The Systemic Leadership Model

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The Systemic Leadership Model aims to help Leaders understand the importance of clear communication from a systems point of view, and encourages personal awareness in terms of impact on others; open communication; understanding the importance of congruency and modelling effective behaviour; and the vital role leaders play in the development of others.

Relationship is at the heart of effective and supportive leadership, yet many people mistakenly overlook this fact and appear to think it is about exerting power over others. 'Being in charge' of a team means being responsible for the well-being and effectiveness of the individuals who come together to achieve goals in the organisational context. It also means having an awareness of the needs of the organisation and the environment in which it is situated.

The wise leader learns about the dynamics which flow in organisations, they learn to listen and tap into the 'undertow' to understand about morale, conflict flash-points, weak connections between teams etc. The *really* wise leader pays attention to the dynamics between people, especially to those between themselves and their team, their peers and the leadership levels who hold authority and power.

Taking time to understand the power of the psychological processes between people can enable a leader to create a team environment which is creative, happy and productive.

In 2011, I wrote an article entitled *Parallel Process* citing the work of Clarkson (1991) where she describes parallel process in the supervisory relationship. It is straightforward to make the links from the psychotherapy world, to the organisational context.
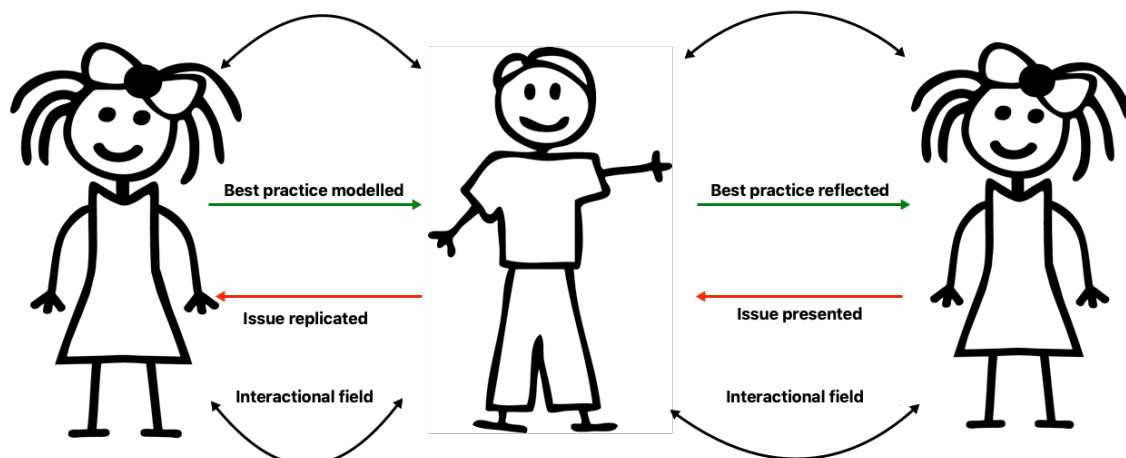
Clarkson identifies:

- What the client brings (pro-active transference)
- What the therapist brings (pro-active counter transference)
- What the therapist reacts to in the client (reactive counter transference)
- What the client reacts to as a result of what the therapist brings (client counter-transference or reactive transference)

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Clarkson says that any of these may form the basis for *"facilitative or destructive psychotherapeutic outcomes"*. I believe this is also the case between levels of leaders, mapped across an organizational framework.

I diagram these processes below. It is easy to see from this diagram the ripple effect – each individual moves in friendship and family 'circles'. We have acquaintances and chance meetings with people. We have exchanges with other professionals etc and at these points of meeting, we have the potential to impact and be impacted upon by others. Maybe changed a little …. or a lot. We may have a profound effect on a person and never know about it! The point is, changes can occur many times a day and in many situations.

Returning to Clarkson's supervision context in relation to parallel process, an issue presented by a client to a coach or mental health practitioner, may be picked up by the practitioner, and replicated when that practitioner takes his or her work to supervision.

Supervisor's family and friends **Practitioner's family and friends** **Client's family and friends**

Best practice modelled Best practice reflected

Issue replicated Issue presented

Interactional field Interactional field

Systemic Parallel Process (Tongue 2018)

Rather than a pathological process as it is mostly described in Clarkson, I see its potential as a developmental process. It could be an opportunity for positive practice to be experienced within the system. An opportunity – as long as the supervisor or leader has enough awareness to 'break the chain' and instead of taking on the issue as presented, for themselves, they can instead turn it around, or model a different, more positive process.

