

What is eco-systems supervision?

Martin Vogel and Hetty Einzig, October 2020

Ecosystems supervision is a collaborative and experimental approach which explores coaching practice within the context of wider societal and environmental considerations. It combines enquiry in depth into who we are as individuals and as professionals with exploration in breadth of the systems and networks within which – and which shape how – we operate.

This article explains our approach and what it is like to experience ecosystems supervision. It is by nature a work in progress as we employ an action learning approach in our work, adapting and developing as we learn with participants in our groups.

Why eco-systems?

The idea of the ecosystem originated in the realm of ecology. But the analogy with natural systems is now widely drawn in disciplines such as psychotherapy, economics and sociology. All of us, all the time, are embedded in interlocking and interdependent systems. Our focus as supervisors is on systems that are internal to us as individuals and those outside the individual in which we are participants. We use the term ecosystems expansively. It includes: the natural communities of living organisms; the sociological systems by which we organise human activities; and the technological systems which mediate them.

Dynamic, complex, self-organising systems are the template nature uses. A tree is a self-organising system as is a forest. So too is a human being and a community. In the world of work, we can identify ecosystems at multiple levels: the team, operating within a company, which is part of an industry, with a network of suppliers, partners, affiliates and stakeholders in wider society. An individual exercising leadership within a team will influence and be influenced by dynamics operating at all these levels – while some system dynamics will function seemingly beyond the agency of people

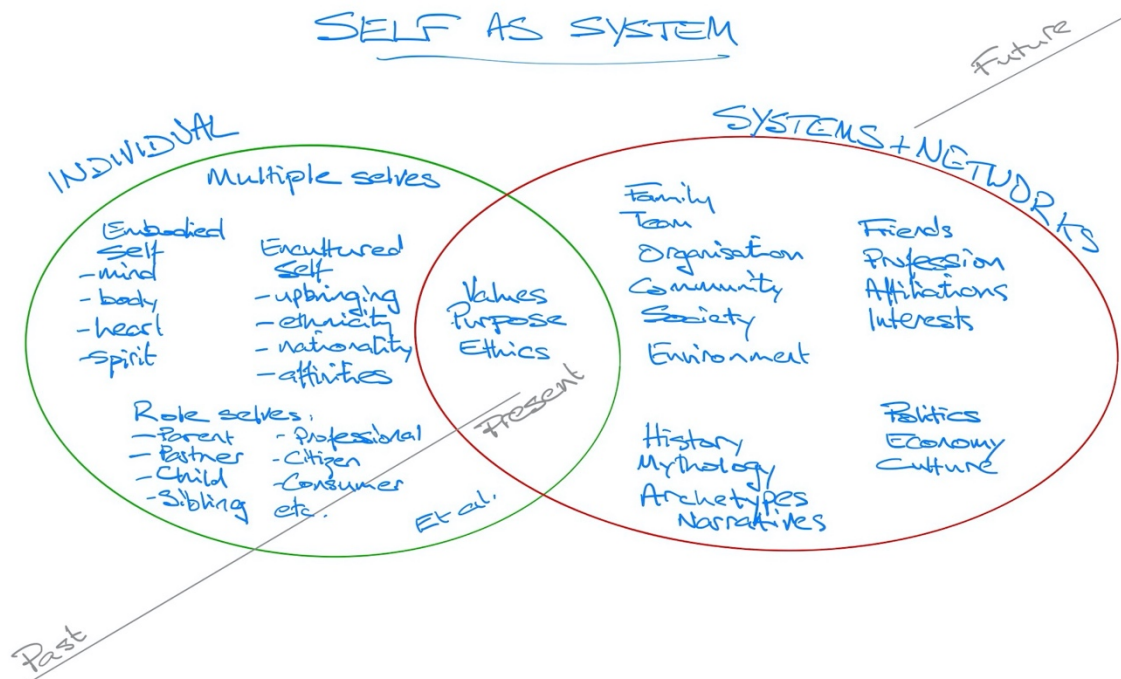
to influence them.

Ecosystems, then, manifest orders of complexity and interdependence. Healthy ecosystems are resilient, ensured through diversity. When diversity diminishes, ecosystems tend to become rigid, lifeless and prone to disease. To stay healthy, ecosystems need a favourable context and space for experimentation – which necessarily leads to levels of disorder, as the system transforms. Complexity can also bring fragility. This is uncomfortable for humans since we are wired to seek stability, certainty and predictability.

