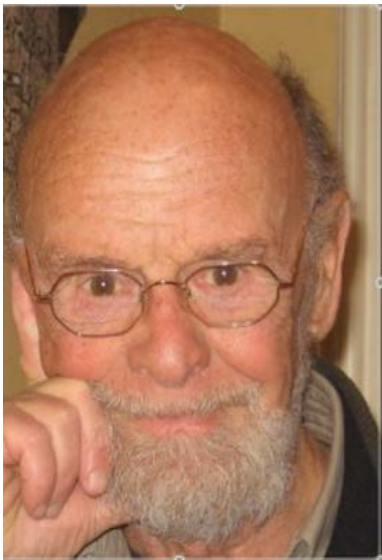


What would Homo Systemicus do?

The wisdom of viewing our world through an organic systems lens

Barry Oshry



*In an article adapted from a chapter in my forthcoming book *While Waiting For Homo Systemicus*, I outline four key elements of the organic systems perspective. I argue that only by taking such a perspective and rising to the challenge of its implications will we behave wisely or enable wiser outcomes throughout our organisations. In particular I explore the relationship between power and love in such a quest.*

*Homo Systemicus
May look quite a bit like the rest of us,
Yet s/he has a view,
Refreshingly new,
One that poses a challenging test for us*

Keywords: Wisdom, organic systems, power, love

Turning the lights on ... and we thought they were already on

Wisdom puts the familiar in a new light. Before enlightenment we believe we see events clearly, as they *really* are. Then, with the emergence of wisdom we find a different, at times startlingly different view, one that creates a fundamentally transformed understanding of our world. In this article I explore the wisdom that comes from accepting our nature as systems creatures, and from viewing our human interactions through the lens of an organic systems perspective.

While accepting that there may in fact be no whole systems, only systems within systems within systems, the essential elements of the *organic systems perspective* are these:

1. Human systems – families, teams, organizations, cities, nations, ethnic and religious groups, among them – are both collections of individuals and whole organic entities interacting with their immediate environments.
2. To understand human systems, we need to be able to see them *both* from the inside (their members' experiences, beliefs and feelings) *and* from the outside (the form whole systems take as they interact with their immediate environments).
3. For the most part our perspective is limited to the inside view. We neither see nor understand the wholes of which we are a part; nor do we recognize how our inside experiences are shaped by the processes of the whole. This system blindness is costly, resulting in needless personal stress,

broken relationships, lost opportunities, diminished system effectiveness and, in the extreme, bigotry, oppression, and war.

4. The good news is this: Although we do not directly see the whole systems of which we are a part (for this we await the coming of homo systemicus), it is possible for us, as homo sapiens, to understand whole systems, their processes, and their effects on the experiences of system members. And that knowledge alone can help us avoid the destructive consequences of system blindness while creating more sane and healthy human interactions.

The vulnerability of Top Teams

In this article I apply the organic systemic perspective to a single class of phenomena – the relationships among members of Top Teams: corporate heads, business partners, project leaders, or spouses. As diverse as these collections may be, they share common features: (1) each has collective responsibility for a larger system – the corporation, the business, the project, or the family, and (2) each is vulnerable to what feels like unpredictable and puzzling breakdowns - relationships that began in great promise and ended in bitterness, separation, and divorce, with costly consequences for the larger systems for which they are responsible.

The explanations of these breakdowns are usually personal (the inside view): the character or temperament of one party or the other, or more charitably, an unfortunate mix.

Examining these relationships from an organic systems perspective (the outside view) yields a fundamentally different understanding of the causes of these breakdowns, along with concrete strategies for creating and sustaining satisfying and productive Top Team relationships.

Before dealing directly with Top Teams, let me share with you my window into whole systems, how I've come to see and understand systems and develop an organic systems perspective.

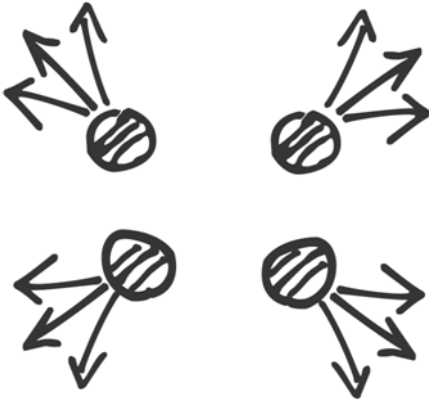
My learning laboratories for seeing whole systems

Over the past 40 years I've created learning events (The Power Lab and The Organization Workshop) to enable people to deepen their understanding of themselves as members of social systems, and to help them see new choices. Central to each programme is immersion in a whole systems exercise. While these exercises were designed for the purpose of participant education, they have also served for my education, offering me the rare opportunity to stand aside hundreds of systems to see the whole - the shape it was taking (the outside view)– while hearing from the parts - the experiences members were having (the inside view).

