"Translating" Palo Alto approach in the companies'consultancy

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Abstract

The Problem Solving Model of the Palo Alto School which pivots around the here-and-now functioning of a system, seems to fulfil all the possible requirements necessitated by the majority of the consulting agencies. The problem that needs to be overcome regards the possibility of applying the model to group contexts rather than to individual interventions, where the consultant goes to the group/company; not as in therapy where the patient arrives to the therapist. The description of the redundancies is in fact the principle intervening instrument used in large systems where we can observe diverse relational contexts that produce a series of redundancies which creates specific patterns. Having a clear picture of the redundancies and of their specific models can help reduce the complexity and thus aid in comprehending better the specific organisation. The description of a particular brief intervention illustrates the use of paradoxical strategies and the analysis of the problematic situation in terms of redundancies and systems.

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In my work as a trainer at the Gregory Bateson Institute, I meet a great number of business coaches and consultants who come to learn about the Palo Alto systemic and strategic intervention model. The model is evidently very tempting, particularly because it aims to solve immediate problems straight away and focuses on the present state of the system, which is what any organisation consultant is looking for.

Nevertheless, after a while, once the students have taken on board the basic inferences and have tried to develop the intervention model, they are usually confronted with two types of difficulties. On one hand, they question the possibility of adapting the model to group, rather than individual interventions: how is it possible to work on a collective using the Palo Alto approach? Secondly, when we supervise our consultants, we see the real difficulties they encounter in their coaching, despite the fact that the context may at first sight, look very similar to that of a therapeutic intervention. The problem which arises then is the positioning of the consultant in a context where it is not the arrival of the client in the therapist's office that initiates proceedings, but rather the appearance of the consultant in the company.

I would like therefore to talk first about the use of the approach in the context of 'large' systems, suggesting some elements that will allow us to model these large systems and thus give some guidance for an intervention.

One particular feature of these systems is that the consultant is directly confronted with a group of sub-systems or relational contexts. These may be at one level, or they may be interwoven in the hierarchy. We know that theoretically all systems are organised into a hierarchy but this particular feature is generally not explicitly taken into account in therapeutic work with individuals and families. In a company, some individuals or groups of individuals play the part of a servomechanism for some sub-systems.

So there is a qualitative break between the different sub-systems. The organisation cannot be approached as if it were an entity in which each part were harmoniously managed (as the rational analysts of the organisation would like to believe). How can we make sense of this?

In Palo Alto interactional theory, the key to understanding systems lies in observing redundancies. This key is all the more essential when dealing with large organisations. The description of redundancies is, in effect, the principal modelling tool for these large systems.

In such systems, we can observe different interactional contexts giving rise to as many sets of redundancies, which are themselves structured (Bateson describes these as 'patterns'). A description in terms of redundancies and models of redundancies will reduce complexity and help in our understanding of the company. What's more, we will quickly realize that the redundancies are never identical from one system to another, even in the same company. And that the redundancies structuring an organization at a particular level may be countered by the patterns ruling the organization at a higher level, which then acts as a servo-mechanism on the first level. This process may continue in series throughout the organisation. Through this reading of the company, the consultant will expect that any directive, and particularly any directive for change, going from one level to the other or from one group to another will be perceived by the 'recipient' as a disruption of his homeostatic balance, and therefore often fought against, slowed down or distorted. How many times have I heard company managers saying:"You know, we give the orders but the employees are the ones who decide!"

Consequently, the first task of the consultant is to recognise these patterns. According to the question asked and the problem to be solved, he will have to spot the perception-reaction systems (the patterns of patterns) that go through the company and cause problems to persist.

Description and modelling by redundancy is not something most consultants are familiar with. It has not been explored by the main theoretical and methodological trends on which in-company interventions are more or less explicitly based. Standard models to explain how companies work seem so resonant that the consultants trained at the Gregory Bateson Institute rarely succeed in transferring the idea of redundancy from the therapist's office to the context of organisations in which they intervene and which they continue to analyse in functional terms. The supporters of the 'systemic approach', for their part, will try to consider the company in terms of sub-systems linked together by flows (informational, financial, hierarchical, etc). So, an approach that looks at interactions and understands their redundancies must surely have a great future! The idea of a hierarchy of regulation, of models of redundancies working at different levels and then coming into conflict with each other should allow the intervention to escape from a utilitarian and rational approach based on linear logic and open up new possibilities, notably by allowing access to the use of systemic and strategic intervention techniques, including paradoxical interventions.

