

BOOK REVIEW

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SYSTEMS THINKING FOR EFFECTIVE MANAGERS: THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Systems thinking for effective managers: The road less travelled, by Prashun Dutta, and published through Sage Publications Inc., provides the reader with an in-depth understanding of how systems thinking may be applied to help alleviate the many and growing challenges that plague the business world today. It demonstrates how traditional approaches to problem solving are inadequate for today's glocalisation, where digital communication technologies, including social media and multimodal texts, and their mobility, have been revolutionising communicative and collaborative interactive practices in both real time and asynchronously for around three decades. Moreover, the uptake of such technologies for work and education is well recognized as enabling developing countries to increase their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Lubis, Karim, Tha, & Rambeli, 2017). Yet despite access to the Internet being available to most of the world and having been vital to responding to and managing the current pandemic, a 'digital divide' exists for those without connectivity, which is now seen as potentially "the new face of inequality" (Mohammad, 2021). This is combined with an access to knowledge and extensive resources as never before, with the additional opportunities for immediate languages translations at the tap of a key (O'Neill, 2021). Moreover, as Pink (2006) raised the vital need for right brain thinking, in arguing for the importance of the following soft skills for the 21st Century; design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning, this is in keeping with Dutta's thesis on systems thinking as a much needed innovative, but practical stimulus, that is supportive of positive organizational cultural change.

It is within this context that Dutta's work is significant as it illuminates the need for a paradigm shift away from thinking about problem-solving in a scientific way to the adoption of his model of systems thinking. The book is therefore not only applicable to an individual's personal reading but is adaptable to use as a resource to guide and design staff's professional development with a view to changing business practices and in turn ultimate performance. In defining and demonstrating systems thinking in relation to current times, the work is highly relevant to the international audiences seeking to lead their organisation to increased business outcomes and learning capacity in order to succeed in changing times.

The eleven chapters capture the reader's attention in their presentation style. Complete with a range of illustrative figures, the author logically moves from his personal 'tryst with systems' to explaining the influence of science as the 'prima donna' of society's problem-solving approach or maintenance of the status quo, and then outlining his 'leap into the unknown'. This no doubt resonates with the reader's experience and engaging flow of the story. Then he engages the reader with essential key explanations before addressing the place of self-organization, dealing with complexity, management styles and the importance of leadership. These later chapters acknowledge the many challenges, including engaging and involving people, managing ongoing change, thinking in wholes, sustainability, the importance of identifying multiple perspectives and identification and discernment of patterns and much more.

As the reader is carefully introduced to the cognitive shift underpinning Dutta's stance, the concept of the 'big picture' is presented as core to comprehending the contrast between his

theory and traditional practice. This is highly effective in illuminating how systems thinking operates and why it can be a vital tool to address the notoriously difficult challenges that conventional solutions are often not positioned to ameliorate. Dutta has articulated his advice in clear and concise language supported by exemplars to assist the readers' understanding. He demonstrates how conventional thinking and the application of conventional solutions to many challenges has emanated from the fact that "traditional education has been extremely biased towards science". He argues, as a result of this bias, the taking of a scientific approach is accepted as the norm, such that systems challenges are typically addressed through a focus on the parts, and not the whole, thus encouraging reductionism. It is important at this point to appreciate that Dutta's understanding of the business organization is taken as a societal system involving people as opposed to a machine-like entity with mechanical parts. He explains that an approach that addresses societal systems via their parts, presents challenges for managers and leaders to use because:

. . . while the methods of science are greatly, if not fully, responsible for its success, these are grossly inadequate in the context of societal systems and the complexities that managers and leaders deal with.

Thus, the goal of the book, from start to finish, is to drive home the need for a systems approach and systems thinking, in contrast to the challenge of applying traditional scientific method that typically emphasises the solving of a problem by breaking it down into parts. In critiquing the scientific approach, he successfully achieves his goal of challenging it through his consideration of the merits of societal systems and systems thinking. He presents a very detailed account of the application of systems thinking through very cleverly revealing his own learning journey, which is highly appealing to the reader.

Through the unpacking of this journey, Dutta is able to relate theory to practice, and vice versa, through the use of story - illustrative anecdotes, that are drawn from his vast experiences as a consultant in systems thinking. In addition, highly pertinent references are woven into the work to incorporate supporting literature, which helps to further explain and substantiate the thesis for the reader.

In highlighting the need to focus on the 'big picture' in his approach to systems thinking, and arguing its centrality to the reconceptualization of practice and innovation, he specifies, ". . . wholeness is a crucial aspect and resembles what we encounter in our experience . . ." He likens the concept of a system to a unified living entity such that the various parts work together in an integrated way, thus contributing to a sense of 'wholeness and completeness'. Thus, the big picture is not to be taken literally with regards to mere size but rather understanding the context and the complex changing relationships between the 'things' within. To help reinforce the influences of these interrelationships Dutta presents many scenarios noting that:

To understand any one element, therefore, we need to first understand its containing system and the role it is meant to play therein. It is only in that context that the specific role of the particular element has to be understood.

As the book takes the reader on a learning journey parallel with Dutta's narration of his personal learning experiences, as a skilled raconteur, the nature of the shift in thinking that readers need to make to become "systems' thinkers" is gradually revealed. Key concepts are carefully unpacked through persuasive discussion supported by exemplars within each carefully throughout chapter.

In conclusion, Dutta has highlighted a way forward in relation to how business practices can be changed to ensure greater success in dealing with the increasing complexity

of the challenges of 21st Century times in a now globalised world. His stance is persuasively justified and is well supported with very detailed explanations of the why and how of embracing systems thinking. The book is more than a 'good read'! It offers the reader an opportunity to come to grips with the need for change and how it might be fostered in organisations where people and culture matter and are seen as critical to success; where multiple perspectives are recognized and welcomed as strategic data. In challenging the science bias, its uptake of systems thinking is in keeping with modern approaches to how business/organisations can be reinvented from within their 'societal entity', thus it will not be surprising to see its popularity as an important catalyst for change.

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