



Attitude in Systemic Consultancy

Roswita Königswieser, Martin Hillebrand

1. Background and Context

No matter how sophisticated the theories or well thought out the techniques, they will all be to no avail in systemic consultancy if a consultant doesn't have the "right" attitude. We believe that – in addition to the other core competencies required in this field – developing an appropriate attitude is a fundamental element in the systemic approach to organisational development. It forms the "heart and soul" of systemic consultancy, and working on this attitude is the thread that runs through all our supervision projects and training programs.

As systemic consultants, we focus not only on the solutions to problems – developed as far as possible in and by the client system itself – but also on collective dysfunctional patterns, paradoxes and barriers. In other words, we work on the modes of perception, the thought patterns, the values and, ultimately, on the client system's attitude and mindset (cf. Königswieser, 2004). To deal with these depth dimensions and identify effective interventions, we also have to be fully aware of and understand our own attitude. Knowing our own internalised beliefs, views of the world, values and the way we deal with paradoxes is the basis of a professional attitude and approach to the consulting role.

2. What Exactly Do We Mean by "Attitude"?

The term "attitude" is closely linked to identity, character, mindset, perception and constructions of reality. It refers not only to the way we carry ourselves and the manner in which we act, but also to our state of mind or our feelings. We talk, for example, about people having a positive (or negative) attitude to work.

Attitude affects the way we think and behave. It is the basis, yet at the same time also the product, of our thoughts and behaviour. It is formed by our history, mental models, experiences and validations and, in turn, influences our view of the world (cf. Bourdieu, 1974).

Attitude is reflected in the way we relate to ourselves and our environment, the way we deal with our internal and external worlds, the way we conduct our relationships and the way we think and perceive. It reflects what we perceive to be true or false.

Our attitude also has consequences for our self-image, our view of what constitutes professionalism and our preferred concepts and methods.

So how would we describe (in contrast to Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term "habitus") an ideal systemic attitude? What makes it instantly recognisable? The following statements illustrate its key characteristics (cf. Königswieser & Hillebrand, 2005).

3. The Characteristics of a Systemic Attitude

- "There is no objectivity; I have to take a closer look at the context. Everything a person does gains meaning if I know the context. It is about making room for more than one perspective ("principle of multiple perspectives"). To orient myself, I have to build hypotheses because my own observations are always subjective and only a part of the whole."
- "Conflicting opinions are part of life. Differences bring richness and variety. What's important is the balance, the emphasis on things that have been pushed to one side. Such issues often represent the dark side of a problem. Conflicts might hurt, but they also provide opportunity for development. Resistance is energy that needs to be used."

- “Things are the way they are.” We must first understand the purpose and meaning behind typical patterns in the system. The right attitude helps to lessen the drama, identify the good in the bad (when the system focus is on deficits) or the bad in the good (when the system tends towards idealisation). The following story illustrates this point.

An old man and his son together worked a small family farm. They had only one horse to pull the plough. One day, the horse ran away. “How awful,” said the neighbours, “What bad luck.” “Who knows,” replied the old farmer, “If it is good luck or bad?” The following week, the horse returned to the farm from the mountains with five wild horses for the stable. “How wonderful,” said the neighbours, “What good luck!” “Good luck or bad,” said the old farmer, “Who knows?” The next morning, the son was trying to tame one of the wild horses when he fell and broke his leg. “How awful! What bad luck!” – “Good luck? Bad luck?” War was declared, and the army arrived in the village to conscript all the young men. They had no use for the farmer's son with a broken leg, and so he was the only one spared. “Good luck? Bad luck?”

- “We see those apparently to blame for a problem simply as the symptom carriers. It is not about changing or analysing individual people, but recognising structures, relationship patterns and mindsets, and enabling people to alter their behaviour by changing the way they look at things. Everyone involved plays their own part in a problem.”
- “We take a holistic approach. Everything, in principle, is contained in every unit, no matter how small, and everything is connected to everything else.” Or to quote a Chinese proverb: “*Each*

drop of water contains the secrets of a whole ocean.” No matter where we begin, what we do will ultimately always have an effect somewhere else (“hanging mobile effect”).

- “When we change the parameters of our field of vision, our perceived connections and meanings often also change. We refer to this as reframing.” Consider, for example, the following story:

A man and his wife, both aged 60, were walking through the woods, when they met a fairy. “I will grant you one wish,” whispered the fairy to the man. Without thinking, he replied, “I wish my wife was 20 years younger than me.” The fairy waved her magic wand and, before he knew it, the man was 80.

