

Helping Others See and Manage Emotional Systems

The Emotional System

- The emotional system is composed of the instinctive patters of automatic actions, reactions, and interactions that shape the functioning of an individual, team, organization, or any network of relationships.

Beyond Cause and Effect Thinking:

- An emotional system can be understood as a “field” in much the same way as we speak of a gravitational field or magnetic field. These fields cannot be observed directly. But indirectly, through the impact they have on us and the world around us, many of their characteristics and the “laws” governing their functioning can be recognized, studied, and “harnessed” for better or worse by those who understand their powerful potential.
- Learning to “see” emotional systems relies on our capacity to search for and recognize linkages and interconnections among actions, reactions and interactions. Because these linkages and interconnections are often repeatable and predictable – they form a pattern, and over time these patterns shape the culture or “way of being” of both the rational and the emotional system being observed. Everything in the rational system is impacted by the patterns in the emotional system.

The Coaching Practice: “The Situation”

- A coach is frequently brought into a discussion with a coachee concerning a “situation” when the coachee wants to complain, reduce anxiety, defend themselves, blame someone, get advice, or figure out how get a different outcome. Generally, the coachee initially thinks about the “situation” using a Cause and Effect thinking model. It is believed that the unwanted situation is caused by the misguided actions of others.
- There are three fundamental Lines of Inquiry that a coach can use to help the coachee begin to see interconnections and linkages related to the “situation”.
 - A. *“What is going on here?”*
 - B. *“What is your part in this situation?”*
 - C. *“What are your options for achieving your preferred outcome?”*

Helping Others See and Manage Emotional Systems

- *The coach can move the dialogue along using a series of Questions for Deeper Understanding such as:*
 1. *Can you describe the facts of the situation, without suggesting “why” it is occurring?*
 2. *What has happened or changed as a result of this situation?*
 3. *What are your thoughts, insights or intuitions connected to this situation?*
 4. *What connections or linkages can you see or infer are contributing to any recurring patterns?*
 5. *Has this situation impacted the way you think? The way you feel?*
 6. *What outcome do you want in this situation?*
 7. *Can you think of two or three reasonable courses of action for you to take that might contribute to moving the situation in the direction you’d like to see?*
 8. *What will you do now?*

The Emotional Systems Coaching Process:

- The coaching process to help a coachee see, think and lead with a mindset that recognizes, understands and manages “situations” from a systems perspective takes time. The lines of inquiry above as well as the eight more concrete coaching questions can inform and guide the coaching process.
- Coachees who are encouraged to explore these questions will develop answers. Over time they will have deeper insights into the emotional system that lies beneath the “situations” in their life.
- The coach’s job is to provide the thinking tools for the coachee to discover their own answers to the right questions at the right time, and then to take steps along the pathway that they create for themselves.

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Cause and Effect Thinking:

Example of a situation and solution using Cause and Effect Thinking:

- *When my sister, two brothers and I get together we inevitably talk about gun control. Mike always withdraws from the discussion while Helen and Jake argue through the same handful of topics in defense of their respective positions. These debates eventually break down into a loud shouting match. I try to intervene and play the peacemaker by recognizing the valid points each of them makes, but Helen feels let down by me and almost always Jake leaves angry at all of us. These arguments always leave me unsettled afterwards. I don't understand why Helen keeps baiting Jake. If she'd just keep her opinions to herself, we'd all get along the way families should. I just have to remove myself from this dynamic to keep my sense of balance and maintain a relationship with my siblings.*

Systems Thinking:

Example of situation and solution using Systems Thinking.

- *(What is going on here?) Whenever I get together with my siblings, there is a kind of script that we fall into playing over and over again. Each of us has a role to play, and although the details differ, the underlying patterns—how we react to one another and interact among ourselves—is pretty constant. Arguing about gun control is a good example. Mike tends to withdraw whenever there is even a hint of conflict. He's the oldest, and when he was growing up our parents were going through a tough spot in their marriage and engaged in a lot of conflict. Mike bore the brunt of it, and he's been conflict-avoidant in every sphere of his life ever since. Helen and Jake were only 14 months apart, and their relationship has always been one of sibling rivalry. They competed in everything, and because Helen was the older, she nearly always came out on top. She thrived on winning and never missed an opportunity to show up her "little brother", as she called him (and still calls him!).*
- *(What is my part in the situation?) I was the baby of the family, born a half a dozen years after Jake, and every one of my siblings gloated over me and spoiled me rotten. I would always try to be the peacemaker, but I was too young to make a dent in the well-worn patterns of my older siblings.*

Helping Others See and Manage Emotional Systems

- *(What are my options for achieving the outcome I prefer?) I still get caught up in their heated arguments about gun control, but more and more often I'm able to step back and see that we're just playing the same old scripts over and over. It's allowed me to try out some different, more thoughtful ways of interacting. I am more willing to express my opinion about gun control, which is to acknowledge and agree with some of Helen's points and some of Jake's, without taking sides with either one. And I no longer try to intervene and get them to stop arguing. I just focus on expressing my thoughts in a calm way, and I find that I can even bring Mike into the conversation on occasion when I get him to respond to my viewpoints. These family "discussions" no longer bother me in the way they used to because now I am always on the balcony, watching the ball being passed from one to another, and my energy is focused more on myself than worrying about family unity or the feelings of any of my siblings.*