



Systemics Principles With a Framework

Working as Social Architects, we have found it helpful to group these principles into three categories:

- **13 Systemic Cultural Principles** - to actively nourish and protect specific cultural norms within an organization to enable effective work with complex issues.
- **6 Systemic Scoping Principles** – to indicate baseline perspectives and rhythmic practices that managers need to utilize when their team is facing complex challenges.
- **6 Systemic Design Principles** - to create interventions that will identify strategies and programs to improve performance within complex issues.

Within each category the individual principles are inter-dependent, meaning the performance of any one influences the performance of all the others in the category. To build our awareness and understanding, initially the principles can be studied singly. Yet, we need to remember that they act as a dynamic whole.

Further, each category has an inter-dependent relationship to each of the other categories. The consequences of the interdependence of the principles show up when we assess the outcomes of a systemic intervention. For example, we may be working on an issue identified by the team through systemic scoping with many systemically designed intervention tools but if the organization's culture does not incorporate systemic principles the outcomes, while still useful, will be less than what is possible.

Thus, the principles within each of the three categories are webbed to each other. Plus, the broader categories are webbed so that these principles create an organic and dynamic whole. It is this whole that sits behind effective Systemic Practice. The development and application of Systemic Principles in an organization characterizes the work of a Social Architect.

Although this extensive sampling helps us see a comprehensive overview, in this Module, we will be choosing to focus our study only two principles in each category, and their inter-dependence. Yet these six principles are examples from the larger whole, and let us take on the task of grasping the Framework without being overwhelmed by too many ideas at once.



Systemic Cultural Principles¹ - Organizational Culture

Engaging as Equals

This is a core principle of a Systemic Practice, simply because it is essential for full participation of all of the people who carry the indispensable information and perspectives we need. When we feel we are “lesser than,” we withhold what we know. If we don’t consciously set up egalitarian engagement, hierarchy tends to become the operative shape of group sessions. People have a deep history of being entrained to “keep in their place.” People at the top are deemed to have “superior” ideas to those below, and Systemic Practice holds that we all have different and unique ideas and experiences, all of which are valuable, and ignore any leads to lower performance.

Why would “egalitarian engagement” be key to the organization’s self-interest? When working with complex issues, *we never know who, among all of the possible participants, holds the knowledge that will open up a new insight, a new lead to managing the complexity we are facing.* Typically, various pieces of information from various sources need to come together for the “Ah ha!” (insight) to appear among one or more participants. Ricochet ideas are common: we don’t know whose perception will catch the flying pieces of an idea, and mold it into a useful pattern for the group. These patterns often hold the keys to a more resilient or productive future.

In addition, in large organizations, people “in the ranks” are the ones who have original, primary source information and details. People at the top have information that has been “homogenized” and filtered for their time schedules and scope of responsibility. As any historian or anthropologist will tell us, “knowledge leverage” comes most powerfully from original sources and pieces that accurately reflect “what really happened.” Systemic principles tap this wisdom and try to comprehensively reflect “what is happening,” as well as what has happened.

In addition, from a staff engagement perspective, all viewpoints are considered from an egalitarian perspective because we are all bringing what we have. No one’s gift is the same as anyone else’s. It is arrogance born of ignorance to participate in a process assuming that your piece of information will determine the outcome. Systemic Practice strives to help people have experiences where ignorance can be de-powered without shaming the individual who suddenly realizes that his/her ideas are not the most promising.

Intellectual humility emerges as we quickly see that our idea is one of dozens... and it may not be the most compelling. This principle leads to a group celebrating differences of perspectives and a healthy new view of our own limitations.

Assuring Diversity of Perspectives

The ideas and insights of people of different ages, genders, cultures, and histories, help illuminate the complex issue’s dimensions and character. Each of us has a life experience

¹ Members of the Future Insight Maps team have contributed their knowledge to this section. The paragraphs below on Systemic Principles draw on various writings by Jane Lorand the CEO of Future Insight Maps Inc., which were created for her clients. Jane was describing a selection of the Principles required to shape systemic culture that she was advocating for the clients’ organizations. While some of the language may vary a little from that used in Videos the focus is the same.



that is rich and diverse. Polarities are everywhere, as is the truth. However, none of us has the whole story. Modern culture promotes the illusion that our knowledge is the whole truth, or at least the most significant part of it. If we routinely converse with people of a similar background and worldview, we may be “comfortable” but we will be aware of only a fragment of what is essential. *We won't know what we don't know!*

Through “Rich Picturing” in Systemic Design, using various techniques of social engagement activities, we are reminded that each of us, at any moment in time, has only a fraction of the whole. If I do not seek out other diverse perspectives, I admit that I don't care...or I assert an egoistic perspective that my picture is the whole.

