Systems Thinking Is Inclusive Thinking

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Abstract

Today's organizations are making a concerted effort to demonstrate greater inclusivity in their workplace practices, their processes, and their larger cultures. Research has shown diverse organizations are more innovative, adaptable, and regarded as better places to work by current and potential employees. Systems thinking frames the organization as a single, interconnected and interdependent system, and abandons many of the traditional organizational concepts which stand in the way of inclusion. Through its emphasis on holism, fostering productive relationships, multidirectional communication, and transparency, systems thinking creates an organizational culture that actively includes and empowers.

Introduction

Today's organizations are making a concerted effort to incorporate inclusion into their workplace practices, their processes, and their larger cultures. This effort stems from an awareness of the benefits known to be associated with diversity. Research has shown diverse organizations are more innovative, adaptable, and regarded as better places to work by current and potential employees.

There have been concerns raised, however, about just how effective many organizations' inclusionary efforts really are. While some initiatives have resulted in positive change, some have led to only superficial changes or to no real change at all. Despite a publicly avowed commitment to inclusivity, in many organizations the intended outcomes have not followed the words. There are many reasons for this lack of follow-through, including the fact many organizational cultures are simply too inflexible to accommodate truly inclusionary practices.

Systems thinking is a mindset which frames the organization as a single, interconnected, and interdependent system, reliant upon the input and talents of its members for success. It abandons some of the traditional organizational concepts, including centralized authority and top-down management styles, which stand in the way of inclusion. By emphasizing holism, productive relationships, multidirectional communication, and transparency, systems thinking creates an organizational culture which actively seeks to include and empower.

What Is Systems Thinking?

Systems thinker Donella Meadows (2008, 2) defines a system as a "set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time." For organizational theorist Russell Ackoff (1998, 29):

> "A system is a whole defined by one or more functions, which consists of two or more essential parts that satisfy the following conditions: (1) each of these parts can affect the behavior or properties of the whole; (2) none of these parts has an independent effect on the whole; the way an essential part affects the whole depends on what other parts are doing; and (3) every possible subset of the essential parts can affect the behavior and properties of the whole, but no one can do so independently of the others."

Bill Bellows describes a system as "a set or pattern of relationships that work together in some fashion. Systems can accomplish things that would be impossible if the same elements were put into random relationships, or no relationships at all" (n.d., as cited in Ackoff 2010, 6). A system, therefore, is a set of interconnected elements working together to accomplish an overall function or goal. While each of these individual elements has a distinct role to play, the most important factor is how the carrying out of this role contributes to the overall health of the system and to the realization of system goals. The interrelatedness inherent in a complex system means effective relationships between system parts is essential. The actions a system component takes impact other system components as well as the larger system itself. Every component contributes to the overall success of the system, and the failure of a component to fulfill its function will undermine system success.

Some of the commonly used examples of a system are the automobile, the human body, and sports teams. Each of these items consists of a multitude of individual elements playing specific roles while contributing to the success of the whole. But if any one of these elements fails to perform its role successfully, the larger system will suffer. If the drivetrain is not functioning properly, an automobile will not move; if a human being's kidneys are compromised, the body will not be able to dispose of waste effectively and will suffer accordingly; if a football team's offensive line fails at its job, the team will be unable to successfully execute its game plan.

Systems thinking is the application of this concept of a system to an organization, to social structures, and to the world at large. It dispenses with the idea of distinct, self-interested elements working together only under certain circumstances, or behaving autonomously and

independently of other parts, in favor of a world wherein everything is interconnected and interdependent. Such a view of the world requires attention to and emphasis on the dynamics of relationships, communication, and transparency. It requires an organization's managers and nonmanagement personnel to understand the nature, behavior, and goals of the whole system when undertaking their activities.

