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Systems thinking

Help employees to see the big picture

Question:

“As the HR director at my company, I’m spending more time mediating conflicts between work areas. No one seems to see the big picture: that we are here to help one another so the company can meet the customers’ needs. There’s a lot of competition, blaming and accusing. What can I do to help people see we’re all in this together?”

Answer:

This is a very common concern. We work with clients to address these kinds of concerns every day. Organizations of all kinds and types are filled with barriers, turfs, territories, and silos. Employees who operate inside these boxes tend to adopt a defended and guarded perspective along the lines of, “We’ve got our act together ... the problem is over there, with those people ... they are the ones messing things up.”

This kind of parochial thinking is, of course, misguided. The adage that, “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link” is applicable here. If Department A is going great-guns but Department B is spinning its wheels, then Department B’s futility will dictate how the organization’s processes ultimately perform.

So what can you do to encourage your employees to start to sing from the same song sheet? Unleash the power of systems thinking.

Systems thinking is a term that was most popularly explored by Peter Senge in his book, “The Fifth Discipline.” According to Senge, systems thinking has to do with, “Seeing interrelationships rather than things, seeing patterns of change rather than ‘static snapshots’ . . . It is a discipline for seeing the ‘structures’ that underlie complex situations, and for discerning high from low leverage change.”

It is more effective to view organizational problems as systems problems and

seek answers that integrate within and between each interdependent sub-system (i.e., work areas, teams, departments, etc.). This is precisely why collaborative, team, and systems-oriented work styles are becoming more common in organizations.

To what settings and pursuits are sys-

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tems thinking applicable? It is an aid in managing complex human service organizations, universities, colleges, schools, government bodies and programs, human services agencies, health care delivery, advertising campaigns, retail businesses, professional organizations, manufacturing businesses, public relations campaigns, recruiting efforts, organizational development activities, human resources departments, and training/development initiatives, to name just a few.

Although each of these applications vary, they have in common the fact that behavior of all systems follows particular common and natural principles of living systems. All systems are dynamic and

change, over time. Think about the impact on work driven by the rise of technology and access to data and information. The world is literally at our fingertips in this Information Age.

That’s a key point you need to make with your employees. We need to use 21st century approaches to solve 21st century problems. From the time we were very young, we were taught to break apart

problems in order to take the complex task and turn it into something easier to handle. A limitation with this approach is that it can create bigger problems—we fail to see the consequences of our actions, and we fail to make the connection to the larger whole. Too often, we rely on traditional (i.e., mechanistic) techniques and tools inherited from the Agricultural Age to solve business problems generated by the emerging (i.e., systems-based) Information Age.

Analytic thinking is such a common way of thinking that we hardly recognize it. It is a central, linear approach to problem solving, looking at only one issue at a time. This is an inherent shortcoming of this

mode of thinking. Basic analytic thinking centers on cause-and-effect: one cause for every effect. It is typically based upon “either-or” questions. The reason it fails us in today’s workplace is that it does not take into consideration the total environment, other systems, and the various or delayed causality that occurs simultaneously with each cause and effect transaction.

The value of systems thinking is that it yields a better and richer understanding of reality. Why? Because systems are dynamic entities and systems thinking is a perspective that allows a person to adopt both a broader and more integrated view of things.

Below is a summary of the differences between analytic (i.e., analysis of today’s needs; parts are primary, the whole is secondary) and systems thinking (i.e., synthesis for future impact; whole is primary, the parts are secondary):

- » We/they vs. customers/stakeholders
- » Independent vs. interdependent
- » Activities/tasks vs. outcomes/ends
- » Problem solving vs. solution seeking
- » Units/departments vs. shared vision of future
- » Silo mentality vs. total organization
- » Closed environment vs. openness and feedback
- » Department goals vs. shared

core strategies

- » Strategic planning project vs. strategic management system
- » Hierarchy and controls vs. serve the customer
- » Not my job vs. communications and collaboration
- » Isolated change vs. systemic change
- » Linear/beginning—ending vs. circular/repeat cycles
- » Little picture view vs. big picture/holistic view
- » Short term vs. long term
- » Separate issues vs. related issues
- » Symptoms vs. root causes
- » Isolated events vs. patterns/trends
- » Discrete tasks vs. links in a performance chain

Systems thinking is the solution to help employees see how the work they do impacts the work that their colleagues do. It is a tool to help each work area see each other work area as a partner in a common pursuit, rather than an impediment to be derided and criticized. ■

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