

# The Simplicity of Systems Thinking:

A Universal Thinking Framework and Guide

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## OVERVIEW OF SYSTEMS THINKING

“Thought,” said IBM’s founder Thomas J. Watson, Sr., “has been the father of every advance since time began.” While this seems obvious, the truth is that we often assume our method of thinking “just is,” and don’t consider *how* we arrive at new ideas or decisions.

But *the way we think creates the results we get*. Therefore, ***the most powerful way to impact the quality of results is to improve the way we think.***

The *Systems Thinking Approach*<sup>®</sup> provides a simple yet universal framework and guide to navigating our increasingly complex, fast-paced world. The purpose of this article is to help you achieve superior and lasting results in *every* aspect of daily life and work by using some simple rules for thinking effectively.

## COMPLEXITY IS THE NEW NORMAL

When we look at the world around us, it has an underlying simplicity (*the natural way the world works*):

- Most of the music in the western world is based on just 12 notes.
- Most math and economics use just 10 digits.
- Most characteristics of humans come from DNA made up of 2 biopolymer strands coiled around each other to form a double helix and are composed of different combinations of only 4 nucleotides.
- Most colors can be made from just 3 primary colors.
- Most information technology in the world is based on just 2 pieces of information – 0 and 1.

Simplicity exists at the core of chaos (e.g., fractals), but we have lost track of it as we

have created our intricate and interconnected world. This complexity is a key challenge for business, government and nonprofit sectors. Technological advances and global interactions require organizations to adapt to a dynamic environment. **The same goes for individuals.**

The world is a complex dynamic global system. Unfortunately, most people are still trying to solve problems with mindsets, thought processes and tools that are outdated.

The complexity of the world cannot be ignored. Individuals have to learn to comprehend it, navigate it and simplify it to its essence so they can choose rational ways to act. Complexity is the “new normal,” but that doesn’t mean that confusion has to follow.

Achieving a perspective that is clear and simple is possible through thinking differently, using *Systems Thinking*. The best part is that it is about *the natural way the world works*, so it is simpler than we imagine. In fact, one definition of simplicity is “a focus on logic and common sense.”

Against this backdrop, the *Systems Thinking Approach*<sup>®</sup> is a common-sense approach that can be taught to almost anyone in 10 minutes. Systemic and holistic thinking about the complexity of the world at all levels of living systems helps to bring it to its core essence—and that leads to simplicity and better results.

## SYSTEMS THINKING VS. ANALYTIC THINKING

*Analytic thinking*— also known as “reductionism,” a piecemeal and mechanistic approach to solving problems—falsely isolates symptoms as the causes of problems and selects simplistic solutions. Analytic thinking doesn’t account for the fact that change in any element of a system affects the whole system, as well as the other parts.

The complexity of our world blinds analytic thinkers to the reality of the interrelated parts of the system. They take one solution and consider it the only best way. It is an *either/or* method of thinking that tries to deal with one symptom at a time—and often with only one solution. Because it takes such a narrow view of the problem, analytic thinking yields scores of unintended and sometimes negative consequences.

Even though the dominant learning paradigm in our lives is analytic thinking, the natural order of life in the world we live in requires a systems perspective. The world is composed of systems within systems within systems. Unlike traditional analytic thinking, *Systems Thinking* embraces, explores and overcomes complexity, as Peter M. Senge notes in his article “Learning Organizations”:

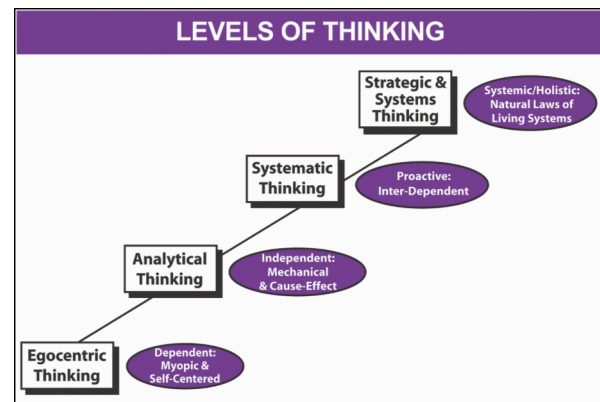
*Systems Thinking* is a discipline for seeing wholes, a framework for seeing

patterns and interrelationships. It's especially important to see the world as a whole as it grows more complex.

