

Leading Change in Early Childhood Education — No Better Time for Systems Thinking

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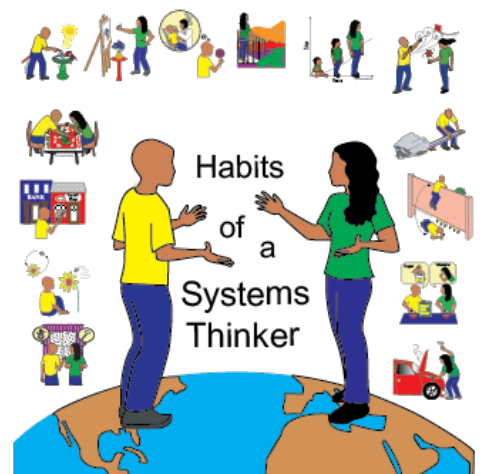
Waters Foundation, Systems Thinking Group

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To realize the vision of a high quality early childhood system that serves all children, regardless of zip code, race, religion, gender or language, it is critical that leaders understand and manage change in complex systems. For this to happen, leaders need to have the mindsets and skill sets to create equitable systems that adapt and respond to a changing educational landscape.

A system's design produces the outcomes it gets, so if current outcomes and trends in early childhood education are less than desirable, leaders need to focus on the internal structures that are creating those results. This endogenous view is empowering and precludes blame when things do not go well. In this view, all members of the system maintain shared accountability for the outcomes that are produced and change is viewed as a requirement for improved outcomes. In addition, members understand that resistance to change and a reliance on the "ways we have always done things," are ongoing hindrances to improvement. Systems that embrace new ways of thinking and new ways of doing help create and nurture a welcoming attitude toward change and innovation. The growing complexity and challenges facing today's leaders make a systems thinking approach to creating change more important now than ever.

The habits of systems thinking and specific visual tools help uncover complex cause and effect relationships that produce system behavior. By surfacing these causal relationships, leaders can best identify high leverage actions and make informed decisions that produce fundamental solutions to persistent problems. The development of systems thinking leaders is not limited to a few individuals at the top of an organization, perceived to be in charge of leading the way. Instead, systems that truly adapt with fidelity have many systems thinkers who represent multiple organizational tiers and stakeholder groups. Leading from the middle becomes as important as leading from the top of an organizational chart. The contagious nature of systems thinking (ST) inspires all stakeholders to learn and lead together. They accomplish this by using the ST language, adopting the habits and tools that facilitate improved and enriched communication, supporting a thriving and inclusive culture, implementing research-based practices and demonstrating a day-to-day ability to engage in informed decision-making.

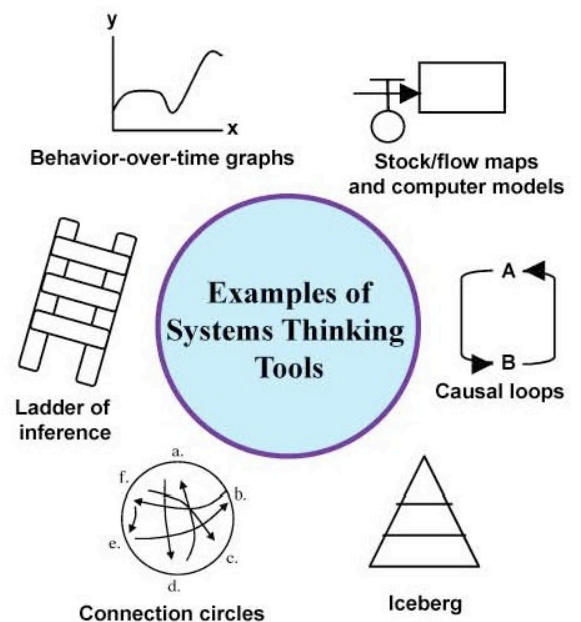


Capacity-Building Process

The systems thinking learning process starts with the development of a common language around systems, including its characteristics and implications. In a 2015 address to educators, Dennis O'Donoghue, Vice President of Boeing International, shared from his experience, "There is no numerical value to prove that a culture is shifting. The first indicator is a change in language." [The 14 Habits of a Systems Thinker](#) provide the language that facilitates common understanding and enhanced communication of thinking. The Habits describe what it means to become a systems thinker and inspires shifts in thinking that influence day-to-day behaviors.

A variety of reactions surface when an individual first learns of the habits of systems thinking. Some comment, "This is the way I naturally think. I just didn't have the terms or the tools to help me make my thinking explicit to others." Others might say, "This is a new way of thinking for me, but I can see how it can help me better understand my work, my family and my life." Systems thinking starts with an intention to see beyond one-time events, to look for trends and to avoid reactive, quick fix responses. Systems thinkers develop a deep understanding of what influences the daily happenings and outcomes of systems they care about. They then use this deep understanding to identify possible leverage actions that will deliver positive results.

Becoming a systems thinker takes intentional practice. There are six different visual tools that help learning leaders put the habits of a systems thinker into practice. The systems thinking tools apply to leadership, management, professional development, teaching, learning, community engagement and more. Over time, individuals experience positive results in their personal and professional development because of the systems thinking methodology.



Benefits of Systems Thinking Habits and Tools for Leaders

The habits and tools of systems thinking empower individuals to gain new insights and a deeper understanding of the systems they want to impact. An initial investment in the time to learn and practice the habits and tools of ST delivers many benefits, including:

- positive and productive shifts in organizational culture
- creative and innovative approaches to leadership
- decision-making and problem-solving approaches that maximize benefits to the system
- improved communication and collaboration skills
- high and clear expectations
- measurable results related to key performance indicators
- organizational effectiveness and efficiency
- social and emotional wellness

Systems across the United States and throughout the world are actively pursuing the advantages of integrating systems thinking at all levels. The benefits of such approaches are both immediate to the development of professional capital and long-lasting for thriving communities that place the needs of children at the core. There is no better time to intentionally build the system thinking capacity of leaders to develop local, state and regional systems as organizations that learn and adapt toward ongoing progress and improvement. The demands of the 21st century necessitate the development of skills and knowledge necessary to manage the complexity of current and future challenges. The language, habits of thinking and tools of systems thinking help leaders create systems that intentionally provide for the diverse and challenging needs of today's children, preparing them to thrive and prosper throughout their lives.