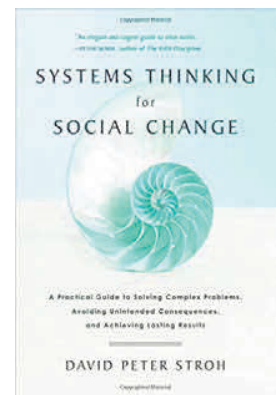


Systems Thinking for Social Change

A book excerpt by Mobius friend David Peter Stroh,
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Whether you are committed to ending homelessness, strengthening education, improving public health, reducing the problems of poverty, developing environmental sustainability, or helping people live better lives in other ways, you might have noticed that the organizations and systems you want to change have a life of their own. In other words, you do things to try to improve them and they essentially continue to operate as if your input makes no difference.

Organizations and social systems do in fact have a life of their own.

As someone committed to achieving sustainable, breakthrough social change, it helps to understand these forces so that you can consciously work *with* them instead of unconsciously working against them. You might be working in a foundation or nonprofit, government agency or legislature, department of corporate social responsibility, or as a consultant to people in these roles. In an era when growing income inequality and climate change increase the vulnerability of many and reduce the sustainability of all, you might feel called to do more to heal the world. You might also be challenged to achieve more with less – less time, attention, and money than you had before.

The book is based on a simple premise: *Applying systems thinking principles and tools enables you to achieve better results with fewer resources in more lasting ways.* Systems thinking works because it:

- Increases your awareness of how you might unwittingly be contributing to the very problems you want to solve.

- Empowers you to begin from where you can have the greatest impact on others, by reflecting on and shifting your *own* intentions, thinking, and actions.
- Mobilizes diverse stakeholders to take actions that increase the effectiveness of the whole system over time instead of meeting their immediate self-interests.
- Helps you and others anticipate and avoid the negative longer-term consequences of well-intentioned solutions.
- Identifies high-leverage interventions that focus limited resources for maximum, lasting, systemwide improvement.
- Motivates and supports continuous learning.

If you are a professional in the systems thinking community who is committed to social change, you can learn how to integrate the tools of systems thinking into a proven change management process.

If you are an organizational or community development consultant, you can use systems thinking to increase people's motivations to change, facilitate collaboration across diverse stakeholders, identify high-leverage interventions, and inspire a commitment to continuous learning.

What You Will Learn

Systems Thinking for Social Change helps you achieve these benefits by understanding what systems thinking is and how it can empower your work. It will also help

you appreciate the basic principles and tools of systems thinking, and learn how to apply it to problem solving, decision making, and strategic planning *without* becoming a technical expert.

More specifically, you will learn to:

► **Use systems thinking instead of more conventional linear thinking to address chronic, complex social problems.**

Einstein observed, “The significant problems we face cannot be solved with the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.” Systems thinking is more appropriate than conventional thinking to solve chronic, complex social problems. By contrast, you can unwittingly perpetuate such problems by thinking conventionally about how to solve them.

► **Apply systems thinking as both a set of principles and a particular group of analytic tools.**

The tools in *Systems Thinking for Social Change* – which include the iceberg, the causal loop diagramming and systems archetypes popularized by Peter Senge, and the Bathtub Analogy – have proven highly effective in shifting how people address social problems.¹ While many other analytic tools exist,² this book demonstrates why these specific tools are especially helpful in enabling a diverse group of stakeholders to, in the words of executive consultant Ram Charan, “cut through complexity to the heart of the matter, without being superficial.”³

► **Integrate systems thinking into a proven four-stage change management process.**

There are many change processes that seek to align diverse

stakeholders without helping people understand how their thinking and subsequent behavior unintentionally undermines their own performance, the performance of others in the system, and the system’s effectiveness as a whole. In other words, they often establish common ground around a shared aspiration yet fail to help people develop a joint understanding of not only what has been happening but also *why*. In searching for root causes, people typically assume that they are doing the best they can and that someone else is to blame – instead of recognizing, in the words of leadership expert Bill Torbert, that “if you are not aware of how you are part of the problem, you can’t be part of the solution.” By contrast, systems thinking enables people to identify high-leverage interventions based on deep insights into root causes that incorporate their own thinking and behavior.

