

Transcript

SIMON BELL: Hi, I'm Simon Bell. I want to welcome you to this series of podcasts celebrating 50 years of applied systems thinking in practise in the School of Engineering and Innovation at the Open University. I'm an Emeritus Prof at the OU. I started with Systems in 1996, which seems like an awful long time ago now. I've tried my hand at a lot of things, including CEO of a research institute, editor of a journal, writer of novels. And I have a dark, wicked suspicion that I love apocalyptic stuff.

People have their own definitions, but to me, systems is primarily the understanding of the world as relationships, the flows between things the conversation which follows is supposed to be systemic so that we can follow through on a number of lines which are interrelated and connected. My guest today is Dr. Rupesh Shah who's a Staff Tutor in Engineering and Innovation at the OU and has a deep and healthy understanding of systems. Hey, Rupesh, how are you?

RUPESH SHAH: Yeah, I'm good. Thank you. Nice to be with you.

SIMON BELL: Yeah, it's great to hear you again. We worked together a number of years ago on a number of things, and I'm sure there are lots of trailing edges in our conversations over the years. Rupesh, tell me a little bit-- just describe yourself, the people who are listening right now, about a systems practitioner. Tell me, tell us a little bit about yourself, just the elevator pitch.

RUPESH SHAH: Gosh, I don't think I've ever sold myself [SIMON LAUGHS] in an elevator. But as a systems practitioner, I think what I would say is that I really enjoy using systems ideas and techniques in my everyday practise as a manager and as an educator. And I find it brings me a lot of confidence in what I'm doing when I am working with others. And it also provides me with continual source of inspiration for thinking differently about situations that I'm facing.

SIMON BELL: That's fantastic. In an earlier correspondence, you referred to yourself as bushcrafting a way through the messes. And I thought that was just a lovely phrase. I thought that was a great way of putting it. Systems has a way of understanding complexity, I suppose, is the complex way of saying it. But I thought that was a great-- bushcrafting a way through the mess. So if we build on that, Rupesh, what does systems mean? If I said to you, boil down the concept of systems, from your perspective, how you experience in your life, what are systems?

RUPESH SHAH: Systems, for me, are ways of making sense and understanding and engaging with the messy complexity that we just talked about. They're conceptual devices, I think, that are helpful for people who are trying to do something different in the world. Just kind of going back to your introduction about sort of framing systems as about engaging in the world through relationships, I often kind of have this image in my mind when I'm trying to explain what systems is about. And I say, well, the great sages of India realised that the world was interconnected, and many of them just concluded that the best approach to dealing with that would be to sit under a tree and meditate on that fact for many, many years.

And I guess systems practise, for me, is about using that same insight but then perhaps engaging with the more active energy that some of us have in the world, the actually wanting to go and do something, then, about having that insight-- so may not necessarily be the right solution in comparison, but it just offers me a contrast to think about what is systems.

SIMON BELL: Yeah, I think that's lovely. I love the kind of connection, as well, to the sages and people who were interested in the deeper meanings of life, as well, because there is this thing running through the systems movement that a systemic approach, in some way, gives us an agency, a kind of leverage

over the world, or an understanding which is not available to many sort of rational forms of inquiry. It's a kind of thing that systemacists have. Would you relate to that?

RUPESH SHAH: Yeah. Yes in some ways, and then no in another way, because I think one of the things is, yes, I'm looking for agency by thinking systemically. But also, at the same time, it makes me more-- I guess I hesitate with the agency that I do generate, because it makes me aware of the limitations of my perspective. It makes me aware-- I mean, it's similar to the sages, again, who-- the Jain monks had a clear view that there was a many-sided view of the universe. And therefore, their own view was limited. And it's the same sort of thing for me that, yes, I'm seeking agency through thinking systemically. But also, I'm very much aware at the same time that there are limitations to that. That's what the systems view has brought for me. And sometimes that has downsides. And sometimes I think I wish I could be more like my sort of 19-year-old pre-systems person, self, sort of thrusting out into the world and just being very kind of sure about what I wanted to do. But on balance, I feel I feel it actually brings me a greater sense of well-being in my own practise, I think. Yeah.

SIMON BELL: That's really interesting. And also, I think the sense-- and it came through in something you sent me earlier on-- maybe a bit of humility, as well. I mean, there is this idea in a lot of academics that they come across sometimes as being quite arrogant and very sure of themselves, very confident of their knowledge, very sort of almost sort of blind to the idea that they could have blind spots, whereas what I'm picking up from you is a fair degree of humility about the bits you don't understand. The true complexity is maybe beyond a simple rendition, yeah?

RUPESH SHAH: Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I mean, the other side of that humility is recognising that systems and all sorts of conceptual frameworks, but particularly systems, has some wonderfully elegant but deeply simple kind of contributions to make. And it doesn't have to all be a five-level VSM diagram.

I'll give you an example of something here. Some years ago, I did some training with patient leaders in East London. And we just did a 10 week programme with various people who are sort of lay citizens but who wanted to or are interested in taking on more of a leadership role within the local health care system. And we were sort of building their capacity to engage with health care professionals and the health system.

And along the way, I kind of took the opportunity to introduce several systems ideas and concepts and approaches. And one of the ones that I introduced was a very simple one that you'll be familiar with, Simon, the PQR framework, a system to, by means of, in order to-- and when I first came across that with Rose Armson, I was sort of really amazed and blown away by the elegant simplicity of it.

