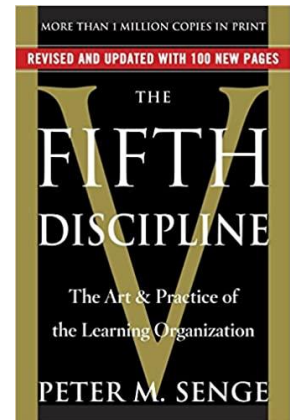


Background and Key Concepts of System Thinking

The Fifth Discipline

Book in 1990 was one of the most influential business books in the last 30 years. In 1997, Harvard Business Review identified the book as one of the seminal management books of the previous 75 years. The Journal of Business Strategy named Peter Senge the “Strategist of the Century.”

Senge defines five disciplines of a learning organization, and the 5th discipline is “Systems Thinking” emphasizing that individuals, policies, and disciplines are all interconnected elements in a larger context. System Thinking also highlights how different feedback signals can balance or amplify elements of a system.



The Dawn of System Leadership

In the article, “The Dawn of System Leadership” in the Stanford Social Innovation Review in 2015, Senge teamed up with Collective Impact author John Kania and Hal Hamilton to describe the need for a new type of leadership. They described characteristics of systems leaders that foster collective leadership. The following are some of the key characteristics described in the article:

“They build relationships based on deep listening, and networks of trust and collaboration start to flourish. They are so convinced that something can be done that they do not wait for a fully developed plan, thereby freeing others to step ahead and learn by doing.”

The first core capability is the ability to the larger system.

*“Helping people **see the larger system** is essential to building a shared understanding of complex problems. This understanding enables collaborating organizations to jointly develop solutions not evident to any of them individually and to work together for the health of the whole system rather than just pursue symptomatic fixes to individual pieces.”*

The second core capability of a system leader emphasizes **reflection and generative conversations**. Reflection involves becoming aware of our assumptions and mental models. The generative conversations feed the third core capability which centers on **shifting from reactive problem solving to pro-active co-creating of the desired future state**.

Embrace the complexity as the challenge to help achieve the desired benefits. Rather than looking for the simple solution or being intimidated that a solution is more than the leader can accomplish, the system leader doesn’t expect to solve the problem alone or just with their organization. Rather than

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Essentials of Social Innovation

The Dawn of System Leadership

The deep changes necessary to accelerate progress against society's most intractable problems require someone who catalyzes collective leadership.

expect to know the answer, the system leader strives to create the conditions to harness the collective wisdom of a larger group of collaborators.

“Knowing that there are no easy answers to truly complex problems, system leaders cultivate the conditions wherein collective wisdom emerges over time through a ripening process that gradually brings about new ways of thinking, acting, and being.”

The authors emphasize the importance of having new tools to support system leadership. They quote the inventor, Buckminster Fuller as saying, *“If you want to change how a person thinks, give up. You cannot change how another thinks. Give them a tool the use of which will gradually cause them over time to think differently.”*

One of the tools they mention is “system mapping,” and a variety of techniques and tools have emerged to support system mapping. System mapping is different from strategy mapping. System mapping helps generate the insights that can help inform the development of a good system strategy. The strategy map technique (not mentioned in this SSIR article) is for clarifying and communicating the strategy so that it can be more successfully implemented.

“We have also seen that nurturing the collective creative approach happens most reliably in concert with helping people see the larger system, fostering reflection, and having different quality conversations.”

Systems leaders are not focused on a type of management that controls other, but rather in creating the space that can support collaboration for the desired change. They do not see a plan as a rigid and linear document that is determined early on and then just implemented. Planning and implementation is a dynamic process that allows for “emergence” as opportunities are identified.

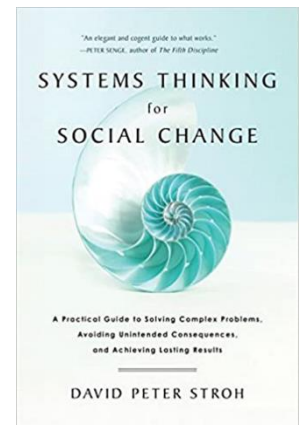
“System leaders need to have a strategy, but the ones who are most effective learn to ‘follow the energy’ and set aside their strategy when unexpected paths and opportunities emerge.”

Systems Thinking for Social Change, by David Peter Stroh

The sub-title of this book describes the contents of the book:

A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results.

This book is packed with insights on the reasons that efforts to address complex social issues tend to be ineffective and often are counterproductive—in spite of having good intentions. He contrasts system thinking with conventional thinking in the following table on Conventional Versus System Thinking:



Conventional Thinking	System Thinking
The connection between problems and their causes is obvious and easy to trace	The relationship between problems and their causes is indirect and not obvious.
Others, either within or outside our organization are to blame for our problems and must be the ones to change.	We unwittingly create our own problems and have significant control or influence in solving them through changing our behavior
A policy designed to achieve short-term success will also assure long-term success	Most quick fixes have unintended consequences. They make no difference or make matters worse in the long run.
In order to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts.	In order to optimize the whole, we must improve the <i>relationships</i> among the parts.
Aggressively tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously.	Only a few key coordinated changes sustained over time will produce large systems change.

Source: Innovation Associates Organizational Learning (and show in David Stroh’s book, page 15)

David Peter Stroh describes the situations where system thinking is especially important when:

- *A problem is chronic and has defiled people’s best intentions to solve it.*
- *Diverse stakeholders find it difficult to align their efforts despite shared intentions.*
- *They try to optimize their part of the system without understanding their impact on the whole.*
- *Stakeholders’ short-term efforts might actually undermine their intentions to solve the problem.*
- *People are working on a large number of disparate initiatives at the same time.*
- *Promoting particular solutions (such as best practices) comes at the expense of engaging in continuous learning.*

(Page 24)

It also shares that system thinking is an excellent complement to efforts striving to achieve collective impact.

The book goes into more tools than I can cover in this summary. One of the key chapters shares about techniques for shaping and telling a “system story.”