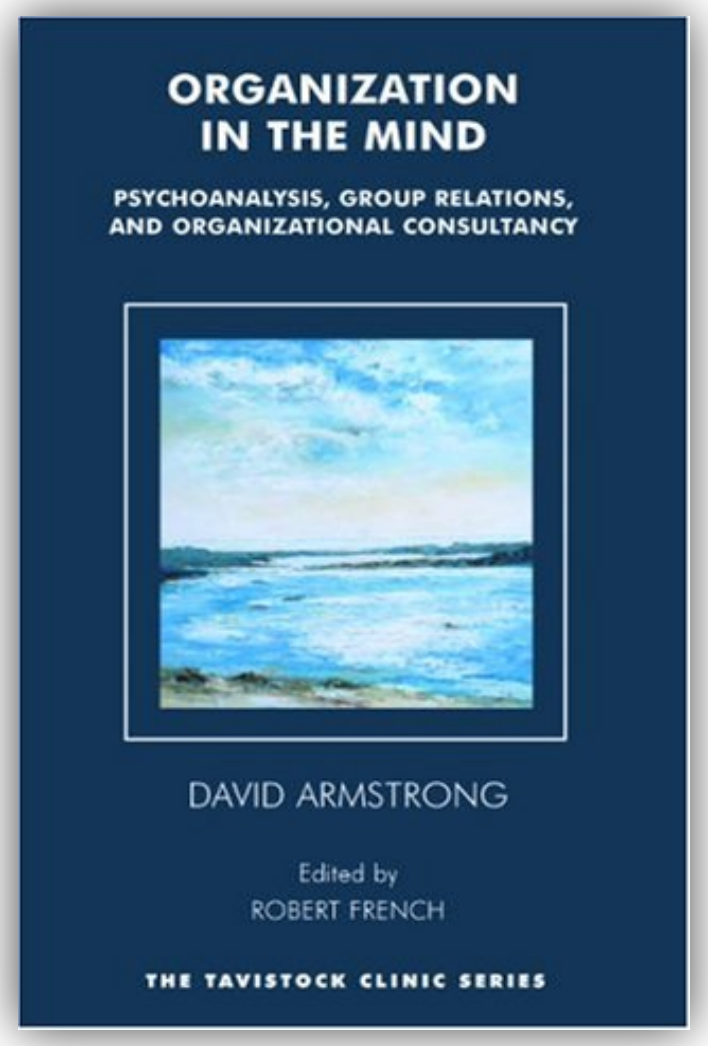

A model internal to oneself: a reflection of the internal assumptions, beliefs, fantasies about self and about the other.

The person/group/organisation/ system *in the room* is not always the same as the person/ group/ organisation/system *in the mind.*

Implications - system leaders…

- Are committed to the whole; can work with system priorities well as individual/organisational priorities.
- Are connected to shared purpose -can *cede* personal & organisational goals for shared goals.
- Broker relationships and connections: see difference, contradictions, ambiguity and multiple perspectives as helpful;
- Can move from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future
- Accept there is no ultimate truth; only multiple, possible next steps; comfortable making progress, not fixing.
- Are learners: they start anywhere but notice where they go; are interested in patterns.

Communicating/ways of being

- See “not knowing” as a resource; are defined by the questions they ask, not the (expert) answers they provide.
- Create learning environments: are experimental - see failure as an opportunity for discovery.
- Use personal authority as much as role authority: legitimacy comes from influencing & quality of relationships, not positional power.
- Are congruent - embody espoused behaviours and principles.
- Know how to ‘let go’

Making system change happen: how to do it?

Myron's Maxims

Where is change located….?

- People own what they help create
- Real change happens in real work
- Those who do the work do the change

What is happening….?

- Connect the system to more of itself
- Start anywhere; notice where you go
- The process you use to get to the future is the future you get