

How does systemic thinking impact leadership ability and what the hell is it anyway!

Pod and Dr. Paul Lawrence

Welcome to our conversation,

Pod: Can I start our conversation today with your own career? So, given you left London where you did your PhD joined BP, and with them you worked across different countries, including Spain, including Portugal, including Japan, including Australia. From a leadership perspective, that's multiple countries in trade, different continents.

Looking back now, what were some of the lessons you learned around transitioning as leader across different environments?

Paul: I think I think for me it becomes it was a piece around just recognizing who I was as a person recognizing and going into some very different cultures because the Spanish culture is very different to the UK culture and the Japanese culture is very different, becoming increasingly aware off who I am as a person and and and how I came to be who I came to be and recognizing the role of all the other people in my childhood and beyond who kind of co created who I am. And that was in a particular culture. And just being constantly curious about just recognizing that everywhere is different.

Pod: I've heard you use the word before tune in, so tune into both yourself in terms of what you think, understand, believe, maybe make sense of the world and then also tune into the environment around you. Do you have any moment in time when you look again? With hindsight, you started recognizing that you were tuning in a different levels and recognizing things differently.

Paul: Um, yeah, lots of remember the first meeting I have ever had in Spain? Well, I was with a colleague from the UK, and we used to the British way of doing things which is somewhat ordered and structured, and after five minutes, everybody in the room was shouting at each other. It's just a completely different way of doing things, and he just would never happen in England. And so we're looking at each other, going, Where are we? What's going on here? Japan was again. I remember when we first arrived in Japan As we're walking down the street and my wife and and if I'm really honest about it, I I was looking at all these people and they all kind of looks the same and that they look different to me physically. Um and it was a real epiphany when, about six months later, we happened to walking down the same street and I just realized I was seeing people.

Pod: So, the first time you went there, you were noticing the differences. Second time you, Francis from May from you, of course. Second time you start recognizing we're all humans here together.

Paul: And, yeah, the similarities when people say to me, you know, which country did you most enjoy being in? I tend to go to Spain and Japan cause I had such a wonderful time in both those countries because those the people who I worked with were all beautiful, generous, witty, funny. They had things to say to a little. But when you when you first arrived in Spain, it's brash and it's noisy. When you first arrived in Japan, your or you know you're very aware of all the rituals and what have you and, you know, in all the cultural space, I think all of that stuff, You know, you get this when you go to Spain, Japan, you get the book telling you how to sort of do this, how to do that. And that's all very well. But at the end of the day. I think when you've been in those places and you're curious, you you turn into where we're similar because we are all very similar to each other. If I remember rightly, you your first expat role was in Australia. And then you went from there to Spain. I went to Australia back to the UK for years, then Spain, then Portugal and Japan.

Pod: Okay, so let's let's go to Spain. You were You had a couple 100 people reporting to you when you first times in the big division. Yeah, um, from memory. Part of the reason why I got the role because you could speak some degree of Spanish, but I think it wasn't probably not a lot. It was it was some Some people apply really applied for because I really fancied it. But my Spanish was I've been living in Brisbane said we live in Australia before he went to the UK, went to Spain and when I was in Brisbane I did this evening classes in Spanish at QUT. I used to ride a bike along the If we lived in Brisbane City. I'm not good at languages, actually.

I said I could speak Spanish, but they got parachuted into Spain and it was more than two because it was a return that way. It was like 500 people and the only other person in the whole none of my direct reports to speak English. The only person who could was this lovely lady who worked on the forecourt in a service station in Malaga. Nobody else could.

Pod: You were actually the foreigner in charge and you're you were thrown in the deep end when you look back now what? What were some of the mistakes or learning you've had from that experience?

Paul: Well, Spain I hadn't really, I'd sort of I've done a kind of really interesting sort of leadership role when I was in Australia first time around, because I was I was out there doing sort of territory management on deer was a leadership aspect. That was the first time I had direct reports and certainly that size. And yeah, I guess I had a model of leadership which said leaders ultimately are supposed to know what they're doing and they're supposed to know the answers and the reason why this ships and expansion here because supposedly because he knows what he's doing did little. I'd say it was pretty directive, Um, hopefully sort of nudging towards authoritative. But it was It was, Yeah, I had a leader is expert model in my head in Spain is one of the one of the beautiful countries where feedback is offered very, very overtly and very often, whether you want it or not, I'm imagining as the expert leader you're on

the receiving in that on occasions. Well, I was very lucky because you know what we're going to talk about. I think the leading change stuff and leading changes. Your research. You know, I spoke to 50 leaders around the world. What have you on what seemed to distinguish those leaders from others? Was they had they had built in feedback loops into their daily lives? So a lot of those CEOs and so on have seven or eight people all around the organization. They're getting a feedback all the time, and you contrast that about your experience.

But my experience of, you know, working lots of people just don't get feedback. I got lots of feedback, and it was very direct feedback. Like, you know why you being such a prick in e? Never Spanish. You know that word in Spanish now? And so it was You know what? Do you know why you're doing this way? Doing that? And And it was it was a beautiful I was there for, like, 2.5 years, and it was a complete learning experience, thanks to the people that I was working with. When do you think you started recognizing how to listen to the feedback to understand it and then, you know, do something with it, as opposed to, you know, react defensively to it which is Imagine imagine is where you started. I thought, Well, I still do respond defensively to feedback, and I think I think most people do because, um, I have a story. I have a story about who I am, you know, if you ask me who I am, I'll tell you who I am. It's a story that I'm making up.

And it's a story that other people have contributed to including yourself. So I have this story and I hold this story. It's the way that I make meaning of everything that goes on. So, if you give me feedback and if the feedback doesn't really what's the word? If the feedback isn't consistent with that story, I'm telling myself, then I then that's yeah, I need to process that to decide for myself what to take from that, because any feedback you give me is not objective feedback. I mean, every thing is different. Different people will give you fever.