Languages of the Inside and the Outside

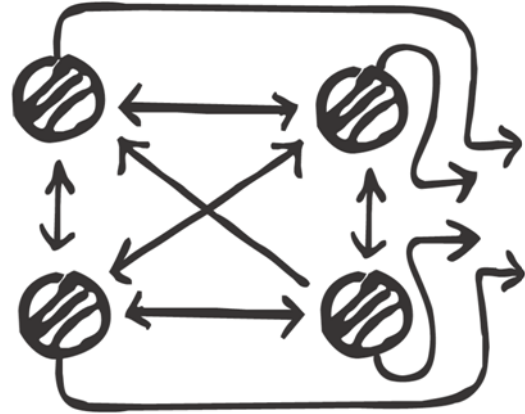
The language of the inside view is familiar to us. It is the language of personal and interpersonal experience; it is the language of feelings. The language of the outside is less part of our everyday lexicon. Yet if we're to understand and master our relationships, the outside language needs to be as familiar as the inside. So the language I have come to use in describing the processes of the whole as it interacts with its immediate environment is one in which whole systems individuate and integrate, differentiate and homogenise.

Whole systems **individuate**,



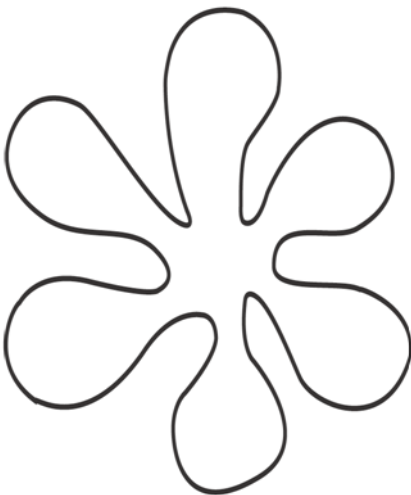
... whereby the parts – members and groups – function independently of one another and in pursuit of their separate purposes;

... and they **integrate** ...



... whereby the parts – members and groups - come together to function as an integrated entity, with parts feeding and supporting one another in pursuit of a common mission, goal, or purpose.

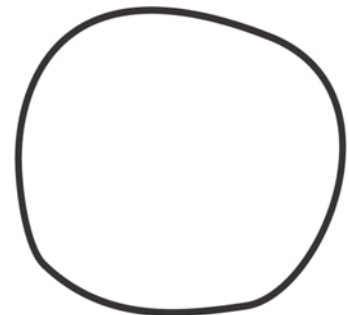
Whole systems **differentiate**,



... whereby the system develops ever-shifting complexity and variety in form and function.

... and they **homogenise**,

... whereby system information and capacity are distributed across the system.

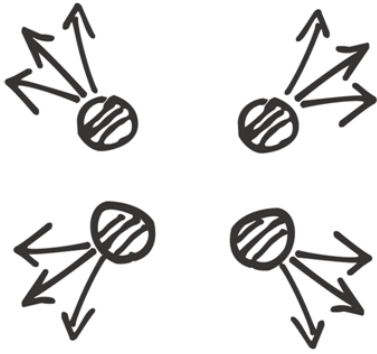


System Power and System Love.

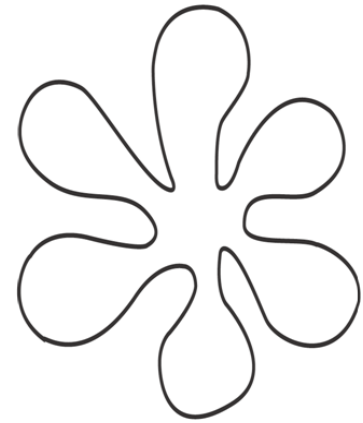
It's useful to see these processes functioning in combination with one another. Individuation and differentiation function together as systems equivalent of Power; homogenisation and integration as the systems equivalent of Love.⁴

System Power.

