

# Reflections

The SoL Journal  
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



## FEATURE ARTICLE

### **Building a Systems Thinking Culture at Ford Motor Company**

Jeremy Seligman

### **Commentary**

Michael Goodman

## EMERGING KNOWLEDGE

### **Committees and Boards in Healthcare Organizations**

Manoj Pawar

## BOOK EXCERPT

### **The World Café**

Juanita Brown  
with David Isaacs and the  
World Café Community

## RECOMMENDED READING

Steve Waddell  
Russell L. Ackoff and  
Sheldon Rovin  
Janine M. Benyus  
Charles Parry, Joseph Moore and  
Marilyn Darling  
Adreas Priestland and Robert  
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IN THIS ISSUE OF *REFLECTIONS* we bring together the themes of systems thinking and conversation. One of SoL's unique contributions is its blend of fresh analytical perspective on the causes and consequences of structures and policies, and insight into implementing the cultural shifts that are required for effective action. The combination of these two approaches evokes the intelligence of systems whose complexity otherwise can be overwhelming.

The Ford Motor Company was an early sponsor of the MIT Center for Organizational Learning, and has been a member of SoL since its inception. In our lead article, Jeremy Seligman, a passionate systems thinker, has captured some of the story of building a systems thinking culture at Ford from the perspective of a relative newcomer. The candor of this piece helps us appreciate the fact that organizational systems will naturally limit the success of even the best-intentioned efforts. Recognizing, planning for, and learning to correct these limits helps build organizational capacity for systems thinking that survives and grows over time.

A key ingredient in developing a deep appreciation for the systemic nature of issues is the ability to consider diverse perspectives. Our Emerging Knowledge feature, "Committees and Boards in Health Care Organizations: Barriers to Organizational Learning?" presents the story of redesigning a structure in order to change the nature of conversations within an organization. The case is an interesting example of systems thinking itself, because the intention of the intervention is not simply to improve the quality of conversation, but to experiment with a structure for governance that is enabled and reinforced with new tools.

One of these tools is the World Café process. "Conversation as a Core Process: Co-Creating Business and Social Value" is our featured excerpt from the new book *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* by Juanita Brown, with David Isaacs and the World Café Community. This chapter features two more stories of transforming working relationships and stimulating significant innovation by encouraging the participation of whole systems.

Finally, I'd like to remind you that SoL gatherings are a great way to sharpen analytical skills and deepen conversation on the topics that matter most to us. You can still sign up to attend SoL's 2nd Global Forum in Vienna – "A Symphony of Innovation" – September 13-16th by visiting <http://www.solonline.org/events/GlobalForum2005Public/>. (There will be a special pre-meeting session for those interested in the World Café process.) In future issues of *Reflections* we will share some of the work presented at this meeting, and feature work from other SoL gatherings as well.

As always, we welcome your suggestions, requests and comments. Happy reading, and we look forward to hearing from you!



C. Sherry Immediato  
Managing Director, SoL

## TIMELY PRACTICALITY

THE LAST ISSUE OF *REFLECTIONS* (Vol. 6, No. 2/3) arrived at a most opportune time. Over the last few months, several colleagues and I in the Technology and Manufacturing Group within Intel have been investigating the implications of social networks on diversity and inclusiveness in the work environment. Specifically, we have been looking at the nature of “dominant” and “non-dominant” networks and their impact on such things as culture formation, business process design, and the definition of what might be called the “ideal” member. The *Reflections* lead article “*The Nature of Social Collaboration: How Work Really Gets Done*” by Dennis Sandow and Anne Murray Allen, provided useful insight.

Of particular interest was the authors’ definition of collaboration as “simply the social coordination of action around a shared purpose” and the related casual loop “Figure 5: Reinforcing Trust” with its associated explanation (i.e. Listening ® Understanding ® Trusting ® Collaborating ® Listening).

Several questions emerged for us that have helped to focus our inquiry. What is the quality of “listening” between members of “dominant” and “non-dominant” networks? What process might create “shared purpose” across current networks and help drive collaboration in order to form new networks?

Many of us commented on the practicality of the article – and how it seemed to arrive at just the time it was needed. Thank you for it and your continued good work.

*Robert M. O’Bryan*  
*Senior OD Consultant, Intel Corporation*

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## PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INQUIRY

AS AN EXECUTIVE COACH WHO SPECIALIZES in women’s leadership, I found the discussion between Peter Senge and Saj-nicole Joni (“A New Tool for Inquiry,” *Reflections* 6.1) fascinating for several reasons.

