

Systems Thinking Video Transcript

Systems-thinking: A Way to Maximize Program Effectiveness

Systems thinking. Maybe you've heard of it, are doing it, or you've heard that you should be doing it. What is it? And what does it mean for the senior manager?

Let's start by looking at what a **system** is. A system is any kind of entity that is made up of 'parts' that interact. Together, these '**Parts**' and their interconnections create a '**Whole**', which in turn, produces some kind of result. Using a systems perspective is important because it helps us to better understand what helps or hinders the success of health interventions.

Here's an example. Meet Suzanne. Suzanne is a senior manager in a large regional health organization. The high rate of obesity is an issue in her community and she's been mandated to address this problem. Her first instinct is to develop a program to get more people active, but what is realistic to expect from this approach? Systems thinkers believe that viewing a program like this, (a '**Part**'), in isolation of the larger system within which it operates (the '**Whole**') tends to ignore other aspects that might influence its potential for impact. Why?

Research tells us that obesity is the result of a combination of many physiological, psychological, social, environmental, and economic factors that all interact with one another. For example, at the individual level, there are issues such as:

- human physiology
- exercise habits
- food choices, and
- one's occupation.

But beyond the individual there are other factors at play such as:

- the local built environment
- quick and easy access to junk food, and

- larger food industry practices, such as trends in portion sizes, sugar, and fat content.

The interaction of all these influences make obesity the product of what we call a **Complex System**. If Suzanne were to use a systems approach she would realize that relying on simple linear *cause and effect* solutions for one program would ignore these interactions and likely fail.

While Suzannes's staff at the program-level have a tendency to think within the boundaries of their program, senior managers and planners, like Suzanne, are in a unique position to do what systems thinkers call, "Zooming out". Zooming out considers how other aspects outside of a program's traditional boundaries, both within the organization and beyond, might influence the success of the program. By Zooming out and looking at the influence of various **interventions, policies, structures, patterns** and **norms** in the broader system, Suzanne is better able to strategically consider the other values and **Perspectives** and **Interrelationships** among each that may impact obesity rates in her community. In doing so, she can identify more powerful **Leverage Points** outside of the program that have the potential to facilitate and support changes in obesity. Leverage points are places within the system that can be tweaked in a way that supports greater impact. For example, are there actions Suzanne and her team might take that could increase the community's access to opportunities for physical activity? While some leverage points are within Suzanne's capacity to change, others will be beyond her control. However, it will still be useful to be aware of these as she plans for the program.

Adopting a systems view won't change the boundaries of this program, but it will expand the boundaries of the **Evaluation**. By recognizing the importance of the different perspectives and values of those outside the program, and the interrelationships throughout the system, Suzanne can ensure that the evaluation is framed in a way that will capture the key boundaries, diverse perspectives, and interrelationships that serve as important leverage points in the system. Of course, Suzanne's budget won't permit an evaluation of the entire system, but she can ensure that any evaluation she commissions will provide her with more strategic direction on how to effectively address obesity within her community. For example, in addition to recommendations for improving the program, the results of the evaluation might indicate opportunities for new partnerships or external policy change. If her community has poor walking and cycling infrastructure, where might she and her team advocate? Or who could they collaborate with to make changes?

By asking these questions, Suzanne is finding that using a systems approach helps her focus on the broader issue of obesity in her community instead of a single program in her organization. She gains a better understanding of what external factors are influencing the program's success and can set more reasonable expectations of what it can accomplish.

She's also learning what needs to change both within and outside of the program to better maximize her organization's effectiveness.

Many now believe that a systems approach holds the most promise for addressing complex health problems like obesity. Which is not only good for Suzanne, but good for everyone.

For more information on systems thinking and evaluation, visit www.evaluationforleaders.org