

Systems Thinking and the Juggling Girls of Berlin

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A leadership-frameworks article by Russ Powell

An essential skill for leaders is the ability to see systems—to think systemically, to look beyond the individual or an event and see the system at play around the individual or the environmental factors that helped bring an event into form.

A few years back I learned a useful framework for thinking about human systems from Chris Holmberg in one of his Middle Path leadership programs. What I like most about this framework is its simplicity.

But don't let the simplicity fool you. It's a powerful tool for understanding, diagnosing and solving problems in human systems. Parvus sed potens—small but mighty.

He calls it the It-We-I framework.ⁱ

The It, the We, and the I

In a business context, the *it* represents the tools, technology, processes and goals of the business. I like to think of this as "things" you can see about the business—a business plan, a medical device the business created, a process by which the device was created, the tools and facilities used to manufacture the device, etc.

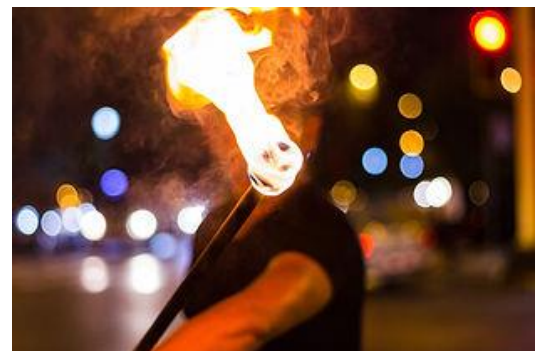
The *we* is the realm of relationships. The *we* asks how much do the players in the system trust each other? How aligned are they? The stronger the *we,* the more the players in the system are able to "move" together.

And the *I* is the individual, the nodes in the system. The *I* is all about how are the people on my team showing up? Do they have the requisite knowledge, skills, abilities, beliefs, mental models, etc.?

A Fun Application of the Framework

Not many people know this, but for a great many years—most of my young adulthood and on into my thirties and forties—one of my favorite [hobbies was juggling](#).

I got into it in college in New Orleans (I learned from jugglers who worked Jackson Square in the French Quarter) and even for a short time earned my living as a professional juggler. (Turns out I could make more money busking than waiting tables! Who'd a thunk?)



Anyway, I got to thinking that juggling, especially team juggling, might be a great backdrop for playing with the It-We-I framework.

And with that I give you the [Berlin Passing Girls](#) –



So, if you didn't already watch the video, do it. They're brilliant! Highly-skilled, focused, motivated and having a lot of fun. (Exactly the kind of players you'd like on your team, right?)

*The *It** –

So, notice that the *it* in this particular human system refers to the tools these young women are working with, the desired technical outcomes, and the processes at play. For example:

- The juggling clubs (each the same size, color and weight)
- The juggling patterns on which they've agreed to throw
- The plans for where they will stand, how they will start and stop, and (even though there are virtually no mistakes in the video) what they will do in the event of a drop
- The technical outcome (e.g., Are they entertaining a crowd or filming a video (high technical demands) or just having fun (low technical demands)?)

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You can imagine that when the girls are practicing, if there's a problem—say a regularly occurring collision of clubs when throwing a particular pattern—they might begin diagnosing the problem by asking, "What are the *it* factors that might be causing the collision?"

- Is a club broken (which would make it wobbly or out-of-balance)?
- Is there a problem with the pattern (e.g., mathematically, it just doesn't work as originally imagined)?
- Are there any physical barriers obstructing the movement of a juggler or the flight of the clubs?

*The *We* –*

Recall that the *we* in this system refers to the relationships between and among the girls. The stronger these bonds, the easier it will be for them to "play" or "move" together, especially at more complex and difficult levels.

More specifically, the *we* refers to:

- How well they know each other
- The degree of trust they have in each other
- How long they have known each other
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- Their degree of alignment (e.g., around things like their purpose and objectives)

When visiting [their website](#), one of the first things I noticed was that they met as kids and have been passing clubs together for over eight years. That's a significant amount of *we* time.



When diagnosing that regular-collision-of-clubs problem, the girls might look to *we* issues for possible causes:

- Do they have enough experience with each other?
- Has trust been broken between one or more of them?
- As a unit, do they share the same belief about what they're doing and why? (E.g., two of them may think they're preparing for a performance and the other two are just out to have fun. This lack of alignment could easily result in conflict.)
- Are they all communicating clearly with each other?

