Systems Snapshot Q&A

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Q: How were you first introduced to systems thinking?

A: I was fortunate to be a student in the Catalina Foothills School District in Tucson, Arizona at a time when the curriculum and pedagogical approach was heavily influenced by Systems Thinking. By the time I realized that my formative education was grounded in Systems Thinking Habits and tools, I was, myself, a classroom teacher. I am grateful for the educators who made that choice for me, and who helped me develop the powerful systems thinking mindset that I once took for granted.

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

A: I gravitate to the role of mental models, and how mental models affect current reality and the future. I'm fascinated with how our minds create our perception of the present and the impact that this unconscious process has on our behavior. The number of times that my worst moments have come from snap judgments, largely mediated by my mental models, vastly outweigh any mistakes I've made after considerable contemplation.

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

A: It is exceptionally difficult for me to name a leader because I admire many people who I have come in contact with or learned about. I think that the best way for me to answer this question is to share that the most powerful lessons in leadership come from having a variety of experiences with many leaders, all of whom are imperfect, and yet all offer insights into what it means to be a great leader. The key lesson that links all of the best leaders who come to mind when answering this question is that we work in systems with people. While this might seem obvious, the consequence of keeping people (and all that they bring to their work and lives) at the center of every decision and interaction is sometimes the most difficult, but also delivers the most benefit to the organization in the long term.

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

A: I'm going to share two that I think are related. The first is a very short book written by Timothy Snyder, who specializes in Ukrainian history, called *On Tyranny: 20 Lessons From the Twentieth Century*. The 20 lessons in this book serve as a warning for our current state-of-affairs in the US and the world, and they serve as a systems-oriented warning that any democracy should heed. The second book is *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, by Masha Gessen. The author takes the reader on a journey into the Russian mind and society in a story-oriented manner. Gessen led me to view the present world through the eyes of a different culture and people in a manner that sometimes took my breath away.

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

A: First, the human brain is wired to search for patterns and relationships, which is the essence of Systems Thinking. So let it happen. Second, don't worry about naming the Habit, perfecting the tool, or connecting to the archetype. Be okay with ambiguity and the discomfort that comes from expanding beyond what you might hold sacred to see the fullest complexion of the world that you can. When you need help to organize the thinking, or to jumpstart your ability to explain your perspectives, then consult the toolbox.

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

A: When we can honor the complexity in the world, but not become paralyzed because of it, we increase our ability to see the humanity in every person. It seems to me that systems thinking is a repertoire of skills that, when you drill into it, enhances the probability that we can find common ground in even the most difficult circumstances. I think it is essential that anything we can do to find a *sensible middle* is a worthwhile effort, and this is aided by more systems-oriented thinkers.