Systems exert their power by individuating and differentiating. These are the high-energy processes. Differentiation is about elaborating differences, change, growth, and continuous adaptation. Individuation is about liberty, independence, freeing up individuals and groups.



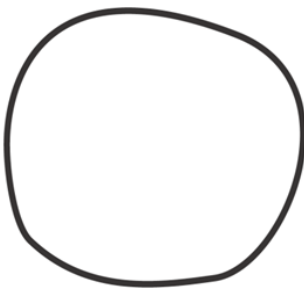
A system expressing its power through individuation



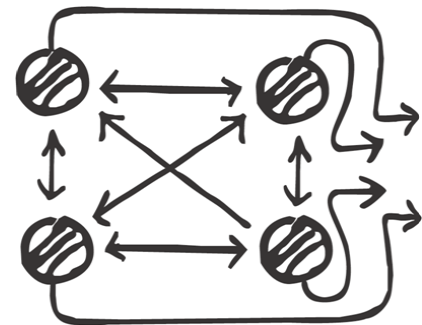
A system expressing its power through differentiation

System Love

Systems express their Love by integrating and homogenising. These are the inward connecting processes, parts working together in the pursuit of common goals, mutual responsibility, the commonalities of system members, their one-ness.



A system expressing its love through homogenisation



A system expressing its love through integration

With this language established, we return to our dilemma of Top Teams. We will examine them through this lens of the organic systems perspective.

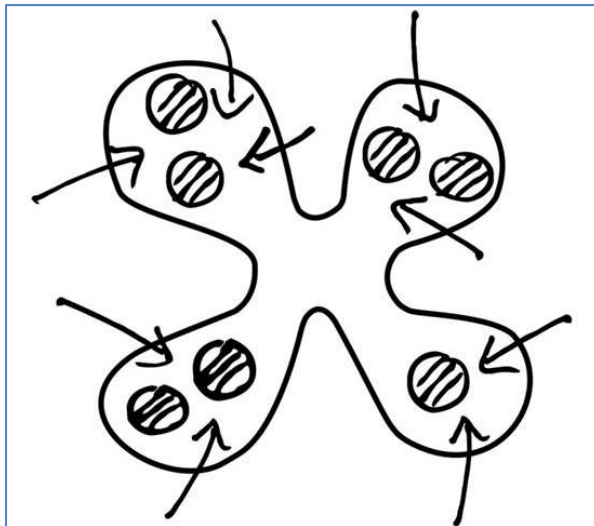
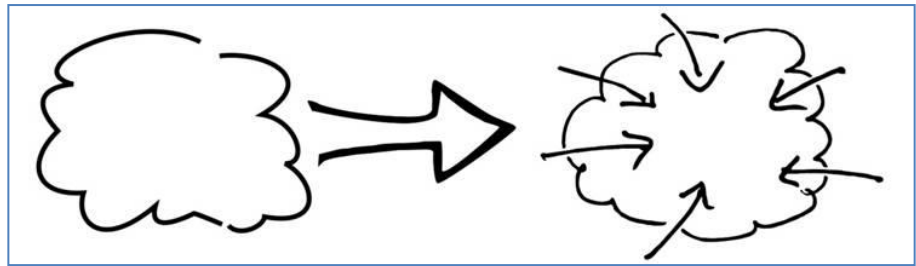
Top Teams:

Systems coping with environments of complexity and uncertainty

As we've said, a Top Team (or Top System) is accountable for the larger system of which it is a part – the corporation, business, project, or family. Top Systems interact with environments having varying degrees of complexity and uncertainty. There are multiple, difficult, and unpredictable issues to deal with. And Top Systems face considerable ambiguity - issues and decisions for which there are no easy, clear-cut answers: *Grow fast or slow? Stick to what we know or venture into new directions? Be adventurous or cautious? Should our relationships with our employees (or children) be democratic, hierarchic, laissez-faire, controlling?*

As the Top System interacts with this environment of complexity and uncertainty a familiar scenario unfolds without awareness or choice. Here's how it goes:

Phase 1. A Top System enters a space of complexity, accountability, and uncertainty.



