

# Systemic Coaching

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# Systemic Coaching - Theory

## Origin

Systemic counseling concepts have their roots in the family therapy tradition of the 1950s. Since then, the systemic approach to counseling has continued to evolve in many places and in many minds. The so-called Milan Group (Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, Prata), which began working with families and couples in the 1960s and developed new forms of systemic intervention, and the representatives of the Heidelberg School (Stierlin, Retzer, Schmidt, Simon, Weber) have played an enormous role in this development.

Today, systemic concepts are used not only for counseling and therapy of families, but also for counseling other social systems, such as teams, companies or even individuals. Likewise, systemic counseling concepts are used more and more in areas such as social work, administration and politics.

In the development of systemic concepts many borrowings from different branches of science have been incorporated, e.g. from biology, medicine, cybernetics, communication theory, information theory, game theory, general systems theory, chaos theory and constructivism.

## Description of the systemic approach

The basis of the systemic approach to consulting is a system-theoretical worldview. The term "system" is derived from the Greek and in the original sense of the word means "put together".

A common definition for system is: "a set of elements or objects together with the relationships between these objects and their characteristics" (Hall & Fagen, 1956).

As can be seen in the ecosystem, for example, if just one link in the food chain is wiped out, there are serious consequences for the whole system. That is, almost any intervention in a system has an impact on the whole system. So it is always a matter of interactions between the various elements of the system in question.

The systemic approach to consulting makes use of this idea of interactions by applying it to persons, groups, organizations, situations, processes, problems or conflicts. The individual is therefore not considered in isolation, but always in the context of his environment/system.

The epistemological basis of systemic thinking is constructivist philosophy. It is connected with names like Heinz von Foerster, Gregory Bateson, Humberto Maturana and others.

The core question of constructivism is in which way people actively participate in the construction of their own world of experience. Since we as humans are dependent on developing concepts or "maps" about the world that make it easier for us to find our way around, it can always happen that we confuse these concepts/maps with reality.

Systemic counseling tries to do justice to the fact that in addition to different maps and constructions of reality, people also have different needs, desires, character traits, fears, likes, dislikes, abilities, limitations, visions, memories - in short, perspectives. Consequently, people can perceive something completely different in the same situation and therefore derive different conclusions and decisions.

By using the so-called "multi-glasses principle", the systemic approach to consulting makes use of these different perspectives to make those involved more aware of the situation. More awareness, in turn, expands the possibility space. The possibilities of choice increase and thus the condition for change arises.

Systemic counseling techniques thus arise from the question of how people in social systems create reality together, what premises underlie their thinking and experience, and what possibilities there are to question and disturb these premises. In the counseling situation, it is important to note that people are almost always "biased" and see themselves or their own mental constructs and projections everywhere first. Since this is also true for the consultant, it is useful for the consultant to be aware of his own reality constructions again and again, as well as of the fact that the consultant's attempts at explanation, theses and impulses are part of the systemic events.

## Important aspects of the systemic-oriented consulting work

- Circularity - Every behavior of every participant is at the same time cause and effect of the behavior of the other participants
- Communication - How does communication take place or not take place?
- Context - In which context are phenomena, problems, situations considered? Who determines this context?
- Constructed reality - What reality does the client construct? What reality does his environment construct?
- Patterns and rules - What rules exist in the system and how are phenomena described in this system, i.e. how are they given meaning through explanations, evaluations, conclusions and what conclusions are drawn from them?

## Goals of the systemic coaching

The goal of systemic coaching is to work out the individual plans as well as the personal competencies of the client, to reflect them in a professional or private context and to lead them to integration.

Further goals of systemic coaching are to open the client to alternative patterns of thinking, perception and interaction in order to enable new behavioral options as well as to initiate and accompany learning and renewal processes in order



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to make people in systems and/or systems more survivable, successful and efficient. Ideally, systemic interventions can promote more mutual understanding, tolerance and mindfulness.

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# Principles and Guidelines of Systemic Coaching

## Principles

**“Everything has consequences” (everything is interconnected – we live in systems)**

- Only the coachee decides what is good or what helps
- Solutions are only stable, if all stakeholders support the decision
- Solutions and competencies are more important than problems

This means for the educational context, that the student (coachee) fixes e.g. his/her own learning goals. The teacher or other involved persons (stakeholders) need to be consent with the fixed goals.

## Guidelines

1. The Coach works in the reality of the coachee.
2. The Coach needs a "commission" for the coaching before starting.
3. The expectations need to be clarified.