Joni’s framework for first, second, and third opinions names a strategy that many coaches advise. But Joni’s model more clearly articulates the value and distinctions of the levels of inquiry and how the connectedness and interdependencies of the opinions help to develop the thinking of the leader. Joni makes a wonderful point in emphasizing that public and private inquiry are interdependent. Regardless of how many questions are asked in public, it’s essential for individuals to reflect on their own and to ask questions of others in private. This combination of public and private inquiry helps to shape thinking by sorting through and integrating what’s learned.

A related point of interest is that to me, Joni’s concepts reflect “feminine” thinking. It might be just coincidental, but Joni’s model is reflective of the way in which many women approach leadership. In my experience and research, women tend to gather information from many sources. They ask a lot of questions, publicly and privately, before they come to a decision. This process can often be misinterpreted by

men who equate the inquiry process with the inability to make decisions. Women say, as Joni herself says, that they need to “talk it out.” Women look for sounding boards to process their thoughts and they recognize the value of talking to people who have insider feedback and to people who can be completely objective.

Joni’s model reinforces the critical concept that leaders, both men and women, have to know when to ask particular questions, whom to ask, in what setting to ask, and how to integrate and interpret the information they receive. Thank you for bringing it to your readers’ attention.

*Ginny O’Brien*

Executive Coach, and author of *Coaching Yourself to Leadership: Five Key Strategies for Becoming an Integrated Leader* and *Success on Our Own Terms: Tales of Extraordinary, Ordinary Business Women*

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Send your comments, questions, and suggestions to [reflections@solonline.org](mailto:reflections@solonline.org)

# Building a Systems Thinking Culture at Ford Motor Company

By Jeremy Seligman



Jeremy Seligman

**M**any of us in the systems thinking (ST) and organizational learning communities have experienced frustration in creating sustainable communities of practice in corporate environments. Sharing that frustration with each other has generated much reflection and dialogue as to why these efforts are so consistently challenging. It can be disappointing to return years later to the site of initiatives – many of which were undertaken with substantial initial internal support and the best resources on the planet – to find little evidence of either measurable benefits or ongoing active practice fields. The benefits of practicing systems thinking – gaining an understanding of the dynamics of a system and how to intervene in it successfully – are incontrovertible. Yet sometimes it seems doubtful that ST will ever gain the critical mass required to make it an integral part of how major corporations practice strategic thinking.

## The Legacy of Systems Thinking at Ford

There was already a rich history of systems thinking at Ford Motor Company when I arrived there as a consultant to the information technology (IT) group in early 2001, although I was not aware of this at the time. When word began to spread that there was a consultant on site who was asking about and talking about systems thinking, people quietly approached me, and hesitantly revealed that they too were systems thinkers, but that we probably ought to close the door if we wanted to continue the conversation. I found the behavior curious, and a little alarming, but over time I came to understand the behavior and the reasons behind it.

When I broached the subject of adding ST to the learning curriculum of IT at Ford, one of the survivors of the last ST era at Ford pulled me into a conference room to speak. Over time, we talked regularly, shared ideas, and learned to trust each other. It was clear that the chief information officer (CIO) was a strong supporter of ST, and slowly a small group coalesced around the idea of reinvigorating systems thinking in IT. We began to plan an approach to building capacity in the organization in a way that would be sustainable. We did not want to do anything that would reanimate Ford's quiescent but vigilant "immune system," the instinctive response of all organizations to reject anything "foreign" or new.

In the mid-1990s, Ford had opened its doors to Peter Senge, Russell Ackoff, Daniel Kim, and others in order to learn about ST and to apply it to an increasingly high-profile range of projects and programs. The story of that time is not the subject of this article, and it has been documented and reported elsewhere. It was an era that produced some remarkable results, including new model launches that were accomplished with better communication, less

rework, and improved cost performance. The era also left its mark on a number of people at Ford, whose introduction to and deep immersion in ST forever changed their way of looking at the world and getting results at work.

Participants in these early efforts had some difficulties. Learning labs and coursework during this era were characterized by a “learning for the sake of learning” approach, without sufficient focus on real-world problems. As a result, many people walked away with transformational personal insights but little idea of how to apply these insights to their everyday work. Also, ST’s innovative approaches, new language, and challenges to existing mental models energized the company’s immune system, and over time, many of the initial champions of the ST projects moved on to other positions within and outside the company. Those who remained came to feel that espousing the language and practices of ST was increasingly unacceptable, and even risky. In the words of one of these “survivors” with whom I subsequently spoke, “We all went underground. There are more systems thinkers here than you know about, but they are not willing to come out of their caves yet.”

