



# **Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results**

*David Peter Stroh*

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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.

The result is a highly readable, effective guide to understanding systems and using that knowledge to get the results you want.

## **Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results Details**

Date : Published October 16th 2015 by Chelsea Green Publishing Company (first published September 24th 2015)

ISBN : 9781603585804

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Format : Paperback 264 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Culture, Society, Business, Philosophy, Social Justice, Social Change, Leadership, Design, Politics, Sociology, Environment, Sustainability

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## Teo 2050 says

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### Introduction

#### – What You Will Learn

- – Use systems thinking instead of more conventional linear thinking to address chronic, complex social problems.
  - – Apply systems thinking as both a set of principles and a particular group of analytic tools.
  - – Integrate systems thinking into a proven four-stage change manag
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## Bryan Sebesta says

I give this book five stars. That is not because there weren't dry parts—in fact, given that I have little training or background for social change writ large, that was almost inevitable. But that is due to my own lack of training. I could sense, reading this book, that I was learning something momentous. Consider:

Building more homeless shelters is a short-term fix that diminishes the problem's visibility and makes participants feel good, but doesn't ultimately solve anything. The real problem is lack of permanent housing for the homeless. ("Fixes That Backfire.")

Government welfare programs can create unhealthy dependencies and incentives for the poor to stay poor. ("Shifting the Burden.")

When confronted with increasing crime, political leaders often encourage harsher penalties for criminals. But often those penalized are parents, and so their children grow up without one or both of their parents. This creates a really bad situation for children, increasing the likelihood that they will grow up without strong emotional support or educational success—and become criminals later. Thus a new crime wave emerges 10-15 years down the road, and often, a new round of harsher penalties is suggested—exacerbating the problem. (A combination of "Shifting the Burden" and "Fixes That Backfire.")

These are just a few of many, *many* examples of systems problems (and, in the parentheses, the common "archetypes" found in systems—shifting the burden, limits to growth, etc). And the trick is knowing what a system is and how it behaves and the language—yes, the language!—you must use to describe this. Systems thinking is, in fact, another language, with its own jargon: feedback, growth, stability, diversity and resilience, time delays, unintended consequences, leverage, etc. On the one hand, its easy. On the other hand, its not. Systems describe chronic problems, what some call "wicked" problems—problems in the world and relationships that were never intended, but stick with us despite our best efforts to solve them (poverty, homelessness, climate change, accidental adversaries in love and families, etc).

An additional thing I learned. Whenever I read the news, I am often reading about events—things that happened. I learned a long time ago to be wary of reading too much into events separated from contextual analysis—that is, trends. Trends have much more explanatory power than events. There are 2.5 million people incarcerated in the United States today, but that means nothing divorced from time data. Is that good or bad? It's not until I learn that there were 200,000 people incarcerated in the 1970s. Now I can be dismayed, and see the urgency of the problem. But trends are not the end of it either. Trends do not explain the causal factors: the economic policies, the psychological truths, the structural racism, the politics, the various acts of different actors, none of whom mean for the prisons to fill with 650,000 new inmates each year. (One tenet of systems analysis is that people are almost always well intended, but do not often see the ways they contribute to the larger problems.) So beneath events and trends lie systems. Though not from this book, this quote seems pertinent:

If a factory is torn down but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory. If a revolution destroys a government, but the systematic patterns of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves. . . . There's so much talk about the system. And so little understanding.  
—ROBERT PIRSIG, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

This is a *momentous* book. It teaches a language I wish I had learned a long time ago. So many of the problems I face, I realize, are illuminated by systems thinking. Systems are everywhere. I don't usually get excited about language or frameworks, but this one has me positively elated. It's like I can see the world fresh again, or at least know that beneath the world I see lie hundreds of thousands of systems. And this book gives one the vocabulary to describe them: accidental adversaries, the bathtub analogy, limits to growth, success to the successful, amplifying and balancing loops, etc. It's a marvelous, marvelous thing.

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### **Nathan Surendran says**

I'll write a better review later, but the best single thing I took away from this book was a very simple observation. I've heard in many different settings the discussion of the problems of not getting 'exponential change' in terms of not perceiving negative changes in systems we rely on such as ecosystems until it's too late (e.g. Albert Bartlett's lecture: <http://bit.ly/1vtJk0L>, or the 1 minute 'impossible hamster' clip from the New Economics Foundation: <http://bit.ly/1ANz4C4>).