One person's blunt and transparent and refreshing. A direct is another person's rude and abrasive, so I've got a really process it and decide for

myself. You know what sense to make of it, Onda that there's a defensive piece around that and I don't just go. Oh, yes. Thank you for the feedback. I need to process it. And then I need to decide what sense to make of it. What to do about it s Oh, that's always going on. But I think over time this is again war. I think we're going to come to in terms of the systems peace. If I If I see feedback as a non toe, it's not on objective process online three sixties or not objective. It's about people sharing with me how they experience May.

And if I can kind of just relate to that at a kind of meta level again. Well, this is how so and says, Well, I get that right, because I know that if I I know I sometimes just get on a doing drive and I just want to get stuff done. And if I get sucked into a meeting where we're gonna spend 60 minutes talking about systems and I'm gonna get cranky, they're telling me they found me crank it. Of course they did, because that's what's going on here. It doesn't mean I am in inverted commas. Cranky.

It means that's the behavior they saw. That's how they responded to it on. By the way, that other person in the meeting thought I was being really doing a great job in making sure that we just cut through stuff. You know, I'm seeing it from a lens that says this'd Zant about May just isn't feedback isn't about you. Feedback is about you, and it's about the relationships between you and other people. I think it's really insightful what you said, Paul, because given the work that you and I do, but also in terms of the role of leaders and leading teams and and and developing at teams towards whatever output they're looking to develop towards, ah, feedback loops off many kinds is very, very helpful. Yes, we know that to your point, people automatically don't receive feedback necessary. Always brilliantly, we aren't always skilled at giving it, and the third point you just put in there is, and we're giving feedback through our own bias of the world and therefore, by nature IQ, it can be pure. It's a perspective. Yet without feedback, stuff doesn't evolve or change, or at least it doesn't involve a change in a direction as purposeful.

This is the I had this conversation with someone very recently. It was a coaching conversation, and she brought to the coaching conversation. I just don't want feedback on DWhite. What what shifted in our conversations was she was, you know, with the whole process. It was a coaching call. It wasn't. The lettering is a coaching thing. What what came out of that was she shifted from a perspective of these People are telling me what I'm like and this is terrible to know. What I'm hearing here is how other people are experiencing our relationships. That's what it is. It's It's not objective, its's beautiful, because the feedback that helps me understand, which again is really important from a systemic perspective, the the influence of the impact I'm having on people at any given point in time in any different context. That's why you need to ask the feedback, this notion of doing on on line 3 60 once a year. What's that? How's that gonna help? That's a very blunt you look at your your thing. This is your feedback. That in itself is an amalgamation of all sorts of different people telling you about how they experience you in different scenarios and you get it once a year, as opposed to a regular conversation all the time.

Pod: Let's move to your first book leading change. Remember when I first read it? I was intrigued by a number of things, but particularly by your premise, there's multiple multiple, probably warehouses on Amazon, full of books about change. They always have the authors perspective of change. Yet you went about it differently. You interviewed 50 leaders around the world, including 25 CEOs who had successfully led change in terms of identifiable success, and you interview them for their perspectives on what they had done. Talk us through that process and talk us through some of the outcomes that you learn from that process.

Paul: Yeah, so the premise. What I wanted to know there's a lot of books that say, you know, the 10 pitfalls of doing change or the 10 ways not to do change, and I wanted to know Well, how should we do change on? I wanted to hear it from the leaders themselves. Books are very quick and easy to write these days, so there's a there's 100 different versions of it

was. So who says So? I wanted to know from And then there's a whole I'm not gonna go into the whole question of how to decide whether someone's a successful leader or what's the successful change process. There's a whole other conversation, but I wanted to hear, you know, from these leaders what their experience here, what Finally number one no change models mentioned these people were not going about doing change. According to ah, change model, they actually was quite intuitive. And based on their own experience, which I think is S o for all the writers who spend hours and years writing books and change the least a sample you have you have spoken to didn't reference those models, Not directly. That doesn't mean they haven't read them. It doesn't mean they were influenced by them, but they weren't kind of they weren't. What they weren't doing was managing reading a book in one hand while they went about reading. And that doesn't mean those books like useful. It doesn't mean they hadn't read them, but But what? What? What I heard was people actually going about doing this based on their own intuition based on their experience. And that takes me to this whole definition of leadership, the Ralph Stacy stuff that says leadership isn't about competencies and about whether you can exhibit these 12 competencies.

Leadership is about practical judgment. The world is far too complex, t say to a leader. Hey, you want to navigate their complexity? Here's the 12 competencies doesn't work like that, and Stacy talks about practical judgment. And that's what I was hearing in all these folks on. I had all these wonderful stories and what I my job was to extract from all these stories the essence, the essence of how these folks were going about leading change. Or at least let's not pretend I was a neutral observer. What I what I interpreted the essence to bay on. What was that, Really?

It was three things. It was number one there the way that they chose to listen to people number to their capacity to say what needed to be said. And if you take the listening and the voicing, we can call that dialogue. And third, it was their capacity to kind of view the organization. Let's use

the word system to view the system and be really cognizant of who they needed to be in dialogue with and who else needed to be in dialogue with each other. Okay, so let's go back to the three points. So he said, listening. Now there's no phrase. You got two ears and one mouth, so let's use that order. I think you're suggesting something much deeper than that. He's talking about these leaders and what they meant by listening and why that was useful. Well, you again, the listening conversation, I think, is somewhat limited and that we talk about needing to listen harder or I'm not still not really sure active listening is, but the premise seems to be we need to listen harder. Theme The the premise here is there are different ways of listening, on which way you're choosing to listen on the way most of us tend to listen. Certainly in an organizational context where we're under time, pressure is we're listening for what's being said, and we're straight away attack very quickly, attaching our own meaning to that. Oh, I understand we're doing that, too, and it's pretty much unconsciously without necessary recognizing it on Dykan. Listen, you you tell me I'm not listening. When I'm doing that, I'm gonna get cross with you because I can repeat back every word you just said to me. I'm listening hard as I'm listening. Actively. Right. But this is about listening beyond the content to what is this person really trying to say? Because you know, a lot of the time, especially when you're talking about complex issues on I'm giving you my view. My view is kind of forming while I speak. So by listening to what someone's trying to say, you can actually help them express what it is they're trying to say. And then there's another form of listening, which is Well, I can understand what you're trying to say. Why you trying to say it? Who is this person?

