

Humanizing Systems

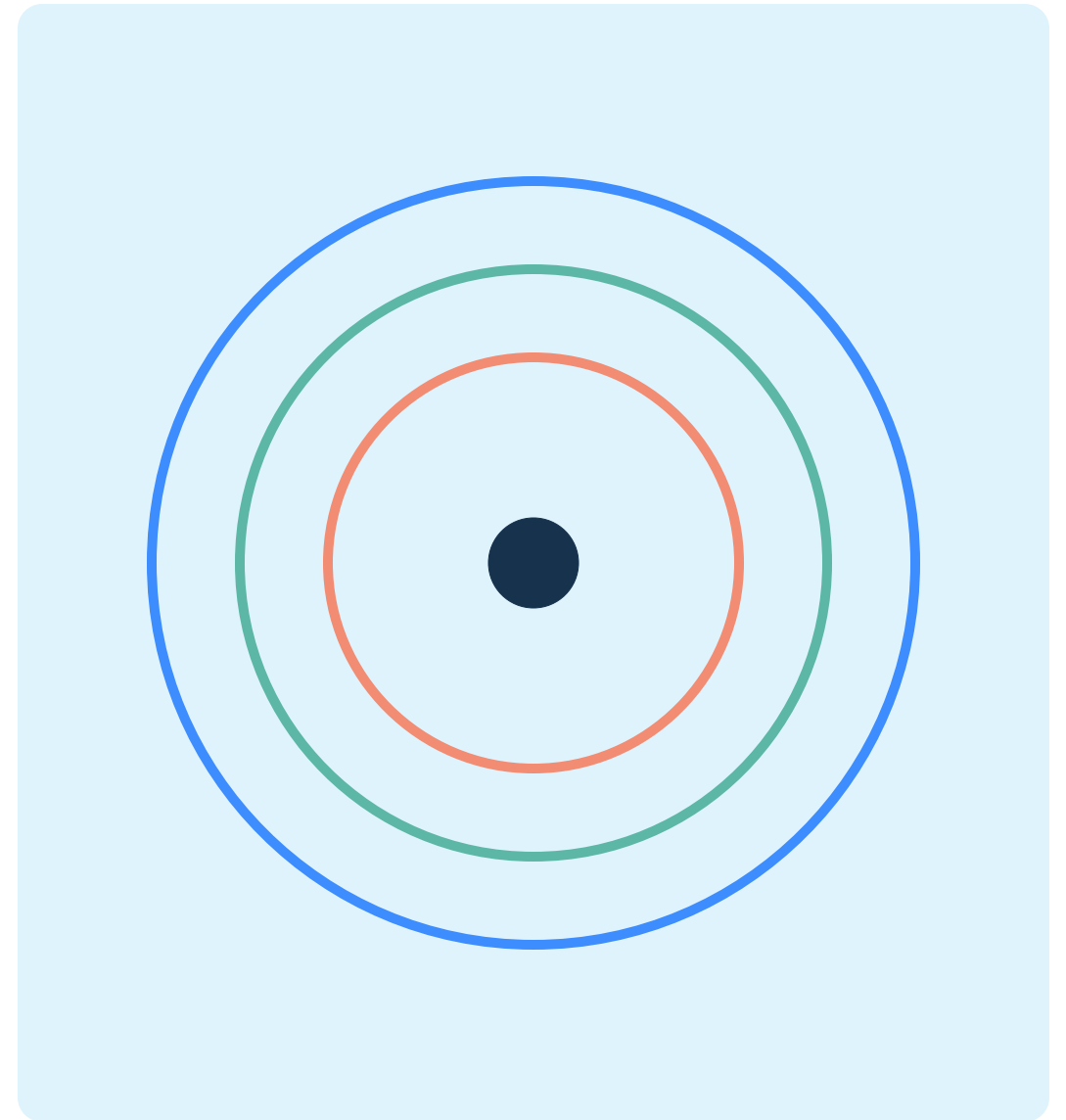
Why the system we see depends on the
self we bring

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Connect & Transform/Flanders Business School

90-minute interactive workshop

21 september 2026



We do not work on systems from the outside.

We enter them with a way of seeing, judging and intervening.