## The Edison Project

In the fall of 2003, Ford Motor Company’s Information Technology Group began to look at the organization’s fragmented IT infrastructure. This undertaking was named the “Edison Project” in hopes that it would “shed some light” on the complexities of the group’s business of warehousing, building, and transferring data throughout the company. Everyone agreed that IT fragmentation was a costly and time consuming issue that needed to be dealt with, but not on the definition of the problem trying to be solved. Some saw it as a problem of data integration across a shared network of servers. Others saw it as a problem of mixing legacy systems with modern day applications. And everyone had questions. How would they know if they were solving the “right” problem? In solving it, would they create a whole host of new issues? Were they willing to bet their reputation with the business on their instincts about the right solution?

The champion, or sponsor, of the project suggested taking a systemic approach so that the group could see the interrelations of the system and gain a better understanding of the issue. Participants in the project first created an accurate picture of Ford’s IT infrastructure. This included what the system looked like to customers, the complexity of the servers, and the complexity of the types of applications. Using systems thinking tools – which included causal loop diagrams and stock-and-flow computer models – helped them articulate and build a shared understanding of the (then-current state) of the organization’s IT infrastructure without assigning blame or trying to “fix” a problem.

Eventually team members identified leverage points within three main themes, all of which were critical for the integration project to be successful. One was “technology,” using factory-like, assembly-line processes that would help migrate existing applications and infrastructure smoothly into a new system. The second was called “adoption,” which included the social technology to support that migration. This involved long range activities such as working with customers beforehand to improve their willingness to submit their owned infrastructure, and early identification of related software applications to the group for integration. This work became very important in building a trusting working relationship between IT and its customers in the business. The third theme was developing an understanding of the “network effect” benefits of infrastructure defragmentation. Once the team understood what the costs and benefits would be to the entire system – which had not been analyzed previously – it was easier to make the case for change to everyone who would be affected.

Initially many people thought that a change of this nature – integrating IT in a new, virtual, user-friendly environment – would be cost prohibitive. At Ford, IT is not strictly a cost center. Most funding for the Edison Project would need to come from business customers. Using systems tools demonstrated that despite a larger

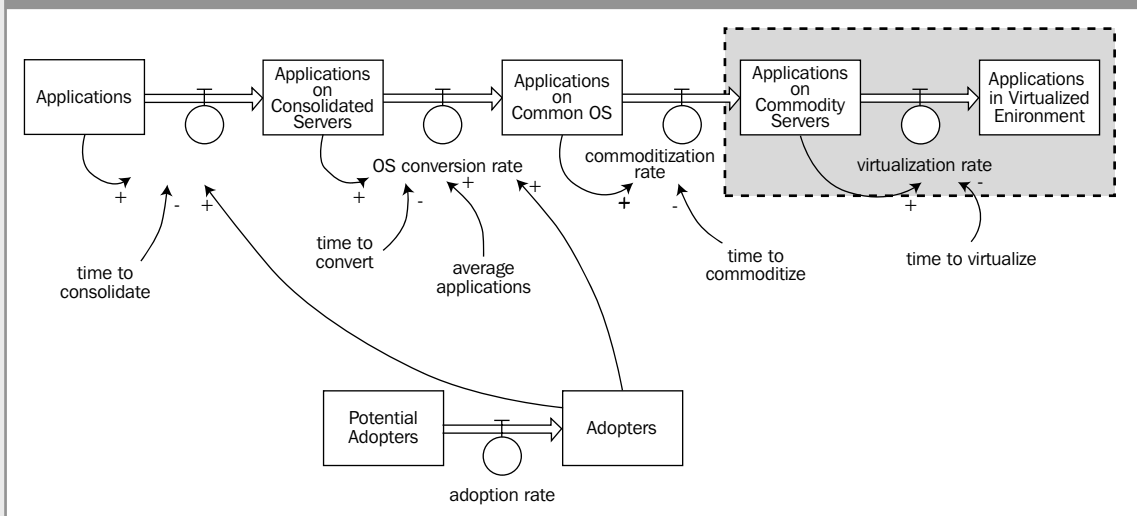
## A New Champion

The existing small band of practitioners had been doing some very limited ST work, but mostly behind the scenes and on small projects, given the sense they all shared of being medieval monks preserving the arts and sciences through the Dark Ages. Around, this time, in 2001, the then-new CIO Marv Adams sponsored several very high visibility ST-based analyses and began speaking to a broad range of audiences about what had been learned from the project, “openly” using causal loop diagrams (CLDs) and praising the benefits of ST as a way of seeing the bigger picture. Partially as a result of this and partially because the ST community was taking on more public projects, interest in the discipline began to increase throughout the IT community.