A lack of diversity is dangerous at best, threatens other critical aspects of organizational performance such as trust, confidence, innovation and resilience.

In briefly outlining the following 11 Cultural Principles, we are highlighting their relationship to Egalitarian Engagement and Diversity of Perspectives.

Forming Clarity of Higher Purposes

In working with complex issues, the goal of a Systemic Practice is the “continuous improvement” of our position relative to the issue(s) and of the situation as a whole. The goal is not to “solve the problem” when it is complex: if we are fuzzy about this and expect the leader to fix “the problem,” then the leader and the group will be frustrated and performance sub-optimal.

Further, if we expect “a fix,” when the issues complex, we'll usually be disappointed as that issue, which received such attention and resources, will soon re-emerge in another guise.

To ensure the equal involvement of participants from diverse histories in a systemic intervention, it is essential we have a clarity about the purpose of the intervention to shape the sharing of knowledge.

Crafting effective Higher Purpose Statements is a core skill for “Social Architects.”

Trusting the Group

This principle sits at the heart of the Systemic Practice. The principle does not mean to give the group unbridled, un-informed freedom to self-organize. It does mean that, when we have designed processes that balance and integrate perception, thinking, feeling, and willing – then we can trust and expect the group to work toward healthy relationships and self-organizing vitality.

Using this principle, facilitators (or leaders) do not grasp authority from the group as it exerts its capacity to self-organize and aggregate ideas into strategies. Different individuals will step forward at different times in the processes, and the facilitator's role is to sense and intervene only where necessary, to maintain safety, balance, flow, and emergence.

It is the facilitator's role to design processes that take advantage of the integration of all of the Systemic Principles because that is where the power of the system supports the group.



Promoting Independent Judgment

In our quest for comfort and acceptance when we are in groups, we often give over our independent thoughts to “group think,” diluting the power of diversity out of our need for sympathetic social engagement. Dominant players continue to dominate. It is awkward and risky to “rock the boat” or say things that our experience has taught us will be challenged or rejected.

Consequently, the “truth” is rarely spoken. Specific design parameters need to be in place to protect against the compromise of unique values and points-of-view, regardless of how offensive they may be to the status quo or what is politically correct.

Our collective intelligence is compromised if we do not tap each participant’s own judgment to assess the relevance and significance of any given idea. Our collective wisdom is compromised if we casually give over to “group think.”

A key to enabling independent judgment is to eliminate attaching the tags of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as an assessment of each contribution. A group needs to suspend such decision-making (see SUN-RAIN exercise in Module 2) until all the contributions are collected and the whole rich picture can be viewed.

Supporting Candor

Candor is gained through encouraging people to safely share their unique perspectives, offering a fragment of truth as the group builds a richer picture of the whole.

Providing contributors with anonymity supports each participant to contribute his/her ideas to “the commons,” to be considered without attachment. Simultaneously, it keeps anyone from tagging that idea back to a specific contributor.

This Systemic Principle works to decouple the individual ego from his/her idea, and curbs our egotistical expectation that people will esteem us for “our” idea.

This principle also shifts attention to the ideas themselves, rather than to whose idea it was. Each of us has the challenge to “wake up” and use our own experience to consider the merits of each idea.

While helping us to overcome fear of reprisal for speaking “our truth,” the Systemic Practice consciously works to suppress prejudices toward the person whose idea it was, and lets the power of the idea speak for itself.

Assuring Transparency

As we have seen in financial systems, where there is a lack of transparency, we invite corruption. Further, we fail to optimize the assets and opportunities that are revealed when we have transparency of the relevant information.

If we are serious about rationally taking on the complex issues facing our organization, we need to be open and to engage in full disclosure of our experiences, thoughts, feelings, and actions. We need to take the step to make transparent to all, the ideas or facts that are relevant.

The opposite gesture that of withholding, for ulterior purposes or out of carelessness or fear implies the suggestion of power/control of others or a lack of respect of others. Of



course, this radiates throughout the organization. It may reveal that we don't trust others to know what we know. All of these antisocial gestures come more alive if we don't challenge them consciously.

