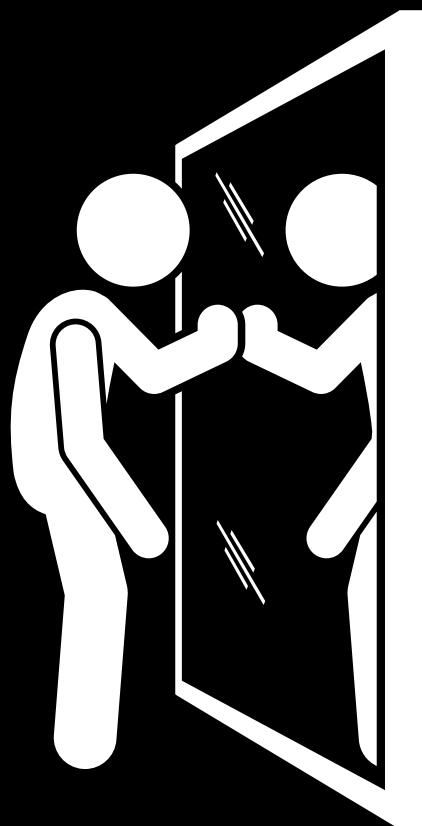


# The System Mirror:

## A Relational Microgame

An embodied experience of how systems shape — and are shaped by — interaction.



### What You Need

- A group of 6–30 people
- 30 minutes
- A bit of floor space to allow movement or milling
- No slides needed

**Total Time:** 30 Minutes

## 0-5mins: Briefing and Setup

**Open with a simple framing:**

"We often talk about changing systems, but we rarely see how systems change – or how they act on us.

What we're going to do now is step into a system, without a map. Your job is simply to follow one instruction at a time. You'll know when the next step begins."

**Then you say:**

"For the next few minutes, find someone to pair up with, someone you don't know. Take turns making statements that begin with: 'In my work...'

You can't ask questions. You can't respond. You can only speak in that format."

**Then you ring a bell, clap, or cue music to begin.**

## 5–10 mins:

### Round 1: Statement System

People will find this weird at first – but quickly revealing.

They'll say things like:

"In my work, it's hard to build trust when people are scared."

"In my work, we spend more time evidencing care than giving it."

It will feel disconnected, like parallel monologues – and that's the point.

They're experiencing what siloed systems feel like.

Let it play for up to 5 minutes. Then stop the group.

## 10–15 mins:

### Round 2: Reflection System

You say:

“Now, find someone new.

This time, you may only begin your statement with:

‘That makes me think...’

Let them go again – now what happens is magic.

People build on what they hear. A shared thread emerges:

“That makes me think about how isolated we all feel.”

“That makes me think the process was never meant to handle real lives.”

You'll feel the tone soften, connections deepen, and new ideas form.

Let it run for up to 5 minutes. Then stop.

## 15–20 mins:

### Round 3: Open Relational System

Final round.

"This time, find a new partner and speak freely. Respond, question, reflect. Use anything that's come up. Try to stay connected. Don't debate. Explore."

Now they're in full relational dialogue.

The energy will be noticeably different – coherence, curiosity, collaboration will emerge.

Let it run for up to 5 minutes. Then bring them back together.

## 20–25 mins:

### The Mirror

Bring the group together. Ask:

“What shifted across the three rounds?”

“How did it feel to connect under each rule?”

“Which round felt most like your day-to-day workplace?”

“What was different in how you showed up or listened?”

Then drop the big insight:

“You just lived three system types:

Round 1: ‘The Echo System’ – Output-driven, disconnected systems

Round 2: ‘The Thread System’ – Pattern-forming, sense-making systems

Round 3: ‘The Flow System’ – Relational, emergent systems

The difference wasn’t in the people.

The difference was the relational condition created by a simple rule or structure change.”

Now they’re in full relational dialogue.

## 25–30 mins:

### The Action Shift

Final reflection prompt (spoken or written):

“What one thing could I introduce in my workplace to move us from Round 1 to Round 3, just through how we structure the spaces for our conversations?”

Capture answers:

- On a flipchart
- On sticky notes
- Or as a group reflection

End with a simple closer:

“This is relational practice.  
Not explained — experienced.  
Not top-down — between us.  
Not once-and-for-all — but moment-by-moment, conversation-by-conversation.”

