

You don't build an organization — you grow it

Reflections from a five-year development journey with Multilingua Language School and Competence Centre (2021–2026)

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“An organization is not a machine to be fixed, but a living system to be tended.”

If you lead a team or are responsible for your organization's development, this feeling may be familiar: the people are talented, yet the team stays fragile, good specialists tire and leave, and development never quite sticks. These are not separate troubles, but symptoms of one and the same system. That is what this article is about — and about what actually helps, if you want development to last.

When we talk about “developing” an organization, we often reach for mechanical language: fixing, optimizing, rolling out, making more efficient. A systemic view starts from something else. Drawing on general systems theory, it treats a company as a living, open system whose behaviour cannot be reduced to its individual parts (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Pull one thread and the whole web moves. Peter Senge made this very observation the foundation of organizational learning: lasting change comes from seeing the underlying structures and relationships, not from treating symptoms in isolation (Senge, 1990).¹

This matters, because most of what determines how a company fares is not visible on the org chart. It lies in the quality of relationships and in what people dare to say to one another. These are systemic properties; they cannot be “taught” to one person in a single workshop, but emerge over time, in the connections between people. Working for five years with one organization — Multilingua Language School and Competence Centre — I saw this principle play out concretely, and looking at that journey through a systemic lens explains why these activities were so valuable to the company. Although this journey took place in one particular company, the principles described here are not sector-specific: they hold in any organization where people work together — whether in manufacturing, healthcare, education, the public sector or a creative agency.

1. What a systemic view actually means

At the core of systems thinking are three ideas, each of which changes how we should invest in development.

The whole is more than the sum of its parts. You can send ten people to ten excellent training courses and the team is still fragile, because a team's capability lies in how those people work *together* (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Development that ignores the level of relationships leaves the single most important variable untouched.

Everything is connected through feedback loops. A burned-out teacher is not merely an individual's problem; it is a signal from the system that later shows up in

teaching quality, client satisfaction, staff turnover and reputation. Burnout research confirms that exhaustion is caused less by individual weakness than by chronic mismatches in the work system itself (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Maslach et al., 2001).

The observer is part of the system. A leader never stands outside the system they wish to change, nor does a supervisor. What we treat as safe to discuss, what we model and what we make legitimate is itself an intervention. That is why a leader's stance is often more important than any programme design — a claim strongly supported today by research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), discussed below.

2. Three systemic principles: belonging, order and balance

One of the most useful frameworks for making systemic sense of an organization comes from the work of Bert Hellinger, whose “orders of love” describe three principles that quietly govern every human group — a family, a team or an organization (Hellinger et al., 1998; Hellinger, 2001). Constellation practitioners have since explicitly extended them to organizational life.² These three principles are **belonging**, **order** and **balance** and they connect directly to the activities of this five-year journey.

Belonging. According to Hellinger's first principle, everyone in a system has an “equal right to belong” (Hellinger et al., 1998). When belonging is secure, energy flows; when it is disturbed, the system weakens. Supervision speaks to this principle directly. A recurring experience that participants put into words — “*I am not alone*” —, is belonging made tangible. It also sheds light on the most common barrier to development: people often perceive an established group as a “closed circle” they cannot enter. Respecting belonging means actively welcoming new members and, where needed, opening a new group, so that newcomers have their own place rather than having to break into an existing one.

Order. The second principle concerns clarity of place, role and precedence in the system. In organizations this means clear roles and a respected structure; ambiguity here is a frequent source of conflict and stalled initiatives. Throughout this collaboration, order showed up in the clear distinction between the trained supervisor's role and the participants' roles, in the seniority of the founding group and — most importantly — in the leader making reflection a legitimate part of the role, not a voluntary extra.

Balance. The third principle is the balance of giving and taking; healthy systems maintain a fair exchange. An organization that invests in its people (gives) and receives commitment, quality and loyalty in return (takes) keeps that exchange in balance. Supervision and development are, in this sense, the organization's side of a reciprocal agreement that keeps people resourced and ready to give their best.

