

In Conversation...

Dr. Marion Keil on Systemic Coaching



Coaching is becoming an increasingly important competency for people holding leadership ranks all over the world. Leaders discover that Coaching as a useful component of support to their leadership role. Leaders decide, orientate, change and motivate – and where do they get support from? The increasing complexity of the work environment influences leaders considerably, as they have to reduce the complex consequences of fast decisions. And with whom do leaders reflect their own situation?

In this interview with Mr. Emmanuel David, Group Head – Human Resources at the Ramky Group of Companies, Dr. Marion Keil during her visit to NHRD's Hyderabad Chapter to facilitate the 3-day programme **Certified Systemic Coaching Programme**, shares her thoughts on Systemic Coaching and its relevance in today's corporate context.

Dr. Marion Keil is founder and CEO of Synetz-International (www.synetz-international.com) based in Germany. Marion, a sociologist, has rich international experiences by working in Europe, India and Africa as Organisation Development consultant and Systemic Coach to various leading European and global companies. She is an expert in large group facilitation. Globally, she has trained around 200 management consultants in Systemic Consulting and Systemic Coaching. Her company Synetz-International is known for excellent Systemic Change Consulting and Coaching for leading companies in Europe, Asia and Africa. She is a visiting faculty for the 18 month - OD Certification Programme of ISABS in India.

Dr. Keil, could you tell us what 'Systemic Coaching' is all about?

Systemic coaching is the process of testing the assumptions about the leader's role or a leadership role in any organisational change context. This approach to coaching using the systemic route is very robust as it follows a step by step model of starting from observable facts and shared perceptions to a deeper understanding of the hidden potential that can be unleashed.

Systemic Coaching is a very efficient way to support managers and leaders in dealing with the rising complexity of their work and to focus on what seems to be really important to them in their role as leaders. This support is given by an external Coach, who offers his/her external perspective as a value-add to the Coachee. We know that leaders often feel quite lonely at the top. They need and want a sparring partner. With various systemic intervention tools we enlarge the variety of perspectives, interpretations and alternatives for action with the leader.

How is it different from the Coaching we hear a lot about?

There are various Coaching approaches. Often they focus on standardised methods which should lead to immediate performance results. These approaches seem to be more planning tools for a leader. The Systemic approach explores, together with the Coachee, his work context and the organisation he is working in. We also have a look at behavioural patterns, which might have hindered so far a different approach as a leader. Systemic Coaching looks at the leader and his role within a whole organisational system with its specific culture, strategy and structure. Specific techniques, for example how to pose questions or to work with situational constellations (a very specific systemic tool which allows a quick overview of a situation), enable the leaders to gain more clarity about their own role and situation and search for new, appropriate ways of leadership.

How relevant is it in today's Corporate Context?

The leader's world of today is fast, complex, stressful, and non-linear. There are so many decisions to take, where no

immediate black or white, yes or no answers are evident. It becomes more and more challenging to find quick answers. Is my point of view the only relevant one? Is my decision the 'right' decision? On whom may I rely? What does my intuition tell me? These questions are difficult to answer alone. The Systemic Coach supports the leader in finding himself his answers, to tap his resources, to explore alternative approaches to face the challenges.

What is the background of this 'Systemic School of thought'?

There are many who have contributed to the systemic approach. Just to name a few, it is Peter Senge from the managerial point of view, or Paul Watzlawick from the communication's side, or Gregory Bateson from the constructivist point of view. Or Niklas Luhman from the sociologist side and Selvini/Palazolli from the systemic family therapy point of view.

The common ideas in all these are the following: there is no truth, but all depends on the perspective of the observer of a situation. Hence we need to check who are the main actors in a system and approach them. Communication is the key and tells a whole story about what one thinks and what one's attitudes are. So self-reflection about one's own behaviour and its effects on the system is crucial. This is not a clear cause-effect chain, as reality is too complex. It trains us to look at our way to intervene in a system more humbly: What effect may this intervention have caused? What may have been the unintended side effects? How could I have intervened differently?

