Some Thoughts on the Notion of Proprioceptive Leadership

At the recent Australian Conference on Evidence-Based Coaching (15th and 16th February 2020) the phrase "systemic proprioception" was mentioned a number of times. Dr Michael Cavanagh in his keynote address on the existential challenges facing coaching was gracious enough to reference the idea of systemic proprioception as emerging from work I have been conducting during my PhD candidature.

The Background to My Thinking

Today's coaches are charged with supporting leaders, and the process of leadership deal with the challenges of today's complex world. This is the focus of my research. To do this effectively as coaches, we must engage with our clients to both understand the world as it is and to develop helpful and adaptive ways of engaging with it. At the heart of this challenge, the coaching conversation inevitably deals with ontological and epistemological issues - whether they are tacit or explicit: Epistemology has to do with the way we understand and describe the world and ontology with the way the world actually is: In this sense, coaching is essentially a meaning-making activity.

Coaching as a practice has emerged from a number of disciplines (for example sports psychology, leadership studies and psychology). Therefore, I chose a trans-disciplinary approach to my literature review which examined perspectives from a number of disciplines on how we might best understand the nature of organisations and "knowledge" at an individual and group level in today's complex world (Brown and Harris, 2010). A number of approaches have been proposed as to how leaders might best engage with the complex challenges of today's world. However, only Stacey's call for "practical wisdom" (2012) and Cavanagh's Four Factor Model (2016) are truly transdisciplinary. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Leadership Responses to Complexity

	CAS Informed	Inter-disciplinary	Trans-disciplinary	Role of leader		Locus of leadership		Constructionist	Constructivist
				S	P	L	R		
Adaptive Leadership		✓ *		✓		✓	✓		
Complexity Leadership	✓	✓ *+		✓		✓	✓		
Generative Leadership	✓	✓ *+		✓		✓	✓		
Practical Wisdom	✓		✓ *+** #^		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Four factor Model	✓		✓ *+** #^>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Legend

+Complexity Science

* Leadership

** Philosophy

^ Sociology

\>Psychology

S = Separate to System = Acts on the system

P = Part of the system - Acts on the system and is acted on by the system
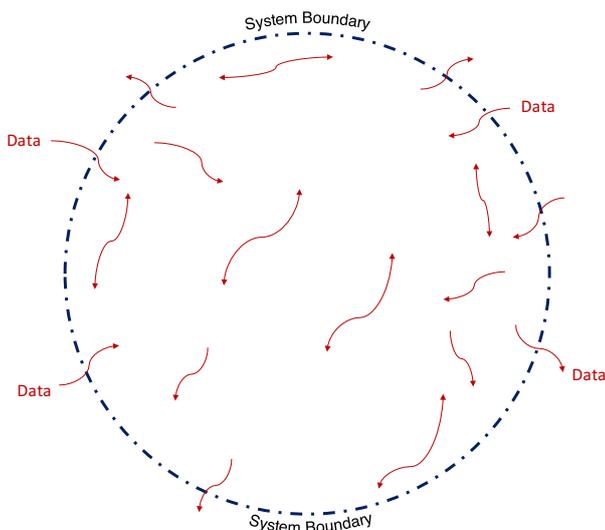
L = Leader

R = Relationship

Many writers in the reviewed literature have suggested that the intractable complexity in today's world requires that we view social systems - such as organisations - as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). These CAS are nested within other CAS. For example, a company is a system that exists with and within other systems, including the market within which it operates and competes, the economy, the political system, the environment and so forth. CAS exist in the natural world in multiple forms, such as local ecosystems, the weather, the climate and the water cycle.

The boundaries between CAS are not sealed, but are "semi-permeable": In natural systems energy flows through the semi-permeable boundaries of the CAS, around the system, and out of the system, and is also transformed in emergent and unpredictable ways. These patterns of energy flows and transformation do not conform to traditional linear models of understanding organisations and leadership and hence, traditional reductionist approaches to organisations and organisational leadership premised on "if-then" causality that treat organisations as no more than the sum of their component parts invariably prove inadequate.

Whilst natural CAS can be helpful in understanding organisations, a more useful way of viewing them is as systems of data flow rather than energy flows: Shannon's (1948) work contends that energy can be viewed as data. Using Shannon's work, organisations can be viewed as systems, nested within other systems, with each system having semi-permeable boundaries which allow data to flows into, out of, and through the systems, and in which that data transformed in emergent and non-linear ways. Data transformation occurs in the dynamic relational interactions between the component parts of the system. Thus, organisations are CAS nested within other CAS into which data flows, is made meaning of, transformed and which produce outputs. The meaning, or knowledge that is created is relational in nature as it is co-created in the relationship between the system's component parts and does not exist in an immutable and intact manner outside of the relationship.

