

# Systems Snapshot Q&A



## Dr. Aaliyah Samuel

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### Q: How were you first introduced to systems thinking?

**A:** I was introduced when I was a regional director at First Things First. My offices were housed in Santa Cruz County, California. Our then CEO brought in Tracy Benson and Sheri Marlin of the Waters Center to facilitate systems thinking learning. I can honestly say that in my 23 years of being a professional, there have been two professional development series that were the most successful and impactful: systems thinking and situational leadership. I was immediately taken by systems thinking because it put words and meanings to things I was already observing and thinking. Since then, I have been using systems thinking in not just my professional life, but in my home life as well. It's also core to how we think about social and emotional learning at CASEL, as a systemic approach that fundamentally improves education for every child.

### Q: Which Habit of a Systems Thinker do you wish everyone practiced?

**A:** I'm going to name two. The first is, "changes perspectives to increase understanding." Now more than ever, we are so deeply ingrained in what we think and what we believe that we don't take the time to stop and understand others' perspectives. It doesn't mean you change who you are or change what you believe – you just open yourself up to learning from others. I think if we all did this it would bring so much civility back to politics and heal so many of our communities, and ultimately, our nation. The next is, "seeks to understand the big picture." All of us are working toward a bigger, "why." Whether you are a parent, working for your kids to have a better future; or a leader of an organization working for your team, industry and community. If we all take a step back and focus on our "why" – our big picture – we would see how many things we have in common and how aligned we are when it comes to what we desire for ourselves and those we love.

### Q: Which leader (past or present) do you admire most and why?

**A:** Carolyn P. Hill. She was the first Principal who took me in as her Assistant Principal. I was young – in fact, I was one of the youngest to ever be appointed by the county at 25 years old. She took me under her wing and there were two things she taught me about leadership. 1. You have to be passionate about what you're doing. If you don't have a passion for it, you shouldn't be doing it and you certainly shouldn't be a leader for it. Her passion came through in everything she did for kids, families, communities; the list goes on and on. 2. She once said to me, "Aaliyah, if you're going to be a leader you have to have compassion and a conscience. You have to lead with both." This has stayed with me throughout my entire career.

### Q: What is one book you think everyone should read?

**A:** *The Four Agreements*, by Don Miguel Ruiz. It's about understanding your power in the world and, as the title suggests, four tenants to live and lead by. The first is about being impeccable with your words and understanding the value they hold. The second is to not take anything personal (this is key – especially for leaders). The third is around not making assumptions and not jumping to a conclusion. The last is to always try to do your best. And remember, your best might look different day by day, depending on circumstances out of your control.

### Q: What advice do you have for someone getting started as a systems thinker?

**A:** Pick the Habit of a Systems Thinker that you are most called to and start there. You will be surprised how interconnected all of the Habits and concepts of systems thinking are. It becomes difficult when we think of it in siloes. For example, "I am learning these Habits for work." Instead, this is about changing the way we think which applies to every aspect of life.

### Q: Why do you think the world needs systems thinkers?

**A:** With technology, our world is opening up like never before – with the click of a button you can be connected to someone four time zones away. We also have more information than ever at our fingertips and coming at us 24/7. Because of this, it's so important we have the ability to think critically and are able to sift through information to decipher what is important and what is real.