FORMAL DISTINCTIONS

System 1 / environment
Operations / metasystem
One recursion level / another

What the map specifies

LIVED DISTINCTIONS

Meaning and identity
Authority and legitimacy
History, incentives and trust

What people actually enact

Humanizing is a shift in where we look

Not primarily...

adding empathy,
participation or stakeholder
engagement to systems
work

But...

**becoming aware of the
developmental lens through
which we perceive, diagnose
and intervene**



When I enter a complex system, my first instinct is to...

Complete the sentence silently. Keep your answer private—for now.

Your first instinct is not neutral.

It reveals what you privilege—and what may disappear from view.

Keep your sentence. We will return to it.

One situation. Many possible systems.

A public health organisation is struggling to implement integrated care.

- Professionals: workload is unsustainable
- Partners: collaboration is fragmented
- Board: accelerate
- Managers: ownership is missing
- Data systems do not connect
- Frontline: give us space

“We have all the structures in place—but the system does not move.”



What is the **system** problem here?

In pairs: agree on one diagnosis in a single sentence.

Different lenses produce different problems

1

Systems/ Coordination failure

Roles, governance and process ownership are unclear.

2

Relational fragmentation

Trust, voice and shared meaning are too weak.

3

Developmental tension

Interdependence exceeds current meaning-making, authority and practice.

