SYSTEM THINKING

Simple Definition & Overview:

A system is a set of interrelated elements that make a unified whole. Systems are everywhere—for example, the interdisciplinary team involve in supporting someone, the Human Resources in your organization, the circulatory system in your body, the predator/prey relationships in nature, the ignition system in your car, and so on. Ecological systems and human social systems are living systems; human-made systems such as cars and washing machines are nonliving systems.System thinking is founded on basic, universal principles that you will begin to detect in all arenas of life once you learn to recognize them. In system thinking, *structure* refers to the pattern of interrelationships among key components of the systems. It may include the hierarchy and process flows, but it also includes perceptions and attitudes, as well as the way decisions are made and hundreds of other factors. System structures are often invisible, at least until someone points them out. Structures in systems are not necessarily built consciously. They are built out of choices people make consciously or unconsciously over time.
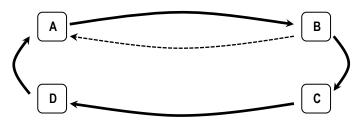
A systems approach helps us understand the complexity of the event or situation, how things influence one another within a whole and encourages us to think in terms of relationships, and context.

System Thinking as a Special Language:

Systems principles are meaningful not so much by themselves, but because they represent a more effective way of thinking and acting. It is also a more powerful language to help us describe and think about complex and sophisticated issues. The typical subject-verb-object language construction (where A causes B) we use:

Doesn't help us appreciate and describe circumstances in which A causes B **while** B causes A, and both **continually** interrelate with C and D. In systems thinking we have to shift from linear thinking and seeing things as structures to seeing them as processes.

Powerful Implications For Our Work:

- System thinking is a way of understanding reality that emphasizes the relationships among a system's parts, rather than the parts themselves.
- System thinking is a process of discovery and exploration, an inquiry into the governing processes underlying the problems we face.
- System thinking offers you a powerful new perspective and helps us understand the complexity of the event or situation, how things influence one another within a whole, encourages us to think in terms of relationships, and context.
- System thinking helps us see the events and patterns in our lives in a new light—and respond to them in different ways.
- System thinking is not one thing but a set of habits or practices within a framework that is based on the belief that the component or parts of a system can best be understood in the context of relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation.
- System thinking has unique qualities that help you communicate with others and emphasizes wholes rather than parts. It stresses the role of interconnections—including the role we each play in the systems at work in our lives.
- System thinking focuses on cyclical rather than linear cause and effect.