- “We see our role in the consulting process as providers of momentum, guides on a system's journey towards developing greater problem-solving abilities. A gardener is a good example of this. He can prepare the ground, plant, cut, feed, prune and care for the plants. But he can't grow pineapples if the climate and soil won't support them. He has to know and respect the conditions that a plant needs to grow.”

- “Development processes take time. Living systems have biological response times. Profound mental change does not simply happen at the push of a button.”

All these statements clearly show that our “systemic” understanding of what constitutes an “appropriate” attitude is not only based on a systemic view of the world (cf. Königswieser, 2004, p.22 ff), it also embraces the types of values propagated by “humanistic social psychology” and found, for example, in the work of Kurt Lewin and Abraham Maslow (cf. Gabor, 2000, p. 153 ff).

4. Consequences for the Consultant-Client Relationship

This characterisation of attitude also implies a certain quality in the consultant-client relationship.

- “Our client system includes everyone in the whole system or sub-system, not just the sponsors and senior executives. We don't just work with the people in positions of power, we work with people from all hierarchy levels.”
- “Since we are trained first and foremost to see resources and potential, not deficits, we are more interested in working with opportunities, positive images of the future and options. What is going well? What are the success stories? What is the vision? This attitude opens up extended fields of action. It can help people break away from deep-seated, hardened patterns of thinking.”
- “We try to find out what is blocking energy. Once these blockages have been removed, things begin to flow again. Usually the people involved themselves know best what is blocking them and what they can do to help themselves.”
- “Feedback implies learning and self-governance. We believe in personal responsibility, in the self-healing powers of living systems, and see it as our role to activate and/or energize them. To do so, we have to know how best to put our message across.”
- “Since we are aware of the limitations of our intervention possibilities and take autopoiesis seriously, modesty is as much a part of our attitude as self-confidence.”
- “If we are to have an effect on the entire system, we have to remain neutral, i.e. not judge one position or point of view to be more important than the others. We must be advocates of ambivalence.”

“Embodying this attitude is not easy. You have to permanently work at yourself, distance yourself from the situation yet, at the same time, immerse yourself in it totally and use your own emotional responses as information. This paradoxical oscillation between closeness and distance is almost impossible to sustain without reflection and awareness, i.e. without knowing and accepting yourself, your blind spots, failings, values and limitations. Coping with this paradox and uncertainty brings certainty, a higher level of stability and characterises professionalism. The following story illustrates this point.

Two Zen monks, one advanced in years, the other still very young, were walking along a muddy path through the rainforest on their way home to the monastery, when they came across a beautiful woman standing helplessly at the bank of a fast flowing river. The elder monk, recognising her dilemma, picked her up and began to carry her across the river. She smiled, wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tightly until he gently put her down on the other side. The woman bowed her head in thanks, and the two monks continued in silence on their way. Shortly before they reached the monastery gates, the young monk could contain himself no longer. “How could you take such a beautiful woman in your arms?”, he cried, “Such action does not befit a monk!” The elder monk looked at his companion and replied, “I left her back there on the bank of the river. Are you still carrying her with you?”

5. Respect as a Core Value

We consider respect for others to be the most important element in a systemic attitude. We all know that before we can respect others, we must first learn to respect ourselves and nurture our own self-esteem. If we cannot accept ourselves, we will not be able to accept and love others. If we are too

strict with ourselves, we will also be too strict with others. Indeed, the things we like or hate about others offer deep insight into our own characters or, as the saying goes: “What Peter says about Paul says more about Peter than it does about Paul.”

The author Hermann Hesse wrote: “If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is a part of yourself. What isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us.” If we can't let go of our own, often too narrow assumptions of the way things should be, if we cannot be open to and embrace the ideas of others, we will not be able to provide the necessary support and coaching for any unusual, creative solutions that might be put forward by our clients.

When our feelings are particularly strong, be it for reasons of hurt, fear, joy or longing, we are very close to our own core values. This also applies to “negative” feelings such as anger, jealousy, rivalry or excess, or as Hesse comments, “If not for the beast within us we would be castrated angels.” Being consciously aware of, identifying and taking the time out required to reflect on all these feelings provides us with a form of guidance system to our own deeper set of core values. This, in turn, forms the pegs and footholds for our identity, but can, of course, also be a corset and a restraint.

But the things that really move us emotionally not only show us the way to the deeper levels of our personality, they also provide us with the impetus to change, to recognise new possibilities or follow new paths. Our colleague, Thomas Keller, describes these as “moving moments”, brief instances which touch us and set something in motion.

This basic attitude can also be described as one of serenity (Königswieser, 1992/2005). It enables

us to let go of preconceived ideas of happiness, rigid goals, fixed opinions and blind fixations, yet at the same time be open to change (no matter how frightening) and the chaotic, illogical challenges of life. Serenity is a form of active passivity that is hard to describe, a replacing of straightforward action with oscillation.