# Design Logic: The System Mirror

A signature Who Works! microgame that lets people experience the mechanics of relational systems – and how small changes in interactional structure can transform outcomes.

## Core Principle

Human interaction is the system.

The way people relate, listen, respond, and interpret isn't just communication – it is the practice of public service. Structure is not neutral. The design of interaction shapes the nature of the system.

This game creates a live, embodied demonstration of that principle.

enable relational practice

# Structural Components & Design Logic

## 1. Minimal Rules, Maximal Insight

- Each round has a simple constraint (e.g. "Only speak using 'In my work...'").
- Constraints act as relational design levers, changing how people engage without needing a long explanation.
- This demonstrates how a small structural tweak can enable or disable relationality – a core Who Works! belief.

 Relational practice isn't about more effort – it's about better conditions.

## 2. Progressive Release of Relational Potential

- The game unfolds across three rounds:
  - Round 1 – Parallel Monologue: Statement-only, disconnected, siloed
  - Round 2 – Pattern Recognition: Reflective, building on others
  - Round 3 – Relational Dialogue: Emergent meaning, co-created understanding

This staged design:

- Helps people feel the difference in real time
- Makes intangible system dynamics visible through embodied experience
- Encourages self-generated insight, not top-down teaching

 Participants experience the shift, rather than being told about it.

 We can't 'teach' people how to do relationships – relationships are a human action. We need to create the circumstances for them to 'feel' their way into the structures that enable relational practice

### 3. Role Fluidity

- People move between pairings.
- This simulates dynamic systems where roles and relationships shift, just like in the real workplace.
- It reinforces that relationality must be portable, not person dependent.

💡 If relational practice only works in stable pairs, it's not a resilient model.

### 4. Constraint → Curiosity → Connection

- The first round feels awkward. That's intentional.
- The second round introduces reflection and interdependence.
- The third round feels freeing, but it's only powerful because of the build-up.

This arc:

- Creates a felt sense of progression
- Establishes contrast – the basis of insight
- Builds emotional memory that sticks beyond the session

💡 It's not comfort that changes people. It's contrast and clarity.

### 5. Reflection as Integration

- The facilitated debrief is where participants name what they just lived.
- It's not a lecture – it's a mirror.
- The facilitator simply reveals the system logic participants just enacted.

This creates the "aha" moment:  
"We didn't learn relational practice – we enacted it."

"What changed wasn't us – it was the structure."  
"I can recreate this with one line of instruction."  
💡 Awareness becomes agency.

### 6. Low Fidelity, High Transferability

- No tech.
- No jargon.
- Just people, a prompt, and a process.

This means:

- The activity is easily replicable back at work
- Participants leave not just inspired, but equipped
- This stays true to Who Works! values of human-scale transformation

💡 Relational change doesn't need infrastructure – it needs invitation.

# Overall Theory of Change

Phase	Mechanism	Outcome
Round 1	Constrained, disconnected speaking	Participants feel how structure isolates
Round 2	Reflective building	Participants feel meaning co-constructing
Round 3	Emergent dialogue	Participants feel system coherence forming
Debrief	Collective sensemaking	Participants see the system in action
Commitment	Action prompt	Participants leave with agency to replicate

# Theory of Change Summary

Component	Function
Interactional constraint	Creates structure that shapes behaviour
Social field	Becomes the system-under-examination
Progressive release	Allows relational potential to emerge
Reflection	Converts experience into insight
Replication prompt	Transfers insight into practical agency

# The Theory Behind The System Mirror

## Core Proposition

*Systems are not changed by policy alone – they are changed by how people interact within them.*

The System Mirror creates a live microcosm of systemic conditions, allowing participants to experience how structures shape behaviour and how small relational shifts can catalyse transformation.