This view of the world—or an organization or a community—as a system represents a break with the centuries-old conception of our world as put forth by thinkers like René Descartes and Isaac Newton. Classical writings posited the world as a vast and ordered machine made of distinct, knowable parts which consistently obey and work in accordance with unchanging laws of behavior. In such a mechanistic model, the world is interpreted through study and an understanding of the individual parts which comprise the machine. If the machine is not working as intended, the common practice is to isolate and analyze individual components to identify the faulty component and to then bring that component back into alignment with the whole. This philosophical approach is known as reductionism, and thanks to the towering influence of Descartes and Newton on Western thought, it is still common practice to begin our analyses by breaking things into smaller and more easily manipulable units (Capra 1982; Haines 2000).

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, it was obvious this reductionist interpretation of our world was no longer adequate. The fact it has led to many notable scientific discoveries aside, as humanity gained a deeper understanding of the natural world and developed increasingly complex social systems, the limitations of the reductionist approach become apparent. The mechanistic view of the world works well when exploring singular structures and events, but it is inadequate when confronting the highly complex, integrated, and rapidly changing modern age (Capra 1982).

The earliest appearance of systems thinking as a formal mindset came in 1936 when Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy proposed what he called a General Systems Theory. He suggested his theory could be applied not only to the biological sciences but to other fields as well, and the second half of the twentieth century saw his General Systems Theory principles incorporated into disciplines beyond biology, including the social and behavioral sciences, management studies, and philosophy. Some of the more notable names to incorporate systems thinking into their work include social scientist Gregory Bateson, physicist and ecologist Fritjof Capra, computer engineer Jay Forrester, and organizational theorists Russell Ackoff, Peter Drucker, and Peter Senge (DeLisi 2021). Today, systems thinking is frequently applied as we seek solutions to our world's problems. Its emphasis on interdependence and the big picture makes it well-suited to today's complex world and to today's organizations.

Key Characteristics of Systems Thinking

For the systems thinker, the world is a complex web of interrelated parts which interact in nonlinear and multidirectional ways. Each interaction has an impact on other parts of the system and on the overall health of the system. Gone is the reductionist belief that individual parts can be separated from the whole and have only a clearly delineated and autonomous role to play, and that their only contribution to the health of the system is to play that distinct role successfully. Every system component is partner to and relies upon every other component, and each part contributes to system success in ways which go beyond the immediate function of that part. This interconnectedness means every part of a system should be included in system processes, activities, and decision-making. A failure to be inclusive when it comes to system activities guarantees a system will fail to realize its potential.

This interrelatedness and the idea of having a "larger" role to play underlies the holistic nature of systems thinking. While it recognizes the existence of subsystems and distinct components with specialized tasks to complete (think of the individual organs within the human body, for example), the overall health and success of the system relies upon every component of a system working in unison. According to Daniel Kim (1999, 3), "All parts must be present for a system to carry out its purpose optimally." A successful systems leader will always see the system as a whole and bear in mind those parts of the system which don't happen to be "in the room" at any given time (Oshry 1999, 10). A system cannot be divided into its component parts and remain effective. Any view of the system must acknowledge the whole of the system and each component in it (Ackoff 1998).

Systems thinking is what is known as heterarchical, which is different from traditional hierarchical thinking. In a hierarchy, employees look to administrators, bosses, and other higher-ups for ideas and direction. The hierarchical organization is highly bureaucratic and reflects rigid levels of authority (Fosbrook 2016). Individuals farther down the chain of command are conditioned to defer to their supervisors, and their input and ideas, which may help the organization improve its performance, may not be brought forward. It's an unequal playing field, with a small number of employees assigned primary importance, a louder voice, and more influence than others. As Oshry (1995) points out, the myth of the all-powerful leader absolves others of responsibility for the organization's progress and failures. The structure of the hierarchy can, either intentionally or unintentionally, limit the contributions of many members of an organization.