Adams, an engineer by training, had long been convinced of the power of a systems thinking approach in understanding both information technology and business problems. He clearly saw that the problems endemic to large IT organizations could be understood as failures to understand the whole system of which those problems were a part. The IT environ-

initial investment, the payback over time would be larger than expected. Armed with this information and a greater understanding of the system at large, group members were able to explain the change in a way that customers could understand, encouraging adoption of the new methodology, and allowing better partnerships between IT and the business.

Figure 1: Edison Service Environment: Adoption Rate



This stock-and-flow diagram (part of a larger model) helped the group see the probable impact of the rate at which customers adopted the new “commonization” of applications and servers. The development of the model pointed out the need for policies and measurements that could offset the “worse before better” syndrome that customers would experience as the systems changed. Intuitively, the group had understood there would be a savings, but the model made it clear that costs would rise immediately and more dramatically than anticipated. The model helped the group determine how to address those cost impacts, build a truer understanding of the benefits of the change, and position the business case more clearly – which helped build trust between IT and its customers, and increase the rate of adoption.

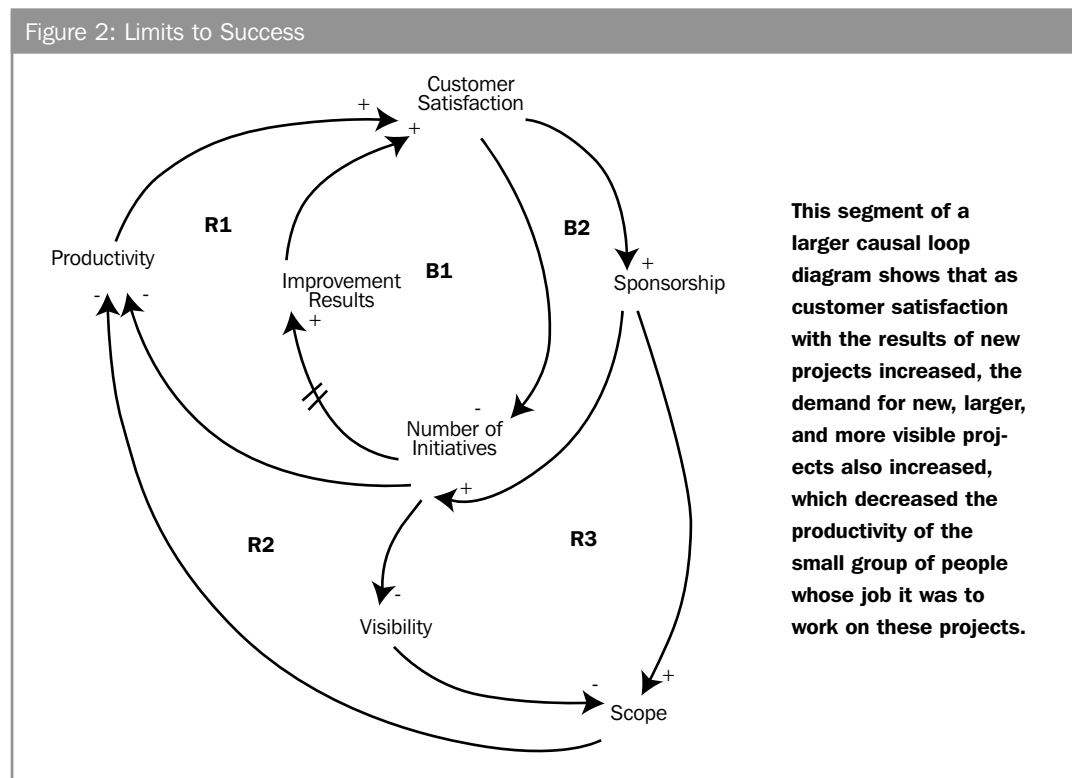
ment has become immensely more complex in the last 20 years, but methods for coordination and control of this complex environment have not kept pace. One study was commissioned to use systems dynamics tools to look at an internal program designed to defragment the computing infrastructure. Although the program had made substantial progress in simplifying the computing environment, it was running up against many unanticipated obstacles, and the harder the team pushed to accelerate the program, the more it seemed to slow down. A systems thinking project produced a broader understanding of the causes of the resistance, and provided insights into how to intervene in the system and get things moving again. (See sidebar, “The Edison Project.”)

## Dealing with “Limits to Success”

As the success and positive reception of some of these early programs filtered through the organization, along with the recognition and support these programs were getting from the CIO, new ideas and project requests began to pour in. By mid-2004, our list of potential projects totaled more than 75, but the resources available consisted of a small handful of people, only one of them truly dedicated to ST full time. This was a situation likely to produce a “limits to success” scenario (one of the most common system archetypes) and a probably fatal blow to the reemergence of ST at Ford.