Let us now return to that core element of attitude “respect”. Behind this attitude of respect lies a deep-seated human need for recognition, a need to be perceived and accepted for who we are and what we are.

The philosopher Georg Hegel discusses the concept of “recognition” (“Anerkennung”) in his Jena manuscripts: “This process of recognition involves us assimilating and 'storing' another person in our consciousness as someone who in their totality is comparable to ourselves.” He asks, “Why is this process of recognition so important to us; why do people have such a 'desire'?”; offering the following answer: “... to satisfy their egos ...”.

Evidently, it is a condition not just for living in peace and harmony with others, but also for establishing and maintaining a good relationship with ourselves and living happy and contented lives.

Hegel differentiates between three forms of recognition:

- Love in friendship, partnership and family as “direct, immediate recognition”
- Honour, respect, appreciation among members of a society: “Everyone wants to be respected by others; everyone strives to see themselves in others.”
- The right to “this general, abstract recognition” as citizens.

He continues, “We have a strong craving – even hunger - for recognition.” This refers not only to our desire to live, our abilities, our work and our property, but also to everything that makes us the person we are. If someone “close” to us rejects us or takes away even a fraction of that which is important to us, we feel upset, hurt, exasperated, emotional, offended and irritable; we try to either re-establish full recognition or in some way redress the balance. Failure to do so can lead to permanent resentment and can overshadow other parts of our life and relationships (cf. Keller & Schrung, 2004).

The concept behind the “appreciative inquiry” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999) centres on this primal human need. In his recognition model, George H. Mead also argues that people are only able to communicate and understand each other if they are also able to put themselves in each other's position (Mead, 1980, 1983).

However, from the perspective of the “civilizing process” (Elias, 2001), this does not simply happen as a matter of course. The stronger held the weaker in servitude and did not recognise them as their equals.

Whenever we feel we are not being recognised and our identity is being put into question, we feel insulted and hurt and conflicts arise.

Paradoxically, learning, action and change seem easier to achieve when we feel understood, recognised and respected as a person (or organisation) than they do when we feel undervalued and pressurised into this change.

6. Paradox and Attitude

As the thread running through all the images, values and views that characterise systemic

attitude, we constantly find ourselves confronted with paradoxes and contradictions. The ability to integrate and balance out opposite poles, switch back and forth between them as and when the situation requires and keep both of them in view at the same time is what distinguishes a differentiated professional approach. The following aspects are of particular importance:

- Reflecting and learning from feedback while at the same time being spontaneous and intuitive
- Being self-confident yet modest
- Learning, experimenting, discovering, being curious and open yet at the same time respecting clear meta norms, distinctions, knowledge and position at the process level
- Being affected and getting involved but at the same time maintaining distance and composure
- Combining a sense of responsibility with a playful approach
- Giving security but also providing constructive irritation
- Including both hard facts and soft factors
- Changing yet conserving
- Slowing things down without reducing efficiency

Can an attitude be clear if it can only be described using contradictory pairs, if it opts to place more emphasis on one side or the other to suit the situation or, indeed, emphasises both sides simultaneously? Shouldn't paradoxes be unsettling? Don't they suggest a situation is hopeless?

The ability to deal with uncertainty, ubiquity, complexity and contradiction is of key importance not only for managers, but also for us as consultants. After all, life itself is made up of paradoxes: no failure, no growth; no problems, no solutions; out with the old, in with the new.

The evolutionary theorist Rupert Riedl introduced the notion that to evolve we will always have to accept constraints and disadvantages.

According to Riedl, his teacher, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, once said that it was only with multicellularity that death came into the world, with the nervous system pain, with the consciousness fear. Their opposites always had a life-prolonging meaning (cf. Riedl, 2004).

Dirk Baecker defines experts as “professionals in identifying extremes, in oscillating between opposite poles”. This is how they develop their knowledge and put it into practice. He refers in this context to a quote from Albert Einstein: “In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.” (Baecker, 2006)

We particularly like the use of the term “oscillating” because it expresses far more than the “balance of contradictions” so often used. Oscillation conjures up the image of a floating, indefinable tendency towards a particular side that changes with the situation and context. It allows us to move simultaneously between opposing directions and keep them both in sight (cf. Littmann & Jansen, 2000). It's about tolerating the oscillation and the uncertainty that comes with it. Such a view does not look primarily at the opposing poles, it looks at the “close links between what's different” (cf. Baecker, 2006)

One thing at least should now be clear: trying to describe what we mean by attitude seems to be almost as challenging as the lifelong, demanding and painstaking process of working on it.

7. References

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