In Systemic Practice, transparency is an essential tenet of the work. In a group exploration of a complex question, the equality of contributed ideas invites transparency of the thinking and the various rationales behind it. With every participant seeing everything and able to fully consider it within the context of their unique experience, we get an exponential leveraging of our total "knowledge capital." Often people block access to information because they are competing with others. In Systemic Practice, the goal is not to win, but to pursue the emergent options and form the most effective judgments, when we do need to make decisions. We are using openness to support decision-makers under pressure from complex issues. So it is usual for a facilitator to ask a group, 'don't only tell me what you know but also why you think the information is important for understanding this issue'.

Inviting Emergence

Emergence is a property of systems that is available when we effectively aggregate knowledge from diverse perspectives. To emerge new insights participants have to be open to all the knowledge that is contributed, suspending judgment about what is right or wrong.

We are seeking what new insight that is revealed from the interplay of all the different contributions. New ideas emerge from diverse participants having the time and opportunity to "play with" the interaction of all the perspectives. Ideas and insights emerge that were not available before the aggregation of knowledge. The emerged idea is a property of the whole complex issue. Each emergent insight provides a new way to probe and learn more about improving a complex issue.

Emergence is extremely valuable in organizations where knowledge is locked up in silos or departments when that knowledge is aggregated across all such barriers and the new insights suggest approaches to complex issues currently hidden. It takes careful, systemic design engaging the cultural principles to release emergence for like thought, it is subtle and is easily de-railed.

Protecting Synthesis

Systemic Practice creates a space/time where it is expected is that participants review and quietly reflect on the aggregated knowledge that has just come before them – providing a social form to support emergence and confidence in one's own independent judgment.

It is expected in this culture that everyone is asking, "So what does this tell us about ourselves? What do I understand now that I didn't see before? Why does this matter? What might this mean?" Then everyone has a chance to share with colleagues what "came to him or her." The organization has the benefit of learning more about itself and this is shortchanged if the time and space for Synthesis is not protected. The culture needs to recognize the value of this "down time."

If we don't set aside this quiet time for reflection in order to understand the "rich pictures" (data or words or stories or experiences) of the whole, we miss many of the richest emergent insights.



Rhythmic Iterations

Humans are subject to the rhythms of the universe, of the earth, and of life. This is a gesture that shapes the systemic approach. The power of rhythm acts as a strong social force, for deepening understanding. It is characteristic of Systemic Methods in organizational life. As typified by the iterations of 'sweeping-in' and 'making-sense' is systemic processes.

Ideas that emerge are implemented, and regularly reviewed so that they are not allowed to stand as "dead" ideas. Rather than having an "end of project" assessment, the group is routinely and rhythmically reviewing "the new now" with the expectation that things have changed and we may need to make mid-stream corrections. The expectation is that we need to enhance and deepen our ideas by revisiting them rhythmically, sharing new experiences and learning. These practices contextualize change and adaptation as the norm, whether or not we have "succeeded" according to our earlier projections.

Focusing on Relationships

In Systemic Practice, insights are available to us when we study complex issues while imaging them as a system, in particular we look for the characteristic of all systems that all the parts are related to each other in the complex issue.

As in the study of ecological systems, what we learn is not to focus on the "nodes" or parts, but to focus on the relationships among the parts. Everything is connected to everything, and this is true in complex issues as well.

It may seem very messy, however Systemic Practice is continually addressing relationships among aspects of the imagined system. Shifting points of view and recognition of the significance of the relationships among the elements is crucial.

This is the opposite of the reductionist approach, which focuses on one aspect of one element of the larger whole, and strives to understand, control, or improve it in isolation.

The Systemic Design of social interaction all ask and support participants to consider the relationships among facts, ideas, people, and organizations. This consideration is challenging, yet highly productive in deepening our understanding of complexity. The organizational capacity and self-knowledge about relationships between entities builds quickly with appropriate practice.

Relationships are dynamic and are best described with *verbs* (doing concepts) because the "nodes", where we use *nouns* (naming concepts) are constantly changing and therefore the relationships among the nodes has to continually adapt to sustain the system. Hence, within a Systemic Practice, emphasis is placed on 'verbs' rather than "nouns."

As an example, let's look at "asset" and "department." Both are nouns. Yet, what we're trying to understand is the relationship between the asset and the department when circumstances change. It is in this dynamic relationship that new possibilities often lie.

Supporting Holistic Imaginations

Some people want to work by laying one brick upon another, however, what is also



essential is someone providing the imagination and thinking of the whole project within its environment over time. This is the work we often expect of an *architect*, whose work is to put the land, people, needs, regulations, and resources together creatively. Systemic Practice is not about the bricks. In this example, it is about the evolving relationships among the land in its unique context, the people, the needs, the regulations and resources across a period of time.