In social systems, the component "parts" are the people in the system and the dynamic relational interaction between them is primarily in the form of conversation. It is in these everyday conversations that the process of meaning making occurs and that meaning making and its resultant actions are either adaptive or maladaptive in terms of the challenges being faced by the organisation. Thus organisations can be viewed as complex meaning making systems (Fig 1).

Figure 1: Organisations as Complex Meaning Making Systems

The Four Factor Model of Leadership

The Four Factor Model (4FM) of Leadership is a transdisciplinary response to complexity developed by Cavanagh (2016). Cavanagh suggests that whilst leadership skills are important, to engage effectively with complexity, leadership capacity is more important. The 4FM offers a highly useful framework to identify what capacities are required by leaders and leadership to engage effectively with the dynamic and emergent nature of CAS. Cavanagh's 4FM is briefly outlined below (Fig 2).

Figure 2: The Four Factor Model of Leadership

PTC

Mindfulness

Purpose

Positivity
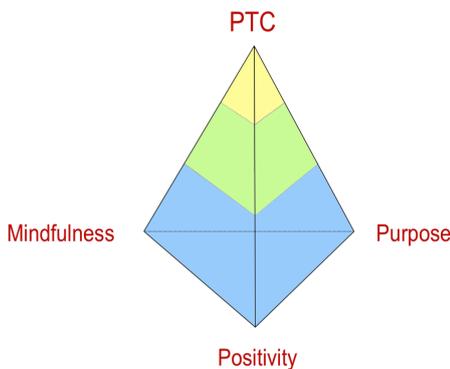
PTC (Perspective Taking Capacity): "A leader's capacity to understand, critically consider and integrate and extend conflicting information and multiple competing perspectives to guide their actions" (Cavanagh, 2006).

Mindfulness: The ability to observe the present moment dispassionately and to see our own process & respond intentionally rather than reactively. The ability to create the moment of choice (Cavanagh & Spence, 2010)

Purpose: Leaders move towards outcomes they consider worthwhile, not just personally but in terms of the organisation's purpose. They enunciate purpose in contextually adaptive ways, and where necessary reconfigure it. They engage with the tension that results from the multiple competing purposes in an organisation and co-create a coherence and shared meaning regarding purpose with those they lead.

Positivity: Leaders co-create spaces that scaffold learning, exploration, innovation, use of intuition, enhanced social connectivity, and individual and systemic resilience.

The 4FM is a dynamic model with each of the factors being informed and influenced by each other. It does not describe a linear process: The interaction between the four factors lends a coherence that is lost if the factors are only considered and examined individually. However, Cavanagh (2020) has stated that of the Four Factors, the Mindfulness Factor and its relation to the other three Factors in his model is the least cogent, and it is in relation to this that the notion of "systemic proprioception" has emerged.
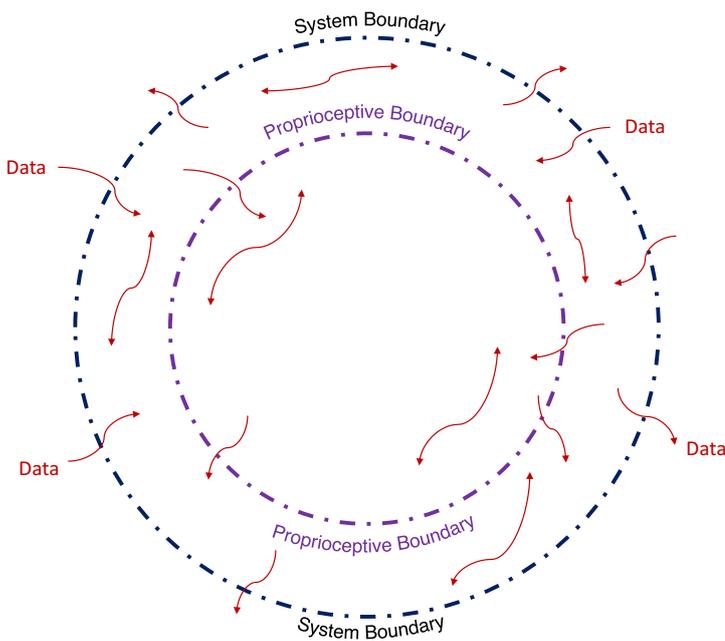
Proprioception:

"Proprioception" is usually used to describe a physical capacity. Proprioception is the body's capacity to sense its location, movements, and actions in the physical environment. It is what enables us move freely without consciously thinking about our environment. Examples of physical proprioception include being able to walk or kick without looking at your feet or being able touch your nose with your eyes closed

The notion of systemic proprioception is one that I developed from Bohm's work (). He postulated that thought itself is a system and speculated what might occur if thought could become "proprioceptive" i.e. aware of its own movements. *Proprioceptive leadership* refers to the capacity of leaders and leadership in CAS to be aware of the multiple streams of data in the system, to discern which data streams to attend to, to notice how the system is emerging in response to these data streams and other emergent dynamics in the system, and to "move" adaptively in the system.

