

Last Word

Communicating Systems Ideas

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In his review of Stowell and Welsh's book *The Manager's Guide to Systems Practice* [John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2012], which appeared in a previous issue of this journal, Neil McBride (2014) reminded us that considering problems, organisations and human activity holistically – which is the basis of systems thinking – goes against the culturally embedded grain of the inbuilt approach to knowledge and understanding. Managers indeed tend to think about complex problems in a reductionist way – something that is not easy to change, as this would involve a fundamental shift in how a person sees the world and approaches problem situations. As a result, managers and organisations make very little, if any, use of systems ideas as they are trying to respond to the great challenges they face.

Ten years ago, Russell Ackoff (2006) offered two main reasons why few organisations adopt systems thinking. The first is that organisations fail to adopt any transforming idea – let alone systems thinking. This is the result of the managers' fear of making mistakes – not doing something is safer, as errors of omission (i.e. failure to do something we should have done) are not recorded and they often go unacknowledged. The second reason why organisations do not use systems thinking is that very few managers have any knowledge or understanding of the discipline itself. Ackoff argued that this is not the managers' fault. It is rather the result of us being an introverted profession and doing most of our writing and speaking to each other. This reminds me of a statement made by Peter Checkland at a past conference of the UK Systems Society in Oxford that we spend much of our time writing papers about other people's papers. These observations made by two great systems thinkers ought to make us think that the discipline of systems thinking has not yet managed to reach managers, let alone convince them of the difference it can make.

My own experience would also support this. I recently participated in a two-year programme aimed to develop problem solving and decision making skills of local government managers on the island of Cyprus. All these managers were well aware of the particular economic, social or other problems that their local communities – or indeed the whole island – faced but often failed to see themselves or the organisations they represented as part of a wider system consisting of several stakeholders with different and often conflicting interests and expectations. These people had never come across the work that is done in the systems field and would probably be lost if they tried to follow the complex philosophical arguments surrounding the nature or the epistemological positions of the various systems methodologies. On the other hand, they would no doubt be willing to adopt systems ideas if they could see how these can help them to deal with the complex realities that the local government – as well as the entire public and private sectors – face.

So what is the way forward? Even though we cannot expect the situation to change overnight, there are a few obvious ways to convince managers of the value of systems thinking and the contribution it could make to their organisations. Firstly, there is a need for more success stories to be published – both in academic journals and in other less discipline-specific sources that could reach a wider

audience. Secondly, there is still a need for more textbooks that introduce the complex systems ideas in a convincing but at the same time simple and practical manner (something that *The Manager's Guide to Systems Practice* has managed to do particularly well). Thirdly, managers would only accept and adopt something if they can understand it. Using the correct 'systems language' might be necessary for a paper to be published in a good systems-related journal. This systems language, however, will sound completely foreign to people who do not speak it. On the other hand, the powerful systems concepts will make more sense if they are communicated in a way that other people can understand (as Ackoff put it, if Einstein could do it with relativity theory, we should be able to do it with systems thinking!). And finally, systems thinkers or anyone else with an interest in systems should reach out to the world advocating what systems is about and how the systems approach can help to deal with the complexities and challenges that organisations and societies face. This is where we can all contribute.

REFERENCES

Ackoff, R. L. (2006). Why Few Organizations Adopt Systems Thinking. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 23(5), 705–708. doi:10.1002/sres.791

McBride, N. (2014). [Review of the book *The Manager's Guide to Systems Practice*, by F. Stowell & C. Welsh]. *International Journal of Systems and Society*, 1(2), 68–70.