

# “Atmosphere is my style”

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In 2014, Edmund de Waal created an exhibition at the Turner Contemporary gallery in Margate, quoting Turner as above, to describe what he was hoping to create. He placed vitrines containing his delicate porcelain bowls, which hung high above the viewers' heads, with mattresses on the floor, so that viewers were encouraged to stare dreamily at the cloud-like vitrines and the sky above the gallery. De Waal had it seemed to me created a particular kind of atmosphere, engendering a sense of wonder and playfulness amongst viewers, who somehow felt emboldened by lying on the floor staring upwards to give voice to their responses in a way which wouldn't happen in a usual gallery space.

This set me thinking about the kind of atmosphere we as systemic therapists and managers seek to create in our therapy rooms and organisations. I had recently moved with colleagues to an open-plan office in a CAMHS service in East London, where we were all struggling, I felt, to create the right sort of atmosphere to manage successfully the business of working together in these new and challenging conditions (we had moved from offices in which no more than 2 or 3 shared an office to a space shared by some 35 people). In the modern NHS, we often respond to this kind of question by developing policies and procedures, including rules about behaviour that, if followed, will allow staff to focus on their task and work efficiently.

This would usually involve providing some opportunity for the staff group to contribute their views. It is widely recognised, I think, that purely 'top-down' methods of managing organisations are not likely to engage and motivate staff groups. But how can we do this well, generating the right kind of atmosphere between us? By 'right kind of atmosphere' here, I mean an atmosphere in which the staff group experiences their concerns being heard by managers and taken seriously, and one in which they can develop, alongside managers, some creative and realistic ideas about how best to work together under these conditions – and an atmosphere in which we could remain united in facing a

common problem (with managers having a particular responsibility), rather than divided between management and workers. Often, I have experienced a push, alongside my fellow-managers, to be in too much of a hurry in managing organisational change (worried, I think, about unleashing a 'moan-fest', and feeling pressured to act decisively by more senior managers) and moving too quickly to action, thereby not bringing the staff group with us.

Some of the literature on organisations and leadership is helpful here. Gilley *et al.* (2009) reviewed the literature on leadership activities that were needed for effective organisational-change, summarising these as:

- **Communicating frequently and enthusiastically** – *Successful leaders are described as providing “abundant, relevant, and truthful” information about the change, and as communicating how the change will personally affect employees. It’s seen as important to be “realistic and not overly optimistic”* (p. 80).

Note here the emphasis on the frequency of communication and the abundance and truthfulness of information, and the alert about being realistic and not overly optimistic. Often, we as managers have had a number of discussions between ourselves about the need for change, and are therefore several steps ahead of our staff group in assimilating the new parameters facing us. We can be in too much of a hurry to implement change, not giving time for our staff to digest information and ask all of their many questions about the implications of change. It's tempting, also I think, for us as managers to feel we carry staff with us by the enthusiasm with which we propose changes, just as we can sometimes find ourselves proposing change over-enthusiastically to family members in therapy. Or, we can seek to minimise the significance of change: many is the time I have heard, or been tempted myself to say, these words about yet one more form we have felt impelled as managers to introduce and ask our staff to fill in about their clients: *“It will only take a minute or two...”* (I'm sure we have all learnt to beware on hearing these words!).



# (J.M. Turner to Ruskin, 1844)

- **Motivating employees** – *Leaders who are skilled in creating an atmosphere of motivation during a change-initiative “communicate effectively, address employees’ questions, generate creative ideas, prioritise ideas... commit employees (and managers, I would add) to action, and provide follow-up...”* (p. 81).

There is a further emphasis here on communication and answering questions, before involving staff in the generation of ideas, the prioritisation of ideas and their enactment, seeking commitment from staff and ensuring that there is then some follow-up. How many meetings have we been in, where one of these steps has been skipped in our haste to reach a conclusion? Ideas have been generated without any plans for enactment, or plans made without any follow-up. A similar process is involved in developing plans with family members in therapy, and I have learnt over the years to slow down when I feel myself hurrying to arrive at a task to send families away to try out, going over with them possible obstacles and ways of overcoming these.

