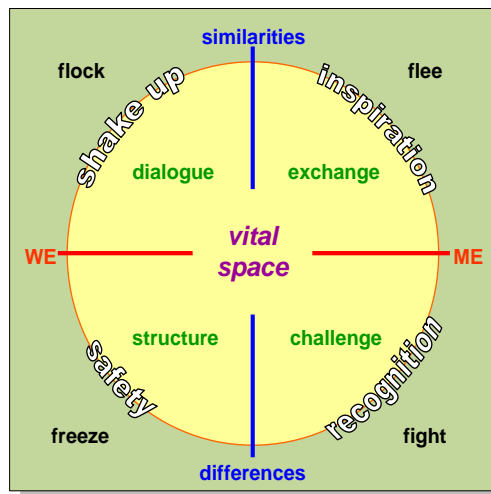


## The Circle of Coherence

*focuses on interaction*



### **The Circle of Coherence visualises patterns of interaction.**

It identifies constructive patterns and defensive patterns, and offers options for intervention to build coherence in the network.

### **Vital Space is what people experience when interaction is constructive.**

If there is vital space, it is rewarding to be involved in the network. People feel welcome to put in effort and align with others. There is room for curiosity and creativity, and for new things to emerge.

When people feel they can rely on others to do their share, they can concentrate on their own contribution, making use of their specific qualities. This allows for task division and specialisation, and creates added value for the network. Coherence in the network will grow, making the network a system that is more than the sum of its parts.

### **Constructive patterns feed vital space.**

Vital space emerges from healthy interaction. Just like trust, it cannot be manufactured, bought or imposed. Deliberate attempts to gain control over it are self-defeating. This is true for most important things in life; luck, creativity, happiness, passion, love etc. The more you chase it, the faster it runs away.

This does not leave us helpless though. Vital space grows by itself if it is nourished. It grows if there is *connection*. Vital space is not equal to trust. Trust can be unhealthy if people rely too easily on others, without being critical and aware of risks.

## Constructive Patterns

There are four basic patterns of interaction that strengthen connection. These patterns provide the basic ingredients for vital space.

- The Pattern of Exchange
- The Pattern of Challenge
- The Pattern of Structure
- The Pattern of Dialogue

### *The Pattern of Exchange:*

Individuals seek a balance between give and take. They look for sufficient similarities between their own ambitions and those that are shared, and which could make the network move. The benefits for them must outweigh the effort, risk and cost of involvement. In this interaction pattern, people try to get positive signals on these issues.

### *The Pattern of Challenge:*

Individuals try to acquire a position in which their contribution is valued and their benefits are secured. They challenge rivals who do the same.

Differences are important in developing task division and specialisation. Unsolved questions make curious and provide opportunities for learning. Indeed steady disagreement and conflict is healthy, so long as the network is learning how to deal with it constructively. This feeds trust that the network can cope with unexpected challenges.

### *The Pattern of Structure:*

The network works on formal and informal agreements, rules, and planning, which organises the traffic between people. This allows for concerted action. It feeds trust that individuals can concentrate on their own contribution whilst others will do their share. In this pattern the shared ambition is operationalised into concrete targets and actions in which people have specific mandates.

### *The Pattern of Dialogue:*

The network allows for mutual learning, creativity and growth. This requires an open attitude and willingness to give up set views and practices. In dialogue, people want to learn with and from each other. Dialogue feeds trust that people are being taken seriously. Their input in the network is valued in the process of co-creation, which may lead to new and unforeseen outcomes. In this pattern people show genuine curiosity and feel fulfilment in collectively building something new.

## **The steering mechanisms in networks are in-built.**

Constructive patterns alternate more or less automatically. When one of the ingredients is neglected, there will always be someone bringing attention to it somehow. This normally happens implicitly, wrapped in arguments about the contents.

Through evolution, people have learned to live together as social beings for millions of years. We may assume that the ability to keep networks healthy is much older and deeper ingrained than the rational mind which allows people to communicate in abstract concepts and language.

If we are well connected, we know what to do even before we can articulate it. This is what we experience as intuition.

This logic becomes clearer when we consider that any interaction between people has at least two dimensions. Every communication reveals something about contents and mutual relations.

*The Axis of Contents:*

People communicate between similarities and differences along the Axis of Contents.

"Contents" refers to what people understand and what they want. We can learn between what we recognise and what we do not understand. The steering mechanism works through limiting or widening our perception.

If there is too much confusion, we respond by limiting our perception to what we can handle. If everything seems to be known, we get bored and widen our perception in search of new differences, which always can be found.

