



## President's Message

Gina Millsap

### Seeing the Forest and the Trees—Systems Thinking

I've been thinking (and ranting) about leadership and systems a lot lately. With the health

care debate/debacle (you choose), ongoing problems with national security, and an economy that came dangerously close to failing, we should all be paying more attention to the systems that allow us to support ourselves and our families and to live safe, healthy, and productive lives.

Systems thinking is key to solving huge, complex issues as well as to making our libraries successful organizations. What is a system? Answers.com defines it as "a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole."<sup>1</sup>

There are all kinds of systems—organizational, biological, mechanical, environmental. Think of it this way: A snow drift isn't a system. Remove a shovel-full and it's still a drift. A car, on the other hand, is a system. Remove one of its parts—say, the battery—and it no longer functions.

What is systems thinking? First, it's recognizing and understanding the relationships between the various parts or components of an organization or entity. We tend to think of and manage organizations as people arranged into groups by the function they perform. Frequently organizations behave as if each group is self-sufficient, and we manage them that way as well.

How many times do people in your organization cross ways with each other because change in one area causes unintended consequences in another? Is there competition for resources that leads to turf wars and a lack of cooperation? Is there a lack of real understanding, even by veteran staff, of how each area (not just the one they work in) operates to fulfill the library's mission? Is the number one complaint of employees a lack of communication? Are managers so focused on tasks that they don't see the context they operate within, think strategically, or work effectively as members of the management team? Does your library have a real management team?

Successful leaders think and act systemically and minimize these types of organizational deficits. What does that mean? It means seeing and leading the organization as a system of interrelated, dependent components that work together to fulfill the mission and that have a shared vision for the future. This also implies a detailed level of knowledge of what each component contributes, what each could contribute, and the resources each requires to excel.

With systems thinking, problem solving becomes a productive and proactive process. As I write this, a big news story is the failure of the U.S. intelligence system to prevent a Nigerian, with known ties to al Qaeda and who was later apprehended with explosives sewn into his underwear, from boarding a U.S. airliner over the Christmas holidays. The traditional approach to resolving this kind of crisis is to assess blame, punish the people determined to be at fault, and perhaps change procedures to ensure better results the next time such a situation occurs. Note that the last thing that happens is change.

In this instance, legislators are doing exactly that. They are calling for the identification of those who failed to be "held accountable," which in many cases will involve lengthy hearings and accusations of incompetence on the part of staff from the intelligence agencies. Ultimately, people may be fired, demoted, and generally demoralized.

In some instances such a response may be appropriate, but what's the goal here? Is this really the best way to decrease the chance that another terrorist will board a U.S. plane with hidden explosives? And to do so in a timely manner? President Obama has indicated that the system failed and the system will be fixed. Specifically, "Rather than a failure to collect or share intelligence, this was a failure to connect and understand the intelligence that we already had," Obama said. Further, Obama said, "Ultimately, the buck stops with me."<sup>2</sup> This is strategic systems thinking.

Peter Senge, author of the book *The Fifth Discipline*, which developed the concept of the learning organization, is a strong proponent of systems thinking. He says learning organizations are "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together."<sup>3</sup> He is adamant that only organizations that continually learn will be flexible, adaptive, and productive enough to succeed, especially in times of rapid change or crisis.

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Senge lists systems thinking as the critical fifth discipline and the cornerstone of organizational learning (the other disciplines are personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning). Integral to systems thinking is delay and feedback, which means essentially that systems thinking demands planning and action with the long view in mind. Taking action and then observing and analyzing the results take time. Initial, short-term results may be positive, but the action in question may result in negative results in the long run.

For instance, when money gets tight, as it is now, how many of us cut or eliminate our staff development and marketing budgets first? Those actions do address our need to reduce expenses, but in the long run, what do we lose by neglecting our staff's need for ongoing learning and new skills? What are the consequences of a lack of knowledge about our customers' wants and needs and our ability to develop relationships with customers on the basis of an accurate understanding of how best to serve them?

As Peter Senge says, "Leadership is attending to conditions that would keep growth from happening."<sup>4</sup> Systems thinking may well be *the* survival skill and practice for library leaders in the next few years. And the buck stops with each of us whose mission is to lead our libraries and help them grow.

## References

1. Answers.com Reference Answers, "System," [www.answers.com/topic/system](http://www.answers.com/topic/system) (accessed Jan. 11, 2010).
2. "Obama Outlines Anti-Terrorism Flaws, Reforms" [www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/01/07/obama.terror.report](http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/01/07/obama.terror.report) (accessed Jan. 11, 2010).
3. Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990): 236.
4. *Ibid.*, 87.