

Systems Snapshot Q&A



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Q: How were you first introduced to systems thinking?

A: I was actually first introduced to systems thinking about 30 years ago as a graduate student. I took a water resources planning course where we used Stella modeling software. Ten years after that I was back in graduate school and we read *The Fifth Discipline*, by Peter Senge. More recently, I was on a Race and Social Justice Initiative Change Team. I recognized that we needed a process that would lead to real, lasting results. I proposed a systems thinking approach and from there discovered the Waters Center for Systems Thinking. I took the "Leading for Impactful Change" online course and it was hugely beneficial.

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

A: My "go to" Habit is usually *Seeks to Understand the Big Picture*. More recently, however, I've been paying a lot of attention to *Recognizes that a System's Structure Generates its Behavior*. So much time is wasted and conflict arises when people are looking in the wrong places to address an issue. Looking at a system's structure helps to avoid some of these challenges.

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

A: Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo and considered to be the father of physical education in Japan. Judo means "the gentle way," and two of the fundamental tenants are: maximum efficient use of physical and mental energy and mutual prosperity for self and others. The connection in Judo between mind, body and spirit is very "system-esque" to me. I learned Judo as a kid and I'm now trying to pass on the philosophy to my son.

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

A: *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tzu. It's a short read packed with so much wisdom and thought. It helps me to consider different perspectives. I actually bought copies for my niece and nephew last Christmas. I think anyone can gain something beneficial from reading it.

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

A: I would start by reading several of the classic systems thinking books. *The Fifth Discipline* and *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* by Peter Senge; *Thinking in Systems* by Donella Meadows; *Systems 1* by Kauffman and Kauffman; and *Systems Thinking for Social Change* by David Peter Stroh are my favorites. I would also suggest taking a course from the Waters Center—this is what really set me on a path of having the knowledge and confidence to apply systems thinking to my work. Lastly, I would say choose one tool and learn it well enough that you could teach it to someone else. This will give you the confidence to apply the tool and you will quickly see how the different systems thinking tools fit together.

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

A: The world is a system—we all live and operate in systems. Using linear thinking is like trying to drive a boat the same way you drive a car. If you are going straight ahead and the water is calm, that may be fine. But if you are trying to navigate waves, obstacles, windy weather ... well, you will run into some problems. If a problem is simple and straightforward, linear thinking may work. But as things get complicated (time delays, unintended consequences, etc.) systems thinking is necessary.