

## AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEXT, RESONANCE AND DOMAINS

BY HARALD KORN, SEPTEMBER 2011

If we were to strip leadership and teamwork down to the bone, we would essentially be left with communication. Communication between human beings; with all our limitations and possibilities. One-to-one communication and one-to-many communication.

For any type of communication to be effective, it must resonate.

In physics, resonance occurs when a system is able to store and easily transfer energy between two or more different storage modes (such as kinetic energy and potential energy in the case of a pendulum). Phenomena of resonance occur with all types of vibrations, such as mechanical resonance, acoustic resonance, electromagnetic resonance, etc. Resonant systems can generate vibrations at a specific frequency, as demonstrated in musical instruments. Phenomena of resonance also occur between human systems, in a figurative way of speaking. It occurs through communication. It represents our ability to generate vibrations at a specific frequency.

In his book *Primal Leadership*<sup>i</sup>, Goleman states that good leaders are effective because they create resonance. Effective leaders are attuned to other people's feelings and move them in a positive emotional direction. They speak authentically about their own values, direction and priorities and resonate with the emotions of surrounding people. Under the guidance of an effective leader, people feel a mutual comfort level.

As communicators – as leaders – the effect of our actions (speech) also lies in our ability to facilitate the “tuning in” process on the receiving end. How can we consciously work to establish the same specific frequency between two people or in a team? One important aspect of the answer to this question lies in the concept of **context** and our ability to provide contextual markers to our audience. By increasing our capability to establish clear contexts, we increase our ability to generate resonance.

### CONTEXTUAL MARKERS

When we listen, read, speak or write, when we act, and even when we think, we do it always based on some sort of context or frame of reference. If we turn on the radio, or surf on the TV and land on some channel or another, it might take some time before we become aware of what is really going on. What helps us to understand the connection or context is a series of contextual markers<sup>ii</sup>. If it's on TV, we can quickly determine if this is a feature film, a newscast or a documentary by relying mostly on our visual impressions. Listening to the radio, it may take a bit longer to identify the type of broadcast, but the radio may also feature sonic context markers such as music (in entertainment) different sound levels (in radio theatre), ambient noises (background) or nothing but the human voice (discussion programs, etc.).

Music also has a number of contextual markers to help us determine how we should listen. After a few seconds of listening to elements such as instrumentation, sound, tone, language and lyrics, we recognise the genre we are listening to. Most of us Europeans are most familiar with western music and may even have some preferences in one or more of the genres of pop, classical or jazz.

If we are presented with music from the Middle-Eastern or Asian tradition, it may sound strange in our ears until we have become accustomed to the different musical language. If we surrender and listen with an open mind until we understand the music on its own terms, we may encounter some amazing experiences, but in most cases we do not have the patience for this. On a day-to-day basis we simply fall back and rely on our predetermined references - otherwise the world is simply too complex to navigate in.

The search for contextual markers is an always on-going instinctive process – because it is vital to our existence. The animal world is full of contextual markers, and one animal is never in doubt as to the mood of another, because the markers are visibly present: The pointing of ears, posture, the sound of a snarl, the stamping of feet, etc. In our more sophisticated human world we have become so polished that we often find ourselves in environments void of such markers; we control our body language, mind our tone of speech and often tend to assume that the context – as clear as it is to us – is equally clear to our audience. Without thinking too much about it, we assume that the team understands why a certain issue is being brought up, or what it is we need to conclude in this very meeting.

Some of us have learned about the helpfulness of mechanistic markers such as including in the calling of a meeting a reference to whether an item is an *Information, Discussion or Decision*. To provide such (or any other similar) markers will enable team members to understand the context, and thereby what they can expect from the ensuing discussion and also what is expected of them in terms of participation and contribution. But our interaction can become even more value adding if we also add more dynamic markers; markers that establish contexts where we can readily explore and understand values, ethics, and personal preference; contexts where we can openly share ideas, doubts and challenges; and contexts where we can reach decisions with mutual understanding and appreciation – where true mutual commitment meets true appreciation of differences.

We search for markers because we are heavily reliant on our ability to reference anything new with something we already know. The markers provide us with the ability to pull out the “most relevant” set of references. One of our challenges as human beings is our ability to balance our use of past (old) experience and reference with the impulses of something new.

## CONTEXTUAL CLARIFICATION

In order to understand what others say, write, do or think, it is crucial to understand the context from which they are acting (speaking). What is their background? What are their intentions and their main reasons? Also the more mundane aspects are important to clarify, like how much time we have for this conversation, whether we need a conclusion today or not and who actually have the authority to make the decision. When context is

clearly stated, explained – and understood – we will more often than not find that participants in the conversation will focus on the primary purpose and task at hand. There are, ideally, not any questions related to task, frame or scope.