Complexity can overwhelm and undermine ... *Systems thinking is the antidote for feelings of helplessness. By seeing patterns that lie behind events and details, we can actually simplify our lives.*

Improving how we think involves progressing up the levels of maturity from Dependence (self-centred non-thinking) to Independence (analytic thinking) to Interdependence (cooperative thinking, recognizing relationships among ideas) to Mastery (Systems Thinking—holistic, integrated and systemic).

A paradigm shift is occurring right now—advanced thinkers in nearly every discipline are evolving models and methods for understanding interdependence, recognizing complexity and seeking holistic solutions required for today's dynamic world.



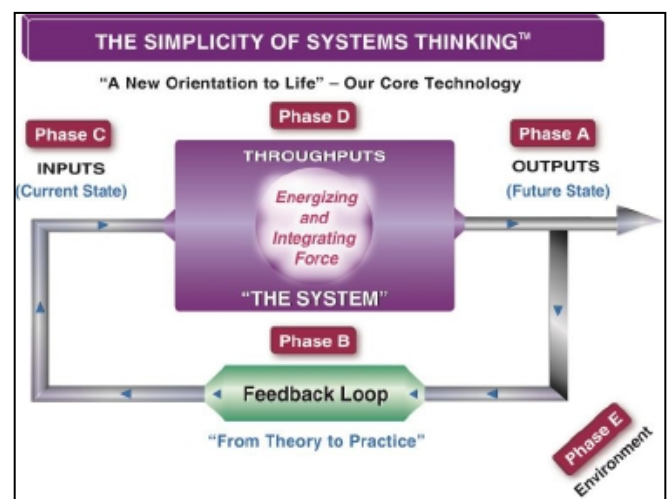
### A UNIVERSAL THINKING FRAMEWORK AND GUIDE

Because organizing frameworks are important to helping people understand complexity, it is important to give people the conceptual tools to organize their knowledge and experiences. Without organizing frameworks, we have difficulty applying what we know to new situations.

The best conceptual organizing framework is the ABCs of Systems Thinking -- the Haines Centre's universal thinking framework and guide. These five phases (see model, right) are all that is needed to find better solutions to today's complex problems.

The ABCs of *Systems Thinking* asks five questions in sequence:

- A. Where do we want to be?
- B. How will we know when we get there?
- C. Where are we now?
- D. How will we get where we want to be? (*Close the gap between C and A*)
- E. What may change in the future that will affect us?



## THE 3 RULES OF SIMPLICITY

In a complex world, simplicity wins the game every time. If people can understand and impart concepts to others in a simpler way, they will be much more effective at communicating clarity of purpose and at achieving goals.

These rules are constructed to help reach simplicity and focus. Once they are understood, there is really an unlimited number of experiences in life and in the workplace that can benefit from following these three rules. The “simplicity on the far side of complexity” will be revealed.

### Rule 1: FOCUS

**Focusing** brings the massive power of attending to one thing at a time.

Some examples include:

- **“Begin with the end in mind.”** Stephen Covey’s advice (Habit #2 in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) is important. Individuals need to know where they want to go in order to get there. Goal setting is the primary criterion for success. Know and agree with others on desired outcomes (Phase A) before moving to the other Systems Thinking phases.
- **Focus on self-mastery first.** If we can’t master ourselves, we’re never going to be helpful to other people. If we want to change someone else’s behavior, we must change our behavior toward them first.
- **Ask What’s in it for me?** This is a legitimate question. Make sure everyone finds an answer to that question in order to get their full energy and motivation.