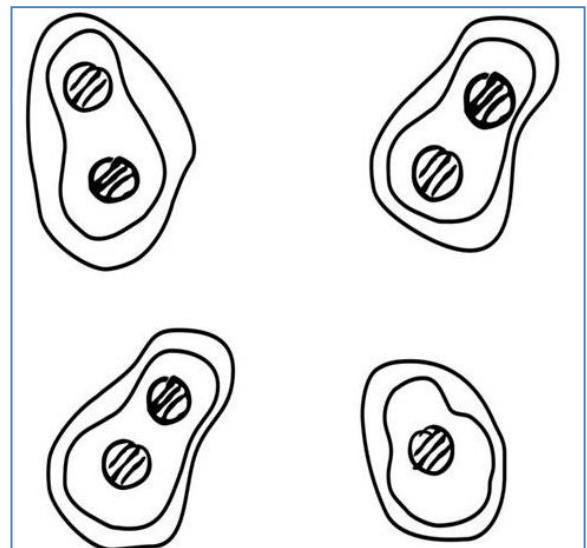
Phase 2: Adaptation. The Top System differentiates and individuates.

Complexity becomes more manageable when the Top System differentiates, when areas of responsibility are divided, and when it individuates, when Tops operate independently of one another, managing their separate areas of complexity. This adaptation to complexity is important and of itself is not a problem. The problem is what happens next.

Phase 3. The System hardens into a pattern of Power without Love.

Inertia sets in; processes continue to move in the direction they are moving. The system becomes increasingly differentiated and individuated and hardens into distinct territories. The Power processes predominate while the Love processes are submerged. The Top System falls into a pattern of Power without Love.

This is the outside view as a Top System blindly and reflexively falls into a pattern of Power without Love. *None of this scenario is visible to system members. All they know is that their relationships are becoming more tense and strained.*



Life on the inside of a system of Power without Love

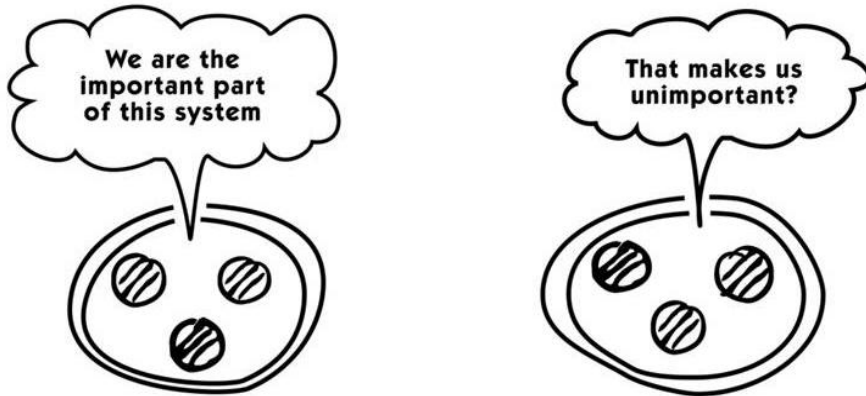
From the outside we see a general story, one that happens with great regularity *regardless of the specific players involved*. A Top System enters an environment of complexity and uncertainty and the general story unfolds – *not always, not for everyone, but with great regularity*.

Meanwhile, on the inside, a very different scenario unfolds, one that feels personal and specific to these particular people. From the outside we see this scenario as being the *consequence* of the pattern the system has fallen into. From the inside, the scenario is seen as personal, the consequences of one another's actions – *issues specific to you and me* – and not as the consequences of system processes.

1. The consequences of Power-without-Love for relationships among Tops (the inside view)

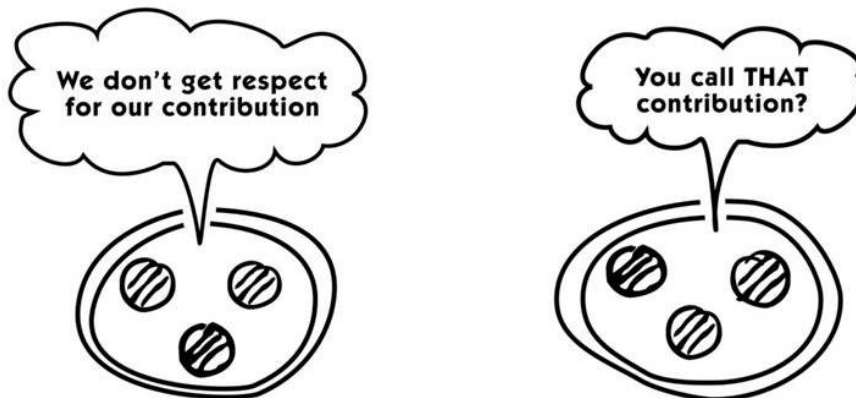
Relative significance

There are issues about who are the more and less important members of the Top System. Organisationally, there are the higher status entities and the lower status ones. For example, in any given organisation, where do Sales, Marketing, Human Resources, Manufacturing, and Research and Development stand on the status scale? And how do these differences in status affect people's experiences of themselves and others? Similarly, in the family, are the contributions of one spouse seen as more important to the family or of higher status than those of the other? And how do those differences affect members' experiences?



