

Systems Snapshot Q&A



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In this Systems Snapshot, hear from Cheryl Rush Dix and Arthur Mitchell of STEM Equity Alliance, a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit that works with partner organizations to promote principles of equity and cultural competency in the STEM education world.

Q: How were you first introduced to systems thinking?

A: **Arthur:** I think my first true introduction was when I was working as an administrator and our team was introduced to *The Fifth Discipline*, by Peter Senge. We read the book and talked about systems thinking, but we didn't put it into practice, which is of course where the real learning takes place.

Cheryl: Systems thinking and the systems perspective became a part of my work with the Baldrige Performance Excellence Framework (a national award program dedicated to performance excellence). Then, after Baldrige, I was lucky enough to collaborate with the Waters Center, which deepened my interest.

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

A: **Arthur:** *Changes perspectives to increase understanding.* We get so locked into our own perspectives and trying to "prove" our own points that we lose the ability to really communicate and see someone else's point of view. I even still get stuck in this pattern, which is why I intentionally practice this Habit every day.

Cheryl: All of the Habits used in systems mapping, which is core to building a shared vision. This includes *changes perspectives to increase understanding; considers short-term, long-term and unintended consequences of actions; makes meaningful connections within and between systems ...* just to name a few.

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

A: **Arthur:** That's a broad question, so I am going to contextualize this and mention someone who is currently doing work that I admire (other than Cheryl, of course!). That person is Dr. Calvin Mackie, Founder of STEM NOLA, which does what I call "Guerrilla STEM" because it brings STEM directly to the people. Dr. Mackie's work is truly transforming community.

Cheryl: Bear with me because my answer is quite antique: Robert Greenleaf whose work is focused on servant leadership. He opened up my mind and allowed me to see servant leadership as a modality to deploy a socialized orientation to power that underpins performance excellence, collaborative norms and community-scale achievement.

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

A: **Arthur:** Lisa Delpit's, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. It's a very personal narrative that takes a look at how teachers view themselves, the children they are charged to care for, and the disconnect between the two caused by sociological, psychological, and cultural factors.

Cheryl: First, I want to thank Arthur for mentioning such an important work. My recommendation is a book called, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, by Ursula K. Le Guin. It's a science fiction work that challenged my perspective of "other" and enhanced my capacity to be more inclusive and relevant to everyone.

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

A: **Arthur:** I live in Philadelphia and our NBA basketball team went through a huge transformation a few years ago, which included the draft of Joel Embiid. With all the change happening, team management told uncertain fans to, "trust the process." That same mantra applies to someone new to systems thinking. Understand it is a process. You have to go through the practices, disciplines, and learning in order to grow and experience the fullness of systems thinking.

Cheryl: Develop and use an inclusive model for your system of interest that helps you move away from silos and closer toward a true systems perspective.

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

A: **Arthur:** Because we need people who are paying attention to the Big Picture; people who understand that activity doesn't happen in a vacuum and that there are consequences of actions and that consequences have consequences. Without people who are thinking of these things, self-destruction is inevitable. We need systems thinkers to save us from ourselves.

Cheryl: The scale of our challenges requires action and intentional work to optimize the impact of our interactive, intersectional, multi-dimensional, real-world shared lives. We need thinkers who are capable of thinking in non-linear, multi-dimensional ways in order to create change that will affect our current reality and future.