This book reveals a four-stage change management process, grounded in systems thinking, that my longtime colleague Michael Goodman of Innovation Associates Organizational Learning and I have been working with for more than fifteen years. It also discusses how you can build systems thinking into other change processes. Many new processes have emerged in recent years to engage diverse stakeholders as a way of managing complexity and sharing resources.⁴ From a systems thinking perspective, *the key is to help participants cultivate a deep awareness of current reality as something they have created instead of as something that exists outside of and independent of them.*

► **Catalyze an explicit choice between the purpose people say they want to accomplish and the benefits they are achieving right now.**

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how dysfunctional a system appears to be, it is producing benefits for the people who participate in it. A pivotal intervention you will learn in this change process is to help people compare the benefits of change with the benefits of the status quo – and then help them make a conscious choice between the payoffs they are now getting and the espoused purpose they say they want the system to accomplish. This involves deepening people’s connections with what they care about most and supporting them to let go of current payoffs that do not serve their highest aspirations.

► **Apply systems thinking prospectively as well as retrospectively.**

The book highlights the application of systems thinking *retrospectively* to help people develop better solutions to chronic, complex social problems by first deepening their understanding of why they have been unsuccessful so far despite their best efforts. Emphasizing the retrospective application of systems thinking is so important because people tend to create more problems by failing to first fully appreciate the problem they are trying to solve.

At the same time, the book also shows you how to use the tools *prospectively* for strategic planning and assessment. You will learn to integrate leverage points into a systemic theory of change, design new systems where there is no precedent, organize your priorities, and establish an evaluation method grounded in systems principles.

► **Cultivate systems thinking as a way of being – not just as a way of thinking.**

Because systems thinking challenges people to take more responsibility for their actions and make hard choices, it is framed in this book as *more* than a way of *thinking*. The book describes how the approach affects people not only cognitively but also emotionally, spiritually, and behaviorally. As you build your capacity to think systemically, you will discover that the tools both enable and require you to develop a new way of *being*, not just *doing* – a set of character traits to cultivate (such as curiosity, compassion, and courage) that complement and deepen your new skills.

The concepts will be tied closely to experiences my colleagues and I have had in applying systems thinking

to social change initiatives. Some of the stories you will read about address:

- Aligning a community of a hundred thousand people around a ten-year plan to end homelessness.
- Designing a more effective statewide early-childhood development and education system.
- Improving the quality of environmental public health in states, counties, and cities around the United States.
- Reforming the criminal justice system with particular attention to reducing recidivism among people recently released from prison.
- Improving relationships between two agencies responsible for improving K–12 education in their state.
- Increasing people’s fitness and consumption of healthy local food in a rural region.

In November 2006, The After Prison Initiative (TAPI), a program of the US Justice Fund of the Open Society Institute (OSI), convened a three-day retreat in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to accelerate progress on ending mass incarceration and harsh punishment in the United States.¹ Aptly named *Where Are We Going?*, the retreat brought together one hundred progressive leaders – activists, academics, researchers, policy analysts, and lawyers – to clarify what else could be done to facilitate successful reentry of people after incarceration and redress the underlying economic, social, and political conditions and policies that contribute to making the US the world’s largest incarcerator among developed nations.

To give you an idea of the scope of the problem, the United States has 2.5 million people behind bars today – versus 200,000 in the 1970s – and approximately 650,000 return home each year. The meeting was grounded in a recognition of how the US criminal justice system – from the beginning and at an accelerated pace since the 1970s – is determined by race, and how society, in the words of Berkeley law professor Jonathan Simon, is increasingly “governed by crime.”² Most of the participants at the

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retreat were Soros Justice Fellows or OSI grantees who competed for OSI funding at the same time that they shared a commitment to criminal justice reform.

The challenge presented by this and many similar retreats was that the diverse stakeholders required to solve a chronic, complex problem often do not appreciate the many and often non-obvious ways in which their work is connected. Taking this challenge into account, the goals of the meeting were to:

- Develop a shared understanding of why US incarceration rates and rates at which people return to prison are so high.
- End over-incarceration; create new opportunities for and remove barriers to successful reentry of formerly incarcerated people.
- Strengthen working relationships and collaborations among the advocates.
- Deepen awareness of the interdependencies (both reinforcing and potentially conflicting) among their diverse efforts.
- Identify new ways to strengthen civil society institutions and promote civic and political inclusion.