Clarifying our own context is a great help in order to create resonance. It is a practical means to establish the same frame of mind – the same frequency – as that of the other person or the team.

Contextual clarification is also important for ourselves, personally, in order to clarify what we need to think, speak, write or do in order for our acts (speech) to make sense to others and thereby have the effect that we want.

## APPRECIATION, DISTURBANCE AND REFLECTION

The Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana and his colleague Francisco Varela wrote in their book “Tree of Knowledge”<sup>iii</sup> of a range of conditions applicable to human cognition and development. Their basic concept is autopoiesis (meaning self-creation), which in short is that a condition in all biological beings is that we are cognitively closed onto ourselves. No matter how determined we are in our efforts to understand the world objectively, our perception builds to 80% on previous experiences and a predetermined frame of reference.

When we then – despite this fact – still are influenced by our surroundings, it is Maturana and Varela's idea that we must feel safe and comfortable in order to be open to influence. This comfort will derive from being appreciated. **Appreciation** in this context is not to be praised. To be praised means that someone passes judgement or estimation, and thereby puts himself in a superior position. To appreciate means to be attentive and interested in understanding the other, to notice what the other does - both good and bad - and then take the time needed to replay what you have heard and noticed, and what it did to you.

When we feel appreciated, we are more open to a certain **disturbance**. This disturbance must be appropriate in order to have the desired effect. If too small, it will make no impact – and if too big, it can be destructive. If appropriate, the one who is disturbed may react with insight and willingness and a readiness to adjust, and thus start a positive development. The most effective disturbance is asking questions. Questions will cause **reflection**. It is the reflection that makes us connect with previous experiences and provide knowledge and insight conducive to change. You may lead the horse to water, but you cannot force it to drink. We cannot change others, but by appreciating them and then provide appropriate disturbance and time for reflection, we may create the right conditions for change.

Maturana talks about how all our human acts take place in language. He distinguishes these acts as taking place in three different domains, and he calls these the Domain of Aesthetics, the Domain of Production and the Domain of Explanations. Maturana continues to explain that we exist in all three domains simultaneously, and that there are even more domains than these three.

## THE THREE DOMAINS

By 1990, the theories on the three action domains developed further through an interaction between Maturana, theologian Peter Lang, sociologist Martin Little and psychologist Vernon Cronen. Lang, Little and Cronen wrote an article<sup>iv</sup> on the three action domains that have been the written basis for the practical use of domain thinking. The article is primarily aimed at therapeutic practice, but the thinking has for many years had a spillover effect on those who work with leadership, management and organisational development from different positions.

The three domains is one way to understand the context for action and communication and to create a basis for resonance – means to provide necessary basis for development, change and sound decisions.

The main point being made is that there are three different domains from which we act, speak and behave. Each domain has a specific purpose and resembles a distinct frame for our modus operandi. The three domains are referred to as the personal domain, the reflection domain and the production domain. The domains provide a simple language for meta-communication – communication about communication.

## THE PERSONAL DOMAIN

This is the domain where we are, feel, think and behave as we please - from a personal vantage point and perspective. Personal does not mean private. Personal also means professional personal. This is where we are, for example when we comment on "what I think and feel about change" (good or bad idea to close down, too little involvement from our employees, etc.); this is where we are when we do what we think is right, i.e. in connection with a change process. Here we exchange our personal value judgments, attitudes and opinions. This is the domain of right and wrong. In the personal domain, we are entirely our own masters; we are unique and supreme. It is very much our values that make up our personality. This is where we may relate to politics, religion, ethics and aesthetics. We fuel this domain by questions that cause the speaker to express his or hers personal views.

To arrive at a common understanding it is crucial to understand the personal contexts from which the other party or parties speak and act; how each individual understands and responds to new initiatives. This domain – in isolation – only rarely leads to agreement, but it almost always leads to a certain appreciation.

When this domain is allowed to prevail in a workplace, the symptoms are typically: many opinions, and much discussion about right and wrong. Communication is characterised by attitudes and opinions; we find lot of discussion and often very little action. Co-operation and solving group tasks are often characterised by "I do what I think is right, regardless of what I think we have agreed", with the consequence that the common ground often gets lost.

The personal domain can be characterised as a universe. A domain with one truth. My truth. My universe.

## PRODUCTION DOMAIN

The production domain is a framework for joint problem solving, which means that I cannot just do what I think and want. Here we find agreed rules and procedures for what to do and how to do it. For example: I cannot just work with people I like, because there are others that I actually have to cooperate with. Here, we check questions that have definitive answers. In this domain we often say: “This is how we do things around here”.

