

Transcript

SIMON BELL: Hi. I'm Simon Bell. And welcome to this podcast celebrating the teaching and practise of systems at The Open University. I'm an emeritus prof at the OU, and I began working with systems approaches there in 1996, I was surprised to find out. My background includes international development, information systems, and the measurement of sustainability. I write novels. And I have a dark fascination for post-apocalyptic stuff. Anyway, in my understanding, systems is primarily working with relationships in the world, the flows between things.

Today my guest is Martin Holt. I'm interested in my guest telling me about himself, about the way he sees the world, and about his understanding using systems approaches. So very much a welcome to you, Martin. Welcome to the pod.

MARTIN HOLT: Thank you very much, Simon.

SIMON BELL: I'll just say a few words about you. And this is what I have gleaned. And I was surprised to see an MSC, an MBA, and an MA in open and distance education. So you're a multi-talented man still considering, I understand, your PhD or MPhil maybe one day. But we'll see. I think for me, the takeaway from looking at some of your data is that you've been an associate lecturer in systems, teaching, doing systems for the Open University for around 30 years. Is that right?

MARTIN HOLT: That's correct. That's correct. 30, 31-- I can't quite remember.

SIMON BELL: And you describe yourself as a curious person. And I think that's a qualification for someone who does systems. Tell me how you use systems in your life, Martin.

MARTIN HOLT: I use it in a number of ways. I use it for my own personal development from time to time. I certainly use it from organisations with which I've been involved. They see me being a someone who can be fairly neutral and cast new light onto situations, a someone who can sometimes help them through issues they're experiencing where perhaps themselves got themselves into a little bit of a trap, perhaps. I use systems thinking. I may or may not be explicit as to whether I'm using systems thinking to actually help them work if they feel they can work with me.

SIMON BELL: I mean, to some extent there's no need to be explicit, is it? It's using things almost subliminally so people don't notice that you're applying something, wouldn't you say?

MARTIN HOLT: I think on occasions, yes. I think occasionally, I have worked in situations where people have needed-- or they're working with other people who need-- to know there is some sort of basic plan to the process. They don't need to know the details of the process, but to be able to say, well, I'm basing what I'm doing on, for instance, the work of Peter Checkland. That's all they want to know. They just know that if they're asked, they can go back and say how something was done.

SIMON BELL: I loved-- we had a little bit of a share of information prior to this interview, this conversation. And I loved one of the things you said. You said it's possible to make an impact when still a relative novice. And I so much agree with that, that students can be taught systems approaches and just about pick them up and run with them straight away, to some extent. And I thought that was a great observation.

MARTIN HOLT: Yes. That comes from-- I completely stand by-- I think although there are contributors to a systemic approach, systems thinking, without realising it, has developed and uses some tools along the way, which have become associated with it. So for instance, one example I can think of in particular was

the civil service example where a training intervention had gone horribly wrong. They were a lot of criticisms flying around that I was asked to try and-- I hadn't been involved with the intervention, but because I was within the organisation, I was asked to try and help them understand the what had gone wrong.

So I went round. And basically, for want of a better word, oh, they had great plans. I started off trying to draw an influence diagram to find out how the training had been designed. And even with trying to draw that simple diagram and asking questions-- well, how was that transmitted, how influential was that-- there suddenly came to corporate a horrible realisation that a key piece of information had never been passed on, in which case, it became all incredibly embarrassing for everyone concerned. And I was told to please take it no further. Go away.

But in reality, I realised that I'd probably saved some people's-- to say that I saved their careers is probably not too strong a word because it was within the civil service of those times, it's [INAUDIBLE] to blame the apportioning situation. Blame couldn't be apportioned where it was thought or hoped. And it was basically a human misunderstanding. A human admission had done it. There was no need for it to be a witch hunt, which it probably looked for at the time.

So that's only even a simple diagram-- similarly, a second example would be I'm a great fan of trajectory diagrams, of history, where we are and where we're going. And what I tend to find is that we start off where we are and where we want to go. We don't actually think of how we ended up where we are today. And sometimes, the learning one can get from how we ended up where we are explains not completely why we are today. But it tells me that if we don't deal with those historic drivers, actually anything we do today is going to be a waste of time.

So that is why I say even simple diagrams, asking those silly questions can actually have a great value. And that's something that people can do even before they've completed doing SSM Or learning how to do SSM, it's something they can be doing, contributing straight from the word go.

SIMON BELL: Absolutely, and lovely example. Another-- to quote you back at yourself because you gave me a couple of beauts, you really did. And you said the learning that systems thinking brings can sometimes be extremely unwelcome. To some extent, you've already described that.

But it is this idea that it's not a soft option, is it? It's not something you do because you want to be nice. It's something you do because you're seeking understanding. And it can be difficult and unwelcome.

MARTIN HOLT: Yeah, absolutely. I would agree with that 100%. It's not always. One hopes it isn't. But I would say in probably-- I'm going to say, pick a number, 50% of the interventions I've been involved in, there have been findings for people which are difficult, either culturally or because, for want of a better word, errors have been made-- all those difficult decisions or difficult or unwelcome decisions or home truths that have to be made.

So for instance, a recent example I've been involved with which hasn't gone very far, where I live-- and I used this example in my teaching-- there is a big issue about local traffic, local parking, and the local car parks, which are absolutely overflowing. Congestion everywhere, to the point where our local bus service is being threatened because the buses can never get through.

And I was talking with a local councillor and some other people. I think it was in a pub one night, as it happened. And they were talking about all these grandiose plans. And I drew a very simple diagram for them. I was a very simple system dynamics diagram. I put basically just two components in it, which was

long-stay car parking spaces and short-stay car parking spaces, and link them together with a simple arrow.