The observer helps constitute the observed

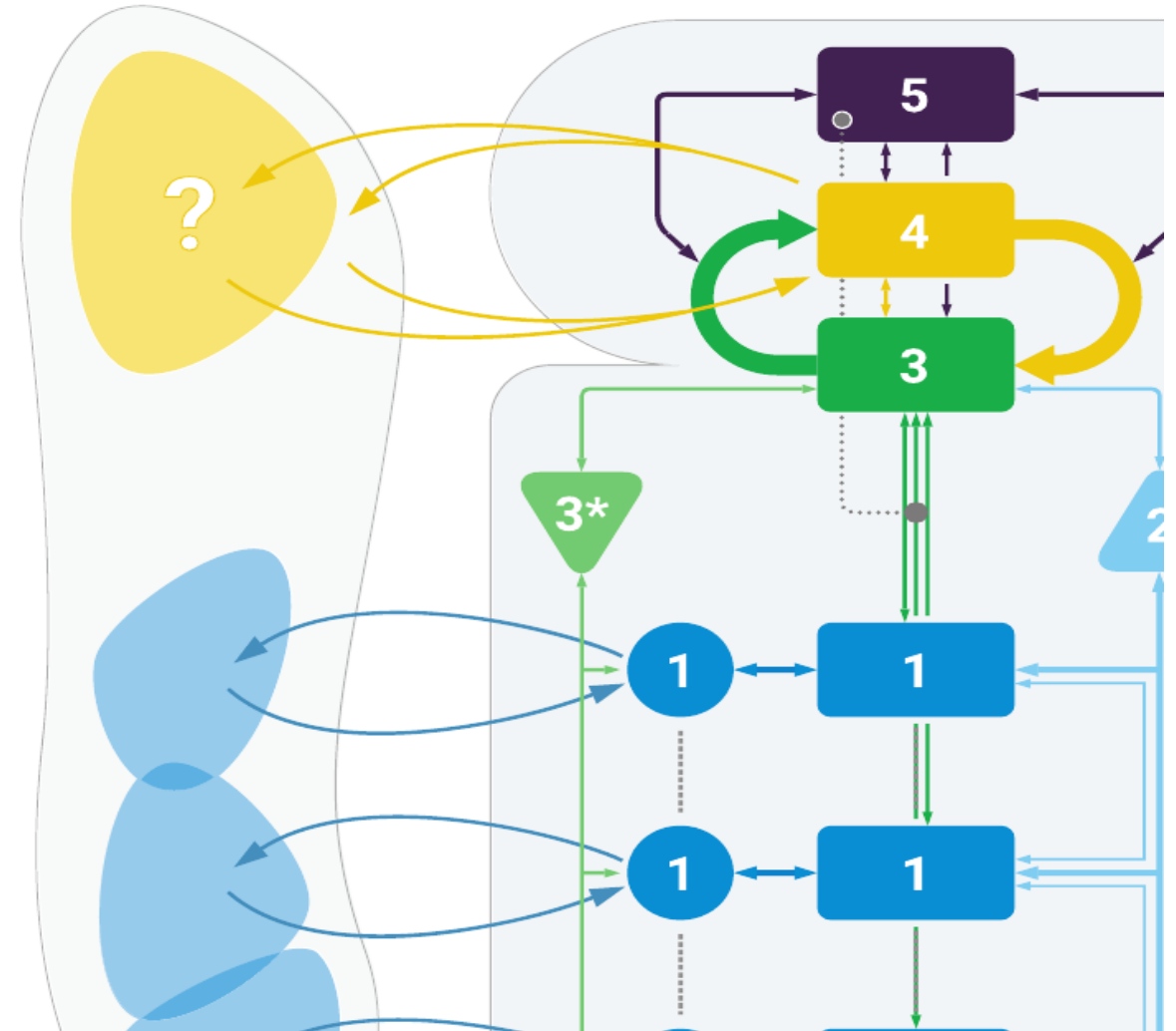


The system that appears is partly shaped by what we can notice, hold and question.

VSM and the human range of perception & thinking

Guiding question

What if actors within each system perceive reality more narrowly or more broadly than the classic model suggests?



Viability depends on structure — and on the developmental range of the actors within it

