

Systems Snapshot Q&A



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Q: How were you first introduced to systems thinking?

A: **Amber:** I was first introduced in 2009 as a part of an early childhood grant funded by First Things First in partnership with United Way of Tucson. We were building an early childhood professional development system and I was leading a Community of Practice that focused on infant/toddler care. We infused systems thinking into that work which really took it to the next level and helped produce positive outcomes for educators, children and families.

Travis: I was first introduced by Amber! During this time, she would come home and tell me all about the systems work she was doing. It was really cool to see her enthusiasm. She shared the Habits of a Systems Thinker cards with me and we began practicing the Habits in various aspects of our life. We've been having conversations about systems and using the language of systems thinking ever since.

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

A: **Amber:** *A Systems Thinker Uses Understanding of System Structure to Identify Possible Leverage Actions.* Oftentimes, we don't take the time to look at the different parts of the system and how they are working together to produce the results we are seeing. To me, this Habit really gets to the heart of the creative thinking needed to find leverage in a system.

Travis: I am going to pick two since I like to break the rules sometimes. First, *Successive Approximation.* This one really resonates with me because I like to tinker with things and see how little changes can impact outcomes. The second is, *A Systems Thinker Changes Perspectives to Increase Understanding.* I use this a lot at work. For example, this past week I was interviewing college kids (18 years old - only 8 years older than my daughter!) and being able to shift my perspective, ask appropriate questions to help guide the conversation, and just being open to a different point of view was not only helpful for me, but I hope made for a good interview process for these students.

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

A: **Amber:** This is a tough question, but I would say Dr. Ron Lally. He led the WestEd Center for Child and Family Studies for more than 40 years and was one of the founding members of Zero to Three. I met him in 2007 when I went through the WestEd Infant/Toddler Caregivers (PITC) certification process. He really gave me (and everyone) a seat at the table and valued my perspective as a twenty-five year old working in the field. He was so intentional about having meals with participants in order to get to know us and find out how we would use what we had learned. He was a leader, but also a player in the game, which was so refreshing.

Travis: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I've always admired him as a president. One, because of the amount of change he was able to push through while in office. And two, he was in office for an unprecedented three terms. This is a testament to the stability he provided our nation during what was a very complex and trying time.

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

A: **Amber:** *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs*, by Ellen Galinsky. This book helps you understand how to prepare children for life. Galinsky takes a research-based approach on early-childhood development and then takes it one step further by discussing the skills needed to prepare children for life. The book is easily digestible and can support adults and children alike. Highly recommend!

Travis: I stumbled across a book series by Brandon Sanderson called *The Stormlight Archive*. The plot spans different time periods, different worlds and dimensions, yet they are all interconnected. It's fascinating how the plot is woven together throughout so many books and it's a testament to Sanderson's talent as a writer.

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

A: **Amber:** It's not about getting the "right" answers. It's about stimulating your thinking and making the time and space for some really deep and intentional thinking. And thinking is messy – that's okay! You have to go through the messy part in order to gain clarity. If you don't, you will find yourself back in the mess again.

Travis: Amber's answer brings to mind a Winnie the Pooh quote I've heard her often share with teachers before, "Did you ever stop to think, and forget to start again?" My advice would be to take a step back and realize that you're probably doing systems thinking and don't know it yet, so try not to get too overwhelmed with the language and concepts. With practice, you will learn when to apply systems thinking strategically to reach goals and desired outcomes.

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

A: **Amber:** Because we have been doing things the same way for a very long time, expecting different results. We are at a place where we need to stop blaming one another and start working together to solve some very complex challenges. And I think we can do it! I truly believe systems thinkers will help get us there.

Travis: We've gotten to a place where people have essentially stopped thinking for themselves. Systems thinking can be the catalyst to get people thinking again. We have more data than we have ever had and if we follow patterns and trends, we can create change. The only way to do this, however, is if people have sound thinking and reasoning skills.