Giving time to thinking through why plans may not work, and for staff (or family members) to refine and elaborate upon plans made, is always helpful in finding a way forward that is likely to make a difference, ensuring that all participants feel they have an influential voice in the process.

- **Promoting teamwork** – *Successful leaders promote “synergistic teamwork”* (p. 82) – *teamwork is seen as critical to effective organisational change. Leaders are seen as clearly defining roles and expectations, but at the same time, valuing and welcoming diversity of work styles, skills, and backgrounds.*

It is this aspect of leadership I wish here to dedicate most space to, as I see it as often poorly understood and appreciated, and yet so fundamentally important. I would describe this activity as ‘building a team’, which I see as a critical frame to hold in mind in everything we do as managers, aiming always to make the most of a team’s different participants. Again, I don’t think the processes involved are very different to generating teamwork amongst family

members and the network of professionals around them in therapy.

Lois Holzman (2016), in the model of social therapeutics she developed with Fred Newman, has elaborated a theory and practice of how and why building such groups is in itself transformational. They see change as emerging not from individual introspection but through development in new and creative activities undertaken as part of a group. The ‘tool’ here is also the ‘result’, it is through the process of engaging with the group in the performance of new activities that development takes place:

*“Building groups that create new things together is the activity of development. It is the building of the group that is developmental”.*

Thus, according to this approach, simply involving a team (or family) in the elaboration of a new way of doing things, in which all views are honoured and have a place in evolving a way forward, and then is enacted together as a group activity, is itself transformational. In the doing of something together, we are creating something different.

How do we do this? How do we create an atmosphere in which staff can feel encouraged to contribute creatively in diverse ways to discussions about change? How can we, as systemic managers, help to build this sort of a group? Here, I will elaborate what I see as some key practices deriving from our systemic approach and Holzman’s ideas.

1. One aspect of this involves the establishment and constant renewal of **connection** with individual staff members who are the members of a team. Brian Smith, the then coach of Leeds Rhinos rugby league team, gave a talk to managers within my organisation some 12 years ago about leadership and told us of his practice, every day, of greeting each individual team member with a handshake, which was his way of renewing this sense of personal and group connectedness. He recognised this needs to be an active process and not something that could be taken for granted. There are a myriad of other ways to achieve the same effect:

- Circulating emails to the group containing information about who is going to be present at future meetings or with news of decisions taken, underlining the importance of presence and absences and encouraging a sense of membership – I am grateful to Percy Aggett (2014) for underlining the importance of this.
- Greeting individual staff members as we pass them in the corridor in informal encounters, as well as more formal ones, in a way that acknowledges and appreciates their personal presence.
- Starting conversations with a personal connection, before moving on to a work focus.  
It is important to recognise the many and powerful practices within modern organisational-life which militate precisely against this sense of connection with others, for example:
  - The use of email instead of personal communication.
  - The practice of making emails terse and impersonal with no greeting or signing (it is so easy, in this way, to get ‘tone’ wrong in emails in a way which leads to miscommunication).
  - The practice of putting the message of an email as a subject header and leaving the text blank (the reader will gather this is a hobbyhorse of mine!).
  - The practice of collecting data during meetings as a way of providing evidence of its usefulness and value (here the ‘result’ has become more important than the ‘tool’). When I was first a manager, I was very pleased about being given a laptop by my organisation and created a template in which to record decisions made in supervision meetings. In a three-way meeting with another manager, I lost no time in opening my template on my computer, making this the central focus of our attention. My fellow manager gave me an important lesson by asking if, instead of going through the template, we could start by discussing together how things were going (as a way of establishing a sense of connection on a more human level).