Similarly, Holistic Imaginations are not the same as a “snap shot” of the big picture. That is a static framing of reality, and what we are striving to build is the group’s capacity to entertain a multiplicity of big pictures in conversation with each other. In the comparison and contrast of this diverse set of big pictures, we begin to see patterns that are not revealed in any one picture. That insight is part of the promise of Systemic Practice.

This Systemic Cultural Principle underpins the *Social Architecture* who is required as the organization strives to manage its complex issues. The Social Architect’s frame of reference advocates the value of the human capacity to “imagine various pictures of the whole.” This helps us identify boundaries and marginalized initiatives or people. I also supports us in building probes or pilot projects to test what we think we have come to understand about a complex issue.

Designing Time

In Systemic Practice, the fact that humans are evolving in their consciousness, with the influence of technology in recent years, is acknowledged; people are processing information increasingly quickly. Indeed, everyone has less and less patience with listening to “talking heads” without having opportunities to socially engage. People want to share thoughts as well as to listen. This is especially true of the younger generations in the workforce.

Thus, systemic methods are specifically designed to utilize time consciously to provide for people’s changing consciousness and habit life. Social engagement and social learning are at the heart of Systemic Practice.

Social time is most often used in active, task-oriented engagement. Regular changes in pace moves participants to consider new perspectives, thus diffusing unproductive sympathies, antipathies and boredom. Individual work, pairs working together, small groups and large group interactions are woven diversely to continue to shift the social landscape.

The new ideas of the group, and various subgroups, become the linking thread, rather than dogma or routine generalizations that are expected to be affirmed. Appreciation of the ideas and people is encouraged. Because the thinking is emerging from the group, and is not linked to individuals who “had that thought,” the blocking egotism and self-centeredness is minimized.

The presence of each of these systemic principles indicates the capacity of an organization’s culture to sustain effective engagement with complex issues.



Systemic Scoping Principles

As we learned in earlier explorations, managers do not need to use Systemic Practices when they are dealing with routine issues. However, being able to be on “active surveillance” for complex issues on the horizon is the manager’s job, and he/she can engage help from the team. The picture is of a team with their ‘eyes wide open’ to everything they are experiencing in their world.

Tapping the groups sensing of weak signals on the periphery can inform manager’s early awareness about possible complex issues on the horizon. Managers are not burdened by being along in this ongoing challenge: yet, in the busy day-to-day management of routine issues, part of the task is to keep aware of the following Scoping Principles.

These principles may seem to overlap, and in many circumstances there is some overlap. However, each has a specific focus to help managers to implement his/her oversight and implementation tasks in particular ways that promote the resilience of the organization.

Continually updating the corporate understanding of the ‘whole’

The utilization of sectional management, to promote efficiency across an enterprise, significantly reduces awareness of the whole enterprise in management processes and practices.

Although it is comforting to feel like “My shop is in order,” the systemic view is that the inter-dependencies in every organization need to be kept “top of mind” at all times. This reduction of awareness exponentially lowers resilience thresholds. Failure to rhythmically monitor these relationships drives us toward unexpected crises that could have been anticipated and at least mitigated by an early alert.

This function can only be established and sustained in a team by insightful managers who are able to “admit” that they don’t know everything and they can’t predict the future.

Identifying emergent patterns among internal and external variables that often reveal new internal dynamics of risk and opportunity

An enterprise and its environment are dynamically influencing each other. External markets, financial trends, competition, global political changes, etc. influence the organization. New patterns between these phenomena (outside the control of the enterprise) that shape this influence are continually emerging.

For example, the devaluation of the currency of a country that imports significant product from us can create opportunities to enhance or retrench our marketing efforts in that country. New alliances might be suggested to levelize our risk or step in where there is a new need for our products. Unless we have the expectation and awareness of the emergent phenomena and their relationships to all aspects of our operations, we sub-optimize resilience and innovative initiatives.

Another example is when our clients in a social service organization become suddenly eligible for benefits from other sources, benefits that we have historically provided. This



might come from a “competitor” or from a regulatory change, or from an unexpected new funding source. Managing the transition, adapting our talent into appropriate new work, and perhaps even changing our marketing image or funding appeal literature - all of these or some of these may show us risks and opportunities. By inviting our team members to share what “they are hearing” from all of their non-work-related networks as well as what they learn from colleagues, effective managers are bringing in the help they need to identify emergent patterns and be early adopters of change.

Knowing the boundaries of control and status of ‘marginalized’ issues

As enterprises develop and change, their boundaries also change. New and old entities are made marginal and form new relationships with the enterprise’s core. New activities are taken up and some activities are terminated or modified. Reviewing (viewing again for boundary changes and marginalization) these entities and their relationships builds coherence and demonstrates an anticipatory approach to resilience.

