

SIMON BELL: Hi. I'm Simon Bell, emeritus professor in Innovation and Methodology at the Open University, and we're talking here on the 50 years of teaching and practise of systems at the Open University. Today, I think I've got a special guest on the podcast. I'd like to welcome Jake Chapman. Jake, hi.

JAKE CHAPMAN: Nice to be here.

SIMON BELL: Oh, it's great to have you on the podcast, Jake. I've worked with Jake a little bit over the years, but he remains something of a figure of mystery to me, and I like mysteries, so that's great. He's a systemisist. He was head of department at the OU. He's a research fellow at the Cavendish Laboratory, he was.

He's a fellow of Emmanuel College, an entrepreneur, professor of energy systems. He's written best-selling books. I think that's enough of me saying things like that. Jake, if I asked you a really simple question, perhaps you can give me a really interesting answer, which is, what does a systems approach mean to you?

JAKE CHAPMAN: What does it mean to me? OK, it means getting a bigger picture, understanding whatever is troubling me in a more holistic way, and there are certainly two parts to that. One is sort of understanding how things are interconnected. And I'm always interested in feedback loops because I know they dominate how things respond, but I'm also always interested in the fact that the people who are in whatever issue I'm looking at will see the world really differently. And so part of my attempt to understand things holistically means that I do my best to understand the way that they are seeing the world and how it's different from the way that I see the world.

SIMON BELL: How do you do that?

JAKE CHAPMAN: How do I do it? In terms of understanding the connections between things, believe it or not, but I usually end up drawing diagrams on bits of paper. And it's not that I want to try and produce a really good or authentic diagram according to some set of rules. What I'm doing, I'm giving myself a visual representation of how things interact and affect each other, and that helps me. It gets me to ask different types of questions.

So I start to ask myself, well, what is causing that? Why has that changed? And things like that. And in terms of getting other people's perspective, there is nothing-- the only way is to talk to them, and then it is-- and actually, just talking isn't enough because I've understood that the way that I hear what people say is conditioned by how I've been thinking about the issue.

So what I have to do is say back to them what I had understood them to say, especially when it might be different from the understanding that I came in with initially. So in other words, when I'm talking to somebody, I'm not just having a chat. I'm doing something a little bit more formal than that. I'm actually trying to deliberately explore the points of difference of where their view or their understanding is different or departing from my previous understanding.

SIMON BELL: But I mean, I want to pursue this because as you know, I was a beneficiary of your approach. I was in a situation which I won't go into the detail of here. You were one of a panel who listened to me when I had a problem. I explained my problem to what I thought was an unyieldingly senior group of people, and you said back to me my problem as you understood it from what I had said.

And I found it profoundly moving. I found it an extraordinary thing just to be heard and to hear somebody say back to me what I think I'd said but with understanding. It was a nearly spiritual experience from my point of view. How do you explain that?

JAKE CHAPMAN: Because actually hearing each other is a profound service that we give to each other. I mean, it really is. And indeed, when I've been-- I was teaching systems thinking and systems approaches to bunches of senior civil servants and public sector leaders. And one of the tools I taught them was how to do that type of listening, active listening.

And so what I would do, I'd tell them about it. I'd say, this is what active listening involves and da-de, da-de, da. And I'd say, OK, so now start interviewing your partner about something that's of mutual interest like a football club or your work-life balance or the garden. And they'd start interviewing their partner, and after about 10 minutes, I'd say, oh, now switch to active listening.

And they'd all do it to the best of their ability. And of course, they weren't perfect at it. They'd only just learnt it. And then at the end of the exercise, say, OK. Now, tell me how you experienced that transition. And they all said something very similar to what you just said. It was revelatory. To have somebody say back in their own words what you've said profoundly affected the interviewee and the interviewer. So I just think that hearing each other and really understanding somebody's point of view is a profound service.

SIMON BELL: Why do you think that we don't do this more spontaneously? Because it struck me at the time is we are conversing creatures. We're constantly discoursing with each other, and yet it seems to me that we're not hearing each other most of the time or not in that way, not in that quality.

JAKE CHAPMAN: Because an awful lot of the time, people are trying to persuade somebody else about their point of view. In other words, instead of me trying to understand your point of view, I'm trying to get across my point of view and make you different or make you change your mind about something. And whenever I'm doing that, I'm not hearing you.

But the paradox is that when I hear you, when you know that you've been heard, you're far more open to what I've now got to say next. You know you've been understood, so now you want to understand me. It's a mutual thing. So we just go about it the wrong way.

SIMON BELL: Do you think-- do you think this form of active listening-- I mean, it strikes me as being entirely consistent with the systems approach, but it doesn't strike me as being, if you like-- I mean, do we just put it under the broad umbrella of systems approaches?

JAKE CHAPMAN: I put it in what I call my systems toolbox. So in order to be a systems practitioner, I need a number of tools. And so there's a whole lot of tools about diagramming and representing systems and modelling systems, and then there's a whole lot of stuff in another box called appreciating different perspectives.

Active listening is on the top of that box. Underneath it is called cognitive mapping. There's another one underneath that, which is drawing rich pictures. So there are a whole set of tools, and those are the things that I end up teaching now.