Legend

-  expanded sense- and meaning-making
-  contracted sense and meaning-making

Shows relationship between system design & complexity handling

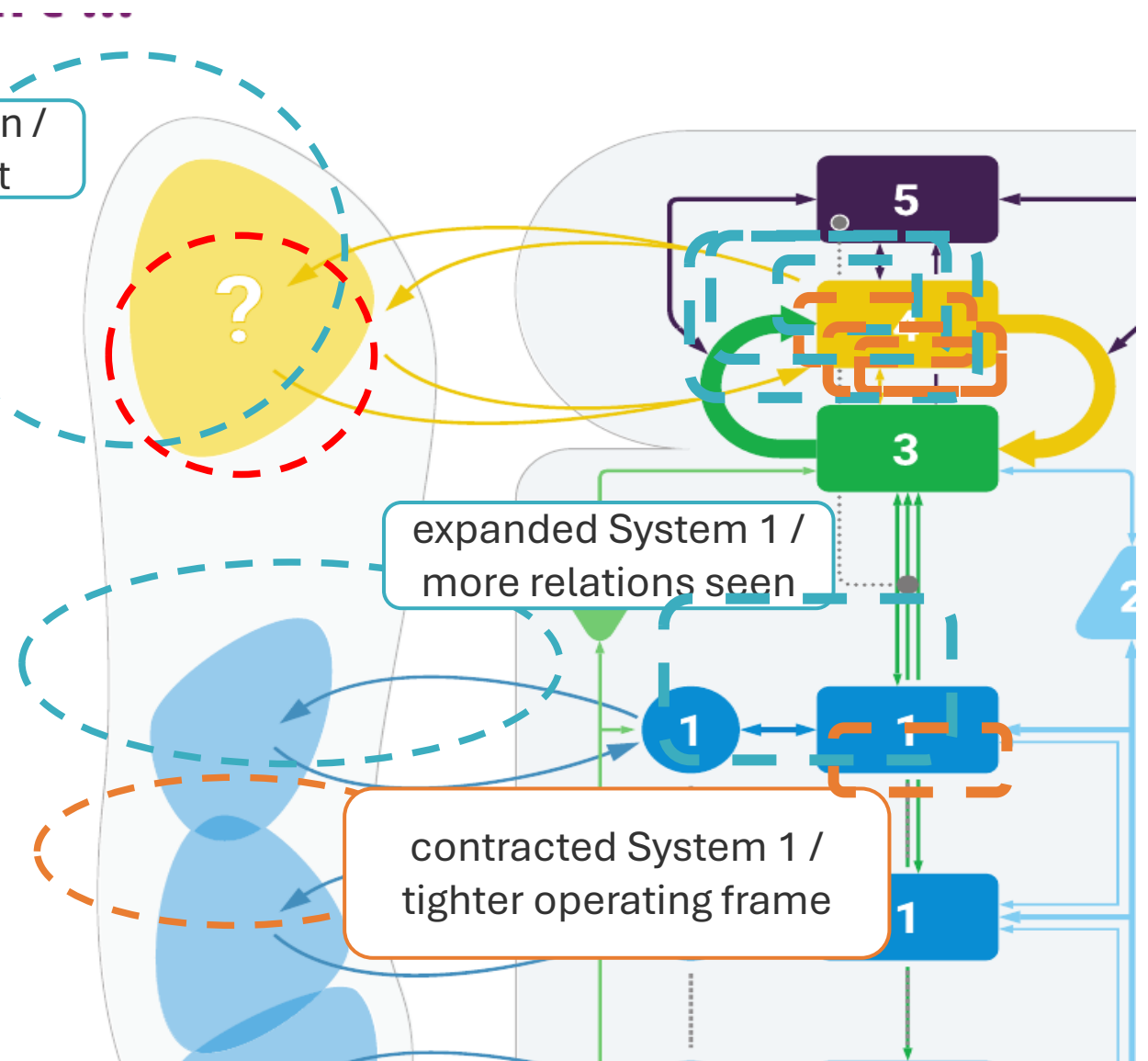
Core interpretation

The classic VSM can be retained, yet enriched by showing that actors within each system may operate with a broader or narrower field of sense- and meaning-making. This affects not only each system, but also the quality of what happens between them.

broader horizon /
more context

expanded System 1 /
more relations seen

contracted System 1 /
tighter operating frame

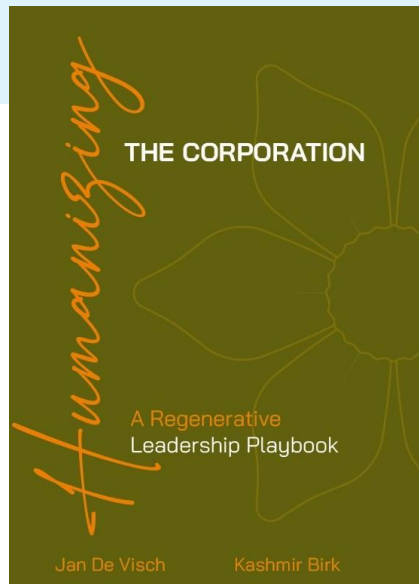


Three books, one developmental arc

01

Humanizing the Corporation

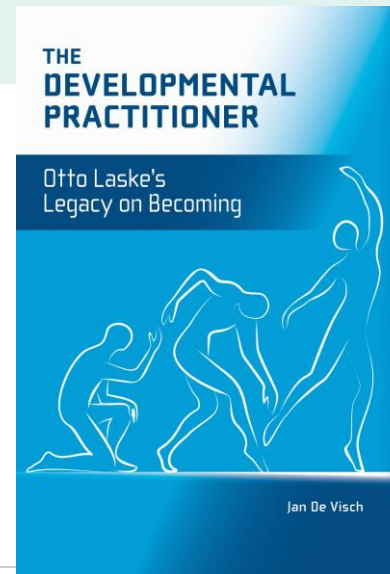
Systems as living fields of value creation



02

The Developmental Practitioner

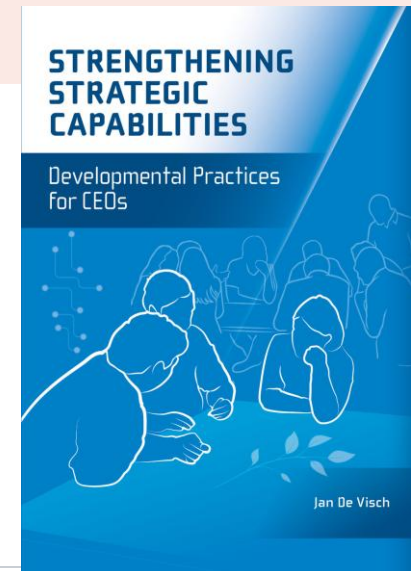
The practitioner is part of the system



03

Enhancing Strategic Capabilities

Capability grows through developmental practice



Our 'internal workplace' shapes the system seen

COGNITIVE

What can I see?

Process • context • relationship • transformation

Breadth and depth of distinctions

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

How do I relate?