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This is because parallel process is *bi-directional*, working down as well as up the chain of practitioners.

To explain the model so far: a client takes their issue or challenge to a practitioner (Therapist, Counsellor or Coach). The same issue is replicated between the Practitioner and the Supervisor. Hopefully, the Supervisor avoids getting stuck in the parallel process, and models a more effective approach to the Practitioner and the Practitioner does the same at their next encounter with the Client. The Client lives and works within a system (family, friendship network, workplace). So of course, do the Practitioner and Supervisor. Unconsciously, changes are made, invitations given out and received and many more than one individual at each level makes changes, responds differently, behaves differently. Fascinating! A powerful positive process ripples through the systems. This could of course could go the other way if the Supervisor gets caught in the parallel process!

Having written about systemic parallel processes from the point of view of supervision in 2018, I developed a model to show the importance of this systemic approach in the leadership context. It aims to support leaders to understand the value of their role, that their behaviour (driven by unconscious processes) has such a knock-on effect.

Leaders can be taught to understand the bi-directional nature of parallel process – that if they are aware of the impact they have on others, if they understand the messages they give unconsciously as well as consciously and "clean up their language", then they realise their leadership power in a positive way by modelling the behaviour they want to see in their direct reports. Obviously concepts like Life Positions, Ego States, TA Proper, Games, Strokes etc all serve to help the leader gain personal insight, and give them opportunities to change how they communicate with their staff. Their positive modelling of effective behaviours is then replicated throughout the leadership levels.

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Berne described the "Complicated Organisational Structure" in his 1963 book, "*Structures and Dynamics of Organisations and Groups*". He did not diagram it, but below is a version to help us look at hierarchy from a parallel process point of view:

Complicated Organisational Structure
(described, but not diagrammed by Berne)

Minor Internal boundary

Major Internal boundary
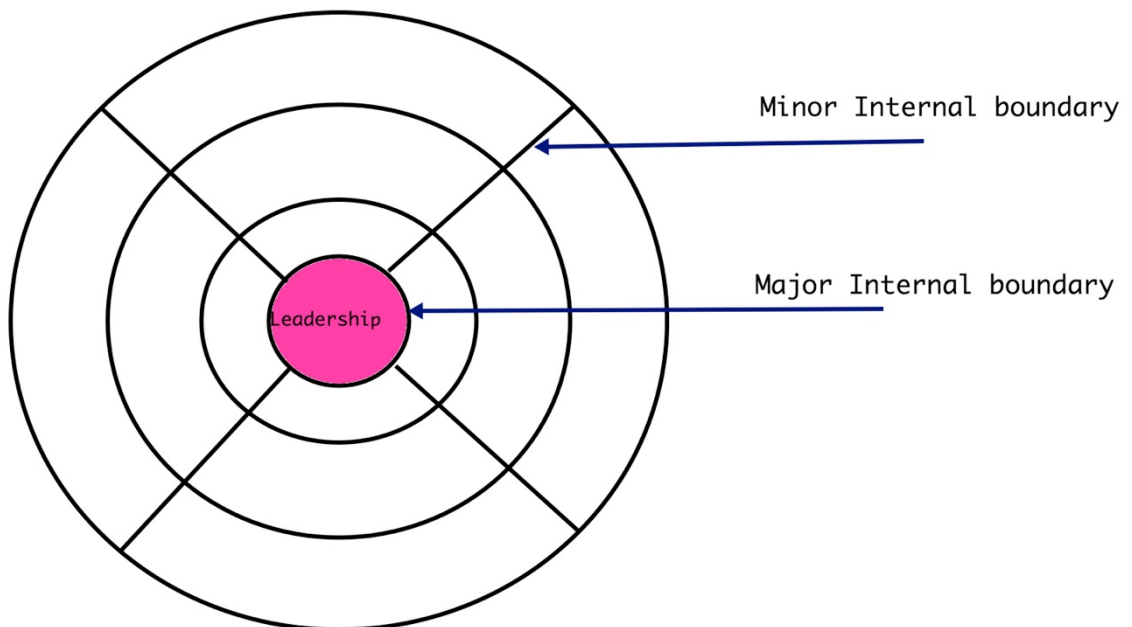
Leadership

Depicted in the diagram above is a straightforward structure of four departments and three layers of leadership – many organisations are much more complicated than this in their structure. However, even with this straightforward structure the complexity can be seen – boundaries between membership of the group and non-members, boundaries between levels of leadership and boundaries between departments. How these boundaries are managed, how people communicate at each point is crucial because systems thinking tells us that the vibrations of the quality of that communication will be felt throughout the system. In other words, how senior leaders behave, how they get results through their teams will be observed (consciously and unconsciously) and replicated throughout the system.

