

Systems Thinking: A Framework for Managing Complexity in Your Organization

“Vision without systems thinking, ends up painting lovely pictures of the future with no deep understanding of the forces that must be mastered to move from here to there.”

- Peter M. Senge, Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Systems thinking is a tool for diagnosing organizational issues, understanding organizational dynamics, and creating change. It can help managers to be proactive instead of reactive and to shape the future of the organization. Systems thinking can help us understand how organizations are impacted by internal and external factors that directly influence how they function. Systems thinking uses concepts from the field of system dynamics, established in the 1950s by Jay Forrester at MIT.

Carson Research Consulting helps organizations meet their goals by measuring what matters, when it matters. We will help you get the information you need, when you need it, in order to make strategic decisions for the long view.



Basic Principles of Systems Thinking

System thinking provides another lens for understanding people's behavior within organizations. It is a very different focus from that of leadership development, where the characteristic of one individual is seen to determine the fate of the entire organization or department. In systems thinking, the structure of an organization influences the behavior of the people within it. This explains why two managers in succeeding positions may be plagued by similar problems, or may have similar management styles. If the organization calls for micromanaging or covert leadership, then people will behave according to those unspoken dynamics.

This is not to imply that people are controlled by the structure they are in, but it is more difficult for one person to “buck the system” (or “cowboy,” as one of my clients likes to call it) and create lasting change than we are often told. Large systems in particular need systemic interventions, not just command and control leaders.

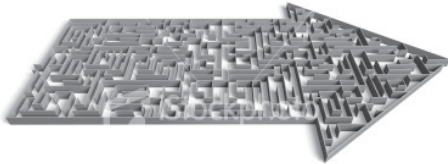
Systems thinking looks at organizations as organic entities. A look at some of the “laws” of systems thinking will provide some insight into this, using as an example an

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Basic Principles of Systems Thinking (continued from page 1)

organization that is trying to create a participatory decision-making environment, where everyone is involved and their input is valued.



- **Change is slow but can be lasting**

If this organization has a long history of unilateral decision-making, it will take awhile for the culture to change. Employees have experience in the past with trying to provide input or take initiative and being shot down or ignored, so it will take many consistent messages and actions to convince them that their voices really are important.

- **Cause and effect are not always closely linked in time**

One of the ways that this change might be hindered is if a manager of a department clings to the old style of unilateral decision-making. His staff quickly learns that he doesn't really want their input. Eventually they learn to make a show of providing input,

but don't really participate, waiting for the inevitable: to be told what to do. Ultimately they don't participate at a desirable level for effective collaboration, and the manager begins to assume that they don't really care or want to participate, when in fact they do. The manager thinks his staff are apathetic, so he makes decisions on his own, since he can't get anyone to participate, and the cycle continues. The cause and effect of even this simple loop can take many steps to carry out.

- **The easy answer usually does not take into account the complexity of the system.**

The easy answer is to put the managers through some training on how to create a diffusion of responsibility, information, and decision-making throughout the organization--quick and easy. But as the above example illustrates, it's too easy to be effective. Consistent effort throughout the organization, training, feedback, and reinforcement of collaboration will be required to get people to really step up with new ideas and information, knowing that they will be heard.

Because organizations as systems exist in a stable state (even when putting out fires is the familiar stable state you are used to), change is resisted. Quick fixes and easy answers create surface changes but do not change the way the organization functions, and often when change is instituted, the behavior of people within a system gets worse before it gets better.

But small changes can produce big results, if you understand the complexity of the system in which you are working. Sometimes just removing an obstacle or providing the right tool can transform how people do their work. The key is finding the place where you can have the greatest impact with the least amount of force. Systems thinkers call these places "leverage points."

While systems thinking is far more complex a field than can be illustrated in this brief article, hopefully you have some ideas about what a powerful mindset it is and the kind of issues that systems thinking can help to address. For more information, see the resources below. ●

Resources:

Pegasus Communications, home of the Systems Thinking conference, discusses some of the main concepts related to systems thinking.

<http://www.pegasus.com.com/lrnmore.html>

This site contains information on some of the tools used in systems thinking, as well as an introduction to the work of Peter Senge.

<http://www.managementhelp.org/systems/systems.htm>

Please visit the new Carson Research Consulting website at: <http://www.carsonresearch.com>, and check out our expanded "resources" section.