

Systems psychodynamics thought (applied) in organisations - how companies can become more soulful



Organisations as complex, interconnected and multi-level systems

Unconscious psychodynamics are inevitable in any human system. As a leader, coach or mentor, you have been confronted with unconscious dynamics many times before no doubt but may not have had the lens to make sense of them let alone support your employee, client or mentee to transform through the dynamic. The systems psychodynamics approach amalgamates the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, group relations theory, and open systems theory. It seeks to apply psychoanalytic concepts and methods to the study of organisations and, in doing so, extend the range of psychoanalysis from the individual body to the body of the group and the organisation (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). In this sense organisations are viewed as complex, interconnected and multi-levelled. The approach considers the individual (micro), the group (meso), and the organisation wide (macro) levels in the systems. Organisations, like any living organism, exchange inputs for outputs through and across the organisational boundary. Our psyches operate in much the same way as we receive inputs from our social environment and process these into outputs of behaviour back into the social space. Many of these processes are unconscious and not readily available to the rational mind yet have significant positive and negative influences on the whole system.

Freud's model of the mind

Scarsella (2018) makes a plausible argument that Plato's tripartite theory of soul had an impact on Freud's own theory of the psyche. Freud (1933) provided a structural model of three main parts of the mind, with each part representing a specific function: (1) The id is located in the unconscious mind and

consists of primal libidinal and aggressive instincts and drives. (2) The ego occupies both conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind, is the centre for logic and reason, and is concerned with avoiding pain or deriving pleasure by devising realistic strategies. (3) The superego, also occupying unconscious and conscious domains, assumes responsibility for establishing and maintaining a moral benchmark of right and wrong. Central to Freud's theory is the emotion and experience of anxiety. We all experience performance anxiety in relation to our work and even survival anxiety when our roles come under threat. The ego defends against anxiety through a multitude of defences such as splitting (good from bad), projection (of the good or the bad onto the other), introjection (the taking in of a projection), projective identification (identifying with the projection from the other and playing this out) and so forth. Defences are not bad in themselves but when they become repetitive and overly relied upon they create blind spots and produce behaviour that is oftentimes unhelpful.

Psychoanalysis in organisations

The task of psychoanalysis is to make conscious the contents of the mind. For example a painful experience, such as a loss incurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, might be repressed into the unconscious mind to avoid dealing with it. Repression is a defense that occurs when the ego denies an emotion, experience or thought and banishes it into the unconscious mind. This dynamic can often result in a repetition compulsion dynamic where the individual, group or organisation repeatedly engages in the same behaviours that led up to the painful experience, thus repeating what was traumatic rather than transforming through it. The task of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious thereby allowing for the transformation of difficult psychodynamics rather than perpetuating them. In this sense the unconscious workings of the mind of the organisation as a collective represent the soul of the organisation. A healthy soul is one that can look at itself and make conscious what needs to be worked with instead of denying, repressing or defending against these aspects in other ways. To deny the workings of the unconscious of the organisation is to deny the soul. Both Freud and Plato considered the establishment of a harmonious relationship between the tripartite elements of the soul as the key factor to psychological well-being (Scarsella, 2018).

The upcoming ISPSO conference

The upcoming ISPSO conference explores soul from an organisational perspective. It promises to reveal the hidden meaning in organisational contexts and to make conscious what was previously locked into the unconscious mind. It further explores the role of circularity and spirit in organisations. In economics, circularity means a product, service, or resource is renewed or regenerated, rather than wasted. When we apply this concept to the psyche of the organisation we might infer that psychodynamics carry the potential for renewal rather than only being viewed as problematic or to be avoided. Spirited organisations are those which are soulful, they constantly find refuge through inner renewal and through a shared sense of meaning and purpose. Most of us would have encountered dispirited organisations and

coached clients who lack meaning and purpose in their roles versus spirited organisations where people feel alive and exchange innovation and fresh thought. Systems psychodynamics offers a powerful lens through which coaches and consultants can explore what is hidden in the unconscious and where meaning and purpose might be restored.

Leadership and containment

In writing up my PhD thesis, *The Systems Psychodynamics of Voluntary Turnover*, I came to understand how important a psychoanalytic process called the container-contained is in order for people to feel spirited and alive. The container refers to the person or system that receives projections from the contained. The task of the container is to process the projections and to return them to the contained in a form that is more digestible and that creates meaning and a sense of purpose. This is a central task of leadership and one which we often focus on in the executive coaching relationship. In fact, every coach out there provides this process for their clients but you may just not be aware that you're doing it. I discovered through my research that when leadership fails to provide this function that people in their organisations become filled with a void of meaning which we call unprocessed psychic material. The danger is that this unprocessed psychic material builds up in the individual until it eventually explodes across the boundary and out of the organisation. Voluntary turnover is thus one symptom of an organisation that exports its soul rather than using it for renewal and for growth.