So there's lots of different ways of listening.

As I said, I think what most of us do when we go out there and we listen, we're listening for what kind of? That's what we want to hear. That's what we don't want to hear. And the metaphor that came up two or three times totally ununsolicited was this concept of agenda, less on agenda, full

listening and so some. Some folks said, You know, my leader comes out and talks to me, but I wish they didn't because they come out here, but, like, as if they really want to hear what's. But I know what they want me to say.

They come out with an agenda. Wouldn't it be lovely if they just came out without an agenda? And they were really curious about May and my perspective on what's going on here. So it's not a genderless and agenda fall. So the leaders I love that metaphor. By the way, I think I might rob that beautiful eso leaders who you interviewed who were relatively successfully, then change and appreciate efficient of success is not in this conversation. They were listening where the degree of agenda less they were listening to understand they were listening curiosity as opposed to listening with an agenda. And therefore I look like I'm listening to you. But in fact, I'm getting ready to answer. I'm gonna ready for a pause, put in my point of view. I am listening, Thio. I am listening to the words that you're saying while I'm hearing the words, I'm deciding what I'm gonna say next. Don't tell me I'm not listening because I'm listening to every word. But I'm listening in a different way.

Another way of putting it is I'm listening without fear. Agenda-less is listening without fear. Yeah, because I've shared this concept with some leaders and some leaders have said to May, um, yeah, but I can't I don't want to engage in that kind of conversation, because if they share all these perspectives with me, then I have to do something about it when you don't have to do anything about it. This is This is you know, dialogue is not just about listening, Dialogue is about listening, and dialogue is about saying what needs to be said if people are presenting views with you that you're really open to and you're curious about, and when they've explained it to you, you're going. I still don't get that that that still doesn't resonate with me. That's fine. So I I think there are leaders out there who they don't want to open the door that wide because they're afraid of what will come through the door and what they'll have toe deal with, especially if they're conflict avoidance by what you're saying is leaders who were

successfully didn't change. We're open to the conversation. We're open to being curious. And then what emerged emerged and that they dealt with that and they're completely relaxed about what someone's gonna say. Think about just giving someone think about just preparing, giving someone feedback, feedback that you don't think they're going to take very well.

One of the things they're trying to do is they're just trying to direct the conversation because they don't want to get into that person's perspective because they don't agree with it, and they don't wanna have that conversation where they disagree with it. This is what I'm talking about. It's fearless listening. I don't mind what you say. I want you to say whatever it is you've got to say, because it's gonna help me understand you. Andi is gonna help me understand this part of the organization.

Pod: The second part of what you said was saying what had to be said, Yeah, now, given that these are leaders and someone in half of your interviews, we're CEOs. They have an opinion. They have a mandate. They have stuff to do. In fact, they actually do have an agenda. What does saying what had to be said mean

Paul: it means, um any point in time. I'm thinking something and his thing, if you don't share it, that doesn't get appreciated. We know this right. If we're having a conversation with someone and we sense that there's something there holding onto and they're not sharing it with May, I don't generally appreciate that. And in fact it doesn't help build trust. I want to know what is. You got to say one of the biggest things I hear, but most unhappiest people in organizations tend to be when there's a restructure going on and senior leaders aren't telling us what's going on. When you talk to the scene leaders and they say, Well, we don't know what's going on We gotta wait until we got something to say through this lens. They want to know what you're thinking. Yeah, okay, so it's that saying that thing that needs to be said it's intuitive, but the word out and it's a really important word is respectful. You want it to be said respectfully.

So you're saying what I need to say? I'm saying, Here's here's gonna CEO Okay, here's the organization. Here's what I'm noticing. Here's what I'm reserving. Here's what I'm being told. Here's what I'm here is the sense that I'm making of that. And on that basis, here's what I think we're going to be doing next. But I'm leaving space for other people to have a different view, and I have to courage to elicit that view on. I have the courage to go. Yet I really appreciate that. Actually, this is what we're gonna do next. That makes sense. And the combination of both of those is this dialogue just for those of us who haven't an idea that dialogue might be. I've got my point of view. You got your's. would just set into each other.

Pod: Can you just explain the difference between, say, a discussion or a debate and dialogue and what they mean? Thank you. So, um, Bill Isaacs, David Bohm and so on have distinguished This is a, you know, simplifying things, but they've distinguished different types of conversation on and keep this simple. His three types of conversation debate We're familiar with debate. It's where I've got my view. You've got your view and we're creating a forum where we just want to get Get all those who's out there. Prime Minister's Question Time is a great example of that. It's basically the prime minister and the leader of the opposition, just shouting each other basically and getting it all out there. What's the purpose of that? I guess just to surface the views it off if it's used purposefully and well, debate is great. That's that's its function. Then you've got skilled conversation and people get skilled conversation mixed up with dialogue. Skill conversation is where I actually have some parameters here, some non negotiables. So do you. So in this conversation, let's work out what each other's non negotiables are. And let's find a solution that meets both of our non negotiables is kind of like a negotiation.