Perhaps the most radical new tool introduced at the retreat was systems thinking. Working under a grant supported by OSI, the organizers of the retreat, Joe Laur and Sara Schley of Seed Systems, recognized that tackling the same problems with the same mind-set and strategies often produces the same, largely unsuccessful, results. They believed that systems thinking might help people in the field get “unstuck,” better understand their theory of change, and devise new strategies and ways of collaborating.

Joe and Sara asked me to introduce systems thinking and systems mapping to help participants create a shared

story of why mass incarceration and high recidivism rates persisted, as well as to identify what more they could do to reduce these rates. This picture needed to include the contributions of all participants to the solution, an explanation of why their independent efforts fell short, and insights into what they could do more effectively given limited resources and an urgent need for change.

STORYTELLING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Telling stories is a powerful way to make sense of our own experience and of the world around us. Stories shape our identity, communicate who we are and what is important to us, and move others to act. They are a primary way of distilling and coding information in memorable form. Leaders use them to inspire others. Peace builders recognize narrative as a key source of conflict (people interpret historical facts in very different and incompatible ways), and they work to help disputants both appreciate each other’s narratives and modify their own. Therapists use storytelling to help people heal from trauma by supporting them to shape a new and more constructive narrative based on past experience.

Likewise, people committed to social change often share a similar story of what they are trying to accomplish and the challenges they face. Three key elements of this story are:

- The world, in the words of Martin Buber, “stands in need of us,” and we are called to contribute our gifts and resources to support those less fortunate than ourselves.
- We are not making the impact we want despite our best intentions.
- The major obstacles to our success are limited resources and the behavior of others in the system.

While the first two aspects of this story are helpful and move people to act in positive ways, the belief that the primary causes of problems are beyond their control holds people back from being as productive as they could be. By attributing shortfalls to limited resources and assuming that others need to be the ones to change, people tend to minimize the impacts of their own intentions, thinking, and actions on their effectiveness.³ Moreover, because many of the stakeholders compete for limited funds, in this case from The After Prison Initiative, they naturally promote their own successes, downplay their failures, and sometimes may be reluctant to collaborate.

In order to optimize the performance of the entire system, people need to shift from trying to optimize their part of the system to improving relationships among its constituent parts. In the case of US criminal justice, the broader system includes how crime is currently fought, the negative unintended consequences of this system structure, and reformers' efforts to mitigate these consequences and redesign the structure. People need to:

- Understand how focusing on their part of the system – the grantees' reform work in this example – not only supports but might also limit the effectiveness of the whole system.
- Appreciate the non-obvious as well as obvious ways in which they are connected to one another as reformers and to others in the system.
- Recognize the unintended impacts of their intentions, thinking, and actions on both others and themselves.
- Apply this increased self-awareness to shifting how they relate to others in the system.

Even if people's contributions to an existing situation are not obvious, it is important, in the words of Jesse Jackson, that they tell themselves, "We might not be responsible for being down, but we are responsible for getting up." In other words, empowering themselves through greater self-awareness is the first step in changing their reality.

Systems thinking can help people tell a new and more productive story. It honors their individual efforts and

surfaces the limitations of these efforts. It distinguishes the short- and long-term impacts of their actions. It aligns their diverse views and stories into a bigger picture where individual contributors can see their part in relation to the whole. Seeing the big picture and their role in it, people are more motivated and able to work together to redesign the whole. ■

SHAPING A SYSTEMS STORY

In order to tell a systems story, people need to make three shifts:

- From seeing just their part of the system to seeing more of the whole system – including why and how it currently operates as well as what is being done to change it.
- From hoping that others will change to seeing how they can first change themselves.
- From focusing on individual events (crises, fires) to understanding and redesigning the deeper system structures that give rise to these events.



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Much of David's work over the past 30 years has focused on enabling leaders to apply systems thinking to hone organizational strategy and achieve sustainable change. He is a co-creator of the website *Applied Systems Thinking* and a charter member of the *Society for Organizational Learning*.

David is also the author of over 30 articles and book chapters, and he is a frequent speaker at the annual *Systems Thinking in Action* and other conferences.