Changes are coming every day, and this means reviewing the “So what?” question once decisions are made to make changes. Unknown and unintended consequences often come back to hurt us if we aren’t looking at our system boundaries.

As an example, if a product line is terminated, are finance, facilities, and HR reviewing the relationships with the marketing and distribution group that led the change?

Unexplored relationships between core and marginal entities increase the risk of blind spots. Resilient organizations are those where we see the most ongoing coherence among the various entities and functions, and the consequent implications of seemingly simple decisions.

Knowing and monitoring the interdependent relationships between all elements

An enterprise needs a high degree of effective coherence at all levels of its operations. The majority of resilience failures occur because of the breakdown of unmanaged relationships between internal enterprise elements.

These “elements” may be functional groups, policy-making groups, communication services, key individuals in high positions or team leaders with strong networks, etc.

Continually assess the diverse experiential knowledge embedded in the enterprise and its value network

Those who know most about an enterprise’s performance and challenges are those active within the enterprise. Every day, every person engaged and affected gains knowledge through experiential learning. This learning, and what individuals make of it, is shaped by their unique background and experiences within the organization. Our personnel are the ultimate ‘wiki’ for our enterprises, yet rarely is that “knowledge capital” effectively leveraged against the challenges of the enterprise. The organization pays people to carry its work forward, yet only taps a small fraction of the relevant knowledge and experience that they develop daily. Another significant consequence of failing to tap the relevant information that people have is that they feel ignored and left out. How often we hear, “We knew from where we sat that it could never work because of! It could have worked if they only.....”

This untapped reservoir of relevant knowledge and experience also lives within our “value network.” People who work with us but are not internal to the organization often



have crucial perspectives that both open helpful doors and also help us avoid pitfalls. We rarely have established rhythmic ways to invite their perspectives to help us see patterns that are there, but are only revealed by diverse people sharing their unique points of view with each other. The organization is the beneficiary of these kinds of Systemic engagements.

Explore the enterprise environment with members' collective wisdom

Every person who works for our organization also has an “outside life.” They have friends, networks, service clubs and families. All of these people also have networks and amongst all of these people have possible insights to share.

As an example, at a local school event, Suzanne met a friend of a friend, and when they got to talking, she learned that this new connection had heard about a policy that had been reviewed by a local agency, and that this policy could jump-start a project that had been dormant in their organization. If Suzanne is not invited to share, that crucial information is likely to be withheld, or simply passed by.

It is often in our “non-work life” that we have the most diverse contacts and social opportunities. How these serve the organization, or don't, depends on how the managers set up expectations and opportunities for their staff to bring possibly relevant information into the group to be considered, and even validated and developed.

The diversity, focus and immediacy of an organization's collective wisdom also enables it to explore and make sense of risks to its resilience and plot securer performance pathways.

Responding to the insights identified from applying these 'Scoping Principles' requires the enterprise to have generated an internal culture, which is characterized by the systemic principles, to support managers forge appropriate systemic interventions. The criteria for designing these interventions are discussed in the next section.

Systemic Design Principles – Crafting Interventions

Sweeping in: Tools used to initiate a systemic intervention must enable knowledge from multiple diverse perspectives to be brought together in an aggregated manner, in which each contribution has an equal weighting.

Making sense: The presentation of aggregated, swept-in knowledge requires tools that enable the embedded emergent patterns among variables. Previously hidden characteristics possessed by the whole issue or organization can then be identified and described.

Iterative Cycles of Sweeping-in and Making-sense: The techniques used in iterative cycles will enable a continual deepening of the understanding of the complex issue in focus. The tools will enable the cycles to move from experiential knowledge to imagining transformational activities.

Focus: The tools used will be appropriate for the level of 'system abstraction' to ensure that the selected perspectives of the whole optimizes the knowledge about the many variables affecting the behavior of the complex situation.



Backcast: The tool embodies the process of starting with a desired outcome and moving back in time and activity to find what needs to be implemented at successive stages to guide the movement from the current state to the desired state.

Communicate: The presentational form of outcomes of all tools communicates the counter-intuitive nature of these outcomes in pictorial, and graphical modes as well as written form. This ensures that participants have the opportunity to engage all their senses in the processes of making sense of aggregated collective knowledge.

*The tools designed using these **Systemic Design Principles** will be most effective when operating in an organization shaped by **Systemic Cultural Principles** and associated with complex issues identified through **Systemic Scoping Principles**.*