The proprioceptive capacity of a leader and/or the group delineates a boundary that determines how much of the system can actually be understood by the them in a particular context. The proprioceptive boundary will never be the same as the system's boundary, as the nature of CAS means that thy can never fully be known or understood. However, proprioceptive boundaries can be increased. Thus, we as individuals and as groups can understand more of the systems in which we move and are able to place ourselves to more effectively engage with those systems. (Fig 3).

Figure 3: The System Boundary and the Proprioceptive Boundary

Proprioception and the Four Factor Model of Leadership

"Proprioception" may better explain the capacity for Mindfulness in Cavanagh's 4FM. Proprioception interacts dynamically with the other Factors both influencing them and being influenced by them. This dynamic interaction determines the "proprioceptive boundary" which both enables and constrains the level at which leaders and leadership can understand and adaptively engage with the complex relational dynamics of organisational life. An adaptation of Cavanagh's 4FM incorporating this suggested change is shown below (Fig 4). In particular, it is suggested the Proprioception both informs, and is informed by PTC in an ontological and epistemological dynamic: The way in which leaders and the process of leadership understands and describes the system changes the way the system is seen. At the same time, the way the system is seen determines the way we in which it is understood and described.

Figure 4: The Proprioceptive Boundary and the 4FM
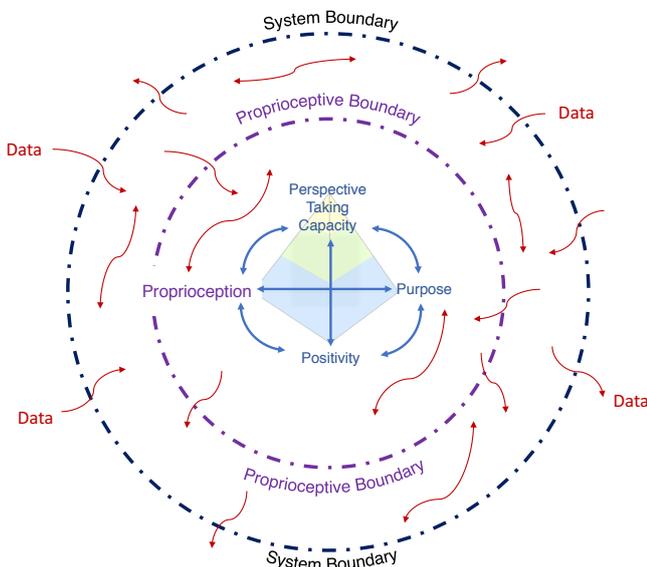
The Implications for Leadership and Leadership Coaching:

The process by which we develop physical proprioception is essentially one of making new connections and establishing neural pathways. This is at the heart of all learning - building new connections and embedding them. In this sense the process of developing systemic proprioception is no different to developing physical proprioception. However, the techniques by which this may be scaffolded are still nascent and lack a significant research base. Dialogue mapping (Conklin, 2006), constraints based learning activities (Cilliers, 2000) and deep listening as part of dialogue (Stelter, 2018) appear to be potentially useful tools, but their proven effectiveness thus far is limited to anecdotal evidence and/or case studies.

Accurately measuring proprioception is also problematic. Is it something that can be quantified or will qualitative and phenomenological experiences be more useful? I am reminded of a saying often ascribed to Einstein that not everything that counts can be measured, and not everything that can be measured counts!

Further, given the dynamic nature of the 4FM what changes, intentional or unintentional, might occur if there is an attempt to shift one of the factors? For example, would attempting to increase

Proprioception result in changes in PTC as measured with a tool like the Subject-Object Interview (***)?

For myself as a researcher, my journey thus far has led to my focus question now being:

How do we effectively coach leaders and social systems (organisations) to best scaffold the development of systemic proprioceptive leadership processes at all levels of the system?

As a coach, some questions that have arisen for me:

- What am I doing to become aware of my proprioceptive boundaries? What do hey enable and constrain? What kind of supervision do I require to do this more effectively?

- How does my understanding of the 4FM, adapted or not, inform my coaching? If I am to heed the challenge at the recent 2020 Evidence Based Coaching Conference for coaches to step up a leaders, then surely the 4FM is as much about how I understand myself and my role as coach in relation to the Four Factors as it is about understanding the individual or group I am coaching?

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