As a starting point, we can answer one question often asked by psycho-sociologists regarding organisations: is it more efficient to work with the upper echelons of the hierarchy, to make sure that the desired change can really go down to the base level, or should we work with the base-level operators, and by expressing the concerns of the largest number, push change up to the top of the organisation? Rather than analysing the organisation in terms of individuals or groups of individuals with various degrees of involvement and power, if we look instead at structured interactions within hierarchically interwoven contexts, then the choice becomes irrelevant. Whatever point of access the intervention may have, the consultant must take account of the interactions and servomechanisms that exist. In other words, if the consultant is working with a line manager, then the line manager must be made aware of the interactions at work in the system and take them fully into account. If the consultant is working with members of a team, for example, he or she must ensure that the limits imposed by the servomechanism are integrated into the changes to be made.

To obtain maximum room to manoeuvre, the consultant should ideally have arranged access to intervene both with the team and the line manager, although the means of intervention will of course be different in each case.

Taking account of hierarchically interwoven relational contexts right from the start of an intervention can be seen as a particular feature of in-company consulting when compared with psychotherapy. In any case this approach has a very direct influence on the position of the consultant. It should lead the consultant to take some very strict methodological precautions.

The position of the consultant in a strategic and systemic approach

Obviously, the consultant should do his utmost to obtain and preserve his room for manoeuvre, so as to influence the system and bring it to a new point of balance. To increase

flexibility within the framework of his sphere of action, it is essential that he himself maintain maximum flexibility in his interaction with the system. We can, however, observe certain typical situations that consultants find themselves in which lead them to restrict their actions. I shall give a few examples to illustrate the difficulties faced by consultants. The main problem is to gain recognition by the company as someone competent to deal with their problem, yet avoid having to integrate their redundancy models in order to win such recognition.

- Most of the time, I have noticed that the consultants I have talked to are very impatient to understand the coaching situations presented to them. They are equally keen to show that they have fully grasped the problem. In so doing, they inadvertently and rapidly accept and share the self-evident values of their clients: the need for performance, the obligation to cooperate that comes with a certain level of responsibility, and so on.

- In the same way, coaches can often develop a "blind spot" in their perception of their task. They are unable to countenance failure; their own failure, or that of their client. Here again, they clearly share with their clients the perceived need for performance and results that forms one of the daily preoccupations of a company.

So often we see the consultant caught up from the outset in the typical models of redundancies of the system he is intervening in. This has less to do with the consultant's own competence than it has with the way he interacts with the company itself. Very often, at least in France and Belgium, the coach is contracted by the Director of Human Resources to carry out a certain volume of work in the company. It is the coach's responsibility to look after the people sent to him, or who come voluntarily. To obtain this contract, one way or another the consultant will have had to convince the person commissioning him of his ability to help these people meet the company's expectations. In so doing, he will generally put forward arguments drawn from the habitual logic of the company – a logic that he will feel obliged to follow during his intervention. Inevitably, even before he has begun, he has already put into place a relational model which incorporates the very redundancies at work in the system he is attempting to act upon.

Other elements illustrate this tendency to accept systemic redundancies from the outset, even, as we shall see, when trying to take precautions to guarantee professional independence. For example:

- The principle of confidentiality, firmly anchored as a basic tenet of most coaching models, which seeks to guarantee that information provided to the coach within the triangular relationship of 'commissioner - coach – coached', remains confidential. This may appear to be a guarantee that people can speak in confidence without fear that the information they provide will be used against them. But unfortunately, it also implies that the consultant is offering guarantees built on rigid protection against risks themselves linked to a climate of duress (you cannot do as you please in a business organisation). In so doing the consultant denies himself the opportunity to establish relational rules based on his responsibility to reach certain objectives – objectives which it would be naïve to see as somehow immune to the constraints that any in-company service provider must face – especially as the service provided is generally costly to the company.

