

Five Facts about Systems Thinking

1. Complex problems have a wide range of stakeholders and issues involved, from private citizens, to small businesses, corporations, government policies, educational systems, and so on. And each of these stakeholders holds a unique worldview of the problem and differing value judgements. Some may have similar views on the problem, but often the actual formulation of the problem is drastically different.
2. Each element of the problem is connected to other elements in different ways. This looks more like a web or a system than a long complicated list.
3. Because the elements are interconnected with one another, addressing one element will likely cause unexpected consequences in another. The interconnections between all the stakeholders and issues means that there is no one single solution or any one organization that can just eliminate the problem. But having a systemic understanding of the problem helps us consider where we might make the most impact.
4. Instead of coming up with one quick-fix solution, we can start to see how pulling or impacting on one area of the system might affect other places in the system, because it's all interconnected.
5. Not all stakeholders have the same power within the system to make change; consider, for example, how government policies or strong industry lobbies might shift the resources dedicated to tackling climate changes, while indigenous voices on climate change have been historically marginalized in the system. To reduce conflict and marginalization, those boundary judgements must be exposed and discussed with special attention to making all stakeholder voices heard. Through dialogue about the beliefs and boundary judgements, a much deeper understanding of the problem emerges.

So how do we address such complex problems?

Before jumping to any solution, we have to look at the whole system. And that requires us to ask some important and difficult questions, especially when we're used to seeing things from our corner of the system:

- Who else is involved in this system?
- What are the multiple perspectives for all those who have a "stake" in the problem?
- How are the specific elements of the problem connected? And connected to me?
- How would a change in one part of the system impact the other parts?

In short, systems thinking - or thinking systemically - helps minimize the distorted thinking that comes when we're entrenched in our worldviews and helps us see the world more accurately. If we can listen to each other's perspectives and find connections, we'll be better equipped to understand the scope of the challenge and develop a systemic response together.