Now I pointed out to them, you can talk all you want about traffic congestion. But you have got to decide what is the purpose of the car parks? Is it to support the local shops, in which case you want more short-stay spaces?

Or is it to support commuters going to the local railway station, in which you want more long-stay spaces. And every time you take away a long-stay space to give a short-stay space, you put a car also some parked somewhere else. If they want to go to the station, it's parked on the road somewhere. Similarly, every time you take a short-stay space to get an extra long-stay space, there's someone who won't stop locally to do their shopping.

It's a very simple example, but ultimately, yes. We can talk about trying to discourage people from using their cars. But in the short-term, because of the geography where I live, which is very, very hilly, people are going to be reliant on their cars for some time to come. And they need to put them somewhere if they want to get to the doctor's, go to the shops

SIMON BELL: So it is this idea, isn't it, that these are difficult. There's no silver bullet here. There's no simple solution. It's a question of hard choices. But the systems approach helps you to gather that information together and somehow hold it in a way that people can actually understand the alternatives, the options they have. And then you can make sense of stuff.

MARTIN HOLT: Absolutely so. But I also wouldn't wish to say that everything, having concentrated on where people have hard choices to make, hard choices can still be nice choices to have. Another example-- I was director of a charity. And the charity was doing great work in the community, in a particular part of the community, but effectively was subsidised and relied on the local authority. It had done a little bit of work to develop itself and make itself more self-sustaining.

But it became apparent that the local authority would no longer provide the level of support they were doing. They'd give a certain amount of support in terms of writing it home for it, but they would not provide financial support.

So there, it was a question of developing options and thinking about what are the charity's strengths, its weakness, and marrying in those, what might we do while maintaining our basic ethos, at the same time doing something which might actually bring in some money. So if we failed in 12 months time, there's going to be a difficult decision because we employed-- it employed about, I'm going to say, half a dozen people full-time equivalents, but also had a big impact on the community of those who came to use its services.

So there, there was a hard choice there. But it was a nice hard choice. If we could get it right and come up with some options, yes, there would be a sustainable future for the charity. And so by helping to look and think about what they were good at, where their strengths are, what they've learned through what they already did without even realising it, it identified for them a way they could move forward. And there were some difficult conversations along the way.

But in an awkward year where everyone had to move out of their comfort zone, we were able to engage them into a paying programme, which actually, they turned out to be extremely good at doing. And it's basically secured their financial future certainly for three or four years after that by tapping into a government scheme and being paid for it.

SIMON BELL: There is this sense-- I don't if you share this feeling. But in some ways, our systems approach is almost like a superpower. It gives you a certain amount of space in which to think. And it gives you the capacity to-- or the permission, maybe-- to think about things which may not be obvious, but which are important.

MARTIN HOLT: I would agree. Although I like your description of a superpower, something tells me it shouldn't be a superpower. But that's how it ends up to a little bit. And what I like, going back to, perhaps, the earlier days of my system's career, what I did like, some of the tools and techniques we used were quite explicit in that they allowed you to step outside what you normally did and just park it for a second and be silly, for want of a better word. Be creative without doing any harm. It gave you that permission to do it and then to think about what you'd learned from that, and then to bring it back into the real-world situation.

Which is essentially what I'm saying is Peter Checkland's first iteration of his approach was what I happened to use. But I realise now that wasn't just about what Peter Checkland did. He might have articulated it and written it down nicely so I could follow it. But that's the permission that systems thinking gives us, is to go beyond and break out of our normal trains of thought without danger to anyone involved.

SIMON BELL: That brings me to my last question for you, really, Martin, which is again, I asked you-- or provided me with your thoughts about what advice you'd give a fledgling practitioner. And your first comment was be kind. And I kind of think I've been dealing with a number of practises recently where it seems to be, be abrasive. Be confrontational. Be difficult. It seems to be the kind of mantra.

I loved the idea that your first words were be kind, because actually I agree with you entirely. Being kind, you open people up. Being abrasive, being confrontational, what does that give us?

MARTIN HOLT: Yeah, absolutely nothing. And it's not even being abrasive. But it's the basic message which I see so often. I've seen so often in my working life people come in, consultants come in, and the first thing they tell you is all you've been doing is rubbish. They don't tell you that in quite those ways. But they completely devalue everything that's been taking place. And that is not the way to bring people. So I can think of-- it wasn't a particular systemic example. I can think of an example some years ago where I went into somewhere. And there was a very strange arrangement for their administrative work. They had to admin officers at the opposite end of a long building. And I could have gone as a consultant and said, this is ridiculous. Sort it out, et cetera.

I just asked people-- I've been working there for a couple of days. And I just said, I'm just curious. Could you explain what you've got the strange admin arrangement here? Just as an outsider, it seems pretty-- and they were only too happy to tell me when I'd put it in those phrases. And there was a historical reason why they'd done it that way. It was nothing to do with organisational efficiency. It was to do with valuing two people who, for completely understandable reasons once I found out what they were, had had a complete breakdown and could not be put within 100 yards of each other. But they were good workers. So the organisation adapted around them, thought how can we keep these people on board both doing a good job, but keep them absolutely separate from each other? And they'd come with what appeared to an outsider is a very strange arrangement, but worked for them. So that's an example of being kind.

SIMON BELL: Martin, we're out of time. It's been fantastic, been lovely talking to you. Thank you so much for your insights and your thoughts. And thank you very much for appearing on the podcast today. Thanks, mate.