Below is a map we put together to help us understand the phenomenon of our own limitations. As we saw this map, we began to realize a leverage point in the system: We needed more practitioners.

In response to this situation, we decided to focus all the efforts of the existing group on building capacity within the organization. This meant that we would decline almost all



requests to take on new projects, except as a part of training or immersion experiences for which the primary outcome was new practice capability. When accepting a new project, we made it clear that unlike a typical IT project, this project came with no promises for any particular results or findings. The primary goal was learning; the secondary goal was results or intervention. This was not an easy concept to sell to the organization, as it strongly challenged executives' mental models of what a project was supposed to be.

## **Building Capacity for Systems Thinking**

The question, then, was “How do we go about building ST capacity in this very large corporate IT environment?” At this point in 2002, the team consisted of one full-time person, a small band of “ST survivors,” and some new volunteers. We agreed that we needed to accomplish two complementary goals.

First, we needed to create an awareness of ST basics across a broad band of the organization. This would require a comprehensive curriculum, and good broad-based learning resources. It would also require ways to sustain the learning, a part of which had to include opportunities to practice in relevant ways. Since then, we have created a comprehensive curriculum that looks at ST from three perspectives:

- The mechanics of ST, including the CLDs, archetypes, and methods for designing interventions.
- The ST theory, including looking at mental models.
- “Telling the Story,” learning how to package and communicate the lessons and findings of ST to the organization.

We created the curriculum, including learning objectives, activities, and resources, along a continuum leading the learner from initial acquisition of skills and knowledge to development of the ability to guide others and ultimately shape and foster the program in years to come. We have shared our work at several Society of Organizational Learning (SoL) forums, and continue to make substantial progress in establishing for the first time a phased, comprehensive curriculum for teaching ST in the corporate environment.

The second goal of the program was to create an expanding base of advanced practitioners, who were able to lead ST projects, design interventions, and eventually teach and lead others in building their capacity. It was immediately obvious to us that these two goals were deeply intertwined and needed to be addressed systemically, but it was not immediately obvious how that was to be accomplished. That's where the Multidisciplinary Action Projects (MAP) came in, and provided an important key to building ST capacity at Ford.

Through our partnership with the University of Michigan, we had been hosting a group of graduate students from the business school in seven-week internships. Three years ago we conducted the first session in what has developed into a unique internship experience for the U of M students. This internship program, named MAP by the university, involved a team of students given a project to work on, typically an analysis of a program or process at the sponsoring company's site with recommendations for improving the project due as a final report. Many corporations have been partnering with the university for more than 10 years in offering these types of opportunities to the graduate students. Potential projects are displayed at a fair each year, and students bid on the engagements in which they are most interested.

**The presentations produced the Holy Grail of ST outcomes: great dialogue and a mood of reflection among the senior team.**

We broke this mold by engaging the students in seven weeks of intensive ST training, and although this was centered on some relevant business issue, the desired outcome was new systems thinkers, not a specific solution to the problem, which was offered up mostly as grist for the ST mill. The focus of this effort was action learning. Students would learn about the

