

The Power within Our Reach

Robert F. Moran Jr.

People have so much more power over things in their lives than they are aware of. For instance, consumers determine the cost of the products they buy and the variety of products available to them. If they decide that something is priced too high and don't buy it, the price comes down, and often the product disappears from shelves or racks. Consumers not only have power over the price and variety of products, they also determine what companies prosper, what companies survive, and which don't. The power is there, but it is so infrequently applied consciously.

I was reminded of the scale of the power we have while listening to a National Public Radio interview of author Thomas Friedman. He noted that strategies for dealing with an intractable enemy nation are not limited to the extremes of negotiating from a point of comparatively equal strength on the one hand and war on the other. One of the infrequently used strategies is that of affecting a nation's economy, for instance influencing the sale price of an export critical to an enemy nation's economic vitality. A high price for oil is crucial for Iran, whose socialist government needs this money to subsidize basic requirements of its citizens. The same could be said with regard to Russia and its current dependence on the sale of its natural gas and oil. Faced with this serious economic disruption long-term, countries would be more susceptible to boycotts and more amenable to negotiations. Choosing a strategy that would lead to a reduction in the price of oil could benefit the United States in its dealings with these countries.

But where is the greatest power to influence the price of products in another nation? Not with the government. Few if any governmental policies or practices have shown a capability of affecting prices of foreign products. On the other hand, theoretically at least, American consumers have this power. U.S. citizens can assist U.S. foreign policy to achieve success. By reducing their use of oil and

its products, they can reduce the global price of oil. This is real power to influence a matter of great importance to them—the limitation of nuclear weapons, for example. Other instances that demonstrate the potential for influencing major national concerns are consumers' ability to force the cost of gasoline down and their ability to reduce the negative effects of human activity on the environment through the purchasing choices they make or decide not to make.

I am not so interested in whether this power can or will be used in the pursuit of national goals. Rather, what is interesting to me is that these opportunities highlight the very real power people have over circumstances that seem too distant for them to affect. Just the fact that U.S. citizens have the ability to bring down the price of oil, and in doing so put pressure on troublesome oil-producing nations, is evidence that we have much more control than we think over circumstances and situations that seem well beyond us.

Examples of things that may seem well beyond the control of library administrators today include constantly decreasing budgets, a budget so limited that layoffs must be considered, decreasing use of one or more of the library's services, a changing neighborhood, dissatisfied staff, the demand for new services without accompanying funding, and the high cost of technology combined with rapid obsolescence. One or several of these may then be accepted as permanent constraints within which the library has to function. Yet that may not be the case if there are things related to these issues that, even though they are as far from our minds as the thought of affecting foreign policy, are things over which we actually do have power.

Despite the way we usually think and act, reality is not a set of distinct sectors through which we pass. Reality is a set of relationships much broader than it at first appears. Reality is a set of interconnected systems. With this recognition we can ask questions: Where is the true point of leverage for assuring stable library funding? Where are people or organizations with similar problems with whom



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we can partner? Are layoffs the only response to budgets too low to support the current number of employees? Is the budget the only source of funding for a new service in demand?

Specifically, where is the real point of resistance to a more reasonable budget? Is it the mayor? What power might the library have in relation to the mayor? How many staff are politically involved? How many who voted for him campaigned for him? When is the next election? Another example relates to partners: Where in the university's community is there an organization facing demands for a new service similar to the demands on the library and where a pooling of skills and resources can bring costs down?

We have much more power to affect things that seem beyond our control than we think. The power is real! Our challenge is finding where the power lies. The things we deal with every day are not limited in their relationships to what occurs within the library. Each has multiple relationships outside the library, one or more of which may provide power to affect the process in favor of the library. A means for identifying the location of the relationships amenable to our influence is what is needed.

Planning tools such as strategic planning and environmental surveillance are valuable but limited. They are one-time activities, and often we perceive the planning sphere as limited in one way or another. What is needed is a different way of thinking. Since reality is a never-ending set of relationships, we need a way of thinking that can see these relationships. We need to become "systems thinkers" so we can find all the sources of the power we have to use to improve our circumstances.

"Systems thinking" is seeing wholes. According to Peter Senge in his *The Fifth Discipline*, it is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than snapshots. It is being aware that whatever we do is related to a much broader range of individuals and elements than at first appears. It is a habit, a habit opposite our common habit of recognizing a problem, looking for a solution in the immediate factors,

and moving quickly to solve the problem. It is understanding relationships, especially understanding the fluidity of relationships. It is about recognizing points of greatest leverage.¹

Looking at systems thinking from the point of view of the power it brings can help one invest time and commitment to developing the habit of thinking in terms of relationships and patterns instead of our more common method of accepting what first comes to mind and acting. And habit it is. Systems thinking is not just a new strategy for planning or analysis. It is not a better technique for allocating resources. It is not a new managerial method to be understood and adopted. Systems thinking is not a topic of a training session where we learn about a different way to work. It is a habit—a new way of habitual thinking.

Since systems thinking is a habit, adopting it requires the behavior required for developing any new habit: (1) recognizing that the current habit is inadequate and being willing to give it up, (2) discovering and then learning a more effective behavior, and (3) practicing the new behavior until it becomes usual and automatic. When the time comes that frustration after frustration leads a manager to recognize that current usual ways of thinking are inadequate, the first of these requirements will be met. The power available in systems thinking is only one argument for its effectiveness. The hard part is the repetition; it means a commitment strong enough to accept the time it will take to become a systems thinker.

One method for introducing systems thinking is the dialogue/discussion model for meetings described in this column in the Summer 2008 issue, and more extensively in Peter Senge's. Another method is to develop the practice of avoiding quick answers in meetings, discussions, and conversations; always ask one more question.

References

1. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994): 67-73.

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I wanted to thank you again for the opportunity to serve. The year has been fun and challenging, full of new opportunities to learn. I am looking forward to seeing many of you in Chicago in July for the ALA Annual Conference. LLAMA's committees and sections have planned a wonderfully rich panoply of learning opportunities through eight pre-conferences and fifteen programs. Check the LLAMA website for details: <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/llama/llama.cfm> I especially hope that you will be able to join us for the LLAMA President's Program on Sunday, July 12, at 1:30 to hear Patricia Martin ([\[.patricia-martin.com/\]\(http://blog.patricia-martin.com/\)\) talk about the RenGen, the new cultural consumer, and the relevance for libraries. The conference promises so many opportunities to be inspired, to learn, and to connect with colleagues. Don't miss it!](http://blog</p></div><div data-bbox=)

References

1. Motoko Rich, "The Future of Reading: In Web Age, Library Job Gets Update." *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 2009.