THE SYSTEMS ORIENTATION: FROM CURIOSITY TO COURAGE

BY DAVID PETER STROH

Systems thinking is different from most other problem-solving tools because it takes into account the fact that we are a part of the system we seek to understand and influence. Therefore, becoming a systems thinker requires that we both learn a new methodology and develop a particular way of looking at the world. The systems orientation not only increases our ability to apply the tools, but it in turn is strengthened when we work with them.

I believe the systems orientation can be summarized by five "Cs": curiosity, clarity, compassion, choice, and courage (see "The Five Cs of Systems Thinking"). *Curiosity* is the willingness to step back when things are not working—particularly when "trying harder" is argued as the only way to proceed—and to consider that we might be trying to solve a problem we do not fully understand. Attacking symptoms head on ("If the problem is declining sales, then the solution must be generating more sales") and framing problems in terms of proposed solutions ("The problem is figuring out how we can reduce prices") tend to generate policies that actually make matters worse in the long run. Curiosity, on the other hand, is the desire to inquire more deeply into why something is happening, and the willingness to acknowledge that espoused solutions might not always be right.

The deep inquiry that results from being curious leads to greater clarity. *Clarity* is the ability to see a situation more accurately and completely. It usually entails learning how better to understand the mental models of others, and to recognize how we might have created or unwittingly contributed to the problem we face. Spending more time up front to determine the cause of the problem usually leads to more lasting solutions, particularly because cause and effect in organizations are not as visibly connected as we would like to believe. Conversely, time wasted solving the wrong problem quickly generates additional problems and does not solve the initial one.

THE FIVE CS OF SYSTEMS THINKING
• Curiosity
• Clarity
• Compassion
• Choice
• Courage

Increased compassion can result from greater clarity. *Compassion* in this sense is the ability to recognize that we are all part of the same system, that no one individual or function is to blame for our problems, and that all of us collectively need to develop the shared insights and alternatives required to solve them. Compassion points us away from blame and toward responsibility—it helps us see how we often self-inflict our problems, whether through individual thought processes or our group's policies and actions. The benefit of compassion and responsibility is power: the power to influence or accept that for which we have compassion and to control that for which we are directly responsible. For example, when we understand that part of the pressure placed on our group by senior management occurs because we do not communicate frequently enough with our managers, we can take steps to reduce this pressure by updating them more often.

Choice is the ability to recognize that systems problems are often best addressed through multiple solutions applied in concert. This contrasts with the tendency for managers to polarize around singular solutions ("We need to become either more market-driven or more technology-driven" or "We need to reduce prices or hold the line"). Choice allows us to consider that the solution might be both (e.g., we can be both market- and technology-driven over time if our aim is to satisfy our customers through technological advancements) or even neither (e.g., the solution may instead be to increase prices and reduce product availability). This understanding also helps us recognize that all decisions have consequences. Knowing the potential outcomes, we can anticipate and manage those consequences more

TEAM TIP

As a group, read and discuss the excellent article, "Moving from Blame to Accountability" by Marilyn Paul.

effectively.

Courage is the ability to understand that while systems thinking might open up a range of alternatives not previously considered, it does not always yield solutions that are popular or easy to implement. Doing "more of what we've always done, only better" or adopting "quick fixes" may seem to work well in the short term, but often makes things worse in the long run. Therefore, it is often important to take strong stands (backed by systemic analysis) in favor of solutions that work in the long term. Courage also supports curiosity and clarity, because it takes courage to admit that we *don't* know something, or that we might be at least partly responsible for our current situation.

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being that points to alternative ways of thinking and acting. By becoming systems thinkers, not only will we impact the world around us more effectively, but our own lives will also be changed when we see the world through a systemic lens. We will inquire more deeply into problems, understand our own responsibility more clearly, meet other's apparent resistance with greater compassion and confidence, be more creative and effective problem solvers, and take a firmer stance in support of our strongest beliefs. ◘

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