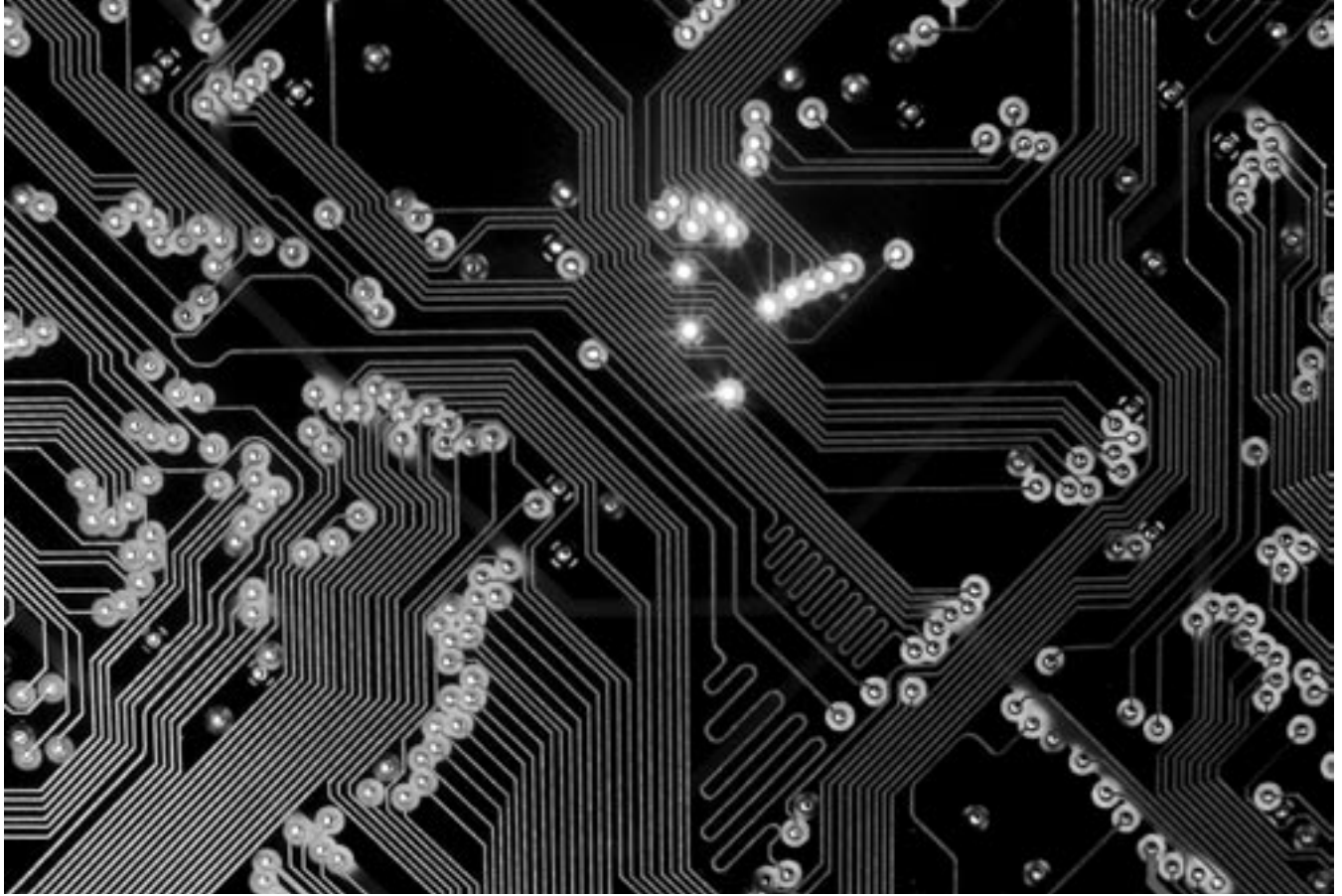
“Ladder of Inference” tool, for example, and immediately apply the concept to the data-gathering stage. Powerful results ensued when students were able to apply a tool to a real-world situation, note the results, and look for additional business issues to tackle, such as finance, purchasing, or other business units we thought had minimal input to the opportunity we were addressing.

It was more than a little interesting to us that the MAP students, when transplanted from their collegiate setting to Ford, were able to go through the transformation required to understand the notion of mental models, examine and question their own, coalesce as a group, and learn to analyze and understand complex issues from the perspective of a systems thinker in a very short time. Further, the team noted with a mix of elation and curiosity that the presentations the MAP students made to the senior IT team produced the Holy Grail of ST outcomes: great dialogue and a mood of reflection among

the senior team. These are the gateways to more informed decision making.

We realized that we now had all the elements we needed to produce an integrated curriculum and approach to ST at Ford. We proposed and got support for a series of MAP-like programs for Ford IT. These Ford–MAP (FMAP) programs would pull a small number of employees out of their regular work for as much as 15 weeks, during which time they would be led and coached through an intensive immersion in systems thinking basics, and would work through the sequential steps of an ST project. Upon completion of the FMAP experience they would return to their everyday work, but their problem solving tool set would have the additional skill of systems thinking. At present our constraint for these FMAP sessions was the numbers of coaches we had to each and lead the course; however we are getting fairly clever and adaptable at our timing without compromising the quality of the results. Recently I had a conversation with one of the FMAP groups. They were nearing the end of their project, and wanted to discuss how to make the transition back to the “real world” of day-to-day IT. They were concerned with how to deal with the corporate immune system, and we were able to strategize together about how they could take what they had learned and embed it in their work and approach to problems.

I fully believe that we are building a small core of people inside IT who will never be able to look at problem-solving with a linear approach again, who will always seek to ask the deeper, more systemic questions, and who will look for the intended and unintended consequences of every decision. Whether we will ultimately anchor ST in the Ford IT organization is still an open question, and of course will never be answered definitively. The word *organization* shares the same etymological root as *organism*, and like organisms, organizations change over time, responding and adapting to their environments in ways that will determine their survival or extinction. We recently had conversations with the organizational development group of a company once widely known for its ST practice, of which there is little trace today. We understand that sustainability is a quality that can and should be part of the design of such a practice. However, in the final analysis it is an emergent phenomenon that will depend on a number of factors not always within our control, including changes in leadership and the broader business environment.



