



# Systems Thinking in Organizational Change

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This briefing doc reviews the main themes and key ideas presented in two articles focusing on systems thinking and its application within organizations.

Source 1: "BOTH THE PARTS AND WHOLE: LEADERSHIP AND SYSTEMS THINKING" by Col. George E. Reed

Source 2: "Systems Thinking: The Role Of Systems Thinking In Organizational Change And Development" by Jonathan H. Westover

## Key Themes:

- 1. The Limitations of Traditional Thinking:** Both articles highlight the inadequacy of linear, cause-and-effect thinking when dealing with complex organizational challenges. Reed emphasizes that treating organizations like simple machines leads to "blind spots" and that "human systems are infinitely more complex and dynamic." Westover echoes this sentiment, stating that "contemporary businesses operate in ecosystems full of interconnectedness and constant feedback loops," requiring a shift from linear to circular thinking.

**Quote:** "The use of lower-level models is problematic when applied to higher-level systems. Thus, the language of simple machines creates blind spots when used as a metaphor for human or social systems; human systems are infinitely more complex and dynamic." (Source 1)

- 2. The Power of Systems Thinking:** Systems thinking emerges as a valuable framework for understanding and addressing organizational complexity. Reed advocates for a shift in focus from individual parts to the interconnectedness of the whole, recognizing patterns and feedback loops within the system. Westover emphasizes the six key elements of systems thinking: interconnectedness, synthesis, emergence, feedback loops, causality, and systems mapping.

**Quote:** "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." (Source 2)

- 3. Leadership's Role in Systems Thinking:** Both authors underscore the importance of leadership in promoting and implementing a systems-thinking approach. Reed argues that leaders have the authority to intervene and correct malfunctioning systems and should be alert to those that negatively impact organizational effectiveness. Westover emphasizes the need for leaders to have a systems-thinking mindset, fostering feedback loops, understanding causality, and utilizing systems mapping to guide effective organizational change.



**Quote:** "Because of their experience and position, leaders are invested with the authority to intervene and correct or abandon malfunctioning systems. At the very least, they can advocate for change in a way that those with less positional authority cannot." (Source 1)

### Key Ideas:

- **Understanding Systems:** Identifying and defining the system's purpose, recognizing the interconnectedness of its parts, and analyzing its behavior over time are crucial steps in systems thinking.
- **Feedback Loops:** Understanding and leveraging feedback loops are essential for identifying patterns, making adjustments, and facilitating continuous learning within the system.
- **Continuous Assessment:** Leaders need to constantly assess what is actually happening within the system, rather than relying on assumptions or wishful thinking, to make informed decisions and enact effective change.
- **Systems Mapping:** Visualizing the system through mapping helps in identifying key elements, relationships, and flows of information, providing a clearer understanding of the system's dynamics.

### Practical Applications:

- Applying systems thinking can help organizations identify and address the root causes of persistent problems instead of resorting to short-term solutions.
- By understanding interconnectedness, organizations can anticipate the potential consequences of changes and minimize unintended negative effects.
- Continuous assessment and feedback loops facilitate adaptive and responsive strategies, enabling organizations to navigate complex and ever-changing environments.

### Conclusion:

The reviewed sources emphasize the limitations of traditional thinking in addressing complex organizational challenges and advocate for the adoption of a systems-thinking approach. Leaders play a crucial role in fostering a systems-thinking mindset within their organizations, leading to more effective decision-making, organizational change, and overall success.

*(Note: this is a summary generated by AI using the aforementioned sources)*