In a heterarchical organization, however, authority is malleable and the primary responsibility for a work action or an initiative can shift, depending on the situation. This is not to say heterarchy is the complete absence of hierarchy; it is not. Hierarchies still exist, but they are overlapping and flexible and situational. A hierarchy may exist temporarily while employee A leads a project while being assisted by employees B and C. Once this project is completed, employee B may be placed in charge of a different project with support from employees A, C, and D, and so on. In a heterarchy, superiority and inferiority exist, but not in the unchanging, rigid manner of a hierarchy. Authority is placed in the hands of the individuals best able to complete a project or realize a goal. Because of this malleability of authority, it is important that every employee be knowledgeable of and actively engaged within the system. Failing this, the system will suffer (Fosbrook 2016; Oshry 1992; Stark 2001).

Leadership in a systems setting is less about directing others and more about facilitation, guidance, and empowering others. Ackoff (2010), DeLisi (2021), and Donaldson (2021) refer to the primary role of the leader as helping individuals understand the purpose of the system and how they can contribute to the realization of system goals. Through these conversations, the leader becomes a guide and a delegator, sharing their understanding and creating opportunities for others to contribute.

Effective relationships between the components of the organization is key to system success. By default, employees identify foremostly with their individual jobs and place emphasis on the responsibilities associated with their unique position. And this is perfectly understandable; the most clearly stated expectations placed on an employee by their supervisor are those related to their daily tasks. And a failure to execute these responsibilities will likely result in some form of reprimand.

But in a system, every employee's primary responsibility is to contribute to the overall health of the system itself, and this contribution cannot be realized without having productive relationships with others who share the same goal. Ackoff (1986), Oshry (1995), and DeLisi (2021) all stress that the ways system components interact is the primary determinant of system success or failure. Ackoff considers the primary role of the leader is to manage the interactions between individuals and system units. In his words, "You cannot manage what people do any more. You can only hope to manage the way they interact and how they relate to one another" (Ackoff 2010, 31). Meadows (2008) writes that changing the individual parts of a system (for example, replacing one employee with another employee doing the exact same job) will not have a significant effect on the system, but changing the nature of the relationship between system parts (a full reorganization of departments and reporting lines, for example) can greatly

alter a system. Margaret Wheatley (2005, 40) states it very plainly: "The more access people have to one another, the more possibilities there are. Without connections, nothing happens." The relationships within a system will determine whether or not a system achieves the outcomes it has set for itself. The cooperation and collaboration which come from good relationships will propel the system toward its goals.

Communication and feedback are also vital to a healthy system. The importance of relationships to a system has already been discussed, and the foundation of these relationships is the communication which passes, in all directions, between system components. Ackoff (2010) defines organizations as social systems, powered by relationships between individuals and parts of the system and made stronger by the sharing of information and feedback across the system. Systems thinker Barry Oshry has written extensively about relationships, and in *The Possibilities of Organization* (1992) he stresses the importance of communication. Individuals across the organization should share information freely and seek to communicate in all directions for the good of the organization. Meadows (2008) posits that a lack of information sharing is one of the most common causes of system failure. The essential nature of communication within the system is reinforced when she points out that adding information can be a powerful corrective to a malfunctioning system.

The building of productive relationships between parts of the organization and effective communication moving in all directions across the system leads to transparency, and transparency is of benefit to any organization. Employees having an understanding of the system's mission and access to the information pertinent to the effort to achieve it will create the information-rich and dynamic environments which lead to innovation. Systems thinking replaces traditionally territorial and secretive attitudes toward information with transparency and the free movement of information throughout the system (Wheatley 2005).

What Is Inclusion?

