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Systemic View and Systems Thinking

A systemic view of organizations is trans-disciplinary and integrative. This view transcends the perspectives of individual disciplines, integrating them on the basis of a common ‘code’, that is, on the basis of the formal apparatus provided by systems theory (e.g. Bell and Morse, 1999). The systemic view gives primacy to the interrelationships, rather than to the elements of a system. It is from these dynamic interrelationships that new properties of the system emerge.

Systems thinking comes from a rigorous scientific discipline called General Systems Theory, which developed from the study of biology in the 1920s. The theory centred on the natural world, the living systems therein, and the common laws governing those systems (Haines, 1998). Its major premise was that such laws, once known, could serve as a conceptual framework for understanding the relationships within any system, and for handling any problems or changes encompassed by that system.

Systems thinking is, therefore, a basis for clear thought and communication, a way of seeing more and further (e.g. O’Connor and McDermot, 1997; Mingers, 2006). This means that obvious explanations and majority views are not always right. With a wider and different perspective, an individual can see exactly what is happening and can then take actions that are best in the long run. Systems thinking looks at the whole, the parts, and the connections between the parts, studying the whole in order to understand the parts. It is the opposite of reductionism: the idea that something is simply the sum of its parts. A collection of parts that do not connect is not a system, it is a heap.

Systems thinking is any process that estimates or infers how actions or changes influence the state of neighbouring systems. It is an approach
to problem solving that views problems as parts of an overall system, rather than one that reacts to present outcomes or events, potentially contributing to the further development of undesired issues or problems. In other words, systems thinking is a framework that is based on the belief that the components of a system can best be understood in the context of relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation. The only way to fully understand why a problem or element occurs and persists is to understand the part in relation to the whole. This means that systems thinking is a way to view and mentally frame what we see in the world; a world view and way of thinking whereby we see the entity or unit first as a whole, with its placement within and relationship to its environment as primary concerns.

The reason that habitual thinking is insufficient to deal with systems is because it tends to see simple sequences of cause and effect that are limited in time and space, rather than as a combination of factors that mutually influence each other. In a system, cause and effect may be far apart in time and space. The effect may not be apparent until days, weeks, or even years later. At the same time, people have to act without delay (O’Connor and McDermott, 1997).

In recent years, systems thinking has developed to provide techniques for studying systems in holistic ways to supplement traditional reductionist methods. In this more recent tradition, systems theory in organizational studies is considered by some as a humanistic extension of the natural sciences.

Another concept from social science is the notion of systemic view—the view that all social systems are composed of interrelated sub-systems. A whole is not just the sum of its parts, but the system itself can be explained only as a totality. The systemic view is, then, the opposite of elementarism, which views the total as the sum of its individual parts. The systemic view is thus the basis of the systems approach. In traditional organization theory, as well as in many of the sciences, sub-systems have been studied separately, with a view to putting the parts together into a whole at some later point. The systemic view emphasizes that this is not possible and that the starting point has to be the total system.

In sum, the systemic view and systems thinking attempt to illustrate that events are separated by distance and time, and that small catalytic events can cause large changes in systems. Acknowledging that an improvement in one area of a system can adversely affect another area of the system promotes organizational communication at all levels in order to avoid the silo effect.