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Getting Into The Mess

From knowing systems approaches
to practising systemically

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How do we adapt systems practice to organisational reality without imposing methodological purity – or collapsing into simplistic improvement work?

In theory...

Learning gives us bounded approaches. Practice gives us situations.

We learn SSM, VSM, System Dynamics, CSH and other approaches in forms that allow us to understand and practise them.

But organisations rarely commission us to ‘do systems thinking’. They ask us to improve performance, redesign a service, develop strategy or fix a problem.

The difficulty is not the robustness of the approaches. It is the interaction between practitioner and situation.

Mode 1 vs Mode 2?

Consider learning to drive ...

And the clues lie in the method names!

- “Methodology”
- “Model”
- “Heuristics”, ...

.. All of which connect to multi-methodology and managing interventions (workshops available here!)

The running theme

Three judgements recur throughout practice

SITUATION

What does this situation require?

What do we need to understand – and what might help?

AGENCY

What room do I have to practise?

Mandate, power, permission, relationships – and my effect on the situation.

RIGOUR

What does sufficient rigour look like here?

What am I adapting or omitting, why – and with what consequences?

The practitioner is part of the mess

“Where you start isn’t where you finish.”

Asking questions, drawing boundaries, involving people and challenging assumptions changes the situation.

Practice is therefore not a one-off choice of method. It is continuing judgement in a dynamic environment.

The situation should pull methods from the practitioner – rather than the practitioner pushing methods onto the situation.

Your situation

You have two weeks. What would you actually do?

A senior leader asks you to run a workshop to help ‘fix’ a persistent performance problem involving several parts of the organisation.

They want recommendations immediately afterwards. The sponsor is supportive, but several operational managers think the problem has already been analysed to death – and have their own preferred solutions.

You suspect the stated problem is largely a symptom of wider structural issues.

Small-group inquiry

5 minutes in tables

1 PRIORITIES

What would your priorities be – and why?

Where would you start?

2 PRACTICE

What systemic ideas or methods might you use, adapt or deliberately not use?

Would you operate partly in ‘silent mode’?

3 BOUNDARIES

Where would you adapt or compromise – and where would you refuse?

Where is the boundary between adaptation and dilution?

Finish by agreeing ONE principle: “A systems practitioner should...”

Harvesting the room

One principle from each group – then look for the pattern

SITUATION

Does the principle help us respond to what the situation actually requires?

AGENCY

Does it address mandate, power, permission, relationships or practitioner influence?

RIGOUR

Does it help us make adaptation deliberate, defensible and proportionate?

WASP? What might principles of Well-Adapted Systems Practice look like?

Sufficiency, not methodological perfection

Rigour lies partly in knowing what you are leaving out, why you are leaving it out – and what follows from that choice.

Do I have sufficient knowledge and capability for this situation?

Are my choices informed by the situation – or by my own habits, preferences and limitations?

What do my choices allow me to conclude, claim or change?

Reflection

Where are you most at risk of getting this wrong?

Pushing a favoured method onto the situation?

Accommodating organisational constraints too readily?

Operating beyond your own systemic capability?

Losing rigour as you adapt?

What will you do differently in your next piece of practice?

A different test of mature practice

Not simply: “Did I apply the methodology properly?”

“Did I do enough of the right things, for defensible reasons, to make an effective and genuinely systemic intervention in this situation?”

SITUATION • AGENCY • RIGOUR