2. Another aspect of ‘building the group’ is fostering an atmosphere and culture in which **diverse opinions and ideas are encouraged** and can be expressed without any being invalidated. Systemic therapists versed in ‘both/and’ ways of working with families should be well placed to lead in the establishment of such a culture, by inviting different ways of seeing things rather than aiming quickly to achieve a consensus, or siding with the most powerful voices: “*Who else has got a view about this?*” Where polarisation and factions arise in groups, systemic therapists are also well versed in finding ways of framing problems that bring the group together: “*We all want the same thing here; how can we use these different ideas?*”
3. Systemic managers are not immune from finding themselves in polarised positions and having powerful negative emotions towards other team members – we are not ‘saints’, as Linda McCann (2016) has reminded me! Systemic theorists like Fredman (2007) have provided us with tools to **prepare ourselves emotionally** for encounters with families, reflecting upon the emotional postures that we carry into our meetings with people so we “*position our bodies to invite tranquillity*” (p. 51). If we find ourselves approaching a meeting with a powerful negative frame about a fellow staff member, then this sort of preparation will also help us towards a more reflective and productive meeting.
4. Another important activity towards ‘building the group’ is to foster an atmosphere and culture in which **‘groupness’ is celebrated**, and acts of spontaneous mutuality and generosity can become the norm. Taking turns to bring food to a group is a powerful building block in creating a sense of cohesion amongst group members, while modelling offers of collaboration and support can start to build a culture in which this becomes a norm.
5. Lehmann-Willenbock and Allen (2014) found that humour was a powerful aid to productivity in meetings in two German industrial organisations: **successful humour** (which excludes negative or failed humour, which didn’t elicit laughter) triggered more problem-solving, procedural suggestions and goal orientation, also promoting supportive behaviour like praise and encouragement

and led to new ideas and solutions. As systemic therapists, we are familiar from our work with families with how well-judged humour can help to dissolve tensions, change affective states and generate creative ideas. I am reminded of Brian Cade’s 1982 article about the way in which humour amongst observing team members helped towards more constructive and creative suggestions. He told the story (which bears repeating) of Carl Whitaker feeling terrified in an initial interview with a veteran, that he might “*kill me there and then*” and going and bringing back a colleague to join him. Carl Whitaker then shared his fear with both client and colleague and the latter said, with a straight face and serious tone: “*I don’t blame you a bit; I’ve often wanted to kill Whitaker myself*”.

It’s important to add that humour doesn’t always help: In Lehmann-Willenbock and Allen’s study (2014), it did not help in situations where job losses and austerity measures were being discussed. And this may be a particularly gendered approach – 95% of the staff in their study was male.

6. Finally, holding regular review meetings about how it is performing its function fosters the sense of being a part of a purposeful group. Meetings can quickly become institutionalised in a way that ceases to encourage spontaneity and creativity. I have sat in many meetings which have lost a sense of purpose and direction and become dull and lifeless affairs. Reviews that are carried out creatively provide opportunities for steps to be agreed, encouraging a return to both a focus and the right atmosphere. Beth Boyd (2016) speaks of how she feels her sense of personal connection and relationship with other members of her team gives meaning to her own work and is inspirational. All of us in such teams can act in ways that foster this sense of connectedness or that can dissipate it; and the greater the sense of connectedness, the easier it is for the team to work well together, creating something greater than the sum of its parts.

Another of Gilley *et al.*’s (2009) activities of successful leaders was:

**Acting as coaches** – *Coaches are described as building one-on-one relationships with the intent of improving employees’ ability to maximise their strengths and work cooperatively with others*

*during and after the change initiative. A coach is seen as a “future-oriented agent of change”* (p. 79). *Mentoring, training, and providing feedback are listed as coaching behaviours that can help in facilitating organisational change.*

This is a step further than appreciating individuals’ contributions, towards nurturing their development. I think Holzman (2016) would see this as more integral to the way in which being part of a group can itself create opportunities for development (tool and result, rather than tool leading to result). Making use of Vygotsky’s theory about language development, she would propose that we should, as leaders, be thinking about each individual’s zone of proximal development (Newman & Holzman, 1993), seeking opportunities for them to perform at a level that is a step beyond their previous performances. She would be urging us to find and create opportunities for staff members to perform at new levels and to support them in doing so. To do so is to centre the group and the development of individuals within it, resisting the temptation to see ourselves as all-important.