In the production domain, we find descriptions and frames and procedures. This is the domain of agreed visions, business foundation, objectives, policies, job descriptions and various plans and decisions. The framework is clear: I am employed by this company in this department, we hold staff meetings at regular intervals, I know my salary and what is expected of me, I know our goals and if I am not sure of something, then I know whom to ask. Governance rules. This is where we are when we make decisions, give orders, make appointments, inform and act. This context creates the foundation, framework and direction for our work and cooperation, and must be clear and transparent in order to avoid duplicity and redundancy, or in order not to leave something important out.

Where this domain prevails, we often find lots of decisions and actions – and rules. Work is characterised by “this is how we do things”, or “ we usually do not...” Ambiguities are often solved by referring to a certain rule or regulation. Things are often quite predictable and stable.

The production domain can also be characterised as a universe. A domain with one truth. But this time it is our truth. Our collective universe.

## REFLECTION DOMAIN

For most of us, the previous two domains are often quite familiar, and we recognise ourselves, and our working environment in these two domains. When working with senior executives, we often hear that what they really would like more of, is time to reflect. In saying so, they probably think mostly about time to reflect to themselves. Our third domain, the domain of reflection however, is a place where we invite others in to reflect with us; openly, inquisitively, curiously, attentively and honestly. This is something that does not happen by itself. It must be actively initiated.

Over the last decades, we have often searched for the absolute (singular) truths and found ourselves comfortable in homogeneous societies. Today’s society is much more complex, and there is little or no room for monopolised truths. We find it more and more difficult to believe in the idea of one grand narrative, and we have come to realise the virtue of pluralism with its diversity of opinions, interaction between different cultures, and more global world perspectives with open borders and constant migration. There is an ever-growing need to involve more people in decision-making, and provide

constructive space for interaction and the ability to play with different truths – all at the same time.

In the reflective domain, there is room for at least as many truths as there are people, and it's an important point that we do not need to agree on a single truth. Maturana refers to this appreciative space as a multiverse, as opposed to a universe in which we must agree on a single truth. In other words, the universe's restrictions that are at play both in the personal and in the production domain are no longer relevant and do not need to be adhered to. In this multiverse, we interfere with each other's thinking and disturb our predetermined frames of reference with open, appreciative and curious questions. We wonder together, we doubt and we share ideas. We give each other time for reflection. We remove ourselves from the centre. We listen more than we talk. We seek to understand beyond what is being said, beyond the observed behaviour – all in a mutual and co-created process.

The reflection domain is a kind of sanctuary, a space where one can take deep breaths and “time away” from an otherwise hectic action-oriented every-day.

The rules of the game in the reflective domain are:

- Diversity and disagreement are welcome
- Nothing is right and nothing is wrong
- Any questions, thoughts, ideas, attitudes, opinions are of equal value
- You listen and ask questions in order to understand each other better (and not to convince the other about their own attitudes)

Maturana's concept of appreciation, disturbance and reflection is particularly applicable in this domain. It is one of the best tools for interaction in the reflective domain, and a good practical template for how to be attentive and appreciative, how to ask questions in such a way that they provide optimal disturbance, and how to secure enough room for reflection and development of thought.

## EPILOGUE

One of the most effective and useful applications of the three domains is to use them as contextual markers for different phases of a process. In any given process you can start out in the personal domain where everyone involved may say something about his or her attitudes towards the given topic or challenge. Then you may explore the reflection domain, where you only have one goal in mind: to understand the hopes and intentions that lie behind the stated expressions. Ask questions and explore, disturb and reflect. At some point you leave the reflection domain and move on to find out what happens in practice and then move forward into the production domain.

Leaders may also find it useful to take advantage of the three domains in more casual team settings, and even in quite ordinary management team meetings. Often, the leader of a team has her, or his, own opinions or thoughts on any given topic on the agenda. Instead of holding back, being afraid of giving the impression that they already have made up their mind (production domain), they may simply state that: “allow me to

“speak from my very personal domain for a while”. In this context, everyone will know that no decision is made. The topic is still wide open, and everyone will be invited in to share (from their own personal domains) and to reflect openly together before coming to a conclusion.

The domains can now be used to set context. They are the tool you use to tune everyone onto the same frequency; make sure everyone is on the same page. The domains are used to create resonance, and through this resonance you may explore further afield than ever before and still reach mutual agreements faster than before, all while remaining energised and in good spirits.

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i Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee (2002). *Primal Leadership, Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*. Boston, Harvard Business School Press

ii Katrine Søderberg et.al. - The Performance Group AS (2008). *Absolut Nærvær. Domænerne på arbejde*. Copenhagen: Frydenlund

iii Maturana, Humberto & Francisco Varela (1998): *Tree of Knowledge: Biological Roots of Human Understanding. Revised Edition*, Boston & London, Shambhala

iv W. Peter Lang, Martin Little & Vernon Cronen (1990). The Systemic Professional - Domains of Action and the Question of Neutrality in Human Systems. *The Journal of Systemic Consultation & Management*, 1, 39-55.