



MENTAL MODELS

MECHANISTIC AND LIVING SYSTEMS

*HOW WE PERCEIVE ORGANISATIONS DETERMINES HOW WE ACT
IN THEM*

DESCRIPTION AND CORE PRINCIPLES:

When we are asked to draw our organisations, in any bigger organisation it usually manifests as an organisational chart or “organigramme” with boxes and communication lines:



What are the assumptions and core beliefs we hold about organisations when the picture manifests like this? This represents a bureaucracy. It also represents a mechanistic view of organisations.

This picture speaks of a belief (basic assumption) that if we can define each part and the relationships between them, the machine will function well. This may also tell us that we believe that leaders are the experts and have the answers. That is why they are at the top of the chart with a bigger office, more responsibility and a bigger pay check. It may also tell us that we believe that people at the bottom of the pyramid do what they are told as long as they are given a good plan and clear instructions or job definitions. It may communicate a sense of order and having things under control. It is a linear system, which makes it streamlined and effective in stable environments.

Another way of viewing organisations brings its own assumptions and core beliefs. This worldview sees organisations as “living systems” or “complex, adaptive systems” and the picture then manifests like this:



This picture speaks of a belief (basic assumption) that we can self-organise. There is no clear top or centre and each part seems as important as the next. There are many leaders and leadership can shift. All the parts are interconnected. It may also seem less orderly. This is a network and a parallel system (as opposed to linear), which makes it resilient, flexible and adaptive in changing environments.

These two paradigms are almost diametrically opposite and often cause a polarisation of views either favouring one or the other. Instead, the complexity of our time calls for both. We need to learn how to lead and participate in both contexts, embrace both worldviews and know what is needed when. Seeing an organisation as a living system or complex adaptive system may seem chaotic to those who are used to working in a hierarchy, which by comparison seems orderly and easier to control. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages and are good for different things. Living systems or complex adaptive systems are flexible and resilient they can embrace diversity and can be innovative. Hierarchies can be stable, effective in action and streamlined. Both are needed.