## The Theory Behind The System Mirror

### 1. Structure Shapes Behaviour (Meadows, 2008)

*"If you want to change the system, don't just teach people how to act differently – change the rules of the game."*

#### Application in The System Mirror:

- *Each round introduces a simple rule (e.g. "only speak in statements", "only respond reflectively").*
- *No participant is told how to feel or perform – yet behaviour predictably shifts in response to the structure.*
- *The game demonstrates that systems shape interaction, not just intent.*

## **2. Relational Systems Thinking**

Human systems are animated by the quality and patterns of relationships, not just their roles or outputs

### **Application in The System Mirror:**

- The interactional field becomes the “system.”
- Round 1 models transactional systems: disconnected, non-responsive.
- Round 2 begins to model reflective systems: pattern-aware, sense-making.
- Round 3 simulates relational systems: emergent, co-creative, alive.
- The shifts happen not through training but through new relational conditions.

## **3. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, Wenger)**

People learn best in socially situated, real-time environments where behaviour, reflection, and context co-occur.

### **Application in The System Mirror:**

- The learning is not abstract or taught – it is generated through lived interaction.
- Participants embody different system logics and make meaning together through facilitated reflection.
- Insight arises from social contrast – how different rules lead to different feelings, behaviours, and outcomes.

## **4. Minimal Structure / Enabling Constraints (Glouberman & Zimmerman; Snowden/Cynefin)**

Complex systems benefit from “light scaffolding” – enough structure to guide, but not to control.

### **Application in The System Mirror:**

- The “rules” are constraints – they enable different kinds of relational behaviour.
- There is no content to remember or perform – only conditions to inhabit.
- This models how managers, leaders, or facilitators can create enabling conditions in their own organisations.

## **5. Embodied Systems Awareness**

The body learns before the mind understands. Insight is more durable when felt, not just stated.

### **Application in The System Mirror:**

- Participants feel the restriction and disconnection in Round 1
- They feel emergence and responsiveness in Round 3
- This shift is somatic, not just cognitive – they “know” because they experienced the contrast

“We didn’t tell them what a relational system feels like – they told us.”

## **6. Dialogic Change Theory (Bushe & Marshak)**

Transformational change happens when people shift the conversations they are having – and the way they are having them.

### **Application in The System Mirror:**

- Each round sets up a different kind of conversation:
  - Round 1: data transfer (closed)
  - Round 2: sense-making (open)
  - Round 3: relational engagement (emergent)
- Participants then surface what conditions allowed those shifts

They leave with a new way of structuring dialogue in their own workplaces

## What makes this a mirror

It doesn't tell people what a system is — it lets them see the one they're in, reflected in how they behave.

- No explanation of theory upfront
- No didactic presentation
- Instead: embodied interaction - facilitated reflection - system insight -replicable practice

## Why It Creates “Ah-ha” Moments

- It doesn't teach — it reveals
- It doesn't theorise — it enacts
- It doesn't prescribe behaviour — it alters context
- It doesn't solve problems — it makes system conditions visible

# Theory of Change Summary

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# The System Mirror Reference List

## **Donella Meadows (2008). Thinking in Systems: A Primer**

"If you want to change the system, don't just teach people how to act differently – change the rules of the game."  
(Page 158)

## **Etienne Wenger (1998). Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity**

"Learning is fundamentally a social phenomenon." (Page 3)

## **Albert Bandura (1977). Social Learning Theory**

"Learning would be exceedingly laborious if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do." (Page 22)

## **Bushe, G.R. & Marshak, R.J. (2015). The Dialogic Organization Development Approach to Transformation and Change**

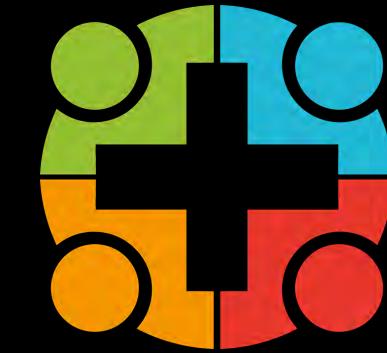
"Transformational change occurs through changing the conversations that shape everyday thinking and behavior."  
(Page 15)

## **Dave Snowden & Mary Boone (2007). A Leader's Framework for Decision-Making**

"In complex contexts, leaders must probe first, then sense, and then respond." (Page 73, Harvard Business Review)

## **Glouberman, S. & Zimmerman, B. (2002). Complicated and Complex Systems: What Would Successful Reform of Medicare Look Like?**

"Complex systems benefit from enabling constraints that promote local adaptation rather than rigid standardisation."  
(Page 9, Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada)



The '**Who Works!**'  
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