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Seen as a "slice" and viewed from a different angle, we can clearly depict the interactional fields between levels of leadership.

At each pink arrow is the interactional field between leader and follower. Best practice filters down through an organisation so the relationship between directors
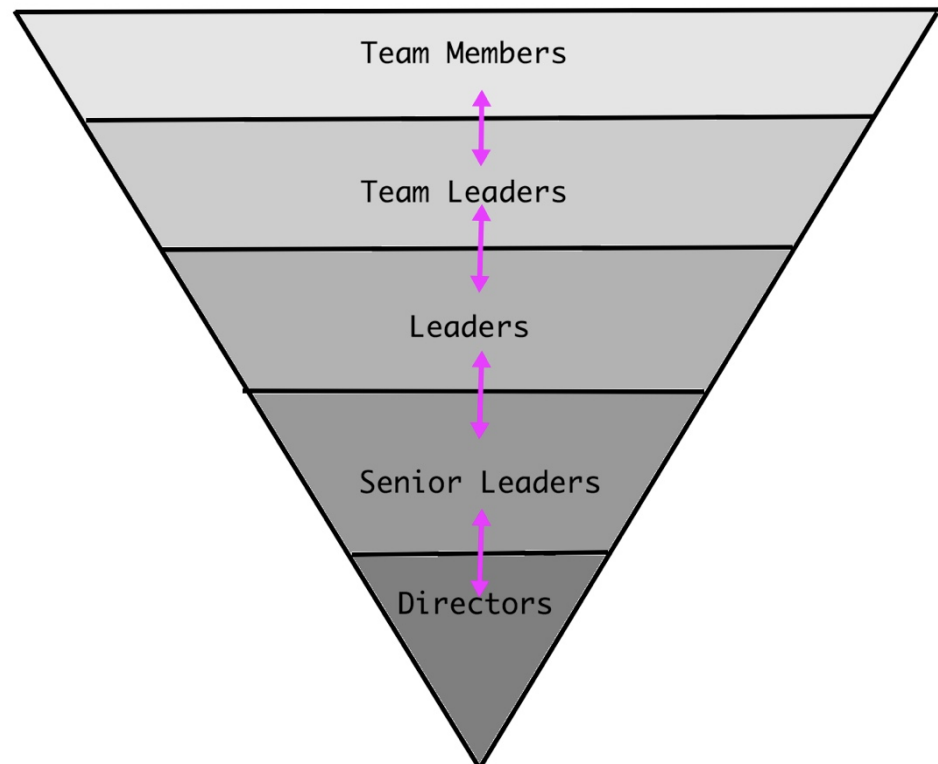

and next level down needs to be one where Integrating Adult (Tudor 2003) processes are applied, Strokes given and received, Working Styles allowed and Accounting through clear Contracting in place. The value and importance of regular one to ones to enable feedback and information to flow cannot be over-emphasised.   Flowing back down through the hierarchy is the avoidance of negative parallel processes and the positive role-modelling of effective leadership. When this is not happening, the effects will be felt throughout the system.

Quentin Holdeman wrote about the "Symbiotic Chain" (1989) – a parallel process involving symbiosis from Parent to Child from one layer of management to another throughout an organisation. Paying attention to the communication style at each level, with each individual in relationship with team members is crucial to an open flow of information, allowing for problem solving, creativity and personal and professional development.

Kreyenberg (2005) says "*the dynamics of processes are often more important than structures*". She gives the example of a river – in order to understand a river, it is necessary to analyse not just the water, ground, sand and stones, but also its energy – how it flows. How the energy flows through the leadership layers is information for the Transactional Analyst – what gets stroked?; what permissions are given?; what leadership style is transmitted?