Dialogue is different because I'm doing my best to come to that conversation without without any non negotiables. I'm coming into this

conversation and Isaacs use this lovely language. I'm suspending my noble certainties. My noble certainty is the thing that I'm sure is right. I'm recognizing it and I'm suspending it. I'm not getting rid of it, but I'm recognizing, for example, and we're gonna have a conversation about how to respond to co vid and I have a belief that says everybody is accountable. So whatever we do here, we need to be making sure people understand that gotta wear masks. And they got to this and got to do that. I insist that's what comes up in our solution. So I approached the darb again. I know this thing about myself, right? I know I believe in personal accountability, and I'm okay with that. But I'm recognizing it. That's my noble certainty. I'm just going to suspend that, as I really seek to understand the other person's perspective on the purpose of dialogue is. Then you are able to work beyond all of the non negotiables that people and create something made that may be completely new and creative. That's why that's why I often talk about dialogue in relation to innovation. I think if you wanna have innovation and create something completely new, you have Teoh. You have to create that space in which there are those absence of non negotiable. I think I think what you're laying out for us beautifully. Here it is in any kind of expansive type conversation being innovation related. Be a generative, be it a complex problem solving where you need to get wider perspective. Dialogue is the most effective way off the conversation approach our mindset relative to debate or relative to whatever else right. But Allah is not easy. Well, dollars impossible is my belief. So, David Bohm said, You know this this idea and dialogue is lovely, But don't try and do it in organizations because it won't work. So there's two reasons it's It's one reason it's impossible and one reason why it's just very, very difficult. The reason it's impossible is if I'm going to go into a conversation on I'm going to suspend all of these things that I hold dear, including my values and my core beliefs. I need to know what they are, and there may be some people in the world who think they're completely 100% self aware. But, you know, a lot of folks think if you read any of this stuff around self differentiation, self actualization would say, that's just not going journey.

So for that reason. I think dialogue is pure dialogue is impossible, but it doesn't matter. This is about an aspiration to create a scree.

Thea Other reason is it's certainly in organizations. And this is the This is the thing that people always pick on. They say I'm ready to have a dialogue, but how do I make the other person engage in direct? Because doesn't it take to? Of course it does take Thio. And so what? What happens in in organizations is people don't turn up without an agenda. They don't turn up agenda less. There are all sorts of power dynamics that are playing an organization, and we recognize the positional power one very easily. So if the boss walks in the room were trying to have dialogue and the boss says, Okay, thank you. 15 minutes in. This is what we're gonna dio. What the boss has just done is taking us out of dialogue and exercise his position or her positional power. Onda course. There are lots of other sources of power as well. Relation or network, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera Eso where you got those. This is Bowman's point. You always in an organization got these power dynamics play. Therefore, you can't engage in pure dollar. I kind of agree with that.

I mean, when we wrote the dialogue, book seven of Us sat together through the intention was to engage in dialogue for 2.5 days and hoping the book would emerge. We noticed in ourselves we couldn't hold that pure dialogue space amongst seven of us for very long. It was almost is just done that we were in. We were out. We're in, We're out, we're in, We're out. You know, it would just take one person to just tune out because it is retiring or they were distracted and it impacted on the on the whole thing. So it's really interesting.

Pod: So the book that Paul is referring to is called the **Tao of Dialogue**. It was second book that you've written our co written in this case, and it's a really beautiful, easy access to the concept of dialogue into short book. It's an easy trade book. It's set up with character business, and it's like storing fables. But it really illustrates, as you quite rightly said, the power

and benefit of it. But also it takes access to it, and then it takes practice and you drop in and out of it.

I'm interested in our current times you were recording this in July 2020 and where the whole world is amidst the pandemic. Still, how do leaders who don't have the answers? Because none of us have the answers right now. But leaders still have to lead, and the accusations are looking for leadership. And I think human beings generally understand this is really strange, But I'm still looking to my leader.

How does the leader manage their own emotions, their own inner dialogue in her voice, whatever to be able to communicate effectively?

Paul: And I think that's a lovely point because I love all this stuff. As you know, I love this stuff around voices and multiplicity and the idea that we have different selves. The the piece I would say there is is I like the inner voices metaphor either. I think it's riel. Here's two ways of looking in the voices. So there's a very popular book sold a lot of copies called Tame, Your inner gremlin. I think it's called and colorful color on it. But the basic premise seems to be, How do you get rid of this gremlin? Um, Andi. Yeah, I'm not comfortable with that idea because there's a lot of lovely stuff that's come out of the Adelaide Center, which is a sort of capturing therapy space, which has manifested itself. I know I came across this in a critic stuff about 10 years ago, and then a critic stuff, says theater critic, is kind of comparable to your gremlin. I suppose it's the voice that saying, Well, you can't do that or you're going to stuff that up or that was terrible and it's not helpful a lot of the time, right, But the premises, actually, you're in a critic is there. It appeared in your life at some point, and it appeared because you needed it. It's there to help. Unfortunately, it's kind of showing up at times when it's not helpful, but it's it's intended to help. So I'm going to do a presentation in front of 200 people in the inner critic is really nervous that you're gonna make a fool of yourself that say remember when you stuff that I don't remember you stuff that don't do that again and look at those people in the audience. They're not even

smiling it. You need to do something to get its on your side. But it's not helping you in that moment. And so if you look at the world through this idea of multiplicity and there's some lovely stuff written around this, it says, authenticity isn't about being true to your single self. You don't have a single self. Authenticity is about two things. The extent to which all your multiple cells know each other. They know each other and they appreciate each other, and they kind of work out who is the best self to show up at the best context.

So I'm going on to do a presentation. This is if I'm authentic, according to this definition, right in, a critic says, Hey, guys, watch out on the you know, call it what you because we all got our own invoices and give what every names we like right? But let's say somebody could win in a voice. That was what was the aggressive librarian and I can't remember the name but he wore a sombrero when he was wore Budgie smugglers. And that was it. And yes, And that self, um said no, we could do this. We're gonna have fun here. I'm just gonna go out there and connect. That's what I connect with people. So be still in a critic. Let let me dio out here now and you just kind of come with us, but just perhaps just take a step back and in a critic trusts that self enough to let that self do it so that cells got to know each other, so sort of that, I mean, I'm going off on a bit of a tangent now, but the purposes, it's become back to your question as a leader, how do I manage my emotions? Get to know him. Maybe the multiple the multiplicity piece. A lot of people find that interesting. Some people don't but get to know the emotion if if you're gonna g o if you're gonna go and work with your team and you want to help your team come up with the response to co vid and Europe and and if your objective is we need to come out of this aligned, then you know that some of the emotions you might otherwise taking to that conversation I'm not gonna be helpful. So you need to know them. You need to know where they're coming from. You could talk about this through a CBT perspective. What are the automatic thoughts and do I know where they're coming from and how do I challenge them? But what you laid out here really lovely is the role of emotions.

