Tool 42: Circle of Coherence

Aim of the tool
To expand insights in the functioning of a vital network; to clarify the participants' positions in the network and to clarify the (power) differences and similarities between the participants.

When to use it?
Co-creation stage or Convergence stage: to review an established MSP or network, preferably with stakeholders.
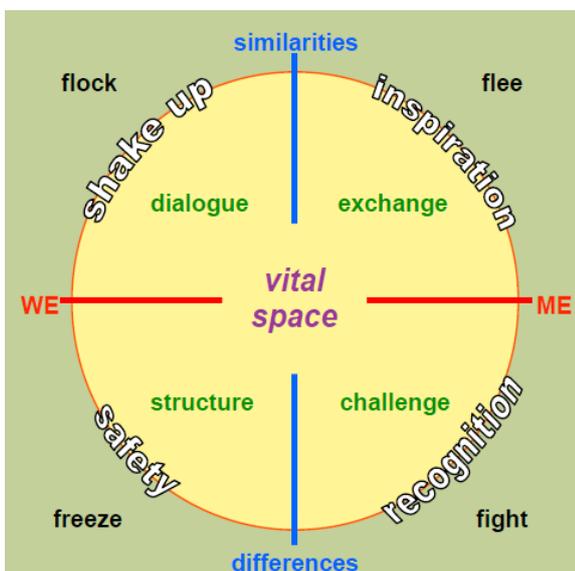
What is the Circle of Coherence?

This tool, developed by Eelke Wielinga (www.linkconsult.nl; Wageningen UR; MDF) requires more theoretical introduction than other tools. It offers a particular way of looking at network dynamics.

Healthy networks have 'vital spaces'

The Circle of Coherence is based on the assumption that human networks are alive, like any living organism in nature. A healthy network develops task division and specialisation, making the whole more than the sum of parts. A coherent network influences its environment.

People feel 'vital space' in a network when they gain from their efforts and when they feel meaningful. There are four basic interaction patterns that feed this vital space:

- Exchange: a positive balance between give and take
- Challenge: incentives to use the best abilities
- Structure: clarity about order that regulates the interaction
- Dialogue: willingness and effort to learn from each other

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Since vital space is rewarding, it stimulates to increase efforts and attuning to others, which makes it a self-propelling process. In a healthy process the drive to keep balance between these constructive patterns is in-built. They alternate. This is comparable with what is known in group dynamics as the stages of group development: forming, storming, norming and performing.

The logic behind it is that in every communication at least two dimensions can be distinguished. The dimension of contents (vertical, blue) refers to images of people about what they know and what they want. Between similarities and differences people can be curious and hopeful. Curious to find out what they don't know yet. And hopeful regarding the ambition that brings them together in the network. Too many differences are confusing, and too much similarity does not have added value.

The dimension of relations (horizontal, red) refers to the tension between individual and collective space. For joining efforts, people have to attune to each other at the cost of their individual freedom. At the WE side, collective ambitions, norms, rules, structures determine what behaviour is expected. If this becomes too strangulating, the natural response is to aggressively reclaim individual space. At the ME side, the added value of the network gets lost, resulting in lack of protection and meaningfulness. This provokes fear, making people more inclined to attune again.

Destructive patterns exist as well. Like every living cell has its destructive mechanisms, ready to do their clean-up work when the function of the cell gets lost, such patterns are looming in every network was well. Under pressure, people have four options:

- Flee: detach from the network
- Fight: try to get it their way by reducing the influence of others
- Freeze: avoid any danger
- Flock: submerge in subgroups, seeking safety against an angry world outside

These patterns are destructive because they escalate into stagnation or chaos. Such patterns do not correct themselves. For someone who cares about the network, these patterns indicate that something needs to be done.

Intervening with the Circle of Coherence

The value of the Circle of Coherence is that it helps to identify different strategies for intervention. What might help in one pattern is counterproductive in others. An inspirator who makes people see the advantages of the network helps them from fleeing to the pattern of exchange. When people are fighting, he makes the situation only worse, because people are already struggling for recognition of their own ideas.

In every quadrant people need something different to get out of the escalating pattern.

- Inspiration (flee): An inspirator can do so by showing how the network connects with their ambitions.
- Recognition (fight): A negotiator can give recognition to valuable intentions and seek solutions for what does not fit together.
- Safety (freeze): An investigator can search for safe grounds where parties can experiment with different behaviour, thus building trust in small steps.
- Shake up (flock): A joker can touch on suppressed feelings in a humoristic way, thus bringing relief in the strangulating climate of forced adaptation.

These are called warm interventions because they bring people to insights that will increase vital space. They work through the mind. Sometimes these interventions are not strong enough to stop

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escalating patterns. Cold interventions make use of power to force people to make certain behaviour impossible.

- A ruler sets conditions in which the price of fleeing becomes too high, and the perspective on rewarding interaction becomes more attractive.
- A strategists intervenes in a fight by making it impossible for any of the fighting parties to win at the cost of others. This forces them to start communicating.
- A fighter breaks the pattern of freezing by making it impossible for the ruling party stay in control.
- A prophet uses his authority in the pattern of flocking to wake up people by telling the inconvenient truth in a way it cannot be ignored.

In practice we use all these interventions, including the cold ones, in more or less explicit ways. However, the cold interventions are in danger to aggravate the situation, rather than opening up the way to solutions. The intention and justification are crucial.

The difference between constructive and destructive patterns in living systems is connection. In a healthy network task division, specialisation and coherence develop as long as all essential elements are connected. Destructive patterns occur when such connections are lacking. Interventions contribute to vital space, as long as they work towards restoring connection.

Procedure

One practical way to get a group of people to reflect on the circle of coherence is to create the basic picture (a circle, with two axes on it made by using rope, and names on A4 paper) in loose elements, enough to cover a big space in your workshop room of at least 5x5 metres. See photo.

Participants are requested to position themselves in the quadrant in which their MSP is currently involved. Within that quadrant, ask them to reflect whether this MSP is inside or outside the 'vital space'. This can imply that the MSP is more on the 'I' side or more in the 'We' side, and whether the focus currently is on the similarities or the differences.

Learn more

Eelke Wielinga (2009) The Circle of Coherence [pdf](#)

Steve Waddell (2012) Innovation and learning networks and free actors. Blogpost 12-04-2012. http://networkingaction.net/2012/04/innovation-and-learning-networks-and-free-actors/

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