Others as confirmation • obstacle • co-creators of meaning

Capacity to stay with the difference

Seeing complexity and staying with it in a relationship are inseparable.

Dialectical thinking makes boundaries more permeable and precise

PROCESS - Dynamic

See movement, emergence and what is becoming

CONTEXT – Part/Whole

Embed the issue within larger wholes and time horizons

RELATIONSHIP - Coherence

See mutual influence and constitutive interdependence

TRANSFORMATION

Work with tension, limits and generative contradiction

Cognitive development: 28 thought structures across four classes

Development shows in breadth, depth, balance and fluid coordination

P PROCESS

What is emerging, changing or disappearing?

- P1 Unceasing motion; negativity
- P2 Preservative negation; antithesis
- P3 Interpenetrating opposites
- P4 Patterns of interaction
- P5 Active, practical knowledge
- P6 Critique of reification
- P7 Embeddedness in process**

C CONTEXT

What whole, layer or frame gives this meaning?

- C8 Part contextualized in whole
- C9 Equilibrium of the whole
- C10 Structures, functions, layers
- C11 Hierarchical nature of layers
- C12 Stability of system functioning
- C13 Frames, traditions, ideologies
- C14 Multiplicity of contexts**

R RELATIONSHIP

What common ground or pattern constitutes the parts?

- R15 Limits of separation
- R16 Value of bringing into relation**
- R17 Critique of reductionism
- R18 Related value / judgment systems
- R19 Structural aspects of relation**
- R20 Patterns of interaction**
- R21 Constitutive relationships**

T TRANSFORMATION

How does the whole reorganize and become otherwise?

- T22 Limits of stability
- T23 Conflict in a developmental direction
- T24 Developmental potential
- T25 Compare transforming systems
- T26 Coordinate systems
- T27 Open, self-transforming systems
- T28 Integrate multiple perspectives**

Within each class: pointing → describing / evaluating → coordinating / explaining

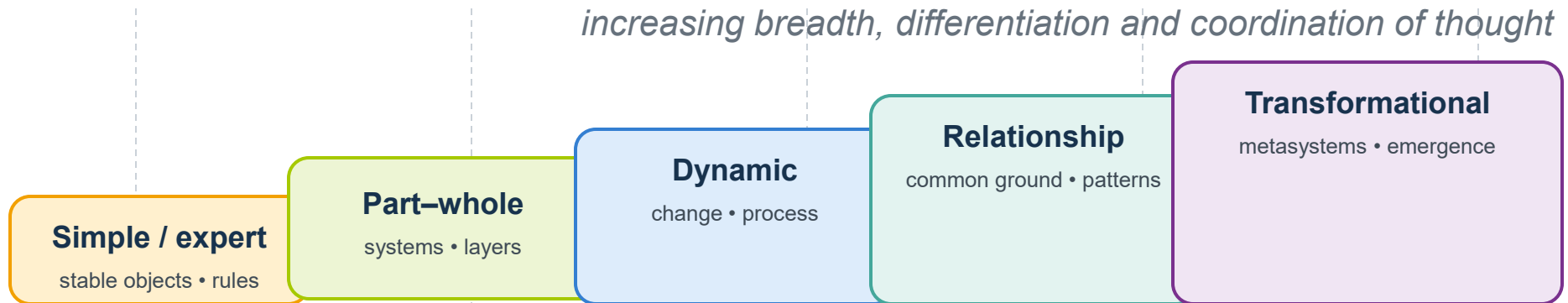
T integrates P + C + R into systems-in-transformation

CDF unfolds through time—not as three static traits

Two developmental trajectories transform; Need–Press shows how the person is functioning in the present context.

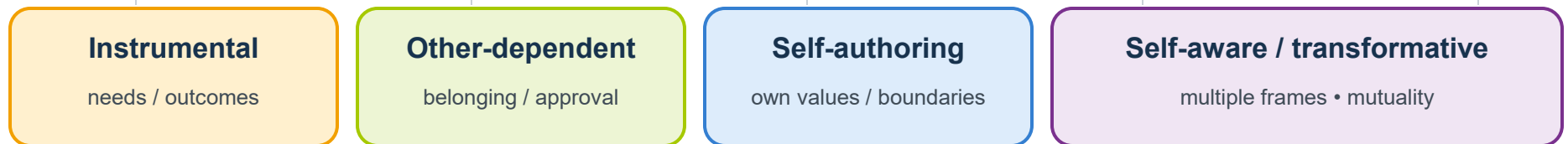
COGNITIVE

How is the world constructed in thought?