If interaction partners are too different we lose interest. If they seem too similar, there might not be much added value in interaction. Between similarities and differences we are curious, and this is energising.

*The Axis of Relations:*

People communicate between "Me" and "We" along the Axis of Relations, between personal interests and the collective value of the network. A network has added value when people attune their efforts to what the network requires. This means that people must sacrifice personal freedom, anticipating compensation by the benefits of involvement in the network.

The steering mechanism works through the emotions of anger and fear. When the network becomes demanding and imposes too much on personal freedom and creativity, we respond with anger, demanding more space.

When we disregard the requirements of the network, we feel that the protection offered by it is diminished, making our efforts less meaningful. This translates into feelings of fear, making us more inclined to attune again.

The borderlines between Me and We are fuzzy and change along with the level of trust in a network. They need to be pushed all the time. Children learn to do so while playing. Children like to play and they are curious. Healthy adults do too.

**Defensive patterns exist too.**

Networks are not energising all the time. Interaction can drain energy. Just as constructive patterns reinforce themselves, so defensive patterns lead to a self-propelling process; as willingness to put in effort and align decreases, the added value of the network shrinks, making people less willing again.

Defensive patterns disconnect. If not corrected, the network ends up in either stagnation or chaos. Each constructive pattern has a defensive counterpart:

- The Pattern of Fleeing
- The Pattern of Fighting
- The Pattern of Freezing
- The Pattern of Flocking

*The Pattern of Fleeing:*

When individuals conclude that the balance between give and take is not in their favour, they will withdraw their contribution and are less inclined to align with others. They disconnect. This decreases the gain for others, also lowering their threshold to step out.

They may have very valid reasons for leaving, but from the point of view of an initiator who needs their contribution, this is a pattern of fleeing.

*The Pattern of Fighting:*

As long as individuals are challenging each other, their competences grow. Even if they lose a game, they learn how to respond better next time. When challenge deteriorates into fight however, the connection is broken. The other is no longer an esteemed opponent but an enemy, whose influence must be eliminated.

This pattern escalates as each party takes a strike from the adversary as a legitimate reason to strike back even harder. This leads to a path of mutual destruction.

*The Pattern of Freezing:*

Structure can evolve into a situation of control, where nobody dares to move anymore. Some maintain the *status quo*, while others suffer by it. The underdog is not satisfied with the limited space it gets, but does not see how to change it. A lot of complaint with little action signifies that they resign in their fate. The dominant party usually profits more from this situation, but also complains; about the lack of trust and the efforts it takes to maintain control.

Due to this lack of connection a spiral of fear, control and resistance develops where people are afraid to make any move. This is a manifestation of resignation.

*The Pattern of Flocking:*

The pattern of dialogue can degenerate into a defensive variety too. This occurs when people start taking any criticism as a threat to their harmony. This is a common phenomenon in idealist movements, religious sects, and also in groups that feel threatened by the outside world.

Groupthink develops in a sneaky way, without being noticed by those involved. They conform to what they think others are expecting from them, because being accepted within the group is more important than maintaining dissent.

**Defensive patterns have an ecological function too.**

Networks provide temporary structures that channel the concerted actions of people. As such they form the living tissue for movement. When the structure cannot respond sufficiently to its environment, it must adapt, or give way to make space for others; just as living organisms die when they lose the ability to maintain essential connections. Then it decomposes and becomes feed for other forms of life. Just like the steering mechanisms to keep a network healthy, the

mechanisms for destruction are deeply ingrained in human nature.

Defensive patterns have two functions. Escalating patterns become a threat to the structure when essential elements are not well connected. This inhibits the network's ability to maintain energy and respond to challenges in its domain. Defensive patterns will either destroy the structure, or provoke a change within the network, allowing constructive patterns to re-connect broken links.

### **Each defensive pattern calls for a different cure**

Such change requires leadership from those who want the network to survive. In each defensive pattern a different mechanism is at work. If we assume that people who get caught in an escalating defensive pattern still have a desire to be part of the network if it were healthy, their needs for re-entering the vital space will be different in each pattern:

- *Fleeing people need inspiration.* New insights or perspectives may change the perceived balance between costs and benefits.
- *Fighting people need recognition.* People are fighting for their position and will not give in to acknowledge the competing position of others. Only after being appreciated themselves, will they turn their attention to the opinions and interests of others.
- *Freezing people need safety.* Deviating from a strangulating structure is dangerous. Risks have to be reduced before people dare to change their behaviour.
- *Flocking people need a shake-up.* Creative and critical voices are not being heard anymore, and people do not look beyond their own clique. A good shake-up reconnects people with their own individual self and releases creativity.

