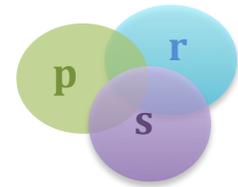


# PERSON ROLE SYSTEM FRAMEWORK BRIEFING NOTE



## PERSON-ROLE-SYSTEM<sup>1</sup>

Person-Role-System (PRS) is a framework for thinking about and designing results engagements. It is a mental model used to formulate strategies for transformation and change by understanding the dynamic, reciprocal relationships between and among persons in role and the systemic structures in which they function. There are skills associated with each of the aspects – person, role, and system, which can be focused on and developed to mastery. What follows is a brief definition of each of the person role system aspects, along with the associated skills.

## PERSON

When we refer to person(s), we mean individuals with the intention or potential to commit to join fully in a leadership effort to make a difference in people's well being.

People come to the task of joining a change effort with their own related experiences in their biography, differing theories of change in place, differing degrees of success with previous efforts; they come with their competencies, assumptions and personal preferences about how work gets done effectively and efficiently. Along with their role identifications, people may wittingly or unwittingly carry their cultural agendas that provide the lens through which they see reality. People bring their worries and anxieties. People come to the task of joining with all the complexity of being a human being in a leadership role in turbulent times.

The challenge that joining with others to make a difference brings is to be able to recognize, tolerate and embrace the personal shifts in attitudes and/or behaviors that may be required in order to come into alignment with the other persons who make up the group-as-a-whole in the work towards accomplishing results.

### ■ Person-Level Skills

The basic person skills that need to be developed to ensure that one is maximally equipped to make a significant impact in a results engagement include: self-awareness; awareness of others and the role boundaries that define differences between self and other; the capacity to align with others to achieve an objective; and capacity to use oneself as an instrument of change.

#### ■ Self-awareness

The job of developing person skills is to know your own mind, to have “your story straight;” to accept that your reality may be different from others without self judgment or projective judgment; to accept that there are as many “truths” as there are people; and to recognize that one's own particular way of being has an impact on others.



*The psychological work* associated with developing heightened self-awareness is the ability to endure the losses associated with shifting self-perception and the ability to withstand tremors in one's own identity in order to learn something new.

■ **Awareness of others: discerning role boundaries**

When one speaks of “the other,” one is indicating the presence of something in addition to oneself. In order to distinguish the self from the other, one can describe the boundaries, which define the distinction. There are many ways in which one could describe the boundaries of difference and distinction; for instance, one could describe a difference in mental models, or one could describe differences in cultural lenses, where models and culture are distinct and recognizable.

For the work of results engagements, the significant boundary differences we are concerned with are the boundaries of authority, role and task (B/ART). This frame is fully described in the article “The BART System of Group and Organizational Analysis Boundary, Authority, Role and Task.” Green and Molenkamp.<sup>2</sup>

*The psychological work* of being aware of others is the process of tolerating the recognition of someone or something other than oneself. It is quite difficult to sustain awareness of others and typically it is easier to use the other as a projective object.

■ **Using oneself as an instrument**

The following descriptions are the key attributes of the effective use of self.

■ **Understands parallel process dynamics.**

The power of self knowledge lies in the fact that one can use inner experience as a reliable touch point, a “tell,” as an evidence base from which to develop understanding of others and systems. This phenomenon can be called parallel process understanding, where mutually projected unconscious feelings constitute identification between and among individuals and/or groups and become a source of “lived data.” This dynamic interplay, which is universally present among and between people, can be used to gain insight into issues being faced or enacted by either or both parties.

■ **Applies knowledge of self to deploy oneself effectively and strategically.**

Having a strategic picture of where one is best deployed in the ongoing results work requires one to learn the skill of delegation, which in turn requires devoting leadership attention to the development of others.

■ **Uses one's authority maximally.**

In order to step fully into the authority vested in one's role, it is necessary to have had a clarifying conversation with the authorizing person. When one is at the edge of authority (wanting to hire a staff person during a hiring freeze, for instance), a business-case negotiation with the authorizing person is needed.



■ **Uses self-knowledge, self-awareness and the awareness of others as diagnostic tools.**

One uses this knowledge and awareness in assessing strengths and challenges in subordinates, colleagues, partners and stakeholders in forming teams, deploying people to tasks, developing task forces, etc.