Ford is much like other large corporations in its fondness for large programs designed to cascade a methodology or culture change initiative through the organization. It is our observation that the failure of ST to take hold and grow roots in large organizations has in part been because we practitioners of ST have forgotten the insights we ourselves developed over the years: The result of a great ST project is not a set of elegant causal loop diagrams, but a new capacity for reflective dialogue, deep insight, and shifting entrenched mental models. This is often a long, painstaking, and slow process, achieved through numerous challenging and carefully crafted conversations led by skilled, experienced, and compassionate practitioners. However, when it comes to teaching ST itself to an organization, we may forget these lessons, and rely on the power that we have seen in ST to be inherently knowable and equally attractive to the organization and the people within it. This is almost never the case, since any approach that challenges entrenched mental models, disturbs patterns of power and influence, or potentially exposes faulty thinking or causes embarrassment is certain to produce significant resistance and even active suppression.

It is too early to conclude that ST will become an ongoing integral part of how we understand our environment and make decisions at Ford, and perhaps it's best never to make that sort of conclusion in a complex dynamic system such as a large corporation. But it has been our experience that it is possible to energize an organization with the practice of systems thinking even in the aftermath of a difficult period. Indeed, the failures of the past may provide the very embers that systems thinking can fan into full blaze.

# Guidelines for Practicing Systems Thinking

## **Understand your history**

*There is no ideal, perfect, or correct plan or template for rolling out ST in an organization. Every situation is unique and can best be understood as the aggregate of all the history and conditions that came before.*

- What has the response to change programs typically been?
- What has the attitude to learning been in the company?
- Has ST made an appearance before? What was the reaction?

## **Respect and appreciate the current state of the people in the organization**

*People love change, but they hate to be changed. Base your strategy on what the likely response will be to each part of the program, and don't try to overcome resistance. Appreciate the resistance and give people a chance to do more of what they find satisfying and nonthreatening.*

- What is the pervasive mood of the organization?
- What events have taken place that might have built resistance to the introduction of an ST initiative?
- Have you spent sufficient time understanding the existing mental models of the potential participants?
- What small successes have occurred that you could leverage to bring ST practices into play?

## **Create the conditions for self-reflection inside a safe practice field**

*Building a safe and collegial environment multiplies the chances of people examining and shifting their own mental models a hundredfold, which will increase the impact of the work on both the individuals and the organization immeasurably.*

- Can you make and accept provisional findings without fear of the "failure" label?
- What does it mean to truly practice, allow yourself to think about new ideas out loud, and invite others to share and build them with you?

## **Take the deep structures into account**

*The larger, older, and more traditional the organization, the more you will discover deep structures that produce patterns of behavior that explain the resistance to change you will encounter. Don't fight deep structures unless they are in your circle of control. Understand them, however, and you will know how to create micro-changes that over time can and will reach a critical mass that will impact and shift the structures.*

- From an ST perspective, what are the deep structures, which will inevitably reproduce the same patterns of behavior within the organization?
- Can you intervene in those structures, or should you take them as givens, providing a set of strategic guideposts for designing your interventions?

## **Look for similar or parallel successes in the organization, and seek to leverage them**

*Spend more time studying successes than failures. Failures are enlightening in telling you which paths are likely to be blocked. Successes indicate which paths may be open to you.*

- Can you think of a time in your organization when people embraced a new idea, method, or tool? What characterized that time?
- What are the ways that you can get a pilot program going in your company with the fewest bureaucratic hurdles or layers of approval?

### **Concentrate on building capacity rather than achieving results or completing projects**

*In one of our projects, the participants didn't draw a CLD until practically the last day, but this group has produced some of the most committed systems thinkers to come from any group. To be overly focused on the product and not the process will inevitably produce bad results and fail to teach the core lessons of ST.*

- Have you clearly communicated the purpose of your project to the sponsors and the organization?
- Have you identified people within the organization who are likely to become practitioners, and concentrated your early efforts on them?

### **Create a “pull” program by concentrating on small groups of early adopters.**

*Large cascaded programs are an invitation to the immune system to go into overdrive. Start quietly, with people who are interested and willing to commit, and don't be in a hurry. Remember that immune system!*

- Who will sponsor an initial pilot, whether it is under the radar or on the screen?
- Is there a group of alternative thinkers, survivors of an unsustained major change initiative, or a group that already meets to discuss ways to improve the work environment that you can connect with?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Jeremy Seligman** is director, Information Technology (IT) Strategy and Organizational Development, Ford Motor Company, a position he was appointed to in 2005. After time spent in teaching and as a professional musician, Seligman began his business career at Xerox in Finance and later in Information Systems, then moved to Frontier Communications, where he was appointed CIO in 1997. A two-time graduate of the University of Rochester (with a bachelor's degree in Education and an MBA in Finance and Economics), he is a lifelong student of organizational dynamics and change and is a member of the Founding SoL Council of Trustees.