First of all, emotions are powerful. There they come from a deep, deep space. They have often have histories and stories attached to them. Somewhere we know some, we don't know what all either way, they're powerful. Three notion off telling emotion just to die away is not really helpful. Whereas recognizing us there and recognizing you just don't have one. You've got multiple, which, as you said, feed your or your own authenticity anyway. But the notion of I've got multiple emotions how do I recognize them? How do I be become aware of them on how do I be mindful off that as I go into the meeting on that would allow me to potentially be ah lot mawr in tune with the conversations I've been chewing myself. Exactly. Great. That's that's that's really, really helpful.

Pod: We'll move our conversation onto a very different topic now. I read an article recently by the consulting firm McKinsey's who have lots of great articles on on their resources section. Things particular one was around leadership teams on the ship, teams who were leading transformations and one off their statistics that caught my eye in their article was, they said, 33% by a third, off exactly 33%. Failed transformations were because the leadership teams behaviors did not support the desired changes on my initial response was what were they thinking then? My second response. Waas I wonder. What were they thinking? That led to those specific behaviors that led to that piece? You have an upcoming book coming out later this year that talks to different levels of thinking and the notion off. There's different ways of thinking and if you understand that, you can actually understand in the behaviors have followed that because you look at the world through a particular lens or a particular order. So I like to dive into that little bit.

But before we before we dive into that, what do we actually mean when we talk about systemic thinking?

Paul:, well, I think that was part of the reason for writing the book because if you get five people working the coach space for the leadership space because that that whole notion of systemic thinking is showing up a lot in organizations that moment I'm noticing it sharpen leadership programs and just the general narrative. What its's. It'll mean different things to different people. But but the most common meaning of that, it seems to may just through my own experiences of people is it means I stand back and I take a big picture perspective. Essentially, that's what it seems to mean. Big picture and holistic.

Pod: Yeah, I've heard you talk about this is that various conferences or what you're saying is that's like an umbrella statement on within that there's a whole range off levels of What do I mean by I? Look at the system bond. It's almost. It's not quite hierarchical, but each Each one has a It's almost like a rings of a tree. Each ring a tree is a ring and a tree, but the more you the bigger ones, have a bigger part of the tree, they can see more of the tree. And in that sense, can you talk us through the five levels off thinking and given where we are in the world right now? Maybe explained each one and then how that relates to a team addressing situation in covert or indeed, maybe the government addressing covert.

Paul: Okay, so the first one is first order. What do I think about Covid? I'm a world leader and I have 10 cases of co vid, And so I stand up to the world media and I say we've got 10 cases of the virus right now, but we relaxed about this because it's just 10 Tomorrow. If we did nothing tomorrow, it might be 20 the next day. It might be 30 if we did nothing for two weeks. We have 140. So this all feels very manageable. And that's a very linear way of thinking about covert. If I think about my team again, I'm thinking about things very much in terms of linear cause and effect. What we do has a very predictable outcome. So we all have our role descriptions, and we have our KPI's . And as long as

we're clear on what we're all supposed to be doing, then the outcome will be pretty predictable and successful. It feels kind of mechanistic or predictable, maybe even simple. It's in some senses. It's certainly mechanistic because this is the This is the metaphor of the organization as a machine.

Pod: So cause if you can identify the cause, you can work out the effect and therefore manage it. So as a leader who looks at the world or looks at the situation or the problem through that way of thinking, they're identifying the system.

Paul Absolutely, but they're identifying. We can manage this, and therefore decisions and behaviors will follow that. Okay, and you may find that team doesn't the various leaders in that team. Team members, they don't necessarily interact a lot. This is ours coaching team recently, actually, and one of the team members said, I don't challenge you because challenge challenging people is something that a lot of teams wrestle with. I don't challenge you because it's your domain. It's your expertise, and I don't feel I have the right to challenge you on that. It's this notion. Yeah, it is simplistic, simplistic, but its mechanistic. It's predictable. You're the expert. We don't really need to interact because, you know, it's all fairly straightforward.

Pod: Okay, so then first order, non linear. What's the difference between those two?

Paul: Well, it's still mechanistic because I'm still I'm still looking at the organization as a machine. But I'm recognized recognizing that cause and effect is not as linear a zai might otherwise things. So then I'm the world leader is saying, Okay, we got 10 cases. We need to be worried here, right, because every person right now is infecting 2.5 people. And so give it a week. We could have 10,000 cases if we do nothing. And I'm recognizing that cause and effect is can sometimes be a little. It isn't the case that if I can get infected suddenly I come up with these predictable symptoms. If if we've got 10 cases, we might have 100 cases. So I'm noticing still the organizations of machine, but it's much more complicated machine. And there's other concepts here, like

causal loops and what have you are not gonna go into that now, but that. And that's how systems thinking was defined by I'm simplifying. But that's how systems thinking was defined by singing about 30 years ago. This is what I mean. This whole were three systems. Thinking has lots of different meanings, but in that level, and if you want to use the word levels but that order of non in your first order the leader or be a politician, be a team leader is recognizing that it's getting, um, there's a It's not straightforward linear. As you said, it's not linear, but it's still within. The system is still within control. We are intelligent. We're smart. We can we can grapple with this. We will figure it out. That's right. And so again, if you look at how much a team function, if a team was looking through this lens, it would value the intelligence and the smartness you might get Mawr collegiate behavior on that team to leverage whoever is perceived to be the clever people to help the other people kind of work out What's going on here on that leaders? Probably likely, if you ask them their values. Intelligence is likely to be in there somewhere. Andi. It's very common,. I did some work with a very big, massive organization. Was in the top five organizations in the world was terribly successful. And the CEO of that organization, when I read their autobiography talked about talked about how he just loved problem solving, and it was it was very absolutely The value is around. It was an incredibly intelligent person, intimidating the intelligent person, and and that was kind of the value of that organization. But the problem solving notion was, you know I or we can solve this probably don't need to go externally. It's within our own control. It's all about your complete your brain power.