■ **Uses diagnostic formulations to form effective task and other workgroup alliances.**

Familiarizing oneself with the preferences and learning styles of subordinates, colleagues and partners greatly improves the chances of a diversity of thought being applied to choice making. Data from Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and/or from other assessment instruments are important supports for this work.

*The psychological work* of using oneself as an instrument is managing the anxiety and other pulls against the capacity to managing oneself in role. Skill level attributes include:

- Ability to enter one's role with clarity of intent
- Willingness to be accountable for the outcomes of one's instrumentality
- Willingness to take the risks associated with working at the edge of the boundary of one's role authority

## ROLE

■ **Theoretical perspective**

Generally, we think of role as a function in service of a given task. While this is not incorrect, we have learned that there is more to role than its mere function. We have come to understand that role is better described as a notion of how to be in relationship with a task. This notion stems from "an idea in the mind". Leading theorists on the concept of role describe it as: "One's own inner perception of what is required of a situation which becomes part of one's conscious behavior.<sup>3</sup>" Similarly, a leading theorist on the psychodynamics of organizational life puts it this way: "Role is the large discretionary zone around a job description.<sup>4</sup>" This is captured by our sense of when others or ourselves over or under use this discretionary zone, or act "out of role." These theoretical perspectives describe role as an internal mental process from which one can explore the empowering nature of role as well as explore the various features and demands of working in role, such as:

- Roles enhance clarity of thinking
- Roles inform action, and need to be dynamic and adaptable to changing contexts
- Roles are delegated and authorized by a system through an authorizing body or person
- Roles are empowering
- Family of origin roles are often the filter through which subsequent roles are taken up in other systems
- Staying in role requires monitoring the boundaries between person, role and task



### ■ Action Perspective

We think of role as an inter-linking set of activities designed to further the task and produce the result. People take up roles according to how they see the job to be done and how they see themselves fitting into the execution of the strategies and tactics required to reach the intended result.

### ■ The Task as Leader

In the Person Role System Framework, we refer to the idea that the task is the leader, where it is understood that the task contains the reason for the commission of work and the delegation of authority. The task defines the necessary assemblage of roles, where roles are designed to serve the task. In turn, roles have designated and delegated task authority emanating from the authority of the task. There is an authorizing entity, which commissions the task and the source from which all authority and authorization flows.

Paramount to the success of the commissioned task is the clear interlinking and alignment of authority, role and task boundaries:

- The group's commission of authority to do work is clear
- The task authority is clearly identified, discussed, and agreed upon
- The relationships of the group's members to each other's tasks are openly discussed, clarified and agreed-upon
- Each person in role exercises both delegated authority as well as personal authority in the service of the task
- People are aligned in their roles such that they can define common values and goals. Clearly defined and aligned boundaries minimize conflict, pain, poor performance, and other forms of resistance, allowing for productive work and for workgroups to emerge and flourish.

Where there are poorly defined roles, tasks and authority boundaries, defensive sub-grouping, alienation, poor performance, other detrimental behavior and mischief can occur.

### ■ Role-Level Skills

There are two primary role skills necessary for effectively joining with others to make a difference in people's well being: a) works with an understanding and capacity to adhere to boundaries; b) creates alignments with others to reach results.

#### ■ Understands Boundaries of Authority, Role and Task

This skill is described by the ability to understand and work in accordance with the boundaries of authority, role, and task within one's current system of roles. This leadership and followership capacity supports the ability to envision and work towards a system of roles and tasks intended to improve people's well being. In addition to supporting the ability to envision results for people, understanding the boundaries of authority, role and task is crucial to the capacity to manage oneself in role. Self-management, of course, is not a robotic, static



state; effective role behavior implies the necessary risk-taking that is required to advance the task at hand by staying on the learning/testing edge of one's authority and authorization. A brief description of the concepts comprising this skill follows:

■ A **Boundary** can be thought of as the container that 'holds' the task. Flawed boundaries can subvert the task and hinder the capacity to reach intended results. Robust boundaries support task work by being:

- **Clearly specified.** Clear specification of the time, task and territory boundary should answer the questions: "When?" "What?" and "Where?" During a specific time, in a specific location, work will be done on a particular task.
- **Agreed upon.** Although a boundary may be clearly outlined, invested parties need to come to some agreement about what the stated time, task or territory boundary is or how they interpret it. Unstated or unconscious disagreements on boundary conditions leads to disharmony, sets the conditions for mischief and role misalignment.
- **Adhered to.** If boundaries are taken as guidelines, rather than clear instructions in support of accomplishing the task, work towards results can become under-bounded

■ **Authority** is defined, simply, as the right to do work. In his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ronald Heifetz defines authority as "conferred power to perform a service" (p. 57)<sup>5</sup>. When one takes up authority, it is assumed that the person takes responsibility and is accountable for consequent actions and outcomes. A brief description of the distinction between formal authority and personal authority follows.

