

# **META-SYSTEMIC COGNITION AND COACHING**

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Editors Note:

People are only now developing language for acting effectively on complex organizational and personal situations. Our mainstream models don't let us see what is really going on. Metasystem Cognition is a relatively new field of study and a process for understanding and acting on what lies beneath. It offers a breakthrough in thinking and opportunities for coaches in helping invent the companies and government agencies that have so far been only a dream.

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## **How rational/analytical cognition works/tries to model aspects of the world:**

Rational/analytical cognition attempts to reduce phenomena to the interaction of a collection of relatively unchanging objects that interact according to known rules. To do this it:

- Analyses phenomena into objects (parts) that interact with each other;
- Treats these objects as if they change little through time (unless their parts change) and have relatively fixed attributes;
- Attempts to find rules or laws that govern the interactions between these objects; and
- Assumes the interacting objects comprise a relatively closed system that is largely unaffected by events outside it (its context).

Rational/analytical cognition attempts to understand systems and processes in the same way – it tries to reduce them to a collection of interacting parts; or to represent them by a set of variables that are related in specific ways.

## **Why is rational/analytical cognition limited?**

- It fails to adequately model certain aspects of reality.
- It is quickly overwhelmed by increasing complexity.
- It gets bogged down easily trying to keep track of all the sequences of interactions.
- It tends not to see patterns, images, fluid processes, parts of the system that might be significant to outcomes, and how complex systems things might unfold.
- It tends to treat all entities/agents at all levels as fixed objects that are autonomous and free to choose whatever actions they want, uninfluenced and un-determined by their context and the systems in which they are embedded.
- It tends not to see fixed objects interacting as evolving systems.
- It fails to adequately represent a system that comprises objects that are not fixed and instead change through time (ie where the system is comprised of a flux of processes rather than fixed objects)

- It fails to adequately represent processes, the contexts in which processes and systems are embedded and the complex relationships between them all.

### **How the limitations of rational/analytical cognition can be overcome using the four quadrants:**

Meta-systemic cognition overcomes the limitations of rational/analytical thinking by giving attention to the aspects of complex phenomenon that rational/analytical thinking tends to ignore. It builds mental models of reality that are more comprehensive and adequate to its complexity.

**Rational/analytical cognition** tends to ignore the context of systems of objects, the fact that all objects are in fact processes, the relationships between objects and that all these constitute transforming systems. These aspects of reality constitute the four quadrants of meta-systemic cognition. They can be used to scaffold the building of mental models that do justice to complex, transforming systems. In more detail:

**Context:** Seeing everything that exists as part of an organized, multi-layered whole, usually synchronically (at a particular point in time). (E.g. Understanding a beehive by describing only its structure and its environment).

**Process:** Seeing everything in the process of undergoing unceasing change. (E.g. Understanding the processes that bring the beehive into being and make it vanish).

**Relationship:** Seeing that everything shares a common ground. (E.g. Understanding that without describing the relationships between the bee hive's main components – the queen, the drones, the worker bees, that the hive has not been described or understood fully).

**Transforming System:** Seeing everything as a transformational system, combining aspects of Context, Process, and Relationship. (E.g. Understanding the beehive is a living system transforming through time).

### **How mind-openers can be used to guide attention to the quadrants so that they can be included:**

A mind opener points out something that makes a difference without getting bogged down. It points out things that would otherwise be left out but that matter.

Mind openers are questions that can be used to guide attention to the Four Quadrants (Context, Process, Relationships and Transforming System which tend to be left out by rational analytical cognition).

Context mind openers signal that:

- There is always a bigger picture of what we consider as real compared with what we started out thinking was real. Everything comprises layers and parts and is part of bigger picture.

- There are no systems that are truly closed but that all systems are open and transformational.

Process mind openers signal that:

- Everything is in the process of undergoing unceasing change.
- Nothing is fixed, everything is co-evolving over time.

Relationship mind openers signal that:

- Everything shares a common ground.
- Individual entities are parts of a coherent organized whole.

Transforming System mind openers signal that:

- Everything is a transformational system, combining aspects of Process, Context and Relationship.

**How it is dis-embedded attention that must be directed to the quadrants, not analytical/rational:**

Dis-embedded attention must be directed to the Four Quadrants and not rational/analytical because rational analytical will get bogged down easily. Rational analytical thought will attempt to represent the circumstances in the quadrants in a mechanistic fashion. And for thinking to be fluid and able to move swiftly over mental models, it must be able to treat thoughts as object i.e. be dis-embedded.