Pod: So let's jump over to second order thinking, and this goes beyond our individual capacity of brainpower to manage what's in our control Talking to that?

Paul: Um so again, it's actually still mechanistic, I think. I mean, there's different interpretations on what everything I'm saying, so I'm just simplifying. But the second order perspective says yes, the organization is a machine, but it's functioning is so complicated we

can't hope to really understand what's going on here. So it looks like a black box theory. It's a machine, but it's not a black box recording an airplane. It's too hard to even work out how this thing works, right? And so, But it s so we need to. The best we're going to be able to do here is to come up with a hypothesis is toe how the system is working, and and we appreciate at the subjectivity of our in perspective that that's another fundamental aspect of second order thinking. We know that we are not objective creatures, that we are subjective, and so we're only going to come up with a really good hypothesis. If we get a number of different people all looking through their own different lenses to come together, and from that, then we'll get a pretty good hypothesis that we can go and test by kind of do learn to learn, do that would be a second or hypothesis. So with covid again, first thing I'm gonna do as the world leader is I'm going to ring up Singapore or Indonesia, or wherever else. So they mostly in Southeast Asia, I think and say you've done this before. What did you do? Help me understand what happened in your country. Help me understand what you did because I'm really interested to know I might be. Even in my own country. I might ring around the other in Australia, a ring around the other states and said, How is this occurring to you? So that that's not a first order way of doing things. The first order way of doing things is this is a company. This is a really complicated thing. But I, as my definition of myself as a leader is, I need to know the answer and you look at the behavior of some world leaders. Some of these a bit obvious. Did they go reaching out to other countries to know they didn't shut the doors, they shut the doors and they said we will work this out with our experts and started pointing the fingers at other you know, it got very, you know, finger pointing. That's not a second order perspective.

So second or so those things you said that I think is really important, there's the notion off. Let's create a hypothesis because right now I know that I are my team or my country. We don't know enough, so we have to bring in other points of view, other expertise, other experiences so we can create the best hypothesis for the moment. The second

thing, he said, is the notion of experimentation because the hypothesis might keep changing. So in order to try and figure this out, we actually have to experiment and learn from that. Now I will imagine given if you're a politician, can I just add There's a really there's a really implication for teams here, which is if that exchange of different perspectives is important, then we as a team have to be good at exchanging different perspectives and not all teams are good at that.

Pod: I was just gonna say I think I think this is a really probably one of the learnings is coming out of this experience around the world right now, four teams and four leaders and for politicians as well is particular politicians who have to go on to their daily news every day with a very clear opinion. Otherwise, at least traditionally wise there they were seen as being not not knowing what they were doing yet there in the world off experimentation with the unknown. And they have to experiment and therefore they have to learn. And Australia has done quite well in covert. But in the early days, I remember the hearing lots in the media about the politicians don't know what they're doing. No one knew what they were doing wasn't just them. I think over time the media has changed and it has become, We're all learning together. But as you said this, the second order thinking requires the leader and the team toe. Understand?

Paul: They are subjective to their own opinions, and therefore that's not good enough. You have to have a range of opinions and they have to develop hypothesis and they have to experiment and learn and and this is co created. I mean, like, if I'm a CEO of some organizations, I don't think it is true, every organization at all. But as a CEO, if I turn it in front of my board, my bought is Tell me what's going on here. And if I go well, I could give you some perspective on what's going on. But I can't tell you exactly what's going on, because no one, no one could ever know that then that might not be accepted by the board. If it's not accepted by the board, then then I'm kind of being firmly directed toward the first order way of thinking. As you said, politicians are not

allowed Thio or haven't really been allowed to get up and say, Hey, who knows the? Because people get really anxious. They want their politicians to be able to tell me the answer on one of the things I've been doing Covid, which really struck me, was when again, I was lucky enough to be privy to a member of the senior exacting talking to the broader organization and and she was saying, Yeah, here's what we're gonna dio blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, not saying that this is the right thing to do. I'm just saying, Given all the data we've got right now, this seems to us to be the best guess I thought. Wow. How often do you hear that? You know the senior team talking to the whole organization, saying we're not really very sure. But this is our best guess. And so one I thought wonderful. Because that seemed to be that seems to me that then they indicated that had access that second order, way of thinking, which is in many contexts, gonna be useful. But secondly, we've talked about this before is, um I thought, Wow, it's something shifting here on day and it does seem to me to be shifting in the in the kind of political landscape more generally where some leaders and we know who they are, who like to go out there and say This is what's happening and it gives people assurance. Funnily now that seems to be actually not giving people insurance at all. That seems to be what's worrying people. And some people are getting very worried by people who were just saying, Yeah, this is what this is coronaviruses. What's happening because most of us know, especially if you're going to second way. We weren't supposed to have a second way. Wow, this is We are heading into an unknown here. Of course, you can expect anybody to know exactly what and in modern day multimedia and access to media from anywhere in the world. Everyone can pick up any newspaper online to find out what's happening anywhere and be is equally informers and anybody else, and I understand that. So I was the leader of my team. How comfortable my showing up in front of my team and my team says, Hey, what's going on? Boston I go. I'm not really very sure what's going on here, but here's what I'm observing and here's what sense I'm making of it. Here's my best guess. Is that okay or not? I was. I'm interested.

Pod: Your comment on your thinking that in the in the in recent weeks on again we're both sitting here and sitting Australia, so therefore, influenced by what's happening in our geography of the world. It's not unique to our geography, the world, and noticing that the media who traditionally have taken ah politicians say and tear it apart and point out what's wrong with it. like a lot. Like many countries, Australia's debt level has risen dramatically. You know, we were in a potential surplus come into this year, and now we're gonna be \$180 billion debt in a few weeks time. So extraordinary change. And as the ministers were laying out the budget changes, um, one of the ministers said to the media, what was the alternative? And the media rooms went quiet, and it was palpable that everyone in the room in a live broadcast recognizing that actually, this is this is dramatically different. And therefore, you know, the notion off the government moving into debt was actually, it's not a choice here. And I just thought it was really interesting about that for the media, particularly, which is a representation of all of us going. You know what? We're actually old and something new together for the first time ever.