Inclusion is the process by which an organization incorporates the diverse talents and experiences of its members into its activities. An organization practicing inclusion embraces the individual differences and identities of its members and actively encourages the participation and contribution of everyone in the organization (Ferdman 2020; Jules 2022). In doing so, it provides a safe space where employees feel supported and appreciated, able to voice their opinions and share their views freely, and able to bring their authentic selves to work every day (Ceccarelli and Tedrick 2023; Ferdman 2020; Jules 2022). "Inclusion is a sense of belonging: feeling respected, valued for who you are; feeling a level of supportive energy and commitment

from others" (Miller 2012, as cited in Ceccarelli and Tedrick 2023). It's worth noting the twofold nature of inclusion, where one aspect of it is the effort made by the organization to include and empower everyone, and the other is the sense of support and belonging experienced by the individual(s).

Inclusion is closely related to (though not the same as) diversity, which is a representation of varied identities and differences, most commonly based on visible differences such as race, gender, and age, but also inclusive of less immediately apparent things like culture and religion and sexual orientation (Jules 2022). In a manner of speaking, diversity is a condition whereby differing individuals and viewpoints are present in an organization, whereas inclusion is the mechanism which creates an environment of respect and support that allows everyone to participate. It is through inclusion that an organization unlocks the potential inherent in its diversity. Researchers point out that diversity without inclusion will fail to create positive change. The simple act of hiring diverse individuals will not automatically lead to greater organizational achievements (Ferdman 2014). Failing to include, support, and value diverse employees will result in their experiencing frustration and failure (Miller and Katz 2002). Inclusion is the necessary action which unlocks the potential of diverse employees and provides them with a safe and supportive environment.

Key Characteristics of Inclusion

It's important to recognize that, to be effective, inclusion must be baked into the culture of the organization. It must be a dynamic organizational practice, supported by structures, norms, and the behaviors of individuals and groups (Ferdman 2014). New competencies and practices based around inclusion should be integrated into the strategic work and goals of the organization (Miller and Katz 2002). Crafting organizational inclusion statements and policies, creating performance standards which apply equally to everyone, establishing practices which promote social integration, and integrating inclusion into the organization's core values and mission statement are some things which can be done to ensure inclusion is a recognized and valued part of the organizational fabric (Bernstein et al. 2015). Barring this kind of fundamental integration into the very organization itself, inclusion runs the risk of being nothing but words unsupported by actions.

Inclusion is an active and ongoing process. It is not possible for an organization to simply "become inclusive" at a certain point and to then always be inclusive going forward. Once an organization has put the practices, beliefs, and behaviors mentioned above into place, it must

constantly monitor its culture and its behavior to ensure it is honoring the inclusion goals it has set for itself. The climate created by these factors must remain in place through its many changing individual, group, organizational, and external interactions (Ferdman 2014). Inclusion must be a constant as employees, initiatives, leadership, and strategic directions change throughout time. Creating committees and task forces related to inclusion, offering training opportunities, and mentoring programs are some ways in which an organization can maintain its commitment to inclusion (Bernstein et al. 2015).

Research into inclusion shows it generates significant benefits to the organization which adopts it. By purposefully leveraging the talents and knowledge of all its employees, inclusive organizations realize gains not typically experienced by more homogeneous organizations. These advantages include greater organizational creativity and ability to innovate, enhanced decision-making and problem solving, a greater capacity for change, and an improved understanding of the marketplace and consequent ability to better connect with its desired audiences and markets (Miller and Katz 2002; Robinson and Dechant 2005; Page 2017). The case has also been made for more inclusive organizations being better able to attract and retain top talent because high performers want to work for organizations which value diversity (Dye and Golnaraghi 2015). The proactive inclusion of a wider spectrum of individual experiences, viewpoints, and talents energizes an organization in ways a homogeneous employee population cannot.

Embracing inclusivity can also result in cost savings for an organization. A failure to acknowledge and support diverse voices can negatively impact a company's bottom line through expenditures related to higher employee turnover, greater amounts of absenteeism, and, possibly, lawsuits stemming from accusations of gender, racial, and age, or other forms of discrimination (Robinson and Dechant 2005).