## Conclusion

I cannot pretend we, as a group of managers, got all of this right, working with our team on how we could work together in our new open-plan office, but I believe, when we were able to draw upon these practices, we were more successful in developing a sense of striving together to make the best of what was a very problematic working-context. Sharing humorous reactions to the repeated shortcomings of the space, as well as a sense of taking collective joint action to propose changes, were powerful connecting forces in helping us to sustain ourselves under these challenging conditions, and to remain united.

These practices fit well with the systemic approach we are trained to use in working with families, and with a systemic ethos about seeking to create contexts together in which individuals can develop and flourish. In an era in which different professional groups are making a play for their right to assume a leadership role in the modern NHS – for example, see Taylor (2015), who argues the case for clinical psychologists taking on a leadership role in CAMHS as ‘applied scientists’ who are not wedded to



a specific model – it will be important that systemic therapists are able to put forward a coherent rationale regarding what they have to contribute. I hope that this piece can act as a stepping stone towards such a rationale for others to build upon, in the spirit of Holzman and Vygotsky!

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# Five principles of systemic management

## Daniel Moonman

One of the challenges I faced when I was training in family therapy was relating systemic practice to adult social care. The service for which I work is not primarily conceived as therapeutic and only occasionally acknowledges the influence of systemic theory. For me, the doubt many trainees share of “*is my practice sufficiently systemic?*” (Markovic, 1993) was eventually pushed aside by a sense of affirmation when I qualified. Two years later, I was appointed to the post of advanced or senior practitioner, with responsibility for promoting good practice in the service. Although I have had to familiarise myself with some basic concepts in the field of management science, like change and conflict management, it is my systemic training that is proving most useful in my new post. It is with this in mind I wish to write about principles that influence my management and supervisory practice.

### 1. A difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1972)

Part of the systemic practitioner’s job is to keep thinking alive (Flaskas, 2005). If I wish to maximise the resource of thinking at work, I will seek to avoid discrimination (see below) and also try to introduce thought from outside the organisation. I call the latter, being a ‘translator’ of good practice. Initiatives like ‘Reclaiming Social Work’ have demonstrated the value of systemic practice to local authority social care with support from reports (Munro, 2011) and research (Forrester *et al.*, 2013).

In my organisation, systemic practice is most reliably appreciated in a situation where there are multiple clients and we are asked to consider the relationship between them. To a family therapist, that may seem natural. In my agency, it always feels unnatural. That is because its dominant discourse is the resource control of individualised one-off interventions: discrete individual-clients are either

eligible or not for budgeted packages of care. Nevertheless, the organisation is forced to look beyond individualised interventions, usually when the discourse of safety (safeguarding) or organisational reputation (a complaint) asserts itself.

I have found two systemic techniques reliably make a difference to supervision in adult social-care practice. The first is the genogram. I use this in supervision sessions: to help the supervisee locate themselves in the professional system; to promote and record new thinking about the case; as a kind of externalisation to help the supervisee separate from a perception that a case involves ‘mess’. The second is the hypothesis. Since the 1970s there has been awareness in the social sciences that it is a mistake to think there are objective truths about a family (von Bertalanffy, 1968). This has sometimes led social workers to eschew judgment altogether, often because they wish to avoid imposing their view or blaming their clients (Munro, 2011). The Milan team (Palazzoli *et al.*, 1978) provided an alternative response through the ‘provisional judgment’ of the hypothesis, which is not offered as a truth, but as a more-or-less useful explanation and as a way of organising the thoughts of the therapist. It not only allows but encourages amendment: we are not supposed to marry our hypotheses. It is therefore a good concept for promoting thoughtful practice and critical analysis (Wonnacott, 2012). My supervisees have found this helpful in preparing interventions that involve multiple relationships, such as a mental-capacity assessment about a major decision like change of accommodation.

### 2. Each person in the client-and-professional system is unique

This involves trying to get a sense of the logic associated with the behaviour of those who are being discussed. Perhaps the best guardian of recognising the