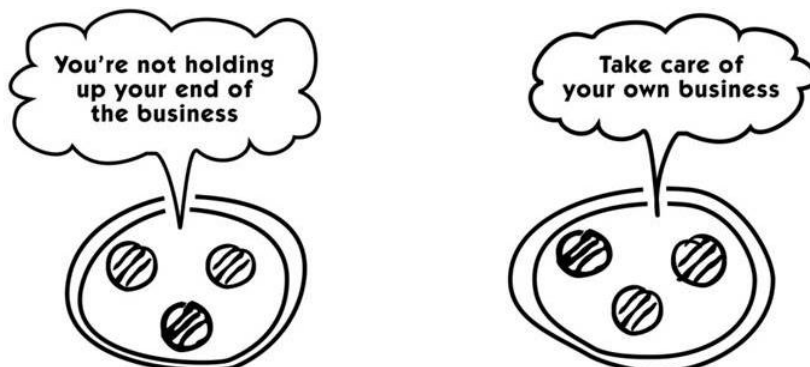
Respect

Tops, whether they are the more or less significant members of the system, feel they are not getting adequate respect for their contributions to the system.



Trust

Tops are separate from one another's arenas



Support

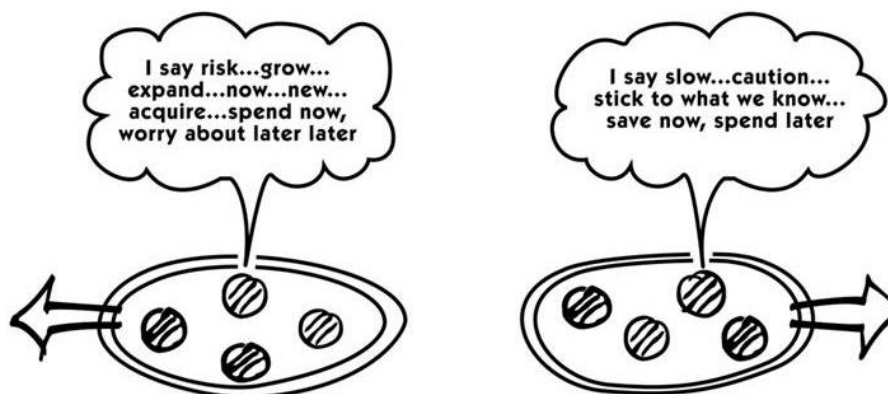
Tops feel they're not getting support from one another, or even that they are being undermined, that others get delight from their difficulties.



Struggles over direction

The above tensions stem directly from territoriality, from the condition in which members' areas of responsibility have grown increasingly different and separate from one another's, from the system having become differentiated without homogenisation and individuated without integration.

There is another set of tensions that can divide Tops, one that stems less from their territoriality than from the uncertainties that the system as a whole faces. Some of these were mentioned earlier, having to do with issues regarding future direction, growth, risk, culture, and such. There are no clear-cut yes or no answers to such questions, only possibilities. *We could go this way or that.*



Possibilities have a tendency to harden into positions. Initially minor differences of opinion – more homogenisation than differentiation - can polarise into diametrically opposed positions – highly differentiated, little to no homogenisation. It is around these polarised directional differentiations that these once promising partnerships collapse because of apparently irreconcilable differences.

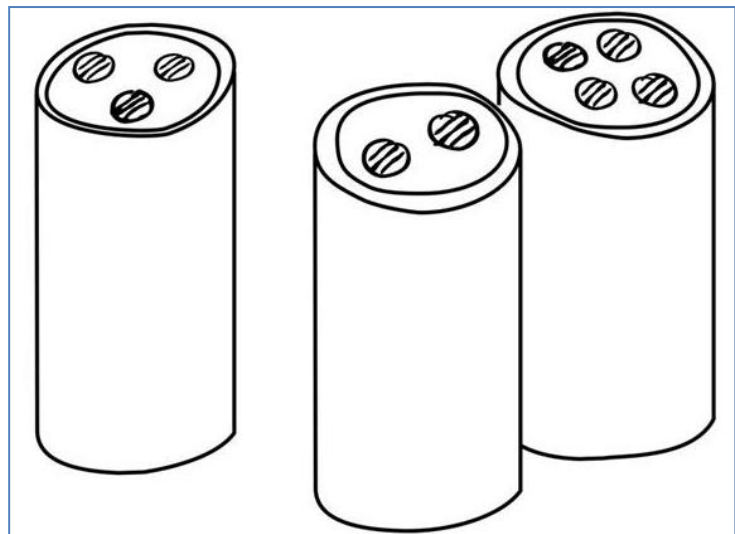
2. The consequences of Power-without-Love for the Tops' systems