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If we extend the triangular "slice" of an organisation to depict a representation of the organisation as a whole, we can see the real power and importance of boundary management and the leadership relationship, and how this could be a positive process. …… positive *leadership* parallel processes, with leaders consciously leading from an I'm okay, You're okay stance - we can see clearly how leaders hold the keys to the success of the organisation.

We can also see how this positive force might ripple out into the community.
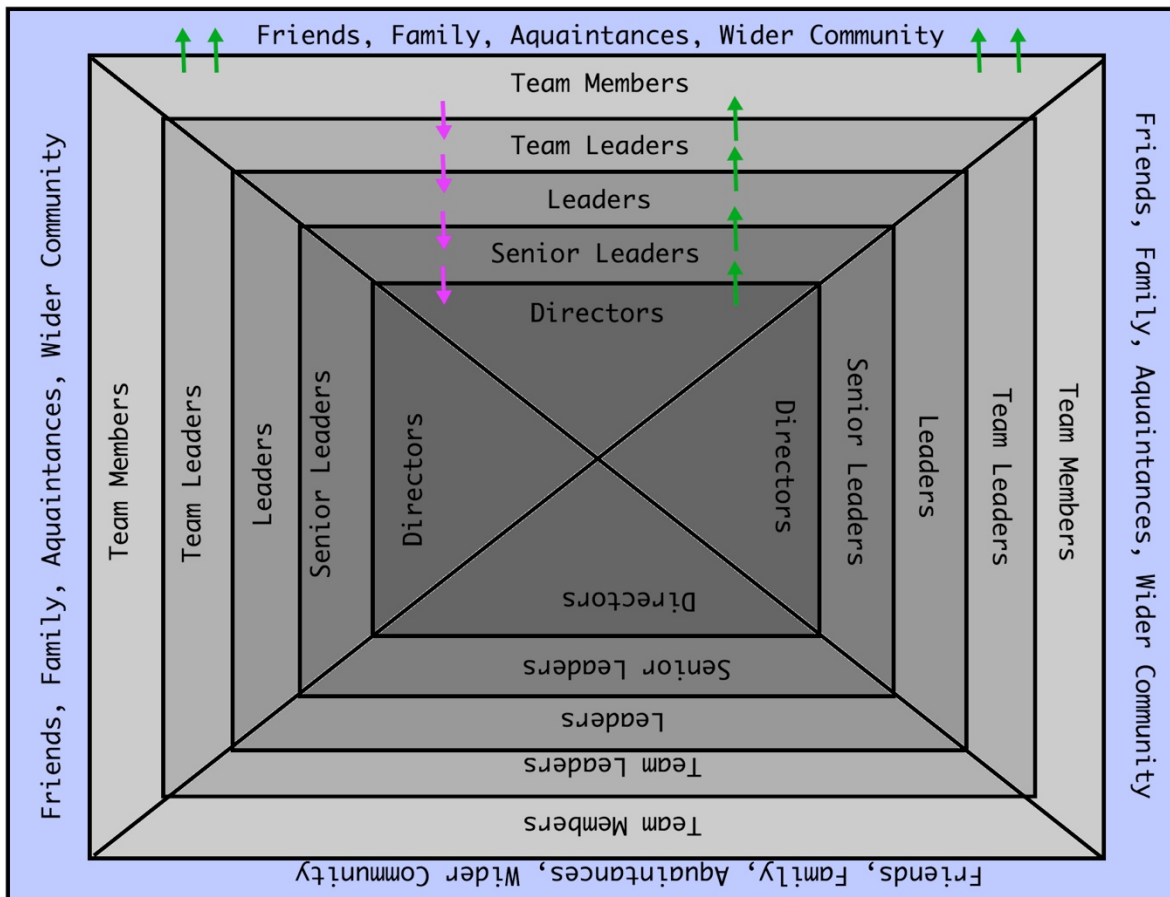
Systemic Leadership Model

How leaders behave, the relationships they build, how they encourage positive morale, giving recognition, providing direction and structure has a far-reaching potential, flowing through the organisation and out into the wider community.

Those of us who work as TA Practitioners in the organisational field especially, understanding organisational dynamics as well as individual psychological processes - we are part of this positive process and wherever we apply our interventions, at whatever level of the hierarchy – the impact we have can be very powerful indeed.

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