

Systems Snapshot Q&A



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Q: How were you first introduced to systems thinking?

A: **Laura:** I was introduced to the language of systems thinking as a student in the Master of Sustainable Peacebuilding program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I remember feeling so excited to have words to put to concepts and experiences that had always felt intuitive to me. The more I learn about systems thinking, though, the more I think that we're all systems thinkers that just don't know it yet!

Alexandria: I was introduced to systems thinking as a formal concept while pursuing my undergraduate degree in Global Studies, specifically in my international negotiation class. I felt like I was given a vocabulary to express how I saw and experienced the world. However, knowing what I know now, I think systems thinking is already present in many areas of our lives, but not always recognized as such-yet.

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

A: **Laura:** A Habit that I wish everyone practiced more often, myself included, is *Surfaces and Tests Assumptions*. My brain tends to be on the move all the time and can create some rather elaborate stories and judgements about other peoples' actions and motivations. It's not always easy to have the conversations to fact-check those stories and judgements, but surfacing assumptions typically allows us to move forward with more clarity, understanding, and a stronger relationship.

Alexandria: *Surfaces and Tests Assumptions*. What I especially love about this Habit is the way it is so naturally applicable to our personal and professional lives. Testing assumptions helps us expand our view of a situation, get creative, and explore what else may be true. It also helps us see our blind spots and can be a compass for where we need to get curious or heal. In my own life, when I am making the same assumption across interactions, that is my sign to explore what is at the root of that belief.

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

A: **Laura:** One of my favorite leaders is my dad, Walter Hermanns. He passed away over 10 years ago now, but in his ministry as a Lutheran pastor, and a father, he always put relationships first. He also had this way of speaking truth to power that was still kind and loving. I've come to appreciate just how much inner strength it took for him to model that gentleness and grace, even in really challenging situations.

Alexandria: A leader I deeply admire is Dr. Alaa Murabit, a global expert in health, sustainable development, inclusive security, and girls' education. I had the privilege of meeting her and seeing her speak, and I remember not only being in awe of her work but her presence, confidence, and authenticity. Her expertise was evident, but she also brought herself and her story to the work. I had been conditioned to believe that to be successful in professional spaces, you had to leave who you were as a person at the door and focus on "the work."

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

A: **Laura:** *Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown changed the way I relate to myself, others, and the world by positioning emotional vulnerability as an essential building block to forming healthy and loving relationships. My studies and calling in the world have always revolved around relationship-building, so it's given me language to be the type of leader I want to be. Plus, it's chock full of systems thinking habits!

Alexandria: *Emergent Strategy* by Adrienne Maree Brown is one of those books that speaks to the soul and the mind. It advocates for collaboration, leaning in and getting curious about change, and continually reminds us of our connection to one another, ourselves, and the world around us. I appreciate her acknowledgment of the pain and challenges of addressing complex problems paired with her unwavering optimism for a better future. For me, it inspires hope and action, both of which are important in doing the work of systems change.

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

A: **Laura:** Rather than thinking of it as this new skill you're supposed to master, approach it as a set of practices to uncover the systems thinker you already are! To me, it's a *process* and a *way* by which we approach the world—not a destination or magic bullet. Embrace the ongoing journey of learning (and unlearning) with an amazing community!

Alexandria: My advice is that no matter how hard or foreign systems thinking may seem, it will click. The deeper I dove into systems thinking, the more I realized systems thinking is not a new concept, but something inherent to us all. I don't think systems thinking is something you learn, but something you reconnect with and journey back to. Also, it is more than a set of frameworks and tools, it is a practice and the lens you use to see the world.

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

A: **Laura:** Practicing systems thinking requires a person to be self-aware, empathetic, adaptive, mindful, curious, humble, and collaborative—all qualities that I think leaders, practitioners, and our world need more of!

Alexandria: I truly believe if we become connected to ourselves and our internal world, and see our connectedness to others and the world around us, the world becomes a healthier and safer place for us all. And to me, systems thinking is the way this becomes a reality.