



Systems Orientation



Why this content might be relevant to you

- You find that your work is affected by where and how your department or school sits in the wider environment, the quality of these relationships and interactions is critical to your role.
- You have become aware of obstacles both visible and invisible in place between different systems e.g. department to department, school to local authority and would like to find out more about how to work with and overcome them
- You would like to explore/find explanations for changes in behaviour of pupils, parents, staff, governors that sometimes seem erratic or illogical.

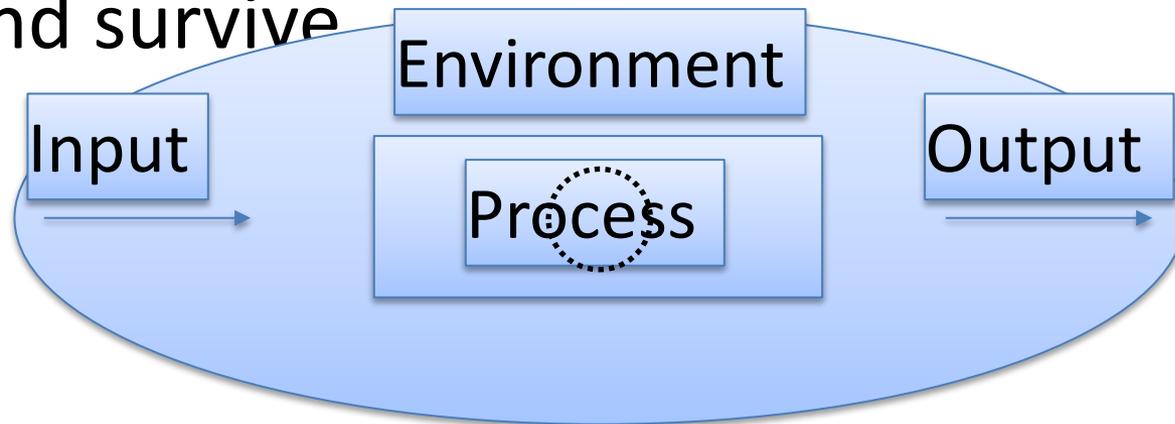
What do we mean by Systems Orientation?

Systems orientation is seeing and understanding what is happening in a group, department, organisation or even a community as having a relationship to the wider environment (also known as field).

It means understanding that what we do, how we act and behave often has a lot to do with these external factors and the nature of the intra and inter organisational relationships between the organisation and environment.

Open systems theory

The origin of open systems was in biological theory: that organisations had similar qualities to organisms such as the human body. The process of importing, converting and exporting material being the work any system has to do to live and survive



Open systems theory (continued)

This raises questions on how the processing happens:

- In the design, division of labour, levels of authority, and reporting relationships;
- In the nature of work tasks, processes and activities;
- In understanding the organisation's mission or 'primary task'.

Of special note are:

- The interconnections between different parts
- The concept of boundaries between subsystems and between the whole and the environment/ecology/social field

Looking at the first level Primary Task

Type of organisation	Primary Task/Mission	Other versions of the Primary Task
School, college or university	To teach the tools needed to survive in society	To serve party politics by providing results in particular work areas e.g a focus on numeracy over life skills
Manufacturing	The transformation of raw goods into new products	To serve the employment needs of the local community. To advance technologically.
Health	The treatment of illness	To prevent death i.e quality of life is neglected.

The Primary Task – is what an organisation needs to do to survive and this involves the organisation’s different departments/units as subsystems contributing to the overall organisational task. As organisations become more complicated the Primary Task can shift in response to external factors e.g in education the Primary Task of the school can shift from education in life skills to education in skills that are seen to fulfill a particular agenda e.g graduates being technologically proficient.

Open Systems and change

Survival and success for organisations calls for constant adaptation with the environment, creating new patterns of interaction internally and continuous engagement with the external environment.

External threats or proposed changes will surface anxieties, disagreements and conflicts in the organisation known as System Psychodynamics. Understanding how these manifest themselves as defensive behaviours in organisational life is an essential skill in working with a Systems Orientation including developing a repertoire of interventions and practices to support change.



What are organisational defensive routines?

Defensive routines are the policies or actions we put in place to prevent ourselves and our organisations from experiencing embarrassment or threat. The unintended consequence of these defensive routines is that they also prevent anyone from identifying with the organisation and thereby reducing the causes of the embarrassment or threat.

- We express strong views without encouraging inquiry (hence, remain in unilateral control and hopefully win);
- Unilaterally save face - your own and other people's (hence, minimize upsetting others or making them defensive);
- Design and manage situations unilaterally (in order to maintain control);
- Evaluate the thoughts and actions of others in ways that do not encourage testing the validity of the evaluation (and our own thoughts and actions);
- Attribute causes for whatever we are trying to understand- without necessarily validating them;
- Engage in defensive actions such as blaming, stereotyping, and intellectualizing to suppress feelings

Theories around Organisational Defences

Social Defences against anxiety (Menzies Lyth, Klein)

Faced with uncertainty individuals, groups and systems find themselves facing unbearable feelings, which causes what is known as 'splitting'.

Group theory (Bion)

Bion's theory of groups (see *Groupishness*) offers explanations for how individuals in groups respond to environmental factors.

Underbounded and Overbounded Systems (Alderfer)

The quality of boundaries affects the way an organisation behaves or works in relation to a set of variables. The degree of boundedness is crucial to the survival and development of the organisation.

The Unconscious at Work

From psychoanalytical theory refers to deeply embedded patterns in our psyches that are triggered by events and cause unconscious behaviours both individually and organisationally.

Underbounded and Overbounded Systems

Overbounded	Variable	Underbounded
Goals clear, priorities unequivocal	Goals	Goals unclear; priorities equivocal
Monolithic, Detailed & restrictive	Authority Relations and Role Definitions	Multiple & competing, Unclear & conflicting
Minimal, short-term stress	Economic Conditions	Impending economic crisis
Difficulties with openness when people meet	Communication Patterns	Difficulties in determining who can and should meet
Constrained, blocked	Human Energy	Diffuse, exhausting

Underbounded and Overbounded Systems, continued

Overbounded	Variable	Underbounded
Positive inside, negative outside	Affect Distribution	Negative inside, negative outside
Organisational groups dominate	Intergroup Dynamics	Identity groups dominate
Dependency	Unconscious Basic Assumption	Fight-flight
Long	Time Span	Short
Single-theory or ideology	Cognitive Work	Multiple or not theory or ideology

Questions to explore in school practice

- Can we find ways to facilitate conversations, and dialogue between different systems and sub-systems?
- How can we maintaining good communication channels within and beyond the organisation,
- What does it mean in practice to be well informed on what is going on e.g government policy, current research
- How do we make space in the organisation to reflect, learn and make sense of change e.g. action learning groups, developmental evaluation.
- Where and how do we pay attention to the system and its boundaries as indicators of defensive behaviours?

Paying attention to what is happening at the boundary (what is within, beyond, on the edge)

	Noticing what is happening in the wider environment: economy, resources, policy	Being aware that crossing boundaries induces multiple responses and feelings
Working with defensive behaviours and routines (Alderfer, Menzies Lyth, Klein etc)	Boundaries are geographical and social (Where am I? What sort of place is this? Who are these people?)	Learning where the organisational boundaries are: in people working in certain roles, doorways, gates, portals, gatekeepers, community groups.