

Habits of a Systems Thinker

CONNECTIONS INSIGHT SYSTEMS THINKING

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The Habits of a Systems Thinker describes ways of thinking about how systems work and how actions taken can impact results over time.

People who practice systems thinking often report that it sharpens and clarifies their understanding of interrelationships within systems, helping them find the opportunities or “leverage points” that can take the performance of the entire system to a higher level. Though “habit” is defined as a usual way of doing things, the Habits of a Systems Thinker do not suggest that systems thinkers are limited by routine ways of thinking. Rather, the Habits encourage flexible thinking and appreciation of new, emerging insights and multiple perspectives.

To behave more like a Systems Thinker, take a look at these 9 habits...



Seeks to understand the big picture

Ask yourself: How can I maintain balance between the big picture and important details?



Identifies the circular nature of complex cause and effect relationships

Ask yourself: "Where does circular causality/feedback emerge?"



Considers an issue fully and resists the urge to come to a quick conclusion

Ask yourself: "How can I manage the tension that exists when issues are not resolved immediately?"



Observes how elements within systems change over time, generating patterns and trends

Ask yourself: "What changing elements represent amounts and how quickly/slowly are they

increasing or decreasing?”



Changes perspectives to increase understanding

Ask yourself: “As I learn about new perspectives, am I willing to change my mind?”



Considers how mental models affect current reality and the future

Ask yourself: “How am I helping others see the influence that mental models have on our decision-making?”



Recognizes that a system’s structure generates its behaviour

Ask yourself: “When things go wrong, how can I focus on internal causes rather than dwell on external blame?”



Surfaces and tests assumptions

Ask yourself: “When considering a possible action, do I and those I work with ask ‘What if’ questions?”



Uses understanding of system structure to identify possible leverage actions

Ask yourself: “Where might a small change – even those not yet considered – have a long-lasting, desired effect?”

The Waters Foundation’s Systems Thinking in Schools work is recognized worldwide for making systems thinking accessible and practical, both for children in classrooms as well as executives in boardrooms. With its mission to build systems thinking capacity in schools across the country and around the world, the Waters Foundation focuses on developing generations of systems thinkers who apply 21st century skills in classrooms, schools, communities and future workplaces. Systems thinkers function as local and global community members who use the concepts, habits and tools of systems thinking to understand the complexities of systems and to face school, work and life challenges with an informed capacity to identify leverage action and achieve desired results.

To learn more habits and to purchase Habits of a Systems Thinker cards, go to the Waters Foundation website:

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