

# Me, Myself And I—And Now Us

## A Living System Organization

by Claire Knowles

**W**ho hasn't sung with a child that fun, yet deeply true, song that goes, "Oh, your head bone's connected to your neck bone, and your neck bone's connected to your shoulder bone?" The lyrics continue all the way down to your toes and back up and around again.

Over time, the illustration expands from a song into a deep sense that our personal being is connected in body, mind and spirit. Each of us is a whole living system, and, within our individual living system, numerous processes are doing their work almost unnoticed, e.g., digestion, respiration, circulation, as well as endocrine and nerve functioning. Each process is part of the vital, complex interconnectedness.

### Living Systems

Living systems have the distinction of being able to adapt to changes in their environment. Complex chemical and neurological communication systems provide feedback, each to the other. As living systems, we consciously learn and reflect from our experiences. We can visualize possibilities for the future and then prepare for them. We communicate in many ways, and, because we are social, we can communicate through conversation. We each have a sense of who we are, of our relationships with others and with the external world. We learn, we grow, we change, we adapt, we co-create, and we seek coherence through patterns and processes. We continually sense that the environment is capable of transformation. We have capacities for inquiring, finding and trying solutions, reflecting, learning and growing. Our being, without even realizing it, is self-organizing all the time. And we are not alone. We are in relationship to everyone and to everything else.



### The Living System Organization

An organization is like a pliable, porous container with an inside and an outside. It is constantly in motion, constantly integrating complex and dynamic relationships. Without people, and without people relating to other people, an organization would obviously not exist. It is made up of people who are living, working and relating in a particular environment, capable of transformative change, much like a living system.

Ask yourself the following questions about your organization as a living system. Examine it for congruency and coherence.

- Is it healthy?
- Is it adaptable to change?
- Are feedback and communications open and flowing?
- Is learning and re-learning taking place?
- Is it growing? Is it progressive?
- Has it visualized the future and prepared for it?
- Is the organization clear on its identity, purpose and intentions?
- Is there clarity and coherence among the functions of its parts?
- Is there cognition of existing patterns and processes?
- Are underlying issues addressed?
- Are differing views invited, discussed and measured against clear principles? Are they synchronized to advance the purpose and goals of the organization?
- Is quality conversation across the board encouraged?
- Do members know what is going on and why?

- Are new ideas supported, encouraged and integrated?
- Do the leaders lead with integrity and clarity?
- Do the ground rules for interacting together support the organization's intentions? Are they principle-based? Are there clear and simple rules?

Analyzing organizations as if they were living systems is important. Congruence, or lack of congruence, is often very visible. Organizations that are congruent, or that exude coherence and clarity, are generally more effective, sustainable and healthy. Those that have adopted the above principles are usually better at addressing their problems, challenges and issues and more successful at prioritizing the most important things. Such organizations succeed because their members understand what is (or is not) happening within the interconnections. Their leaders are skilled in uncovering and addressing hidden problems while supporting the organization's development and evolution.

Extraordinary results are achieved when organizations embrace the idea that they are living systems, mindful of connections, clear intentions, collaborative effort, being caring and relational, yet remaining open to honest conversation, sharing information and adhering to principle-based and collectively enforced accountability standards. Is your organization a living system?

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