

COACHING IN COMPLEXITY FOR SUSTAINING OUTCOMES

Systemic coach [Josie McLean](#) describes how she uses a living systems approach in her practice, through the example of her work with the leadership team responsible for urban sustainability in the Australian city of Adelaide.

'I believe you understand how leading change, sustainability and complexity are connected? Could you help us review our work to be more effective and find new ways for us to work more effectively?' This was the beginning of a conversation with the team responsible for urban sustainability in Adelaide, South Australia.

Over the past five months we have explored an alternative way of 'perceiving', because that is how we might best understand both the terms sustainability and living systems (or complexity). Before explaining what I mean by this, and how I am working with the urban sustainability team, first we need to look at how living systems behave.

Much has been written about how complex adaptive systems, or as I prefer living systems, behave. I use the term living systems because it reminds us that systems are 'alive' with energetic flows. Living systems are characteristically:

- Sensitive to initial starting conditions.
- Coupled to the larger system in which they exist.
- Influenced by indirect and non-linear cause and effect.
- Inherently unpredictable and inconsistent in their behaviour.
- Self-organising with reference to their identity.
- Self-replicating and self-regulating from their constituent elements.

SUSTAINABILITY AS AN EMERGENT PROPERTY OF LIVING SYSTEMS

Living systems seek to be sustainable; that is, to survive or thrive as conditions allow. Sustainability is dynamic. It is an emergent quality, not an end point. Evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris describes it as a fluidity where 'self-interest is negotiated, which leads to compromises and cooperation or intelligent dynamic harmony'. Acknowledging this, I prefer the term 'sustaining' over 'sustainable' because it better reflects the movement of a constantly evolving flux.

The injection of 'self-interest' into the discussion of understanding sustainability also reminds us that we, as selves, are a part of the complexity. We are not separate from it. Our rich mix of past experiences influences our emotions, relationships, spirituality and understanding of the contexts in which we exist every day.

Complexity is more than an interesting theory; it is also a way of trying to understand our lived experience as living systems within larger living systems, and how to influence those larger systems.

From a complexity perspective, we can't control the larger living systems but, because we are a part of them, we can influence them through liberating possibilities. This might be more powerful than the self-limiting idea of controlling outcomes.

A complexity perspective helps us see that the purpose of influencing the system may be to assist in enhancing its healthy functioning. If it is healthy, it will be sustaining – for now.

This approach is quite different to the reductionist methodology typically used to fix problems in modern Western society. Reducing the issue down to the smallest part, fixing that part and replacing it back into the larger whole. This works well for bicycles. It doesn't work well for complex living systems such as natural environments, organisations or communities of people. To influence living systems, we need to work with the whole and seek to understand the relationships and patterns that connect the parts.

So, how does this work in the real world?

COACHING THE URBAN SUSTAINABILITY TEAM

As a coach, I have looked to help the team review their work and find new ways of working and being. This means asking questions of team members from my understanding of the paradigm of living systems. It also means providing some structure and order to help the team navigate their way through the ambiguity of living systems.

We began by developing a shared and co-created vision, rich with values, of how the team wanted people to experience the city of Adelaide when it is 'sustaining'. We sought to understand the connections between the team's existing projects and their vision and its embedded values, and identified where the team could upgrade or tweak existing projects to reflect all of the important values instead of just a few in each project. It is a greater degree of connectedness that will bring resilience and cohesion to their work.

Our focus then turned to how they work together and what their unique role may be within the system that is urban Adelaide. They had already identified that working to personal strengths was a powerful strategy. However, for reasons of efficiency they each took independent accountability for different projects. They have reconfigured this approach, appointing two people to each project so that they always work with a sense of support.

We have explored different stakeholders and their interests. This team instinctively includes the natural environment as a stakeholder. They identified that a key role of the team members was to be facilitators of connection within the network of relationships. Knowledge of and access to that network is a privilege that they alone possess within the system.

Most recently we have been exploring how the team can be sure it is making progress. The organisational key performance indicators (KPIs) are clear in their annual work plan, but the KPIs have a degree of disconnection from the team's vision. At present we are exploring the idea of indicators that emerge from their vision and indicate the health of the whole. These are likely to be qualitative rather than quantitative. Since causation is indirect and nonlinear, the disconcerting question of 'what is

our contribution to these indicators?' arises. Identifying these indicators will be challenging, but the process of considering them is a bountiful process of mutual learning. The new, more meaningful indicators will eventually sit alongside the organisational KPIs.

An interview with the team leaders prior to writing this article indicates that we are being successful in identifying new ways for the team to operate and that they believe they will be more effective as a result. My reflection is that we are all enjoying our work together and I believe that the team's energy levels have increased since they have begun to experience clearer connections between their vision and work. My energy levels are certainly higher as I apply myself purposefully as a guide to influencing in complexity. The work is sustaining us all, as a different way of nurturing the larger living system in which we exist emerges.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Josie McLean specialises in guiding the development of leaders and organisations to equip them to cope with and lead through changing and complex challenges. She has held various leadership roles in the ICF over the last 20 years. In 2009, she was a recipient of the global ICF President's Award. Josie has expertise in systemic coaching through her interests in sustainability, systems thinking, adaptive leadership, emergent change and organisational culture. She continues to publish in these areas.

AC TO LAUNCH TEAM COACHING STANDARD

The Association for Coaching, as part of its ongoing work pioneering and championing coaching excellence, is delighted to announce that it has commissioned Dr Declan Woods, an AC Fellow and the inaugural Global Head of Standards and Accreditation, to create an international standard in team coaching. This will include designing an individual team coach practitioner accreditation scheme for completion and launch during 2020.