SIMON BELL: And I mean, something that I picked up in an earlier convers-- earlier piece of paper you sent me, which was about your interest in-- well, first of all, executives, very senior people, and you've already said something about them listening to each other. You also mentioned this issue in Manchester, wicked problems related to asbos and juvenile issues. Again, issues of perspective, understanding, and maybe, again, people just not hearing each other.

JAKE CHAPMAN: Well, absolutely. So I went there with a-- we were commissioned by Manchester City Council to actually try to make some headway on what was then called antisocial behaviour. And Manchester was the asbo capital of the United Kingdom. They dished out more asbos to young people than anybody else. And they basically-- their view of the world was that the kids were taking the piss, their keys thrown away so that they know that they had to behave.

There's another group of people. It's the parents that we need to get. We should kick the parents out, not punish the kids.

There's another group of people who are in charge of Youth Services who said, look, teenage kids are always mischievous. We've shut down all the youth clubs. They've got nothing to do in the evening. What do you expect them to do? There's no way for them to sit at home because the home is already crowded. And then another group of people, it's you don't get this problem in middle class areas. You get this problem only in poor areas. And there was another group of people who said, no, it's a sign of cultural breakdown. We don't have any respect for each other.

All along these different perspectives went. And what I found, so there was at least six different groups of people, and they were so intent on trying to win the argument that they weren't doing anything to help the kids. But it was like not only were they not listening to each other, they were fighting each other. So different departments within Manchester City Council were fighting each other to win the argument, to get their way agreed to be the way to treat it.

I ran a workshop with them all there. I got them all to say their point of view. I made sure that they all felt heard. And then I said, OK, so now, we're not going to try and solve the argument, but what would improve the situation?

You know, they came up with stuff that was so obvious, and it was just-- it was brilliant, and they all started to do it. And the arguments still went on in the background, and it was still-- a lot of them were still committed to try and win the argument. But finally, they were putting their attention on the kids and doing something different. So this multiple perspectives thing, to me, is in some ways almost more important than the interconnectedness, which is when you say I'm a systems thinker, most people think of those diagrams with arrows pointing everywhere. Yeah, that's part of it, but the different perspective seems to me to be a much more important part.

SIMON BELL: Yeah, I like that a lot. I mean, we've talked a fair amount on this podcast about perspectives and multiple perspectives, but it's almost always been from the point of view of the analyst looking in, being appreciative of multiple perspectives. What I think you're bringing to this is this idea that people who own different perspectives to become more reflective and aware of their own perspective, that there is just one view. So it's not so much using it as a tool to understand other people. It's helping people to understand each other, which I think is where active listening comes in.

JAKE CHAPMAN: I couldn't agree more. And when I used to run these case studies with senior civil servants and public sector leaders, they would go out-- so day one, I taught them a whole lot of these systems tools. Day two, they would actually go out on a real case study. A minister or somebody senior wanted this problem solved. They interview everybody from the minister through the various departments and institutions right the way down to whoever was the final customer.

So you know what? When they were tackling teenage pregnancies, they ended up interviewing teenage girls who were in a hospital giving birth. They went all the way through the system. And then they all came back together and exchanged their views.

And these were public sector leaders, so their job was to solve problems like this. And they were all completely gobsmacked by the fact that everybody in the system they talked to saw it differently and certainly different from the way they saw it. And they realised that if this was a system that they wanted to intervene in, they had to listen a lot more rather than think up solutions a lot more. Absolutely.

I mean, I did this for six or seven years for the National School of Government, and it was always the same. They just came back and said, oh my god, I never knew what went on in a nursing home. Or I never knew what a probation officer did. Or I never knew why teenage girls wanted to have babies before they were 20. Whatever it is.

SIMON BELL: Do you think that this kind of learning, this kind of new understanding, do you think it has persistence, or do you think people slip back into old ways afterwards? Or do you think they actually retain this kind of approach?

JAKE CHAPMAN: I've never followed it up in an academic sense, so I've never gone back and interviewed people that I taught it to. I tell you, when they were doing-- so in my three-day work with these senior people, teach them systems tools, do the interviews, then they come back and use different systems tools to do something different. I had to stop them talking to each other.

I literally had to say, no. Right now, you're drawing a diagram. Or right now, you're role-playing. Well, right now-- because if I let them talk, they would immediately fall back into their conventional ways of thinking, and they would start to reinforce each other's presumptions about what was going on. I do know-- I do know-- because some of the people who were on those courses asked me to come and help them with other problems, which they had only realised was a problem because of the stuff they'd done on the course. In other words, they'd started to appreciate that other people had a different perspective.

SIMON BELL: And this is something which actually does have persist-- or it sounds like it has persistence in that people see value in what they're learning, and they must presumably see that this gives them advantages and improvements in their working, in their living, or whatever, presumably.

JAKE CHAPMAN: Yes, Yes. I think. And one of the things that I always found difficult when I was teaching at the OU, this stuff about systems, unless you experience it, unless you actually experience the radically different view that somebody else has got of the same problem that you've got, only when you viscerally experience it does it get in. You can read as many books about it as you like, but it won't make much difference. But when you actually get confronted with it, a live human being in front of you talking about the same problem in a completely different way, then you're, oh my god. That goes in.

SIMON BELL: Jake, we're out of time. I could talk to you for hours and hours, but I can't afford you, so no. But it's great having you on the podcast. Thank you so much for coming along, making time for us. And I hope to have another conversation with you in the future, sir.