

The Role Of Systems Thinking In Organizational Change And Development

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Years ago, I was working in the corporate organizational development office at an international electronics company in South Korea. I was at the beginning of my career and excited for the adventure of working for such a large company, in a foreign country, doing the work that I love. I was the only American in the division, and having lived and worked in South Korea for two years previously, I had developed relative fluency in the Korean language and familiarity with the culture.

Very early on in my time on the job, the division vice president asked me to work on a project related to gender equity issues at the company (perhaps because I brought an outside perspective). Being so young and a non-native speaker, I was worried about how I could possibly tackle such a complex and challenging issue at such a large organization. And I was concerned about how I could possibly convince executive leadership to take the steps that this young, naïve American would recommend.

Though I did not have the vocabulary for it at the time, as I reflect back on

this experience, I realize that what I did was take a systems-thinking approach to organizational change and development. Additionally, I did not try to convince leadership to adopt my recommendations. Rather, I created a compelling and holistic case for striving for greater gender equity at the company, mapping out the interconnectedness and causality of various inputs and outputs, and I asked a series of probing and reflexive questions that guided leadership to ultimately arrive at the desired conclusions all on their own.

Overview Of Systems Thinking And Organizational Change And Development

Systems thinking has been gaining significant interest lately as a comprehensive approach to introducing organizational change and development. Through systems thinking, a number of core concepts and practical tools can be applied to better understand the complexity of each organization.

There are many competing definitions of systems thinking in the academic literature. As Ross D. Arnold and Jon P. Wade point out in their recent [article](#), "Systems thinking is, literally, a system of thinking about systems."

[Organizational development](#) "refers to the context, focus and purpose of the change while developing an organization." Additionally, one [recent definition](#) of organizational development states: "Organizational development is a critical and science-based process that helps organizations build their capacity to change and achieve greater effectiveness by developing, improving, and reinforcing strategies, structures, and processes."

In essence, good organizational change and development require a systems-thinking mindset and an interdisciplinary, holistic approach to tackling complex organizational challenges.

Six Themes Of Systems Thinking

Although systems thinking may be considered a talent, there is a lot of supportive theory and a stack of tools to use when applying it. Leyla Acaroglu, a systems-thinking educator, points out [six key elements](#) to creating a systems thinking mindset: (1) interconnectedness, (2) synthesis, (3) emergence, (4) feedback loops, (5) causality and (6) systems mapping.

Interconnectedness and **synthesis** relate to the dynamic relationships between various parts of a whole, the process of obtaining expected synergies between parts of the company. This includes the idea of circularity, which stresses the requirement of a mindset shift from linear to circular. Similarly, the concept of **emergence** relates to the outcomes of synergies that can come about as the elements of a system interact with each other in nonlinear ways. In the workplace, this often takes the form of the push and pull that happens due to organizational politics and competing priorities. Organizational leaders with a systems-thinking mindset will see this as an opportunity for enhanced collaborations and innovation.

Balancing and reinforcing **feedback loops** within an organization serve as guidance for making adjustments as we learn more about the interconnectedness of the elements of the system and their outcomes. Additionally, **causality** refers to the flows of influence between the many interconnected parts within a system. As we better understand the casualty and directionality of these elements, we will have an improved perspective on the many fundamental parts of the system, including relationships and feedback loops. In the workplace, a skilled systems-thinking leader will ensure that mechanisms for multiple feedback loops are established and effectively communicated to their employees. Furthermore, they will understand correlation versus causation as they use the data gathered from the feedback loops to enhance workplace

practices.

Finally, **systems mapping** is a tool that systems thinkers can use to identify and visually map out the many interrelated elements of a complex system, which will help them “develop interventions, shifts, or policy decisions that will dramatically change the system in the most effective way,” as Acaroglu explains it. By visually laying out the key inputs and outputs, all of the stakeholders and the directions of the flows of information and influence, you can visually start to see and more deeply understand the nonlinear complexity of the given system, which can help you make appropriate adjustments to workplace policy, practice and associated systems in your organization.

Conclusion

Contemporary businesses operate in ecosystems full of interconnectedness and constant feedback loops. Mapping such complex systems helps organizational leaders navigate into adaptive strategies. The ultimate gain is the ability of organizations to be responsive to the changes in ecosystems and to be prepared to fine-tune and adapt parts of their organization on the fly. With this understanding, systems thinking provides clear benefits to organizations. It helps in framing complex problems, which are often being misdiagnosed when using linear thinking. It shows alternative directions for improvement with respect to the company’s inner and outer connections. It gives a significant advantage in increasing the organization’s capacity for change and, as a consequence, to fulfill the vision of business sustainability. Although it requires some talent and a deeper understanding of complexity and ambiguity, systems thinking can be successfully introduced and utilized to strengthen organizations.

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