To this point we've examined the consequences Power without Love has for the relationships among Tops. The resultant territoriality also has far-reaching system-wide consequences.

Silos

Organisationally, each differentiated and individuated entity creates its own differentiated and individuated silo throughout the organisation.

The consequences include costly build-up of redundant resources, lack of cooperation across silos, loss of potential synergies, and information that would be important to the system as a whole remaining un-integrated and therefore lost. There is confusion below, conflicting messages coming from above; there is increased competitiveness among the silos within the system and decreased competitiveness externally.



Similarly, in the small business and in the family, the tension among the Tops causes tension below: *The Tops (parents) are fighting*. There are conflicting messages from above, uncertainty about the future of the business or family and one's position in it; employees (children) are torn between conflicting loyalties.

How, with the wisdom of system sight, we are able to create strong and effective Top Teams: systems of Power and Love.

Power-without-Love results in a painful and costly scenario: personal stress, broken relationships, and whole system dysfunction; and it all happens without awareness or choice. From the organic systems framework, the picture is clear: the Top System adapts to its environment of complexity and uncertainty by differentiating and individuating. These processes deepen and harden into separate territories, with the resulting negative consequences for Tops and their systems.

All of this can be avoided, but for that to happen we need to be able to see, understand, and master organic system processes. In this case, Power – **individuation** and **differentiation** - must be infused with Love – **integration** and **homogenisation**.

The goal is not to decrease differentiation or individuation. These are the high-energy processes that are essential to the ability of the Top System to cope with the changing conditions in its environment. The challenge is to infuse Love into a Power-without-Love system in ways that strengthen Power processes and enhance the capacity of the Top System to interact effectively in its environment.

Understand organic system processes.

This is the fundamental transformation – a shift in lenses - upon which all else is based. We need to grasp this concept of ourselves as systems creatures and to understand the connection between organic system processes (the outside view) and our experiences of ourselves and others (the inside view). We have not yet evolved into *homo systemicus*, so we may not be able to see whole system processes directly, but even as *homo sapiens* we can have the wisdom to grasp the concepts. Much heartache and system damage

could be averted if members of Top Systems learned about Robust Systems – systems of Power *and* Love - differentiation *and* homogenisation, individuation *and* integration, and also learned about how these processes predictably play out in the world these Tops are about to enter or are in. And it would be important for them to understand the need to infuse Love – homogenisation and integration – into their ongoing interactions.

Six examples of such needed Love strategies.

Here are six ways of fostering Love in systems:

1. Develop powerful shared vision and values

The members of the Top System need to have shared vision and values for the larger system; this needs to be something more than a surface exercise. The vision needs to be something that taps deep chords in the partners, their fundamental commonality, their grounding in homogenisation. *What are our fondest wishes for this whole system for which we are jointly responsible? What deep personal meaning does this system have for us?* And what are our fundamental values that ground our choices? Tensions and disagreement are inevitable in the Top world; the complexities and uncertainties will always be there. Vision and values, when heartfelt and shared, give Tops something in which to re-ground themselves, in the face of the complexity of their situation and the inevitable tensions and disagreements. A leader of a military medical services operation, when faced with growing territoriality among medical specialties and between doctors and administrators, infused Love (integration and homogenisation) into the relationships through two strategies: (1) developing regular joint learning events and (2) using values as the touchstone of all decisions.

2. Take time to walk in one another's shoes

Find opportunities to live in other Tops' worlds; experience directly the issues, dilemmas, and choices other Tops face. Can corporate Tops rotate through one another's domains of responsibility? Can family Tops shift their habitual patterns of responsibility regarding finances, childcare, who washes and who wipes?