These different needs call for different leadership interventions in each pattern to restore vital space.

### **Interventions can be "warm" or "cold"**

*Warm interventions work through the mind.* They invite people to rethink the situation and reconsider their behaviour:

- *The Inspirator provides inspiration,* offering new insights and opening people's eyes to possibilities.
- *The Mediator gives recognition* to each fighting party, and helps to find ways to make their intended contributions compatible.
- *The Investigator provides safety* by negotiating room for experimentation.
- *The Joker takes care of a shake-up* by wrapping the inconvenient truth in a

humorous way, possibly expressing what no one else dares to.

*Cold interventions make use of power.* They force people to change their position. Such interventions may limit their options or change the balance between costs and benefits.

- *The Regulator imposes limits and rules*, making it unattractive to flee.
- *The Strategist intervenes in the fight*, making it impossible for any actor to "win" at the cost of others.
- *The Activist undermines the position of the dominant actor*, forcing them to enter into negotiation with the underdog.
- *The Prophet uses his authority* to shake up people by telling the inconvenient truth.

The legitimacy of interventions becomes an issue when deploying power in networks. Since hierarchy is lacking, the mandate for using such power is not at all obvious. Who is *allowed* to? And to what purpose?

### **Connection is key**

Connection makes the difference between healthy networks, where constructive patterns dominate, and unhealthy networks threatened by defensive patterns. Warm and cold interventions aim to restore connection.

Warm interventions work through communication. Cold interventions make use of power. Here, imposing the conditions or even fighting may be necessary. But the risk of further escalation is high. What makes the difference between being part of the problem or part of a solution?

It's about intentions. There is a tremendous difference between using power to win or to reconnect. Using power to win does not contribute to connection, and therefore fuels defensive patterns. Using power to reconnect creates space for constructive patterns, through which people can build meaningful relationships. Anyone who feels responsible for the network can do this, with or without a mandate, although such interventions are more effective when initiated by a respected person.

### **Using the Circle of Coherence requires practice**

The Circle of Coherence is a powerful but complicated model. Real life has more than eight colours, and it takes time to recognise the basic patterns in a wide variety of situations. Not everyone is necessarily acting in the same pattern, although escalating patterns tend to drag people in. The intervener should focus on the pattern that is most disturbing at a given point, and the people who are furthering it. Practice and joint reflection are helpful in learning how to recognise the principles of the model in everyday life.

The main point is that different patterns require different interventions. What is effective in one situation might be counterproductive in another.

For example, the inspirator will only complicate matters in the pattern of fighting, where there are too many visions already. And don't use the humour of the joker either, because it makes a joke out of the fighting parties struggle for recognition. Neither the inspirator nor the negotiator will be effective against the pattern of flocking, since the conformists do not perceive there to be a problem. And so on.

The constructive patterns of exchange, challenge, structure and dialogue are similar to the stages of *forming*, *storming*, *norming* and *performing* as commonly depicted in theories of group dynamics. However, these stages suggest a linear process from primitive beginnings to success.

The Circle of Coherence does not imply this linearity. Patterns alternate. New networks often start in the pattern of exchange, after which those of challenge and structure will follow. A new network of managers or representatives is more likely to start in the pattern of challenge, because they will try take a strong starting position for the negotiations they expect. The pattern of dialogue requires a certain level of trust, for which the other three patterns must already made some headway. But a good shake up can bring the network back into the pattern of challenge, whilst a far reaching proposal may make people reconsider their level of involvement, which takes place in the pattern of exchange.

The Circle of Coherence acknowledges the role of defensive patterns and the importance of connection for feeding vital space. It illustrates how investments in relationships empower the network to work on a shared ambition. This shared ambition gives focus to the efforts network members.

What emerges from the vital space that is thus created cannot be foreseen. The good news is that it might be better than anyone could have imagined beforehand.

**Origins:**

*The Circle of Coherence was developed by Eelke Wielinga and the first version was published in his PhD thesis "Networks as Living Tissue" in 2001. The metaphor of living networks proved to be a useful alternative for other metaphors in use (eg. the world as a machine, a jungle, a market place or a village where people share a common faith). The Circle of Coherence visualises how interaction patterns are governed by biological mechanisms. The model builds on earlier work on situational leadership by Hersey and Blanchard (1977) and insights in group dynamics.*