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

How is self related to others and authority?



successive subject–object shifts: what once had me can increasingly be reflected upon

NEED–PRESS

How am I doing right now?



developmental time / lived experience

Three social-emotional stances in systems practice

Each stance locates meaning and authority differently. This changes the system the practitioner can see and enter.

	1 Instrumental	2 Relational	3 Developmental
	Goals, expertise and results	Belonging and shared meaning	A self-authored position, open to revision
SOURCE OF MEANING	Own needs, goals and expertise	Recognition, belonging and mutual expectations	Values and commitments that can themselves be examined
THE SYSTEM APPEARS AS	An object to improve, align or fix	A web of voices, relationships and meanings	A living field of tensions and possible transformation
PRACTITIONER REFLEX	Clarify, optimise and deliver	Listen, include and repair	Hold contradictions, integrate and grow capability
CHARACTERISTIC RISK	People become variables and resistance becomes noise	Dialogue substitutes for decisions while power remains untouched	Abstraction loses contact with real work, roles and decisions

Development expands the ability to choose and combine stances in response to the system.



A system becomes more human when it becomes more capable of carrying its own complexity.

Where do you locate 'the human' in the system?

01 Individuals

motivation • fear • wellbeing • competence

02 Relationships

trust • dialogue • conflict • belonging

03 Structures

roles • boundaries • authority • decisions

04 Developmental field

tension • difference • uncertainty • responsibility

In trios, make your lens visible

01 Name the system you chose

02 What do you usually notice first?

03 What might you be under-seeing?

04 What does this reveal about your stance and/or cognitive fluidity?

Listen for the lens—not for advice.

Re-read a live system developmentally

VALUE

What integration is being created—and for whom?

TENSION

What tension cannot yet be held productively?

BOUNDARY

Which boundary is rigid, porous or misplaced?

RESPONSIBILITY

Where is responsibility fragmented or avoided?

CAPABILITY

What must grow for the system to carry more complexity?

Your intervention reflex is part of the intervention

CLARIFY

FACILITATE

CONFRONT

DESIGN

PROTECT

ANALYSE

INTEGRATE

ACCELERATE

LISTEN

RECOMMEND

QUESTION

SLOW DOWN



Is my intervention reflex adequate to the developmental complexity of this system?

The right method is not enough. Stance and tension must meet.

Choose the statement that most challenges you

- 1** **Systems practice becomes dehumanising when the practitioner hides behind the model.**

- 2** **The most important boundary is often the one the practitioner is not ready to see.**

- 3** **Transformation fails when change outruns the developmental capacity to carry it.**

Complete the second sentence

When I enter a complex system,
my first instinct is to...

**To humanize my systems practice,
I need to become more able to...**

Choose one developmental commitment—small enough to practise, real enough to matter.

Humanizing systems is not making systems softer.

**It is making our practice
more developmentally awake.**

People • roles • boundaries • tensions • value • responsibility

The system we seek to transform is always also transforming us.



- Jan De Visch - jan@connecttransform.be
- Jan (b. 1961) is a seasoned consultant and executive coach with decades of experience facilitating complex organizational development processes. As a professor at Flanders Business School, he explores one essential question: What drives organizations toward sustainable growth? His approach blends strategic insight with in-depth developmental understanding, enabling leadership teams to align their structures, cultures, and purposes. Jan is the author of 14 books, including the recent "*Opening the Box: Systems Thinking for Transformational Conversations*" (2024), "*Humanizing the Corporation: A Regenerative Leadership Playbook*" (2025), "*The Developmental Practitioner*" (2025) and his forthcoming "*Strengthening Strategic Capabilities*" (Nov26). His work translates cutting-edge developmental research into practical tools for CEOs, change leaders, and facilitators eager to unlock their organization's full potential. With Jan, transformation is not just a goal—it's a guided process of becoming.



Executive Professor



Managing Director



Chief Ecosystems Officer



President, Belgian Chapter



Advisory Board Member