Systems Snapshot Q&A

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Storyteller at Systems Thinking World

Q: How were you first introduced to systems thinking?

A: I was taking a computer course in 1975. The instructor had us read *Platform for Change*, by Stafford Beer. I wouldn't recommend this book, however it was the accident that got me started on this journey. To say I became an evangelist for the systemic perspective would be an understatement – I talked about it to everyone I could because it's a perspective everyone should have.

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

A: All of them. I keep a copy of the Habits on my desktop. When looking at an issue, I go through each Habit and ask myself, "did I consider this?" Lots of people think they don't have the time to do this. To them I say, you will have plenty of time to do it over again when you get it wrong.

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

A: Ludwig von Bertalanffy. He was an Austrian biologist and is considered by most to be the father of modern systems thinking. So many of the conclusions we have arrived at today are the direct result of his thoughts, particularly his thoughts in the book, *Uncommon Sense*.

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

A: *Thinking in Systems*, by Donella Meadows. And if I can give two, the other is *Systems 1: A Introduction to Systems Thinking* by Draper Kauffman and Morgan Kauffman. It presents systems thinking concepts with a nice sense of humor, which I like.

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

A: Most people don't like my answer to this: find someone who actually builds models and become an apprentice. Most people I know who call themselves systems thinkers don't build models, and so I don't really view them as systems thinkers. You can only hold one thought in your mind at a time. Though if you develop a model, you can contemplate many things and the relationships between these things simultaneously.

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

A: The problems we face today are the direct results of yesterday's decisions. People always make decisions based on what makes the most sense to them in the context of that moment based on their current understanding. So, if someone does something that doesn't make sense to me, it's because of something I don't understand. Systems thinking helps us understand one another, something our world needs.