

Systems Snapshot Q&A



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Q: How were you first introduced to systems thinking?

A: By the time I turned 15, our family had moved ten times, across five countries and several culturally different regions within some of those countries. Each move meant re-assessing cultural norms for friendship, success, and even just being. I think that experience shaped a foundational mindset for systems thinking. I first encountered the formal systems thinking mindset and methodology during my undergraduate work in Organizational Communication, and it resonated deeply for me. Several years later I had the opportunity to experience a systems thinking approach to strategic planning for our Church, and I have been seeking greater understanding, competence and confidence in the application of ST principles and tools since then.

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

A: All of them. The way they work together and build on each other when used effectively is almost magical to observe and experience. That said, two that stand out most often in my work are Considers How Mental Models Affect Current Reality and the Future, and Recognizes that a System's Structure Generates its Behavior. It is so easy to get "stuck" in patterns of auto-pilot behavior. Considering the mental models behind our behavior can open our eyes to the reason for the behavior, and to the possibility of other approaches. I also believe most organizational leaders try to "hold staff accountable" for behaviors before considering how the structures created and reinforced by leaders generate the very behavior they seek to hold others accountable for. When we only address behavior, we typically get compliance at best. When we address structure AND behavior, we can generate lasting and intentional change.

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

A: The leaders I have appreciated most continually do their inner work to live and lead from love and humility as opposed to power and ego. As a result, they speak truth with kindness and compassion, ask questions with true curiosity, and strive to see possibility in people and circumstances. I have been blessed to encounter many such leaders at different times, including my wife and children, as well as many colleagues, students and participants with whom I have worked in various settings. On so many occasions they have offered more grace than I deserve, been authentically present through difficult conversations, and encouraged me (directly or indirectly) to continually do my own inner work to "live divided no more" (Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*). I think that in our pursuit of leadership gurus or giants "out there", we sometimes miss the quietly brilliant leaders around us every day.

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

A: The book of our own lives. Our lived experiences have so much to teach us. How we interact with our lived experiences so greatly impacts everyone around us. Someone once said something to the effect of "humanity's biggest problems stem from our inability to sit quietly with ourselves." Any book that can draw us inward for meaningful reflection is worth reading. For me, a couple of those are the Bible and *A Hidden Wholeness* by Parker Palmer.

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

A: Don't sweat the details. Play. Practice. Apply it to your own life and growth. Allow it to bloom organically the way it is intended to be for you, with your lived experiences and current reality. If you do that, systems thinking will become an extension of who you are more than a set of tools and mindsets to apply.

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

A: The world needs compassionate systems thinkers, not just system thinkers. Systems thinking can be manipulated for intentional harm as well as for intentional good. With that caveat, the greater the community of compassionate systems thinkers, and the greater our collective impact, and the more likely we are as a human race to generate systems that foster equity and possibility for all of life.