3. Share high quality information.

When we are in the grip of territoriality, we tend to be selective in the information we share, withholding anything that might bring our competency into question or challenge our competitive position. Yet developing strong Top Teams requires sharing information that would be useful for others to know, information that will give an accurate picture of system conditions, information from one part of the system that might suggest action in another. Such openness can then set the stage for mutual coaching.

4. Mutual coaching

Structure Top meetings such that members take turns coaching and being coached by one another. Members bring issues that they are wrestling with and then allow themselves to be coached by other Tops. Mutual peer coaching is a process in which all Tops are working in partnership, committed to and investing in one another's success. Even more importantly, it is a process by which all are investing in strengthening the Top System as a whole: differentiation *and* homogenisation, integration *and* individuation. Power strengthened by Love. Mutual coaching requires skill, both in how we coach others and in how we receive coaching. So it may be helpful to get professional coaching education to set the process going. It should be

worth the investment, since mutual peer coaching has the potential for fundamentally transforming Top Systems.

5. Interact in non-role settings

Experience one another in settings other than the familiar system ones: for example a community service project and other opportunities to experience different facets of one another.

6. Avoid enthusiastic counter-revolutions

The point behind infusing Love into Top Systems is to enhance the robustness of these systems. It would be counter-productive to assume that *Love is the answer*, thereby putting too much emphasis on homogenisation and integration while devaluing and suppressing differentiation and individuation. These latter processes provide the expansive energy of the system. The purpose of infusing Love, using the methods described above and undoubtedly others, is to enhance rather than constrain the capacity of the Top System to cope with the complexity and uncertainty of its environment. An overabundance of Love can smother that potential.

Is it too late?

System knowledge is likely to be most productive as people are just entering the Top world, or early on in the relationship when people are able to see the processes in action – differentiation and individuation beginning to harden into separate territories. But, once Top relationships have fallen apart and Power-without-Love dominates, when commonality and connectedness are dialled down to zero, it can be difficult to heal them. The history of mutually inflicted pain may be so intense as to be beyond repair. At this stage, members' experiences of one another can be felt to be so solid, so deeply personal, and so connected to specific actions and events that it would be difficult for Tops to experience them as *merely* the outcome of system processes. To do so runs counter to the evidence of our direct senses. The notion that this whole dramatic scenario of Power-without-Love may be nothing other than the consequence of blind reflex may simply be too much to swallow.

Even if the relationship is not to go forward, there can be a valuable healing resulting from revisiting that beginning place of great promise, and retracing the systemic (not personal) scenario by which members went from that optimistic beginning to the current personal, interpersonal, and systemic dysfunction. Once having clarified that history, the members have a choice: to end the relationship or move forward with the commitment to infuse Love into Power.

The key to creating and sustaining satisfying and productive Top Teams lies in our ability to view these collections of individuals through the organic system perspective as these systems attempt to cope with complex, demanding, and uncertain environments. But the issue of Top Teams is part of a larger issue: the willingness to challenge our current personal paradigm and explore the wisdom that comes as we accept our nature as systems creatures, and view our human interactions through the lens of an organic systems perspective.

Further reading

The Organic Systems Perspective has unfolded over the years in the following publications by the author:

The Organic Systems Perspective: A New Paradigm for Understanding and intervening in Organizational Life. Boston: Power + Systems, 2012

Seeing Systems. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1995, 2007

Leading Systems. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999

In the Middle. Boston: Power + Systems, 1994

Space Work. Boston: Power + Systems, 1992

The Possibilities of Organization. Boston: Power & Systems, 1986.

Power and Position. Boston: Power + Systems, 1977.

Controlling the Context of Consciousness. Boston: Power + Systems, 1977.

Organic Power. Boston: Power + Systems, 1976.

Notes on the Power and Systems Perspective. Boston: Power + Systems, 1976.

About the author

Barry Oshry is a distinguished educator and a pioneer in the field of human systems thinking. Barry's area of research, writing and teaching has been the human systems dynamics arising when people are in top, middle, bottom and customer relationships with one another. He's been exploring with special interest the issue of "middles" in organisations for more than 35 years, and he's written extensively on the subject. His research has also led him to investigate the dynamics at play when dominant cultures interact with "other" cultures. Barry is also a playwright whose recent stage productions include "What A Way To Make A Living," "Hierarchy" and "Peace." Since 1975, he has been President of Power+ Systems Training, Inc. in Boston, which he founded with his wife and partner, Karen Ellis Oshry.

You can contact Barry at barry@powerandsystems.com