Group dynamics

You may have noticed some group dynamics at play in organisations. The group as a whole typically experiences survival anxiety in relation to their primary task which ensures their survival. To defend against their anxiety the group engages defences such as pairing (members pair with the unconscious fantasy to give birth to a messiah that will save them), splitting (the group splits itself), fight/flight (the group flights using rationalisation and other defences or it engages in conflict), one-ness (the group becomes caught up in a sense of unity and oceanic feelings that make them feel safe), and me-ness (members of the group retreat into themselves). The irony is that these defences take the group off task which really does then threaten its survival and purpose for existing in the organisation. The coaches' role is to make the group aware of its defences to enable the transformation of them toward on-task behaviours. This is referred to as the process task as in psychological processing.

Organisational culture - when members collude

Similarly, organisations as a whole find clever ways to defend against their anxiety. Social defence theory helps us to understand how people in organisations unconsciously collude on the defences they use which produces collective behaviour which we often call culture. I'll put a bet on it that most consultants and coaches working in OD space have encountered the assumption that 'our values reflect our culture'. The values posted to the walls of boardrooms and canteens reflect what the organisation idealises but these don't often translate into the actual culture of the organisation. One organisation that I consulted to

claimed to have the strongest values out of all the organisations on the JSE. When looking beneath the surface an entirely different picture emerged. The organisation needed to become aware of how it collectively defended against its anxiety if it stood a chance of transforming the many unhelpful dynamics in the system. It needed to reveal its soul and to become conscious. This wasn't an easy task because it posed as a blow to the narcissism of the organisation who believed it was the best.

The application of systems psychodynamics

Systems psychodynamics can be applied to executive coaching, working through unhealthy group dynamics, and to working with organisational culture and transformation. Many innovative thinkers over years have developed valid coaching models, such as Simon Western of Analytic-Network Coaching, and techniques to work with the unconscious, such as Gordon Lawrence's Social Dreaming Matrix and the Opus Listening Post. Other interesting ways to access the unconscious include the use of photo matrixes, social dream drawing, psychobiography's, and free associations. It is critical work to enhance the emotional health of organisations by making the unconscious conscious. This important role of leaders, coaches, consultants and mentors is often neglected resulting in superficial change that doesn't endure. Applying the systems psychodynamics approach to organisations offers an opportunity to transform difficult or repetitive dynamics that keep the organisation stuck. It is my professional view that all emotionally intelligent leaders coaches ought to have a foundational understanding of the workings of the conscious and unconscious minds of their client systems. The systems psychodynamic approach provides the vehicle for such understanding which can be applied toward more soulful organisations where meaning might be experienced by its members.

When the unconscious, complex and systemic aspects of organisational life are denied, the result is inevitably a frustrated workforce who become disengaged in their lack of meaning. The result can also be scapegoating which is a dynamic that involves the group using a member, or even the organisation using a group, to carry its unwanted felt badness. In these cases the scapegoated party introjects the bad projections of the other which relieves the other of their felt badness. It allows the group to deny its own soul and to deny the opportunity to transform. The voluntary turnover of high potential employees who offer promise of a great contribution to the organisation is often the result of scapegoating dynamics. Furthermore, teams and their members can become caught up in the paranoid-schizoid position which is characterised by the psychological defences of splitting (the good from the bad), denial (of the bad in oneself), projection (of the bad onto the other) and introjection (the taking in of the good for the self). This is often evident in organisations with excessive inter-personal and inter-team conflict. Nobody owns up to what went wrong which makes it impossible to learn and to grow through the dynamic, instead people blame each other and the climate becomes psychologically unsafe. The coach or consultants task is to help the client to retrieve their bad projections and to work with them. This allows for the opportunity to move toward the depressive position which is characterised by high levels of psychological

safety and feelings that everyone's views are important.

The benefits of using systems psychodynamics

The benefits of using a systems psychodynamically informed coach or consultant include:

Making informed strategic decisions with insights into what is driving behaviour in organisations

Creating meaning and purpose through a process of the container-contained

Maintaining a high performance culture where people are largely on task

Transforming difficult group dynamics and preventing voluntary turnover of your star players

Understanding the actual culture of the organisation and what keeps people stuck in unhelpful repetitive cycles of behaviour

Creating more conscious and emotionally intelligent leaders who understand themselves, where their behaviour comes from, and who can remain accountable

Creating psychological safety in groups

I could go on with my list but in essence the application of systems psychodynamics thinking to your organisations works toward healthier, more productive and spirited workplaces where people can flourish. Join us at the upcoming ISPSO conference and begin or enhance your journey in becoming a systems psychodynamically informed leader, coach, consultant or mentee.