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## Commentary

*By Michael Goodman*



**Michael Goodman**

When I began working as a consultant in the field of organizational dynamics and change more than three decades ago, my colleagues and I believed that once people saw the richness, compelling logic and value of thinking systemically about serious business, organizational, and social issues, they would naturally adopt this approach in making decisions and setting policy. We assumed our job was in large part a marketing challenge: “show and tell” the world about what systems thinking (and later organizational learning) offered and “they would come.”

Ironically, most of us failed to think systemically about the change process itself. We did not fully grasp the power and resilience of the resistive forces and pressures inherent in every system, no matter how well intended or beneficial the proposed change. Take the case that Jeremy Seligman briefly alludes to in his article: the systems thinking work at Ford related to the launch of the Lincoln Continental in the mid-1990s. It is often cited as one of the most visible and measurable corporate systems thinking success stories. Yet upon hearing it, people usually ask “What became of all that success and learning within Ford?” It appears that despite the clear bottom line impacts the program generated, little of the tools and methods associated with the launch dispersed to the wider system. The immune system seems to have kept a local success from becoming an organization-wide success.

As Seligman’s article demonstrates, systems thinking practitioners are still learning how to

bring about sustainable change in organizations. The guidelines he offers reinforce the lessons many of us have learned, often the hard way. Having dealt with a diversity of organizational immune systems all over the world, I can offer a few additions – many developed with my colleague Cliff Bolster – that may help those who are newer to the work.

**“Go slower now in order to be able to go faster later”** is always a winning strategy in systems thinking work. Proceed carefully, and let expectations about results grow slowly and in alignment with internal capacity.

**Doing systems thinking alone is not enough.** In my experience, the practice and application of systems thinking must be used in concert with the other learning disciplines, especially mental models and building shared vision.

**The process is more important than the product.** How you go about using systems thinking matters. As Seligman notes, the Holy Grail is generating serious dialogue which can then produce shifts in mindsets and behavior. It isn’t about getting the diagrams right, it’s about getting the process right: getting the right stakeholders in a “safe” environment or “practice field” where they can start to discover the hidden consequences of their collective actions and challenge their own thinking. It’s about learning.

**Sheep dipping often leads to drowning.** As Seligman again notes, organizations hold an unfortunate bias in assuming that everyone needs to be exposed to systems thinking.

I know of no better way to evoke the wrath of the immune system than by forcing everyone through some sort of training program.

**Intervene at organization, team, and individual levels.** This is an easy one to miss. Capacity building at the individual level is necessary but insufficient. Working with intact teams is very high leverage. But the policies, processes, and procedures that drive the organization's inner works are most critical. It is often here that you find some of the sources of the immune system or deep structures that resist change: the reward system, the appraisal system, the financial priorities, and the management development strategies.

**Learn from the implementation experience itself.** When it comes to organizational change, there is no better teacher than direct experience. In Ford's case, realizing that the MAP (Multi-disciplinary Action Projects) could be used to build internal capacity was a real breakthrough. But what is true for Ford IT may not be replicable for other organizations for reasons such as access, tradition, history, etc. Start small, see what works, and build on your experience.

**Watch out for initiative overload.** People are overwhelmed from the number of change and improvement programs, efforts and initiatives rolling through their organizations. While each of these programs is well intended and should yield positive returns, the reality is that often individuals do not have enough time, energy, or commitment to fully engage and commit to those programs. Demand seems to have exceeded capacity, and the unfortunate byproduct of too many large-scale initiatives is often cynicism.

**Do not make systems thinking a separate initiative.** If you can keep your program "under the radar," you can accomplish a lot more. We often advise our clients not to label what they are doing as systems thinking. Just start using the tools and processes with people and observe what happens.

Given the difficulties in getting started implied by these guidelines, you may wonder why we should bother trying to create a systems thinking culture at any organization. My own answer is that systems thinking is a powerful language for diagnosis and action. Its focus is on the critical relationships and connections often missed or undervalued that can make or break a change effort. It enables us to recognize the often hidden and unintended consequences of our actions, to change our own thinking to match the way complex systems operate, to alter our behavior so that we are working with these complex forces instead of against them, and to expand the choices available to us. When we see those choices, we have the ability to pick the high leverage changes that will really make a difference.

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# Reflections

## The SoL Journal

on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

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### Editorial Team

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