Paul: Yeah, And isn't that sort of isn't that covert is sort of lovely example of that narrative of us, you know, every time, just appreciating the complexity of something looks quite simple because I think when Kobe's started did the task was simple. How'd you How'd you stop it now. I think we're all in a place that says This isn't a simple is that you've got the virus and you've got the impact on the economy and you can't look at one divorced of the other might sound a bit inhumane, but there's this massive, complex thing and it means you weren't quite. I think we're going a bit quiet because e think we're all just a bit stumped. Eso level three seconds to think you level four.

Pod: Complexity. Let's talk about that.

Paul: So the first three ways of thinking are quite mechanistic because they're saying, Put crudely, the world operates like a like a really an

engine, either a simple engine or engine that's so difficult to understand, but it's still an engine. What complexity theory says that's not actually how change happens. What happens with change is people. They make meaning of stuff. So the example attend to use because it was really and it's just a good one, I think is when I was doing a coaching skills program that this organization and at the lunch break we're all out there and they sort of kitchen did a little and and someone said because what they're all talking about an email that come out that morning. Andi, It had said something on the lines of your I know. We said that everyone would be getting a 15% pay rise. It's now gonna bay 12%. Oops, Yeah, but it's not a big number, right? I'm going 15 12. But then that's just may so 15 to its own. Over here, a zero point of your right as a point to my right, there's a group going. I'm seriously pissed off about this. You know, it's like this is a matter of principle. They said 15% no matter what. If you say that, you have to stick to it. If that wasn't the case, then don't say it. So this is a matter of principle. There's a group over here that are going pointing to the left. There's a group over here that they're going. This is so cool because this organization is not commercial enough. This this this whole thing about we can't afford to pay 15. We're gonna pay 12. That's the lesson we just need to. Everyone needs to understand that over there, pointing forward. There's another group that goes 12%. 15%? Who cares? That's 500 bucks. I mean, I'm not gonna get worried about that. So you had all the different examples of different populations on there talking to each other, and out of that kind of collective process comes different meanings on then and then what happens when all of those views come together? Who knows? It's going to be somewhat mysterious. And if I'm only looking at what's happening at the high level, and I see this mysterious random think I go, that's really random. Where did that come from? The only way. But it's not random. It's actually. But to understand it, I've got to go and understand what's happening at the local level.

So change emerges from these conversations that are happening in the out there all over the all over the organization. And then what emerges is an overall action is could be somewhat mysterious. Now, if I'm if I'm looking at life through a first order lens or even a second order lens is a member of the senior executive him, I'm going. That makes no sense. What just happened. Obviously, why didn't they just take the message and logical, rational. Do it well, they're resistant to change. You know, hear that phrase a lot, a little bit stupid. And then you say to People will ask how change works here has. Here's how a change which you do not get to control outcomes that is the scary. But you do not get to control outcomes. And then people say, What's what's my job as a leader? I just kind of It's all it's all just happens anyway. No, because the way change works is it's an emergence off all of those conversations that are happening all over the organization. You can influence those conversations. You have to be in conversation because in conversation on that again, there's the control bit. The other bit that this really challenges the leader who says I only talk to my direct reports because if I go and talk to people below, then I'm challenging their authority. No, remember, this is what one of the leaders said on the leading change thing. He said, No, no, no, no, no. I go and talk to people all over the organization, But I'm just careful about what I talk about. I don't do anything to change their authority, but I go and listen and speak. Listen, seeds and listen. Yeah, great. Let's move on. Toe met a systemic thinking

The fifth over here things is a quite a different view of the world. The first four. Yeah, and this says, Well, by the way, there is no such thing as a system, the organizations, and not systems. And there is no such thing as a team. And actually, there's no such thing as an organization. These are all just mental constructs. Kind of scary. Yeah, it certainly is. And this is where I, you know, I've sort of had these conversations at conferences and so on. And this is the one which tends to elicit the most resistance and people. So what do you mean? There's no singers organizations? Yes, there is. Um, of course there is. But it's just a

metaphor. There's no such thing as a team. A team is this construct that we create for ourselves. So I've got eight direct reports. That's what I inherited. We're a team now. That's a very nice idea. Very useful to an extent, can be useful. Could be used in all sorts of ways. It can remind us, too, get to know each other better. I mean, it can remind us that we actually need to communicate about this thing that we're all supposedly trying to work toward. It's a useful thing, right? But sometimes it can be not very useful. Here's when it's one of the one example of where it's not very useful is Hey, you always coach your team. But you know you're gonna make to people and you and I know this. But you know, two people are gonna be made redundant next month. You're gonna have to replace them. So let's leave it six months until this team gets stable. I don't know if that's very useful theme, and the other way it's not useful is I feel all eight of us have to be in every conversation. How often do you hear people complaining about meetings and how boring meetings are? This says no, from from from a better perspective, you need the people in the room to talk about what you need, the people you that should be in the room with the people that need to be talking about whatever it is you're talking about, and sometimes that might be those three people in the team and sometimes not. If you, if you look at it from a systemic perspective, people would say, You can't You can't have three people. What? You have to have everybody talking about it From that perspective, it says no, Right now, that's the team. It's Tuesday. It's nine o'clock. Those three people we need, that's inverted commas the team because they're the people that need to be talking about this thing. A five o'clock. We got this other conversation. We need seven tomorrow at six o'clock, we got this other conversation. We need three people from the team in inverted commas, and then we need all these people who are outside the team, so notice the notion of the team can also limit our thinking sometimes.