An inclusive organization also benefits the individual. It can uplift employees by offering them opportunities to utilize their individual talents, to deliver value to their workplace, and to feel a sense of acceptance and belonging which may otherwise elude them. An inclusive workplace can satisfy the need people have for respect, recognition, safety, and access to employment that engages and energizes them (Miller and Katz 2002; Ceccarelli and Tedrick 2023; Bush 2018). Inclusion allows individuals to fully contribute and to flourish without requiring assimilation and without necessitating the suppression of one's identity (Ferdman 2020). The inclusive organization creates an environment where an individual employee can realize their full potential and maximize their contribution.

While research demonstrates that inclusion has an overall net positive impact on organizations, critics have pointed out challenges related to inclusion. Organizational cultures can be rigid, and individuals who do not represent or "fit in" with the normative culture will feel pressured to conform, and may experience difficulty in coping with expectations at odds with their identities (Adejumo 2021). Individuals from nonmajority groups may also experience what Alida Miranda-Wollf (2022) calls "diversity fatigue," which is a feeling of additional burden arising from the expectation that diverse employees must be the primary carriers of the inclusion banner in their organizations. Other concerns with inclusion focus on the difficulty nonhomogeneous groups may experience in fostering team cohesion, how a lack of shared values can stall progress, and the belief that inclusion ignores the talents and merits of White employees and potential employees (Howard and Ulferts 2020; Meeussen, Schaafsma, and Phalet 2014; Smith 2018).

It's also worth noting the act of disclosing one's personal differences to a prospective employer or to coworkers may come with professional and personal risk. Despite general advances in understanding and accepting differences in gender, race, age, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and ability, our social institutions and systems still reflect biases—and worse—which prevent the full inclusion of individuals from outside the dominant groups (Werth and Brownlow 2018). When an individual feels the environment around them is not safe, they may hide their identity and curtail expressing themself as they otherwise might, and this prevents an individual from fully engaging with their workplace (Ceccarelli and Tedrick 2023).

Despite its criticisms, inclusion is believed to have an overall beneficial effect on organizational performance (Smith 2018; Howard and Ulferts 2020). It seeks to create positive connections between people and to involve all voices in the process of working toward and realizing organizational goals. And systems thinking, with its emphasis on relationships, interconnectedness, and communication, inherently mirrors these same values.

Systems Thinking and the Inclusive Organization

As an organizational mindset, systems thinking offers opportunities for inclusion which are not necessarily found in traditional hierarchical management thinking. With its rigid reporting structure and centralized authority, a hierarchy can stifle organizational tendencies toward engagement and collaboration and limit the contributions of some individuals. The heterarchical nature of systems thinking, however, presents an organization with numerous opportunities to codify and leverage inclusionary practices.

Individuals in leadership positions can deploy systems thinking concepts to make their organizations more inclusive of all employees. The primary responsibility of individuals at the top of the organizational chart is to make sure everyone in the organization understands the overall purpose of the system and works toward meeting its goals (Ackoff 2010; DeLisi 2021; Donaldson 2021). A system will only be effective when everyone is working in coordination toward the common good. Conversely, an organization will be less effective if there are individual employees who do not understand its purpose and goals.

There are a number of activities a leader can undertake to bolster this system-wide buy-in. Ackoff (2010), Oshry (1992), and Meadows (2008) stress the importance of communication across the organization. The proactive sharing of information in all directions and a commitment to transparency will help everyone understand the purpose of the system and their place in it. Leaders should look at their organizations and determine where they can share information to maximum effect. What information can help employees better understand the needs and goals of the organization? What are the best ways to get this information in front of them? What can you do, regardless of your position in the organization, to help people around you appreciate the efforts of your unit?

