

Systems thinking promotes sustainable GSS growth

Editor's Note: The following editorial is contributed by [Mel Bost](#), project coordinator for the Program Management Office. His responsibility includes looking past the events (individual projects) to patterns of behavior among projects to determine what systemic structure drivers might be causing those patterns.

When speaking about the GSS Strategic Excellence process, [Gene Batchelder](#) said, "We need a culture that is more inclusive, more empowering and more collaborative with our customers and employees. We are great at managing consolidation and want to be as great at managing growth – which is what we need for the next 1,000 day journey."

Traditional approaches to organizational growth have been to identify, develop and implement key initiatives based on well thought-out strategies. Some initiatives succeed at providing growth, while some fail. Traditional approaches often assume pushing harder on initiatives will succeed in achieving sustained growth.

However, a relatively new discipline known as "systems thinking" provides another way of looking at the organization and another series of actions to promote growth. As a discipline, systems thinking originated in the 1990s, but it wasn't until the early 2000s that noticeable results brought it more into the mainstream. The early works of Peter Senge in "The Fifth Discipline" helped shape this new discipline.

According to Peter, everyone in an organization needs to view the organization as a system, which contains a group of interacting, interrelated and interdependent components that form a complex and unified whole. Systems,

in this case, refers to organizational structure, culture, processes, procedures, feedback, human interactions, policies and the structure we use to manage the systems.

The defining characteristics include:

- Every system has a purpose within a larger system.
- A system's parts must be arranged or aligned in a specific way for the system to carry out its purpose.
- Systems change in response to feedback and maintain their stability by adjusting as a result.

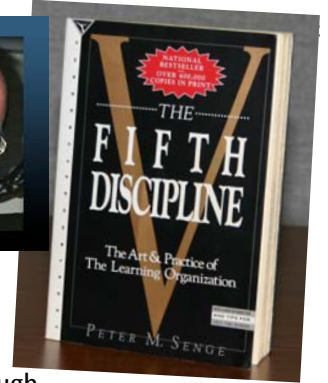
Systems thinking is a perspective, because it helps us see the events and patterns of behavior in our lives in a new light and respond to them accordingly. In a system, structure influences behavior. Structure includes the system's interrelationships, feedback, inputs and outputs, operating principles, processes, procedures and standards, which dictate behavior in support of producing results.

For every action or initiative in a systems-thinking scenario, there is a reaction or feedback of the environment to that initiative. Recognizing and understanding this feedback is key to deciding if the initiative should be pushed further or modified. Often these reactions help to promote growth through a reinforcing process.

Frequently, however, the reaction



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can be to slow growth through balancing processes. Instead of continually pushing on the initiative in the face of a balancing process, systems thinking advocates that organizational leaders must identify the barriers to growth and remove them. These are often structural in nature and require looking beyond the obvious events to see patterns of behavior and the systemic structure which has been built into the organization over time.

The removal of these barriers is key to sustained growth. This is not an easy task, especially if the current organizational culture is not equipped to examine the organization from that perspective.

I recommend "The Fifth Discipline" as a tool to provide each person in GSS a better view of how their actions create feedback within a complex system. We need to be aware of systems archetypes (such as limits to growth), which are recurring organizational patterns of behavior in response to structure.

To review a Learning Action Model based on the principles from "The Fifth Discipline," visit http://www.systemsprimer.com/matrix_explained_two.htm [#The%20Learning%20Action%20Matrix](#)

Systems thinking and "The Fifth Discipline" use the following action sequence:

1. Identify feedback relationships which are in response to reinforcing and/or balancing initiatives.
2. Identify "time delays" or time lags for which an initiative may yield no immediate feedback or response and which may mask the true effect of the initiative.
3. Identify the influence and the players.
4. Look beyond events to see patterns of behavior, "mental models" and "systemic structure" if it is present.
5. Look for "systems archetypes" such as "limits to growth" which are typical organizational patterns of behavior in response to structure.
6. Identify barriers and high leverage variables for change.
7. Eliminate the barriers to growth through a change in the leveraging variables.