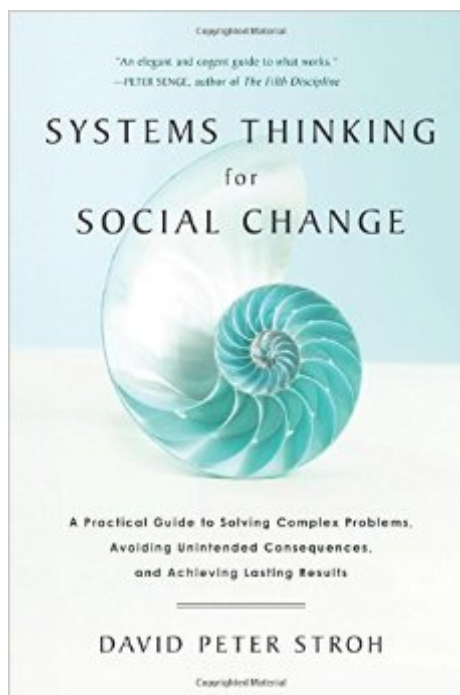# Systems Thinking For Social Change: A Practical Guide To Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, And Achieving Lasting Results

Synopsis

Donors, leaders of nonprofits, and public policy makers usually have the best of intentions to serve society and improve social conditions. But often their solutions fall far short of what they want to accomplish and what is truly needed. Moreover, the answers they propose and fund often produce the opposite of what they want over time. We end up with temporary shelters that increase homelessness, drug busts that increase drug-related crime, or food aid that increases starvation. How do these unintended consequences come about and how can we avoid them? By applying conventional thinking to complex social problems, we often perpetuate the very problems we try so hard to solve, but it is possible to think differently, and get different results. Systems Thinking for Social Change enables readers to contribute more effectively to society by helping them understand what systems thinking is and why it is so important in their work. It also gives concrete guidance on how to incorporate systems thinking in problem solving, decision making, and strategic planning without becoming a technical expert. Systems thinking leader David Stroh walks readers through techniques he has used to help people improve their efforts to end homelessness, improve public health, strengthen education, design a system for early childhood development, protect child welfare, develop rural economies, facilitate the reentry of formerly incarcerated people into society, resolve identity-based conflicts, and more.Â   The result is a highly readable, effective guide to understanding systems and using that knowledge to get the results you want.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I enjoyed reading this book for a number of reasons.First, it is easy to follow. David Peter Stroh includes definitions of terms in plain English so I can understand difficult systems terms like structures, archetypes, and balancing and reinforcing loops. He also often provides three different levels of explanation for concepts - a brief overview, a contextual explanation, and a more detailed example. This works well for my learning style because I need to understand the theory and the practice in order to apply these ideas to my own work.Second, the book is filled with case stories. These examples underscore the value of systems thinking, for instance, by identifying unintended consequences of change efforts that don't consider the whole system or by pointing out counter intuitive ways to shift a system. I also like Stroh's idea of helping people see how they contribute to the status quo and how they can change their behaviors to contribute to innovative solutions. This book includes many real life stories of this, and I'm excited to try out the techniques he shares to move people to collective action.Third, throughout the book, David Peter Stroh includes many tools that I can use as stand alone tools for change initiatives. These include things like the iceberg tool or conversation questions. Even if I don't go through a full change initiative, the tools can be used to help people rethink what is happening and what can be done to get to different results.Finally, and most importantly, I appreciate that this book is written about social change. Much of the systems thinking writing is very academic and grounded in specific disciplines like public health, economics, etc. Often, this writing focuses at the organizational or institutional level.

We need a better way of making sense of the complex problems of our modern world if we are going to bring about any kind of meaningful and lasting social change. The current linear, cause and effect, blame-laden way of seeing and understanding issues no longer works with these multi-relational, multi-faceted social dilemmas. Systems Theory provides a more wholistic way of looking at and understanding the dynamics of these problems. Past writing about systems thinking tends toward the academic and is often not very accessible, or the author uses mostly examples of natural systems, making it difficult to translate those systems principles to human/social systems. David Stroh's Systems Thinking for Social Change, overcomes both of those problems. Because of his real world examples of social issues seen through a systems lens, the book draws the reader in as Stroh narrates the story of an issueâ ™s complexity. Problems like prison release and recidivism, health care, and affordable housing seem like tightly woven knots, impossible to untie, as we initially approach them. But as Stroh begins to diagram the elements of the problem and their relationships, the knot begins to unravel and understanding begins to emerge about potential places to intervene in the system for maximum effect.Iâ ™ve read many books on systems dynamics and modeling,

and Strohâ ™s is one of the best at leading the reader through the step-by-step process of creating a model of a problem. He doesnâ ™t overwhelm with too much information or too many technical terms. He keeps the reader focused on the issue and learning about diagramming unfolds as the issue is tweezed apart. The result is that the reader comes away understanding systems thinking and not just how to draw causal loop diagrams.

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