### Rule 2: COMPARE

**Comparing** involves evaluating only two concepts or items against one another. Sometimes these concepts represent two polarities, such as Pros and Cons. At other times, we may take a long list of options and compare the first two against our criteria for success, then take the “winner” and compare it to the next option on the list, and so on until only one remains.

As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, *“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”*

Some examples include:

- **“Both/And” Thinking.** “Either/Or” thinking assumes there is only one right

answer to a problem. It is an analytical and reductionist mindset that creates unnecessary conflict and polarization. “Both/And” allows us to combine ideas and explore possibilities.

- **Dialogue over Debate.** Dialogue is based on asking and listening, and involves full participation, understanding and respect. Debate is based on power and winning, and involves domineering and proving. Dialogue is always more productive and successful. Are you debating or dialoguing? Both cannot be done at the same time.
- **Means vs. Ends.** People often focus on actions or tactics (means) without having clear goals in mind (ends). The “means” become insignificant and ineffective without a clear “end” in mind. Individuals have to first focus on the “ends” and get clarity of direction to the desired results. Once this is accomplished, consensus and agreement must also be obtained before moving to the means.

### Rule 3: RETAIN

**Retention** involves **presenting concepts in threes**, since that is what most people can think about at once. Sticking to The Rule of Three will help an organization to obtain clarity, simplicity and speed in all that is done. Some examples include:

- **Action, Reaction and Consequences.** For every *action*, there is a *reaction*, followed (immediately or in the future) by the *consequences*. While every system functions uniquely, its parts, elements and subsystems are interdependent, weaving a web of relationships. Change in any element of a system affects the whole as well as the other parts.
- **Feedback is the “Breakfast of Champions.”** The best feedback and reinforcement techniques to ensure success require *recognition*, *challenge* and *support*. Remember, to sustain new behaviors this feedback and reinforcement is necessary and required.
- **Experiential Learning.** Everyone learns best by doing, but only when the experience is followed by some reflection, analysis and generalization. After an experience, ask:
  - *What?* What happened? What did I do, see, hear, feel? What did others do?
  - *So what?* What did I learn from this experience?
  - *Now what?* What am I going to do differently as a result?

### SUMMARY

W. Edwards Deming, best known for his ideas on statistical quality control, said, “*We live and work in an analytic prison: Working hard within this prison produces nothing. We*

*cannot remodel the prison. We must get out of it. To do this, a transformation is required.”* **That transformation is Systems Thinking.** Not only will Systems Thinking release you from an analytic prison—it will also raise your Strategic IQ. It is how to out-think and out-maneuver the competition by using simplicity on the other side of complexity.

*How you think, is how you plan, is how you act  
and that determines the results you get in work and life*

The three Rules of Simplicity can be applied to nearly every area of life. When reading each rule, consider which are the most applicable for you, and consider what actions each example calls for.

## PARADIGM SHIFT TO SYSTEMS THINKING

This is a shift from seeing elements, functions and events to seeing the patterns, processes, structures, and interrelationships and their desired outcomes:

- ✓ *From single events* (analytical thinking, reductionist and mechanistic)...
- ✓ *To patterns and relationships* (simple cause-and-effect, repeated events, and relational thinking)...
- ✓ *To the new mental model* of collaboration, cooperation and integrated Systems Thinking.

Living systems on earth are governed by the natural laws of life—and a successful participant must learn the rules. Analytical thinking is an old way of thinking for an industrial era. Systems Thinking is the better way of thinking, understanding and navigating today’s complex world—and the best way to approach the future.

## THE SYSTEMS THINKING APPROACH® IS...

- A new orientation to life
- A way to create simplicity from the world’s complexity
- A different, simple and better way to think
- A higher order of thinking
- An advanced way of thinking
- A better diagnostic set of tools
- More systemic and strategic
- A common language and unity of thinking



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