There is a simple observation in this book that was new for me. The author flipped this thinking around and observed that the changes that many are working towards are also exponential in nature, and that many get discouraged and quit before they see the fruit of their labours multiply and create lasting change. At only 1 doubling periods before the completed work of reaching everyone with beneficial social changes, only 50% of people are reached, 25% at 2 doubling periods, 12.5% at 3 doubling periods, 6.25% at 4 doubling periods...

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### **Vi says**

bathtub thinking aside, it really isn't tenable for a reader of this book to build these charts.

## TAS says

First, full disclosure. I picked this up because it was recommended to me to help guide my work with a non-profit. I read some, skimmed some, skipped some of the book.

On the plus side it has some very useful information about how to think about "big picture" solutions to pervasive problems. And I think a full understanding of the material would help people facilitate change in an organization's thinking. However, it was pretty dry, even dull to read. So, if you're interested in helping an organization shift to a more strategic kind of problem-solving, I'd recommend this book. Just be prepared for it to feel like reading a textbook.

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## Tumi says

The recommendation to read an introductory systems thinking books before tackling this one really isn't necessary. This book does a great job of explaining our unintended consequences as we try to make social change happen within their complicated ecosystems.

A must-read for people working in the social impact space.

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## Josh says

This book really gave a very practical frame work for how to think about, evaluate, and solve problems on a big scale. I think reading this book and applying the principles can help you out on any scale however. The forces, such as unintended consequences and reinforcing feedback loops) that make problems so persistent apply to problems big and small.

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## Connie Liu says

This book presents a clear picture of systems thinking in action by referencing examples in everything from education to homelessness to crime. Although dry at times, these examples help propel the book forward and serves as a good introduction to systems thinking. However, I do finish the book still a bit uncertain about how to apply systems thinking to create real change: often people are only brought together to rethink their role in a system in the face of a catastrophe that catalyzes this rethinking. The book does not mention how this meeting of the minds is best facilitated for problems like climate change and education when the negative effects are slow but sure. All together, I feel that I have a new framework for thinking about complex problems, but not too many answers. But that's the nature of complexity right?

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## Philippa says

Not the most engaging read, but as a educational resource it was clear, concise and illuminating. Would be

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interesting for (at least) anyone working on large scale issues, anyone in social policy or programming or NGO's and the humanitarian and development sector at large.

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### **Scott Ford says**

Excellent introduction to system's mapping for better organizational design. Focused on such community concerns as education, health care and homelessness, this book guides facilitators through system mapping by providing specific techniques and demonstrating their application through real-world example.

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### **Sean Estelle says**

This book is worth reading, despite the slightly lower rating. There are lots of good suggestions, and it reinforces much of what I've already read in the network theory realm. But it is jargony and hard to follow at some points, and would probably be difficult for folks to absorb if they aren't already versed in the language of systems. I recommend Donella Meadows' "System Thinking: A Primer" if you're looking for something more introductory, then this for examples with case studies and in depth diagrams.

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### **Christy says**

Using this with a class of only a dozen students in an upper-level course on Applied Social Policy in Portland, Maine this term, and I think it provides a clear model that students can use to work with a local "community partner" to achieve some positive social change. The best systems thinking on social and local issues gets us to root-cause analysis, and I think Stroh succeeds in giving us a way to map complex social problems that does that.

My Master's thesis adviser was Walter Buckley, a sociologist who wrote the first book in the 50s applying mechanics and systems theory to social and behavioral sciences Modern Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist: A Sourcebook, but he mostly taught me skepticism towards systems theory, although I did inhale both Meadows' Thinking in Systems: A Primer and Wallerstein's World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction. I read Senge and those folks "doing" data-driven decision making work in K-16 education systems, and tended to think that mostly a disaster (in part having to do with education not having R&D budgets but an expectation of "business like" results.) So, I was hesitate to check this one out, but it's radical in all the good ways of promoting positive social action almost in every sentence, and it gives me a bit of hope using this as one of our texts with students (joining 4000+ people at the Women's March in Augusta, Maine today didn't hurt, either!)

Stroh's "real life" examples come so quick and thick, and I wanted him to spend "time" extending his thinking before he was on to something else, that I do think it will overwhelm some students (as it did me, and I read as regularly as I can about all these social problems!) He has fascinating ideas on prison recidivism, affordable housing, rural development, immigration, and on youth including a number of issues related to education as well as child welfare.

## **Brian says**

Good, thoughtful, nearly step-by-step guide to solving 'wicked' social problems.

'A wicked problem is a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize.'

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## **Doni says**

I don't feel like I learned much of anything in this book that wasn't covered better by Donella Meadow's book.

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