- In a similar vein, through an almost natural acceptance of the way companies operate, consultants often confuse the objectives of the commissioner (the manager who contracts the coach) with those of the person undergoing the coaching. This tendency is favoured or made worse by the promise of confidentiality. The commissioner can send a person for coaching in order to get him to reach certain objectives after having analysed the problem as being self-evident. As failure is not usually countenanced as a possible result, the consequences of failure for the person being coached are never made explicit. Sometimes they are discussed between the commissioner and the coach, but must remain secret! The person being coached may himself have implicit or explicit objectives that are widely different from those of his manager. In these circumstances, the coach embarks on a task – even more difficult because it remains hidden – of trying gradually to match up the work objectives of the person being coached with those of the commissioning manager, which may well be unknown to the person being coached. It is easy to imagine how interactions of this sort muddy the waters and render the coache's strategic position practically unusable.

To summarise this point, one might say that the difficulties encountered here are due to the context and the consultant's lack of strategic awareness of this context. A patient who visits a psychotherapy practice receives an implicit message: "you have come here to be helped". The framework of a coach's intervention in a company or organisation may, if we are not careful, produce the message "the coach improves employees' performance". The implicit obligation to get results and the fact that the person being coached may adopt an entirely passive attitude result in the coach losing most of his strategic potential. Consultations on the coach's own office, although they may give the impression of being outside the company framework, do not, in fact, make much difference in themselves to the context as defined here. The first strategic manoeuvre any consultant must make is to grasp and control the framework of his intervention. In the context of an organisation, this cannot simply mean establishing general and formal ground rules, which may often be sensible but can also be counter-productive (as with the linear confidentiality obligation mentioned earlier). It must always involve using the emerging qualities of interactions and it is with regard to the specific context that the consultant will decide to favour (or not to favour) this strategic freedom.

Using the strategic model to work on a collective

The difficulties many consultants face when working on a collective seem to come from the numerous interactions at work within the group. They also stem from the presence of individuals who have differing positions, and commonly antagonistic ones. To be more exact, the difficulty stems from the consultant's perception of this "complexity". Under such conditions, how can we follow a group and drive it towards a common objective?

It seems to me that if the consultant has taken on board the points mentioned earlier, we could almost say that this question should not arise. If the consultant has given sufficient attention to a particular group and been sensitive to the redundancies within it, he will perceive the rules of the interactions at play and will not focus excessively on the movements of certain individuals. What's more, a deeper analysis will enable him to find

the perception-reaction system that is leading the collective to repeat the same attempted solutions and thus fail to break the status quo. Once he has found these redundancies and redundancy models, the consultant must still be capable of using his own position to move the group forward.

The obligation in a company to produce results, to be visibly dynamic and efficient, to promote rational processes rather than those that escape the protagonists' own will, all these elements make working in-company in many ways much more simple than acting in a therapeutic context. Behavioural possibilities are greatly limited, unless of course personal deficiencies emerge, like depression, alcohol abuse or phobias. But if the consultant manages to maintain control of the framework of his intervention, certain strategies can be particularly efficient in a company or organisation.

A particular example of a successful strategy is to announce the failure of a collective to reach its goal. When announcing this failure, the consultant publicly takes full responsibility for it, as it is his job to lead the work of the group. Of course, he justifies this failure by listing all the disadvantages, impossibilities and other negative reasoning that the team members have advanced against the work goals. Whilst expressing complete understanding of the situation the people concerned find themselves in, he announces that he will nevertheless do the job he was paid to do. He will report this failure back to the hierarchy, explaining that he was unable to convince the team. He asks all members of the team to remain extremely vigilant regarding any proposals he might make during this task. They should remind him each time how damaging the proposal would be to the team or the persons concerned.

Remember, this type of framing is proposed in a context where reaching objectives and getting verifiable results form part of the general redundancies. What happens, then, when a consultant, who is being paid to ensure the success of the operation, announces that he has failed? The usual system of perception-reaction is disturbed by the absence of a partner playing the same game, and those present are actually forced to find a new point of balance, without being able to call officially for the breakdown of the process. We must also remember that in collective work, the consultant is himself part of the task and can therefore directly influence redundancies, on condition that he plays on his own behaviour. New interactional modes then become possible. The consultant encourages these new modes, but continues to talk of failure whilst agreeing to help group members if they so wish.

The main quality of a consultant accompanying a group, then, is his ability to escape the redundancies at work in it, coupled with a sufficiently convincing low position. Very often these two manoeuvres are sufficient to liberate, or at least help to liberate new possibilities for interaction and mobilise energies which previously have been devoted to failure.

