



Systemic Approaches in Organizational Development and Change Management: A Qualitative Reflection Based on Systemic Focus Group Practice

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Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of a systemic position in organizational development and change management. Drawing on systemic theory and constructivist epistemology, the study explores how systemic stance is perceived and enacted by practitioners accompanying change processes in organizations. Empirical data were generated through a qualitative systemic focus group interview with experienced systemic consultants. Findings highlight observer-dependence, lethological non-knowing, trust, transparency, and resource orientation as central elements of systemic stance. The results further demonstrate how systemic approaches might contribute to support participation, and foster sustainable change processes, while also revealing contextual boundaries such as limited voluntariness and predefined outcomes. The paper contributes to systemic organizational research by linking theoretical principles with empirical practitioner insights.

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Keywords: Systemic Stance, Organizational Development, Change Management, Systemic Thinking, Qualitative Research, Focus Group

1. Introduction

Organizations operate in increasingly complex, dynamic, and uncertain environments shaped by globalization, digital transformation, and societal change (Mohr, 2006; Kaudela-Baum *et al.*, 2022) ^{[1], [4]}. While technological innovation is often at the center of transformation initiatives, research indicates that cultural, interactions, and communicative dimensions are decisive for the success of change processes (Koch *et al.*, 2019) ^[5].

Traditional change management approaches frequently rely on linear, top-down planning models. Empirical studies, however, show that such approaches are associated with high failure rates and employee resistance (Vahs & Weiland, 2013 cited in Koch *et al.*, 2019; Vahs & Leiser 2007, Ashkenas 2013 cited in Koch *et al.*, 2019) ^[5].

Against this backdrop, systemic perspectives offer an alternative by conceptualizing organizations as complex social systems that cannot be controlled (Grochowiak & Castella, 2002) ^[1] but invited to reflection and interaction.

This paper explores how systemic stance can contribute to organizational development and change management. The guiding research question is: How is systemic stance perceived and considered in the accompaniment of organizational change processes, and what potentials and limits emerge from practice?

2. Theoretical Foundations

Systemic thinking is rooted in systems theory (Orthey, 2013)^[12], constructivism (Palmowski, 2014)^[13], and second-order cybernetics (Kutz, 2020)^[7]. It rejects linear cause–effect explanations and instead emphasizes circularity, interactions dynamics, and observer-dependence (Simon, 2013)^[15]. Reality is understood as constructed through perception and communication rather than objectively given (Orthey, 2013)^[12]. A systemic stance builds on this epistemology and is characterized by non-knowing, impartiality, appreciation, and respect for multiple perspectives (Radatz, 2010)^[14]. Practitioners refrain from expert-driven solution provision and instead facilitate reflection and self-organization within systems (Kutz, 2020)^[7].

In organizational development, systemic approaches focus on interaction patterns, meaning-making, and contextual conditions rather than structural optimization alone (Orthey, 2013; Koch *et al.*, 2019)^[12, 5]. Change is conceptualized as a continuous process of self-organization influenced by communication, leadership behavior, and interactions trust (Grossmann *et al.*, 2015)^[2].

3. Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research design aligned with systemic and constructivist assumptions (Mayerhofer, 2009; Mey & Mruck, 2010)^[8, 9]. Empirical data were collected through a systemic focus group interview with three systemic consultants who regularly accompany organizational change processes.

Participants were selected purposively based on shared systemic training backgrounds and practical experience in organizational development. The focus group was moderated using systemic impulses designed to stimulate reflection and multiple perspectives rather than consensus (Mayerhofer, 2009; Misoch, 2015)^[8, 10].

The session was conducted online, audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022)^[6]. Categories were developed deductively from theory and inductively from the data material.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings underline observer-dependence as a foundational element of systemic stance. Participants emphasized that acknowledging multiple constructed realities is essential for working with complexity in change processes.

Lethological non-knowing emerged as a central professional attitude. Consultants described their role as facilitators of reflection rather than experts providing solutions. Trust, transparency, and appreciation were identified as prerequisites for participation and commitment among organizational members.

Regarding change approaches, participants contrasted systemic accompaniment with top-down change models. While directive approaches were perceived as faster, they were also associated with resistance and fragmentation. Systemic approaches, although more time-intensive, were described as more sustainable.

At the same time, boundaries of systemic work became visible. Limited voluntariness in employment contexts and predefined change outcomes were identified as structural constraints that can conflict with systemic principles.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that systemic stance offers a valuable orientation for organizational development and change management. By fostering reflection, trust, and participation, systemic approaches can contribute to sustainable transformations.

However, systemic work operates within organizational logics that may limit voluntariness and openness. Integrating systemic accompaniment with the disclosure of frameworks and offers can help integrating the context and the participation of the respective individuals.

Future research could include perspectives of employees affected by change processes and longitudinal research across organizational contexts.

6. Thank-You Note

The authors thank the participating systemic consultants for their openness and reflective contributions. Their insights provided a valuable empirical foundation for this research.

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