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# Course of a (systemic) coaching session

The course of a systemic and solution oriented coaching session that is described in the following can be compared to a conversation you would have in a travel agency. The goal is similar: The client wants to get *somewhere*.

The overview of the course:

1. YES-Setting
2. Concern - why are you here
  - What is your objective
  - Expectations - job clarification (of coach)
3. Goal description
  - possible: *miracle question*
4. Solutions in the past
5. Scaling
6. Valuable observations
7. Invitation to experiment (=homework)
8. Final words
9. END - this is really the end, every other topic/question will be discussed in the next session

## YES-Setting

This is the "welcoming part" of the coaching session. The important and name-giving aspect of this part is, that the coach creates an attitude within the coachee that says "YES!". The saying yes can be achieved via different options:

- The coach welcomes the coachee and presents him/herself with name
- The atmosphere is welcoming, pleasant and reassuring
- Small-talk about topics where both agree, means where the coachee can respond with YES: e.g. "The weather is warm/rainy" or "How did you get here - the traffic is X."

Besides, in this first part, the coach can start to get to know the coachee by asking him questions about positive things (resources question), e.g.:

- What are you proud of?
- What gives you pleasure?
- What comes easily to you?
- What do others say you are good at?

These questions help to reveal the resources that lay in the coachee and that may be useful afterwards during the solution finding process, where the coach can refer to the answers given here.

Already at this point, the coach focuses on the competencies of the coachee and not on the problems.

**Solutions are more important than problems.**

At the end, before continuing with the concerns of the coachee, the coach has the possibility and should clarify his/her role and that he/she will interrupt when necessary. This way the coachee does not feel caught off guard when the coach has to interrupt the talking of problems, in order to e.g. orientate him/her towards solutions.

## Concern

After the YES-Setting, the coachee can tell why he/she is here, in this coaching.

**What is your concern - Why are you here?**

Since we don't want to focus on problems, the coach needs to make sure, that this part is short and does not pass 5 to 10 minutes. The content in form of problems is not so relevant. In case the coachee loses him/herself in describing the problem, the coach should intervene and bring the coachee back on track through questions that relay on the original question.



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# Objective

Part of explaining the reason if doing the coaching is to describe where the coachee wants to get.

## **What is your objective - What should be different?**

This can be one smaller or bigger objective. Generally, objectives cannot be too big, since they are the foundation of motivation.

# Expectations

A very important issue that needs to be clarified at the beginning are the expectations of the coachee towards the coach.

## **What do you expect from me?**

Without a concrete "job clarification" it is not possible to offer consulting/coaching.

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# Tools of Systemic Coaching

## Open Questions

In order to receive proper input from the coachee, the coach should use open questions (what, where, when, who, etc.). This allows the coachee to give more detailed answers.

Alternative questions (X or Y) or closed questions (answer can only be yes/no) should be avoided.

- *Where are you right now?*
- *What is your goal? How can you describe it?*
- *What should be different?*
- *How did you get there?*
- *What is a first small step to achieve X?*

## Goal description

Goal description (in detail) is the baseline for (self)motivation.

Imagine, the goal is reached ...

*What is different?*

*What do you do now?*

*How do you feel?*

*What are you thinking?*

*How will others react?*

- Needs are clearer
- Benefit of the goal is clear (→ motivation!)
- Visualisation of goal works like a self-fulfilling prophecy
- Feeling of longing to get there
- First ideas for solutions may appear

**Goal needs to be fixated on a paper (in the words of the coachee!)**

## Scaling

Scaling is useful for reflection of what has been achieved, of where we are now, to identify next small steps.



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On a scale from 0

10 ...

- *Where are you right now?*
- *How can you describe it?*
- *What should be different?*
- *How did you get there/ to (2)? (coping)*
- *What could be a first small step to achieve (3)?*
- *If X had been successful, where would you be?*
- *What is the difference between (2) and (7)?*

→ Probability of doing something, evaluation of sessions, steps to do

## Goal orientation

0

10 (scale)

- *Where are you right now?*
- *What is your goal? How can you describe it?*
- *What should be different?*
- *How did you get there/ to (2)? (coping)*
- *What could be a first small step to achieve (3) / the goal?*
- *If X had been successful, where would you be?*

If working with teams: **Need of a common goal for cohesion.**

## Coping

Before applying this tool, the past situation has to be described. For this, please use "Goal description" (see above).

The tool of Coping helps to identify solutions you had already in the past for (similar) situations that can be reactivated.



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Reactivate solutions from the past

- *How did you get there?*
- *How else?*
- *Which of your qualities / capacities / competences were involved in this success?*

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