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Systemic Stance in Mentoring: A Qualitative Exploration of Systemic Principles in Trainee Programs

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Article Info

Abstract

This paper examines how systemic stance is perceived within mentoring processes in trainee programs. Drawing from qualitative interviews with trainees, the study investigates the extent to which systemic principles—such as mutual curiosity, appreciation, process orientation, circular questioning, resource orientation, and reflexivity—shape mentoring relationships and development. Anchored in systemic theory, constructivism, and communication theories, the research illustrates how mentoring becomes a co-created learning context rather than a directive transfer of knowledge. Results show that mentors who embody systemic stance foster trust, motivation, and personal growth by inviting self-reflection and responsibility. The findings highlight systemic stance as a valuable orientation for designing trainee programs that balance organisational objectives with individual development. The paper concludes with recommendations for organisations and mentoring practitioners seeking to integrate systemic approaches and constructivist positions into leadership development and early-career programs.

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1. Introduction

Trainee programs are widely used in organisations to prepare young professionals for leadership roles and long-term commitment. At the centre of these programs, mentoring often plays a key role in supporting personal development, professional orientation, and integration into corporate culture. Traditional mentoring models emphasise expertise transfer and hierarchical guidance. However, systemic approaches suggest a shift towards dialogue, co-reflection, and mutual learning. The mentor–mentee relationship becomes a circular process in which both parties learn through interaction.

The concept of systemic stance—characterised by mutual curiosity, appreciation, process orientation and self-reflection—offers an alternative lens to understand mentoring. This study explores how systemic stance adopted by mentors is perceived and experienced by trainees in organisational settings. It aims to reveal how systemic principles can enrich mentoring, enhance self-awareness, and promote sustainable personal and professional development within trainee programs.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Systemic theory and constructivism provide the conceptual foundation for understanding mentoring as a relational process. In systemic thinking, individuals are seen as part of complex networks of interaction (von Foerster, 1993; Simon, 2023) [11, 3] and cybernetics (von Foerster, 2003) [13]. Every observation is influenced by the observer's perspective, making communication and reflection central to learning and development.

Constructivist theories (von Glasersfeld, 1995; Reich, 1996) [14, 10] argue that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed rather than transmitted. Applied to mentoring, this perspective suggests that mentors do not simply impart wisdom but rather facilitate reflection, contextual awareness, and self-directed learning.

Systemic stance, as described by Radatz (2010) [9] and Königswieser & Exner (2019) [5], emphasises an appreciative attitude, resource orientation, and a belief in the client's autonomy. In mentoring contexts, this translates into a focus on possibilities rather than problems, and on dialogue rather than instruction.

Mentoring research (Kram, 1985; Clutterbuck, 2014) [6, 2] distinguishes between career functions (such as sponsorship and coaching) and psychosocial functions (such as trust and empathy). The systemic stance integrates both dimensions by attending to relationships, context, and meaning-making processes that support authentic growth (Höher, 2014; Lunsford, 2022) [4, 7].

3. Methodology
Our qualitative study explored how trainees perceive systemic stance within organisational mentoring relationships. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with participants from five different corporate trainee programs. Participants were selected via purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, sector, and experience.

The interview guide was informed by systemic coaching principles (Tomm, 1994; Radatz, 2010) [12, 9], constructivist positions (Simon, 2023; Von Glasersfeld, 1995) [11, 14] and focused on the following themes: relational communication, feedback culture, reflective dialogue, and perceived impact. Interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) [1]. Categories were derived inductively from the material and grouped into three main areas: (1) systemic stance in interaction, (2) perceived effects on development, and (3) organisational context and boundaries.

4. Results and Discussion
Systemic Stance in Interaction: Participants described systemic stance as a mindful presence characterised by listening, empathy, and respect with no judgmental or advice-giving normative intention. Mentors who avoided giving direct advice and instead asked circular or reflective questions encouraged self-awareness and ownership among mentees. Appreciation and curiosity for the mentees' contructions and understanding were repeatedly mentioned as key relational qualities.

Perceived Effects on Development: Mentees described a process of increasing confidence, more clarity in decision-making, and the improvement of their ability to navigate organisational dynamics. The mentors' systemic stance enriched the mentees' perceived understanding of leadership and enhanced communication across hierarchical levels.

Organisational Context and Boundaries: While most participants valued a systemic stance in their mentoring process, some noted institutional challenges—such as time constraints, hierarchical culture, and unclear expectations from Human Resources and/ or the management. These findings suggest that systemic stance thrives in organisations that foster openness, feedback, and reflective spaces.

An expert stance adopted by mentors was mentioned as expected at early moments of the mentoring process, when some irritation of a systemic stance was described and categorized as inferior to a positioning of right and wrong alternatives, expert behaviour and specific recommendations shared by the mentors. However, this initial irritation changed over time and invited a more appreciating attitude towards a systemic stance. Overall, the results confirm that systemic stance contributes to the development of mentor–mentee relationships and supports both professional and personal growth when overcoming initial irritations.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations
The findings of this study highlight systemic stance as a transformative orientation in mentoring relationships. By fostering reflection, mutual respect, and curiosity without judging or advice-giving normative attitude, systemic stance enhances both the developmental and organisational impact of trainee programs. Mentoring thus becomes less about instruction and more about dialogue, resonance, and co-created meaning.

Recommendations include:
Integrating systemic coaching principles into mentor workshops and mentor enablement.
Creating reflective spaces within organisations to discuss mentoring experiences.
Encouraging mentors to adopt circular questioning and resource-oriented communication.
Conducting longitudinal studies to explore the reflection of long-term intra-person and inter-person processes regarding leadership and organisational learning.
Embracing systemic stance in mentoring supports not only individual development but also contributes to creating learning organisations capable of adaptive and sustainable growth.

6. Thank-You Note
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