- **Formal or Delegated Authority** is derived from an entity that has higher authority, and is passed on by delegation of part of that authority so that a delegate might do work on the delegator's behalf.
- **Personal Authority** refers to the manner in which one takes up and executes the delegation of formal authority. The variation in the ways individuals exercise personal authority is influenced by many factors, including personality, culture, and personal preference.

■ **Role.** A specific work role is the function associated with delegated authority. In more general terms, roles are functions taken up on behalf of others, which can be taken up either consciously or unconsciously; roles can be achieved, acquired, assigned, and/or ascribed. Some roles, according to the goodness of fit, can be reflections of or equated with our identity.

- A **formal role** is a contract, much like a job description. It defines the duties to be performed, the parameters for completing tasks, the people and processes with which interaction must take place, and the outcomes or deliverables that mark the tangible successful performance of the role. Typically some external, higher authority assigns these roles and serves as the arbiter of how well the formal roles are taken up, executed and completed. One assumes a formal role consciously.



- **Informal Roles** emerges naturally through group membership interaction, where individuals, through their particular valence,<sup>1</sup> assume functions that serve to fill the gaps in formal role authorizations. E.g., one may have a valence towards care taking, and becomes the team member who provides extra snacks. One assumes an informal role consciously or unconsciously.
- **Role Conflict** describes the emotional conflict arising when competing demands are made on an individual in the fulfillment multiple group memberships, organizational and social roles. E.g., a manager will suffer role conflict if required to fire an employee who is also a close friend.

■ **Task.** In the person role system framework, task is thought of as work to be done, which is either imposed by an authority or assumed as the process to reach one's goals. In either case, taking up work tasks implies the assumption of responsibility for performance and accountability for the result of the work effort.

**Primary Task**, also referred to as functional task or work task, corresponds to the mission, goal and/or result designed by the work group that has taken up the task.

When a group works on a task, members of the group always, albeit mostly unconsciously, have the survival of the group in mind. We call this the survival task of the group. "Although this fundamental task is frequently disguised or masked, survival as a group becomes the primary preoccupation and latent motivating force for all group members..." (Hayden and Molenkamp, 2002, p. 7). The primary task and the survival task co-exist; at times the survival task is in service of the primary task and complimentary, but mostly it is in conflict with the primary task.

**Off-Task Behaviors.** The survival instinct of group members is the foundation for off task behavior, which can be distinguished in four categories, called "basic assumptions:"

- **Dependency:** the group waits for one person to take leadership, as if other members don't have leadership skills.
- **Pairing:** the group uses a pair of members to produce the solution in the form of a prophetic idea or person.
- **Fight/flight:** the group starts a conflict about relatively inconsequential matters, using a fight as flight, literally or metaphorically, to distance itself from the task.
- **Oneness:** the group acts totally undifferentiated, as if there is no difference of opinion

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<sup>1</sup> Valence, as used in psychology, means the intrinsic attractiveness (positive valence) or averseness (negative valence) of an event, object, or situation. The term is also used to characterize and categorize specific emotions. For example, the emotions popularly referred to as "negative", such as anger and fear, have "negative valence". Joy has "positive valence." Positively valenced emotions are evoked by positively valenced events, objects, or situations.

In describing an individual group member, valence refers to the person's tendency to take up particular roles in groups; e.g. "the quiet one;" "the practical one;" "the angry one." This describes the acceptance of a projection from the group because it fits the person's psychological tendencies.



*The psychological work* of understanding the boundaries of authority, role and task is the ongoing engagement in clarifying the boundaries and contents of one's self and one's authorization.