3. Reflection as the engine

If systemic principles describe the *structure* of healthy development, then reflective practice is its *engine*. Its modern foundation was laid by Donald Schön (1983): in his view, a good professional does not merely apply learned techniques, but thinks about and adapts their action in the course of the work — Schön called this “reflection-in-action”. Kolb's experiential learning cycle made this same idea practicable: experience

becomes learning only when it is consciously thought through and applied anew (Kolb, 1984). Barbara Bassot captures its essence well, describing reflective practice as a repeating, open and creative process (Bassot, 2016).³

Creativity here is not decoration, but method. As Beckett-McInroy and Ali Baba argue in their book “Creative Reflective Practice”, reflection deepens when the practitioner moves beyond routine journalling — towards metaphor, image and experimentation —, precisely to those creative methods that make reflection sustainable rather than a tedious obligation (Beckett-McInroy & Ali Baba, 2022).⁴ Supervision is the structured, relational home of this work. Proctor's widely used three-function model shows why it is so valuable to an employer: supervision is at once **developmental** (formative — it builds competence), **supportive** (restorative — it protects wellbeing and prevents burnout) and **quality-assuring** (normative — it secures standards) (Proctor, 1987; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012).⁵ A single well-run practice thus serves learning, wellbeing and quality all at once.

4. Five years, four interwoven interventions

Read systemically, the activities that accumulated over this collaboration were not standalone services, but mutually reinforcing layers.

A development programme — shifting the operating culture. The journey began with a development programme for teachers that worked on two levels at once: methodology and the inner life of the work. Systemically, it did something more fundamental: it created within the group a *shared language* and a *habit of reflection*, shifting the culture from “giving lessons” towards “professional development”. This shift is the soil in which everything else grows.

Language-coach development programmes — distributing capability. Successive development programmes shaped skilled teachers into language *coaches*. The systemic step here is *distribution*: instead of concentrating all capability in one expert, the organization dispersed it among many people and created internal multipliers. A system that can reproduce its own capability is far more resilient than one that depends on a single source.

Supervision — holding the relational field. An ongoing supervision group provided structured, professional reflection in a safe setting. Its task is to hold the relational field that determines whether people stay resourced — in Proctor's terms, the restorative function. For a service-based company whose product is its people, this is core-asset maintenance, not a soft add-on.

Leadership, vision and strategy work — holding the system's coherence. In parallel with the teacher track, there were vision-board sessions tied to a multi-year strategy, change-management training and the design of an onboarding programme. Systemically, this concerns *coherence* — tying leadership's intention to the team's actual experience, so that development does not “flow” away.

5. Why this is genuinely valuable to a company

A systemic view shows that these activities are infrastructure rather than perks.

- **It protects the core asset.** When a company's value lies largely in its people, restorative reflection reduces burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) and keeps experienced staff engaged; in this case the core group stayed together for five consecutive years — a remarkable retention signal in a field where turnover is costly.
- **It builds capability that reproduces itself, instead of creating dependence.** Because capability was distributed through the development programmes and, increasingly, through co-vision skills, the organization depends less and less on a single external expert. The system learns to feed itself.
- **It creates a new, ownable service.** The *language-coach* development programme became a reusable, branded product that shifted the company from a language school towards a genuine competence centre, opening doors to more public tenders and external demand. Development became a growth engine, not a mere cost line.
- **It compounds into quality and reputation.** A reflective, well-supported teacher brings composure into the classroom. Quality and reputation are emergent properties of a healthy system — precisely what a service-based company competes on.
- **This way, something good can be offered to more people without becoming superficial.** And this is exactly where the key to systemic thinking lies. The question is not how to repeat the same thing more often, but how to build a system that holds depth by itself: new cohorts, co-vision as part of the programme, and a culture where reflection is a natural part of the work.

6. The leader is the keystone

One observation deserves separate emphasis, because this is where most development efforts stall. People often say that supervision “sounds excellent” — and then never take a step. Research on the intention-behaviour gap shows this is the norm rather than the exception: good intentions turn into action far less often than we assume, and the gap narrows only with concrete cues, deadlines and structures (Sheeran, 2002; Gollwitzer, 1999).⁶ The deeper barrier, however, is psychological — the fear of appearing vulnerable, uncertainty about the process, and a quiet sense that investing in oneself during work hours requires “permission”.