And if we speak about an 'intervention', it is in fact communication. The systemic coach has a clear, 'systematic' way to go about Coaching, by using very specific 'systemic' interventions on hand; which allow us to set crucial inputs in the Coachee to move himself.

It would be nice if you can share some significant success stories.

I recall the CFO of a company who received bad scores during the annual employee survey. His department did not perform the way it was expected. We explored together, how his employees might see him, what they might need more or

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less of him as a leader. We came across his very introvert style of communication, which did not allow him to approach his employees so easily. Not even his Vice President knew how much he valued her, simply because he was not conscious about the need for acknowledgement of his employees. Knowing his competence for financial affairs and his need for keeping a certain distance, I developed some hypotheses which I mirrored back to him in the form of a story: him being a lion who was a great fighter, lonely, brave and proud. All other animals look to him for guidance and inspiration, but him being not available. It was fascinating to see, how much he could relate with this image. From there we could take it to several new ways how to deal with his employees in a better way.

Another case was a leader who very recently joined a new leadership position. He wanted to prepare himself for the new company and the unit he would lead. In fact joining a new company as an outsider is more risky than climbing the career ladder within one company. So we explored, what new and different challenges might be out there, how different the new company might be regarding its culture, strategy and structure, what he knew of the style and reputation of his predecessor. Also we had an intense look at his leadership style, his personal patterns which sometimes prevented him of fully enjoying his job previously. Here my hypotheses were that he constantly was mentally already ahead of the situation – to the extent that neither he himself nor his people could really harvest the success and achievements. The glass was always half empty: “we still need to”. My feedback made him aware, that on the new position, he would like to consciously reflect together with his people the achievements and highlight more the success on the way and start from there. We framed a very valuable process how to get to know the new organisation, his new crew and though make his first 100 days already a success.

You have anchored and facilitated the Event for NHRD at Hyderabad, please tell us about this experience.

It was an outstanding experience to work with this group of high

calibre HR specialists from the NHRD family, who were eager to get to know the Systemic Coaching approach. As they came from different companies, there was also plenty of opportunity to learn from each other about the different ways companies go about Coaching as part of a talent and career development system. Apart from that they really appreciated this way of doing Coaching in a very respectful manner; we as Coaches see ourselves not as the more knowledgeable, or the one who holds the truth, but as a partner in a learning and personal growth process of the Coachee. We offer new perspectives and unusual methods and tools, which enable the Coachee to himself find new ways and insights. This attitude seems to have been convincing. Also we worked very practically – every participant has practiced the Systemic Coaching already during this three days event. That was for all very satisfying and assuring. Personally speaking, I enjoyed the group very much; their learning became my learning.

We understand you have visited Andhra Pradesh earlier and travelled extensively. Could you describe this experience?

In 1989 I stayed for one year in Andhra Pradesh to do my PhD research in Sociology. Since then I have been travelling and working in about 40 countries as a Systemic Change Management consultant and coach. Being back in India now, I really appreciate and admire the passion and speed how India is growing. 1989 and today – these are two different worlds. The Ambassador used to be nearly the only type of car and today a German CEO is heading Tata Motors. This shows a lot. At the same time let me share that I am also a little bit worried about the purely urban focus. I still remember the beautiful landscape and the farmers of AP. I hope they get also a share in the wonderful growth. ■

Mr. Emmanuel David, Group Head – Human Resources at the Ramky Group of Companies holds a Bachelor's in Science from Madras Christian College, and also has a Post Graduate Diploma in Personnel Management and Industrial Relations from XLRI, Jamshedpur. With over two and a half decades of experience in the field of Human Resources he is well-known for his innovative HR practices. He uses his extensive networking skills to effectively engage external stakeholders like government officials, ministers, defence and industry personnel, and union leaders to influence change in legislation, policy and action for business needs. In his previous assignments, he has worked with companies like British Gas, Volvo, Oberoi, Eicher Good Earth and Hindustan Motors.