Given the rapid rate of change of our contemporary world, with its globalised, complex interdependencies, we believe it is necessary to develop our capacity to perceive, understand and become comfortable thinking in systems. We aim to foster awareness of the ecosystems in which we are located and the influence we can bring to bear on them as individuals. Ecosystems supervision encourages an integration of our identities as professionals, citizens and private individuals.

We look to the whole person

Eco-systems supervision attends to the mind, the body, the heart and the spirit. Whether it is the supervisee, the client whose story they bring to supervision or actors within that story, we are interested in the selves that show up in the narrative. We are many selves and play many roles. A person may bring to supervision their professional self as a coach, their tentative child nervous at being in a group, their rebellious teenager determined not to conform, their outraged citizen having just read the news, their caring healer who sees the distress of another, their ambitious, competitive warrior, their skilled team player and so on. Who shows up at any particular session will depend on many factors – not least the chemistry of the group and dynamics of the group system.



We explore how people are embedded in eco-systems and networks

We take a broad view of the areas of enquiry that are relevant to coaching, leading and supervision. People do not operate in any given context in isolation of the other systems of which they are a part. There is an inter-reaction between them: family, team, profession, organisation, community, society, the environment. In these times of crisis, questions of politics and economics might come to the fore. As do matters of people's upbringing, ethnicity, culture, affiliations and interests. Some of the networks in which people move might appear to have clear boundaries – for example, the company for which they work – in comparison to the circles of friends and associates who make up the social fabric of their professional and private lives. However all boundaries are porous, with energy constantly flowing within and between entities. This is the nature of complex, self-organised systems.

We view people as embedded in time

There is also a temporal aspect to consider. We exist in the present. Coaches work with their clients in the present and so do we as supervisors. While people, whether in supervision or coaching, generally talk about things that have happened in the past or might happen in the future, how those stories show up in the present moment is significant. We might attend to aspects such as the emotions that are present, the metaphors employed or the body language observed, or physical sensations experienced.

We may also enquire into how people's past is shaping their present – and their sense of what possibilities for the future might be. How people think, act and feel in the present is shaped by their biographies: their family and cultural inheritances; their lived experience of the systems in which they have participated and which have formed their inner selves.

Taking account of all this – present-moment awareness, the playing out of our past in the here and now – creates a foundation for contemplating action in the future. Supervision serves limited purpose if it does not create a

sense of direction. There is space for formulating strategies, contemplating where one needs to develop one's networks and how to exercise influence within them.

Putting this together in ecosystems supervision

Ecosystems supervision tries to work with an awareness of all of this while responding to specific material that supervisees bring to a particular session. This makes it necessarily an emergent process. The aim is to meet the individual in his or her wholeness, while locating them within any of a potentially limitless set of ecosystems. We consider the ecosystems of the coach coming to supervision and those of the clients whose stories they may bring. At any level of these stories – family, organisation, wider society – it is possible to expand the systemic perspective and access different discourses which might shed light on the object of enquiry – and the enquiry itself.

We value diversity in the modalities that we adopt in supervision. We want to resist our own ecosystem becoming too institutionalised in its routines and perspectives. Coaches can be particularly grounded in the sensibilities of the corporate world or maxims about professional coaching practice which risk becoming dogma.

We put a premium on questioning received wisdom and bringing freshness. So we might, for instance, use drawing, unorthodox locations, found material, imaginative work or embodied awareness to create new frames of consideration. Diversity extends to how we hold the session.

While we take responsibility for holding the space, we see ourselves as peer supervisors and honour the expertise and experience of the group.

Together, we aim for relational presence: we maintain a collective curiosity in how the sessions unfold and what the unfolding means.

Disagreements or conflicts, met in this spirit, add to the richness of the experience.

A session may address specific cases brought by participant coaches. Or it might address more thematic questions being raised by the ecosystem. If coaches don't raise these themselves, we might introduce them. In this, we are conscious that coaches and their clients may

sometimes (perhaps unconsciously) bracket out of consideration matters that are considered too political, too risky or too difficult. But, to work with ecosystems awareness, these need to be brought into the conversation. There is an ethical element to this. Ecosystems supervision holds that coaches and leaders should act with full awareness of their impact on the community and the environment. In this, we align with the idea of ecoleadership as defined by Simon Western: to act in good faith to create the good society.