Here the leader is the keystone. Edmondson's foundational research shows that a team's learning behaviour depends on psychological safety — the shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking — and that a leader's inclusiveness is one of its strongest preconditions (Edmondson, 1999, 2019; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). When a leader signals clearly that reflection and supervision are valued and expected, the “permission” problem disappears and the field becomes safe enough for people to step in. A leader cannot stand outside the system; their stance *is* the intervention.

7. Obstacles as part of change management

An honest picture of this journey must also include the obstacles — because, seen systemically, these are not failures but part of how change actually happens. Every new element first creates uncertainty and questions in the system: where does it

belong, what does it require of me, is it safe? This was exactly the case when *coaching* and a reflective stance were introduced into the organizational culture. A system always seeks balance, and something new disturbs the existing order for a moment before it finds its place.

The most visible obstacle was the intention–action gap already described: people said “yes” to supervision in words, but did not always get to action — and to some extent this is still so. Systemically, this is not a lack of will, but a signal that between a good intention and actually showing up there are too few concrete supports: fixed times, named invitations and a structure that makes participation a default choice rather than a separate effort.

A second, deeper obstacle stems from the nature of the organization itself. In the training field, good teachers are in demand and split their time and energy across several employers — they are not tied to a single organization one hundred percent. In systems-theory terms, this is an open system with diffuse boundaries: members belong to several systems at once. As a result, the classic “levers” — command and obligation — barely exist, and the scope for involving people is smaller. But this is not only a drawback: a living system cannot be changed by command. When participation cannot be required, it can only be invited — by creating a space so valuable and safe that people want to come of their own accord. This makes the work slower, but also healthier, because engagement born of free will is more durable than engagement born of pressure.

There are also more everyday, but no less real, obstacles: information does not always flow to where it is needed, and time is scarce. These, too, are not random — scarcity of time is often a chronic systemic mismatch, the same one that feeds burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). A systemic view does not allow such obstacles to be “solved” with a single move, but it helps to see them rightly: not as evidence that development does not work, but as a natural part of change management. Here a leader's supportive stance and steady, persistent work can gradually turn these obstacles into strengths.

8. Gardening, not engineering

If I look for a single image, it is not a machine but a root system. Seen from above, each tree stands on its own. Underground, the roots are interwoven — sharing nutrients, holding one another upright in a storm, and signalling when there is danger somewhere. A healthy organization works the same way: visibly independent people, quietly interwoven into a single network that carries and feeds them all.

The figure below helps to see this same idea. Above the surface is the visible world — behaviour, skills and results —, addressed above all by training. Below the surface is the invisible world — relationships, attitudes and the whole system —, held by supervision. *Coaching* works at the boundary between the two, in the trunk, where the person themselves grows. All three operate at different depths, but for the sake of the same living system — just as the canopy and the roots are parts of one and the same tree.

