

# 10 Useful Ideas on Systems Thinking

By Richard Wilkinson

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## **1. Everything is connected to everything else.**

Real life is lived in a complex world system where all the subsystems overlap and affect each other. The common mistake is to deal with one subsystem in isolation. This almost always backfires as other subsystems respond in unanticipated ways.

## **2. You can never do just one thing.**

Every action has unintended consequences. Actions always yield consequences that ripple through the system.

## **3. Different people in the same structure will produce similar results.**

"Who has the most influence on the performance of an ocean liner when it is out at sea in route to its destination?" Charlotte Roberts asks. "The designer of the ship." If the system tries to make choices for people, people will try to outwit the system. Change the rules so that making choices good for the whole system are to the advantage of most people.

## **4. A collection of things is a system if any one element can affect the performance of the whole.**

The boundaries of a system are arbitrary, defined by the observer. The threshold analytical question is, "What level of the whole do you seek to know?" For example, businesses are inextricably part of larger systems. Business decisions affect the economy, environment, community, their industry, the wealth of investors, and the mental health and wellbeing of employees and their families.

## **5. From "either/or" to "both/and".**

We often err when we think in mutually exclusive opposites, solution *x* or solution *y*. Breakthroughs come when we consider the possibilities of blending *x* and *y*. Considering both the whole and its parts, bridging in some lively way what appears at first to be opposites, forces us to consider situations from multiple perspectives.

## **6. There is no "away" to throw things to.**

Dennis Meadows of the University of New Hampshire said, "When you see whole systems, you start noticing where things come from and where they go. You begin to see that there is no 'away' to throw things to."

## **7. The easiest way out is the fastest way back in.**

A common blunder is to grab for a solution prematurely without appreciating the underlying root causes driving a situation. Gain deeper understanding by first considering the event, then peeling back a layer to see if it is part of an underlying pattern. Has this happened before? Peel another layer by asking why this pattern is occurring. Continue asking, "And, why is that?" until the root cause emerges.

## **8. Profound changes can take place in ways we cannot foretell.**

A small force or event can have a disproportionate effect.

**9. The map is not the territory.**

No model, theory, or tool can capture the full complexity of the subject it's addressing. Roger Harrison writes, "I never can resist the urge to create theories and models. But I hold all maps and theories lightly, consciously making room for mystery and for doubt."

**10. An answer is a question's way of asking a new question.**

And, there are no final answers.