Pod: Well, what I love about this notion, and I must say it took me a while to get my own head around it. But what I love about it is specifically for

leadership teams. So you CEO, lead religion team or a a regional say, you know, Southeast Asia or Europe type leadership team on def. You're looking at that through first order lens. You could easily have 12 or 14 people who are all direct reports of that leader who always have to be on the team and every single conversation. If you look at the Medicis Temic thinking, the notion of team well purely doesn't exist. But let's say it's fluid. But it's a metaphor that we're holding, which is this is what we call. We don't call this anti systemic. We call this meta system because what it's saying is we're just seeing the system and the team and organization idea for what it is. You really useful metaphor sometimes before that leader they can easily work with in order for to help this decision to be made the core people are the perfect people there, a subset off what we call the team. There's another subset of what we call the team who are best suited for these conversations. We want the whole group of what we call the team into these kind of conversations on that allows allows the leader as long as everyone else in the team understands that and there's a bit of work to be done there. But that gives the leader a lot more scope to be flexible and agile with how they bring that group of people together.

Paul: It does, on the meta systemic perspective on the complexity perspective, a similar in many ways because their fundamental idea of how change happens is the same. All we're doing here is, we're saying, but just be careful. The complexity of respect because you still talk about the organization of is a system. Sometimes that's not gonna be helpful. Otherwise, it's quite a similar way of looking at things. And so, yes, that's the leader's job. But you know, of course, when you as soon as I listen to you saying that I'm just imagining I'm on your team, What are you talking about? That's right. There's an impact. You're having a team meeting without me present. So to be able to manage this is a leader. I'm gonna have to be very good at managing those relationships, and I'm gonna have to think a certain way. It's not as easy as it sounds. Absolutely not. None of this is easy as it sounds. Of

course. Well, we are. We started by saying individual complex teams of complex and we're in complex times.

Pod: I want to bring this conversation towards the close. Pretty soon, if I could. I got three questions to finish off with, and I bring it right back to you. In terms of where we started today. I mentioned up front that you're a prolific writer. Um, I didn't actually explain you right in many genres, uh, leadership in teams, one genre coaching, supervision of coaches. And there's another genre. Historical fiction. He's a third genre. What does that do for you? Writing historical fiction. So I wrote a trilogy of book murder Mystery set in 17th century London. And they're very gory. Andi, they're just I was gonna say they're great. They were great fun to write. They were great fun to write. But I'm not sure that there isn't a bit of me showing up there that perhaps a zoo, no, sort of slightly confused figure in the middle of it all but Onda sort of general glorious of it. But it's it's a very self indulgent space. It's a self indulgent space. When you're writing on this fiction stuff, if you if you believe in that kind of systemic perspective, you know that you're just kind of what you're saying. and writing is just kind of is to assume most like a just an escape valve for for a very collective conversation writing fiction. You can just go and do that by yourself. You don't have to touch base or anybody else. You could just do it by yourself. And it's very self indulgent. And Ugo, you're like and yeah, it's very boundary less brilliant.

Pod: I know you're also a music fan and in bracket today or any day bracket, What's your favorite song today?

Paul: A couple of songs, and so this is all connected. Those of racist um so you and I I think you did is well, we have. We had tickets to go and see a band called The Fat White Family before they got the spoke with coronavirus. Yeah, and I hadn't really sort of had a good looking, But I spent a lot of time because because we don't get to go to bands now, one of the things that they're doing Coronavirus was just going to find a new band every week that are like enough to go and buy their stuff. So I really got into the fat white family. And then there's another band. So this is another story. So Lady called Maxine Peake, who was in a film

called Funny Girl On and She One day this disappears because of the sort of 17th century stuff, because I've done a lot of reading into witchcraft, and she done a lot of reading into local witchcraft and was really appalled by it, because what she found Waas that actually all these women were tortured and executed On what premise? You know, basically, it was a way for males to go and torture and kill all the women. They didn't really like very much in their community efficiently. Yeah, very efficient, not very nice. So she was. She was looking for to do a sort of musical thing around it, and and she found these two muses on Facebook, and they formed a band called the Accent Tronic Research Council, and they did an album called 16 12 Under Your, which is hard to find. But the song another witch is dead Eyes is on YouTube. It's brilliant. And then the other song that I really like because you know you can't invited me to be part of your little music group during Covid, where you listen to each other's music. And one of the things I found was the rest of the group didn't seem to be terribly fond of the fat white family. And there's this particular song called Touch the Leather, which I think is more of the video than the music. Andi, that was funny. So so then. Then they're connected, right, because you have fat white family and you have eccentric research council on. Then they thought they formed a joint venture called The Moon Landings on the Moon landings to this album. They've got a fictional lead singer called Johnny Rocket on the extent Tronic Research Council did another album, which was a kind of ALS through the lens of this girl who was believed she was the daughter of Margaret Thatcher on her imaginary love affair with Johnny Rocket. So all these three bands are connected and all the songs are connected.

POD: Wow, most people want to ask that question to that gave me, you know, like what a beautiful day by YouTube. But Paul gives us this huge, extraordinary insight into his working in mind and to potential music around the world we've had a lot of insights into what do you what you've learned over your career path. Given all of that, what would you now say to the Let's say, the 35 year old version of yourself,

Given all the wisdom you have accumulated or insights over the years, why would you tell that person?

Paul: Yeah, and, uh, to me, my head goes, It's really not about skills and knowledge, and wisdom is such I think it's a theme that we've kind of talked about. I think you know, when we talked about the Emotions piece and I think I think it relates, not quite sure how, but it relates to the systems thinking, too, that that leadership and we talked about with the dialogue piece that our capacity to be super effective as a leader, relates Thio, the extent to which were self aware that we really understand ourselves. So I think if I was given access and I said, Well, yeah, I'm perfectly happy with the way my life turned out But but But, you know, I don't know what the impact of this would be, but it would be, you know, I'd love to sit down with a 35 year old self and just in a short period as I could help that self just become more aware of himself.

Pod: Beautiful I'm I am delighted that you are who you are on, delighted that you've shared with us all of your insights. Well, actually, not all of your insights Lots of your insights today and lots of your learning for those who want to Nome or I'm going to include a link to Paul's website, the Center for Coaching Organizations. And if you like reading, there is an abundance off White Papers, blog's articles and even some recent podcasts that are pretty available off Paul's website. Paul's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.