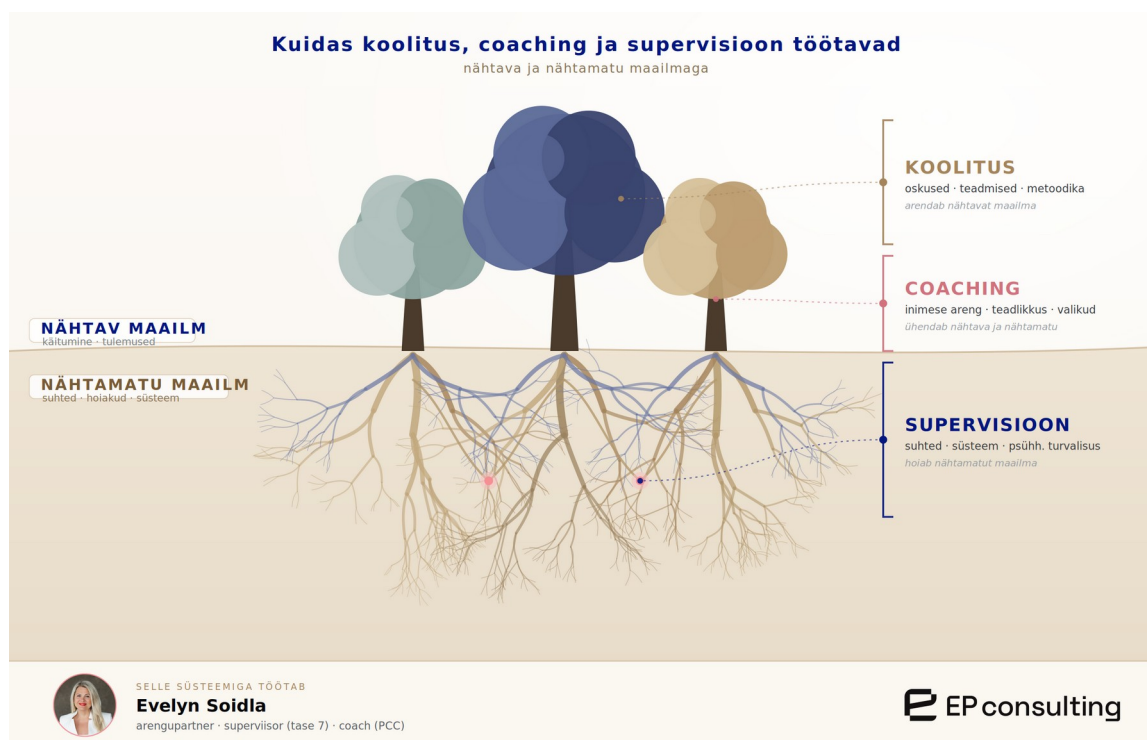


Figure 1. Training, coaching and supervision in relation to the visible and invisible worlds.

A root system cannot be built overnight — it is grown patiently, season by season, doing the right things at the right time and in the right place. Five years of *coaching*, training and supervision are, in this sense, cultivation rather than a sequence of projects. Seasons come and go; the roots remain — and it is the roots, far more than any single visible result, that determine whether an organization stays strong when the next storm arrives.

This is the reason to take these activities seriously: not as perks, but as steady, systemic work that keeps a living organization alive.

Looking back, I see that these five years were not a series of separate projects, but one shared journey of growth. This is precisely where the meaning of a systemic view lies: development is born in relationships, in patient tending and in steps taken at the right time, not in quick fixes. It was a privilege to experience this up close and to build it together with this team — to see how people, the team and the whole organization grow stronger together. And the journey is not over: the interventions continue, because a living system is tended onward, season after season.

I thank Multilingua Language School and Competence Centre for this shared journey — for the trust and the courage to invest in their people over the long term. Such multi-year collaboration is rare, and being part of it has been a gift to me as well.

Notes

1. Senge's "learning organization" frames development as building the system's collective capacity to learn, rather than as the sum of individual training events — a directly systemic interpretation of organizational growth (Senge, 1990).
2. Hellinger himself was cautious about turning constellations into a rigid theory, but the three principles have been widely adopted as a diagnostic lens in organizational development and

in so-called organizational constellations, where violations of belonging, order or balance are read as sources of recurring tension and stalled change.

3. Bassot's formulation is useful because it places reflection as creative and open, rather than a box-ticking exercise — the same stance that keeps a habit of reflection alive over time.
4. Clare Elizabeth Beckett-McInroy and Sameera Ali Baba, "Creative Reflective Practice: Global Perspectives for Critical Reflection on Professional Experiences" (Beckett-McInroy Publishing, 2022; ISBN 978-0-9931999-8-1). The book brings together sources from *coaching*, supervision and education, arguing that creative methods make reflection deeper and more sustainable.
5. Proctor's model is sometimes called normative / formative / restorative (also the managerial, developmental and supportive functions). Hawkins and Shohet's "Supervision in the Helping Professions" is the standard practitioner handbook developing these ideas, and also contains the well-known "seven-eyed" model of supervision.
6. Sheeran's meta-analytic review measures how often intentions fail to become behaviour; Gollwitzer's work on *implementation intentions* shows that specifying when, where and how an action takes place narrows the gap markedly — this is the practical basis for fixed dates, named invitations and opt-out registration.

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