Anyway, so I introduced this framework in one of the sessions to this group of mostly-- well, all local people. Many of them were out of work or not working, working at home. And I didn't really think much of it. I thought it was a helpful kind of intervention, but an introduction to them about PQR and so on.

Several weeks later, anyway, one of the participants came back to me and says, oh, I've got to just thank you about that session that we did a few weeks ago. I said, oh which one, thinking that we'd done something. She goes, yes, because I was talking with my husband. We were facing eviction from our property.

And we actually used a PQR framework to make sense of what we were doing, and we've avoided being evicted from our property. And she directly attributed their ability to deal with the problems that they were facing to something as simple as that, which we, often as academics, perhaps dismiss as not really kind of having depth to it. It's a very simple thing that made a big difference to somebody's life.

SIMON BELL: And it also gives us this idea that systems approaches have a relevance, a reach. And they have a relevance and a reach in a highly practical manner to laypeople, people who barely understand anything at all about the systems. There's this huge literature and these vast number of academics who all study systems. But you can take a very simple nugget, like a soft systems review, or a [? TQR ?] review. And you can get great value from that at a very, if you like, what an academic might call a superficial level. But actually, it still gives people a profound sense of depth.

RUPESH SHAH: Yeah. Yes, absolutely. I find one of the things that I value in the systems view is a sort of-- there's a rigorous framework underlying some very simple, straightforward ways of thinking about the world. So it provides a sort of a very strong bit of scaffolding. But then once you're in that scaffolding, you can do some quite simple things with helping people.

SIMON BELL: Yeah. I mean, do you do you actually have any experience yourself of communities making use of systems approaches? Of people out there doing systemic things?

RUPESH SHAH: I've done work in communities where we introduced, like the example I shared earlier, introduced systems ideas to tackle problems that they're facing. We had one instance where we were faced at a community with really high rates of late diagnosis of cancers. And we realised that actually this problem was a relational problem. Rather than something to pinpoint on one particular aspect of the situation, it was a relational problem about the local people and the health care professionals. And we did some work to do some systems mapping. We did some multiple cause diagramming-- relatively simple kind of multiple cause diagram work with both community people and with health care professionals just to try and develop a more relational appreciation of why cancers were being diagnosed so late. And I think that was a kind of intervention that I felt made a real difference to people's understanding of what was going on. People stepped away from blaming each other, and I think that can make a big difference, that change.

Yeah, so there are examples out there. Yeah. [LAUGHS] I think so. They're perhaps not as ubiquitous as we would like. And I think this goes back to one of the reasons, one of the elements of I think what we perhaps-- we perhaps expect a lot from systems approaches. We expect these big wham-bam interventions. And of course, there are examples like that, great big transformational interventions. But sometimes, perhaps, it's also, for me, I mean, speaking as middle manager in a large bureaucracy, I think sometimes it's about just making some small changes to how we have our everyday conversations with the people we manage or the people we support, or indeed the people who are managing us. And they don't necessarily show up in large case studies. But changing the way that managers interact and engage with colleagues can be just as much about thinking systemically as a kind of large-scale cross-sector intervention.

SIMON BELL: I think that's really-- that's a profound observation, because it is this idea that people-- the change has to be in the individual. And then that change can work its way-- so sometimes it's almost fractional. You hardly notice a change. But one person sewn into an organisation can make a huge change in the culture of the organisation if they have systemic ideas, maybe. Maybe, yeah. I think I have examples of that, too, of people making changes in that way. But it's hard to quantify. I think that's probably important.

RUPESH SHAH: Yeah, and it's hard on you as a practitioner, as well, because you can often come back to feeling like you're not making any progress, feeling like you're having the same type of challenge or battle over and over again, because the wider structure perhaps doesn't support that way of working. I will

give you an example. I find myself quite regularly frustrated with our meeting culture in the Open University, where we're hyper task-focused, really super task-focused.

I mean, it's wonderful. It's great. We get tasks done. And I often think, well, we don't pay much attention to the relational dynamics, again, within a group of people, within the team. And if we have more time and attention towards that, then I think probably our performance would be better.

And it takes a lot of effort to make the case for having 10 minutes of a check-in at the beginning of a meeting. I mean, when I worked in community development, it was a regular part of our practise that meetings, communities meetings or even team meetings, we would have a space for people to check in with each other about how they're doing, because that was-- we saw that as, yes, there's no good just us doing interventions outside. We needed to look after ourselves inside the organisation, as well.

And I think making the case for that sort of space within a highly rational institution is challenging and often feels like hard work. You feel like you're asking for something which ought to be relatively straightforward. And you're asking for the impossible, because we've got so much business to be done.

And I think the business of any organisation is often the business of building and maintaining relationships.

I think many of the conditions of current life require us to step outside of ourselves, our embodied selves as humans. And I think some of those very same things are factors that create the conditions that we have. But unless we can sort of make mistakes together and laugh together about them, I think it becomes very, very difficult to practise as a professional in a world of deep complexity.

The last two years has taught many people all over the world that things are very, very complex and that what we thought might work or a strategy that we thought might work, be effective, may be completely wrong. And so therefore, we need to be able to be humble enough, to come back to that word. And we need to have a relational context, relationships with others that allow us to make mistakes and feel OK about it.

SIMON BELL: Thank you very much, Rupesh. That's great. Thanks.