As Russell Ackoff (2010) says, the role of the manager is less about telling people what to do or evaluating their actions than it is about brokering relationships between the parts of the organization. As a leader, ask yourself what can be done to help units or departments understand one another, how they are related, and how they fit into the larger system. Breaking down silos and opening lines of communication between departments is fundamental to building effective relationships. The creation of cross-departmental teams, of ad hoc project teams involving individuals who normally do not work together, and the sharing of departmental data, goals, and other information across the organization can help build closer relationships. Even simply asking departments to simply share what, why, and how they do what they do with others can create new understandings. Ongoing communication between units will lay a foundation for the more productive relationships which really help an organization be effective.

Leaders should solicit feedback from those who report to them and involve them in the issues they are addressing. They should be unafraid to ask for help (Oshry 1992). Every organization is filled with individuals with expertise and knowledge, and leaders should actively leverage this very valuable resource. Identify what is the best way to receive feedback from others. Do you need ongoing feedback, or feedback only in certain situations? For which initiatives do you need help in the form of additional information, and where can you find this help? How can you best leverage the expertise of your colleagues to move the organization

forward? Asking for feedback will help leaders better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their system (and where more resources may need to be applied), as well as how well employees understand broader system functions and whether more communication and/or training is needed. Asking for help will make sure the talent needed to successfully complete projects and accomplish system goals is in the room.

While system leaders have definite responsibilities to play when it comes to creating a more inclusive organization, other employees have essential roles to play as well. The organization which engages in systems thinking invites and expects participation from everyone in the organization. It regularly offers individuals across the organization opportunities to be heard and to contribute.

As Fosbrook (2016) mentions above, the concept of hierarchy still exists within systems thinking, but it exists in flexible and situational ways. An individual who does not necessarily take a leadership position when it comes to certain organizational matters may find herself acting in a leadership capacity as the head of a project team or as a member of an ad hoc group spearheading a new initiative. Individuals in these positions have power and they should use that power to help the organization. As Oshry (1999, 8) says "Position does not determine power." Any individual in a system has power when they possess an understanding of the system, they believe they can make a difference, and they have the courage to act.

Every employee should seek opportunities to contribute to the health of the system. This is best done by sharing information and by building relationships with others (Oshry 1992). Employees should ask themselves questions like: What information and observations do I have which would be helpful to others? Would closer relations between my department and another help the organization? Where do I see opportunities for new and different collaborations? A system welcomes communication and feedback, and everyone should make an effort to communicate, share, and lead. It offers opportunities to individuals who may not otherwise feel they have a voice to be heard.

While it is easy to perceive the ways in which a systems thinking mindset might help to make an organization more inclusive, there are reasons why this might be difficult to implement. Traditional organizations are built on a system of centralized authority which rewards and punishes, while a more inclusive organization is built on participation and trust. It requires a shift in overall mindset on the part of both managers and employees to create such an environment (DeLisi 2021). Adapting a system mindset requires a number of fundamental changes to an organization, including seeing it not as a collection of discrete parts but instead as an interconnected whole, changing the way supervisors act with subordinates, and forming new

relationships between units (Ackoff 1998). It requires resetting the culture of an organization, and as anyone who works in an organization knows, changing culture is a very difficult task. In the words of Russell Ackoff (2007, 37), "The only thing more difficult than starting something new in an organization is stopping something old." But for the leader who can communicate this mindset to others and incorporate these practices into organizational workflows, no matter how small they might appear at first, the payoff will be an organization which welcomes its members, seeks input from them, and values their contributions. The end result will be a healthier and more effective organization.

Conclusion

Systems thinking's view of the organization as an interconnected and inseparable whole asks us to think and act more inclusively. The importance it places on facilitating productive relationships, on listening and communication, its concept of authority and power as malleable and situational, its respect for others based on knowledge and expertise instead of simply position, and its belief that every individual is responsible for the success of the system differentiates it from the traditional reductionist view of the organization. While any organization wanting to become truly inclusive faces a significant amount of work and a concerted effort to build and maintain such a culture, the adoption of a system thinking mindset provides a solid foundation upon which an inherently inclusive organization can be built.

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