A BRIEF INTERVENTION EXAMPLE, as an illustration of the use in a company of paradoxical strategy through consultant positioning, but also as a situation analysis in terms of redundancies and patterns.

It concerns a production unit of a large national Belgian group, which we shall call a regional centre. The national and international context is disrupted, and with a rapid succession of changes in European regulations, the strategic perspectives are unclear. These are uncertain times. The intervention proper was preceded by a diagnostic, insofar as the difficulties, although deemed to be at a precise level, also appeared in the Management's

eyes to be linked to the context. Here is an example of an interactional diagnostic, seeking out redundancies and redundancy models.

-        Information coming from the group head office is often fragmented, and over time, contradictory (the strategy is not clear). So the management of the regional centre plays for time, making sure that the information is valid before passing it on. In this way it avoids disseminating contradictory information internally. The members of the regional centre are aware of the unstable context and know that decisions are taken at head office level. They have already had to face considerable change over the past five years. So they are worried and impatient to obtain information. The information doesn't arrive, so they contact other organisations in the group and exchange any available information with them. They again ask management and are again told that the required information is not available, which contradicts the fact that members have obtained some information themselves. "They're hiding something" – the management denies this. When finally the management finds that it can give out full information, what it says, of course, largely ties in with what the members had found out though their own channels, which serves to confirm the hypothesis that management is withholding information. "You are lying to us!" the employees say, through their union representatives. The management are offended and strongly deny this. They come to suspect that certain people are trying to destabilise them. They make great efforts to reassure everyone and convince them of their good intentions and of their policy of transparency. Until the next episode, which will confirm the suspicions of both parties. A redundancy model has thus taken root in the global system.

-        In this context, the main department manager, the Director-General's right hand man, is in open conflict with one of his colleagues, the main union representative. This union official suspects the manager of conniving with the DG to favour promotions of members of the rival union, so as to weaken union action. He claims to have a file containing proof of these allegations, and threatens to reveal all, and ultimately to provoke a strike, with the support of national union officials. There have, indeed, already been strikes here and there in the group, and a manager has even been sequestrated on his own production site.

Management denies the allegations, claims it is acting in good faith, remind the employees that strict rules govern promotion decisions and calls on the union to show common sense. The union formally calls on the management to "find a solution".

This, of course, is where I come in. After meeting with both sides, I manage to convince the Director General to call a meeting with the union representatives concerned and the permanent branch official. This decision was agreed to very reluctantly as the official had vowed not to return until management came up with a solution. The management had adopted delaying tactics, and the DG actually admitted that I was part of the delaying process. This, then, was the first U-turn, as I precipitated the meeting rather than delaying it. In the course of the meeting, which should normally have provided a solution to the problem, I announce to the participants, with regret, that I have failed in my mission. I say that I have talked in detail to all the participants, and have realised that they are all sincere. What's more, they all have sound arguments: the union rep does indeed have a file fully detailing all promotions; management can prove that it has followed the rules as

agreed with the unions when dealing with promotions. Both parties appear to me to be within their rights. I then put forward some solutions.

- We could compare promotions according to union membership: however, information on union membership is protected under the Belgian constitution as private information. Do the participants present wish to override this protection? Of course, the answer is categorically no, especially as the union does not want to make its accusations in the presence of the other union.
- Would the management agree to allow the union to participate in the next batch of promotions, with a view to redressing the balance, as it were? Obviously, this is impossible, as that would be relinquishing control of a function firmly within its remit. The union also opposes this idea, as it would be unacceptable for the other unions.

At this point, I confirm my initial remarks, apologise for having failed and regretting that I haven't been able to find a solution. I add that the situation is even more regrettable because the next stage looks depressingly predictable: without a solution, the union will have to live up to its threats by calling a strike. It will have to act alone, without the support of the other unions, as it cannot divulge its accusations to them. Worst of all, even if the conflict lasts a long time, no solution will be found as we have just established that no solution exists. The only hope in these circumstances, if we are to avoid a worsening of relations and climate, is that some unexpected event occurs that completely changes the position: the dissolution of the regional centre, for example, given the current restructurings.

The meeting is suspended at the request of the union. When it is reconvened - of an hour later, the national official announces that the union is abandoning its accusations to avoid aggravating the situation. He demands that the management take immediate and serious steps to improve internal communication, so that such difficulties do not arise in the future. The management immediately accepts this demand.

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