■ **Creates alignments with others to reach a result**

“It takes a village” to change conditions, to improve the conditions of people's well being. Coming into alignment with others to reach a result has at its core the capacity to see and be transparent about one's own interests and agendas, and to see and internalize the interests and agendas of partners in pursuit of a result. The work is to find common threads so that agreements can be made that accelerate interests in common. For the in-depth discussion on alignment, see “The Theory of Aligned Contributions,” Jolie Bain Pillsbury.<sup>6</sup>

*The psychological work* required to come into alignment with others is to bear the loss of “sole agency,” and to find self-satisfaction in the participation in reaching a collective result. Although counter-intuitive, it is necessary for this work to set aside the normal, natural, competitive inclinations to prevail, dominate, eclipse, and overshadow others.

## SYSTEM

*Human activity systems are described by these three levels: a) a system serves the purposes of its collective entity; b) it serves the purposes of its members; c) it serves its environment of the larger system in which it is embedded.*

■ **A Notional System**

A “system” can be defined as “a group of interacting, interrelated and/or interdependent elements forming a collective entity; a regularly interacting, interdependent group of elements forming a unified whole”

■ **Human Activity System<sup>7</sup>**

A human activity system can be thought of as a group of people and other resources organized into a whole in order to accomplish a task, pursue a result. A human system has several salient properties, which can be thought of as *systems dynamics*:

■ **A reciprocal relationship exists between persons in role and the system**

The people in the system are affected by being in the system; by their participation in the system (lack of participation is a form of participation here), they affect the system.

People in the system select and carry out activities, individually and collectively, that will enable them to attain a collectively identified purpose.



### ■ Relational rules are important to system survival

The system maintains sets of relations, sustained over time, among those who are in the system. The maintenance of these relations is of primary importance to the system survival. The process by which these relationships are maintained is the system's regulation, “the rules of the game.” Some of these rules are held as unconscious; some unconscious rules can disadvantage sections of the system. Unconscious, disadvantageous rules are held in place with the same survival vigor, as are all the relational rules.

Rules that are sustained represent the conditions of the system’s stability over time. In this regard, commitment to shared purpose and motivation to carry out the system activities play such an important role. By the same token when disadvantageous rules need to be changed, the system is destabilized and the people within the system re-appreciate their commitments and their motivations. This is the system work required to address systemic disparities.

### ■ Environmental interdependence is foundational to a well functioning system

A well functioning human system with permeable enough boundaries is open to and interacts with the environment, depends on it and contributes to it. The nature of its relationship with the environment is mutual interdependence. This interdependence imposes constraints and expectations on both the system and its environment respectively. The environment is expected to provide the resources and supports that are required by the system.

## ■ System-Level Skills

There are four primary system skills necessary for effectively joining with others to make a difference in people’s well being.

### ■ Sees systems

Can explain the behavior or properties of the whole system in terms of the role(s) or function(s) of the whole and can distinguish between system reality and one’s leadership wishes.

### ■ Sees systems in context

Understands the context or environment in which the system operates and on which it depends for its development and understands the system as a whole in relation to the changing environment

### ■ Engages in Whole Systems Leadership

- Can formulate the intended results for the system for which one has accountability. To this end, enrolls others to the point of view that when many interconnected individuals and groups take many small actions, a shift happens in the larger patterns of communities, organizations, and societies.
- Develops collaborative relationships among people, matrices and networks and helps them discover a shared common cause and vision of what’s possible.



- Promotes collaborative alignment among leaders and promotes aligned contribution among collaborative entities

■ **Thinks systemically**

- Comprehends and makes meaning of the “big picture,” and can identify root causes of difficult problems
- Retains focus on the system as a whole, keeping system analysis connected to the overall purpose of the system

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from writings in Human Relations, Journal of the Tavistock Institute. SAGE Publications, London; further developed at the White Institute Organization Program, 1990-2010.

<sup>2</sup> The BART System of Group and Organizational Analysis Boundary, Authority, Role and Task. Zachary Gabriel Green and René J. Molenkamp, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> 'Organizational Role Analysis' in C.L. Cooper (ed) Developing Social Skills in Managers McMillan Role Analysis. Bruce Reed. 1976

<sup>4</sup> The Workplace Within, Larry Hirshhorn. 2002

<sup>5</sup> Leadership Without Easy Answers, Ronald Heifetz defines authority as “conferred power to perform a service” (p. 57)

<sup>6</sup> The Theory of Aligned Contributions. Jolie Bain Pillsbury, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from “Human Activity Systems.” Reprinted in the New York Times; International Herald Tribune, Global Edition, Science Section. 2003.