*The *I* –*

We said the *I* refers to each of the individuals in the system. In this scenario (similar to any business scenario), the *I* refers to each juggler's:

- knowledge (e.g., of passing patterns)
- skills (e.g., technical, communication)
- abilities (e.g., spatial awareness, relating, attending)
- degree of engagement (e.g., how they're showing up)
- work/practice habits
- experience (e.g., passing clubs in complex patterns)
- mental models (e.g., beliefs, values)



When diagnosing the "collision" problem, the girls might also look to *I* causes:

- Does everyone know the passing pattern we're playing with?
- Is each juggler able to perform at the level required for this particular pattern?
- How is each juggler showing up? Is everyone rested, ready, willing, able to perform?

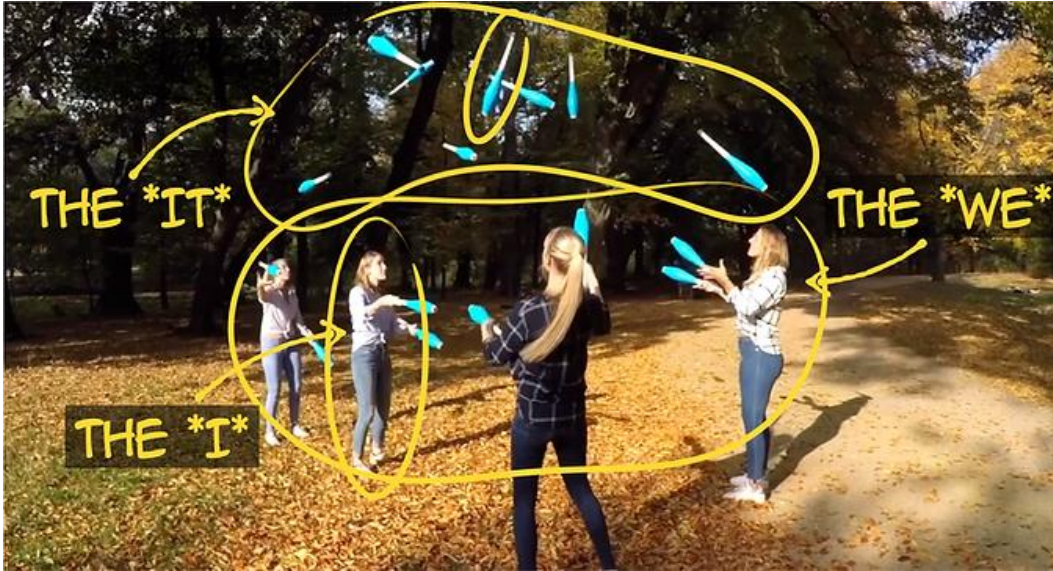
Leaders Who Think Systemically Get Better Results

Often when diagnosing problems we look to only one dimension. "Oh, it's his fault! He doesn't know what he's doing." (In this case pointing to an *I* cause.)

The leader who's thinking systemically however will consider all dimensions. ("Perhaps there's more to it—were we clear on the ideal outcome? Is there enough trust and alignment between us?" "Are there any flaws in our our tools or processes?")

And I suggest that leaders who use a systemic mindset are more productive. When solving problems, they and their teams are more likely to be accurate in their diagnoses and generate better solutions.

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I hope you've enjoyed this explanation of the It-We-I framework. And the next time you find yourself diagnosing a problem (in a human system) try it out.

Join us for our next [Leadership and the Middle Path public workshop](#).

For more insights on team and leadership development, follow Russ on [LinkedIn](#), and/or [Facebook](#).

For more on Middle Path Leadership, follow the [#middlepathleadership hashtag](#) on LinkedIn.

For more on Russ' juggling, see [this video](#) w/ Mark Bunnell on basic passing skills, [this TED-style talk](#) on the intersection of juggling and instructional systems design (ISD), or [this Ignite presentation](#) on how to juggle knives.

See and share the [original blog post](#).

ⁱ The original source for the It-We-I model is philosopher, writer, and integral theorist, Ken Wilber.