

TEACHING THE PRACTICE OF SYSTEMS THINKING

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ABSTRACT

For over 400 years, the analytical process has been the dominant paradigm for furthering our understanding in many fields of study. Evidence of the dominance of this approach in business education can be readily observed by looking at the names of the departments and majors within most colleges of business. Functional specialization is still the primary focus. Furthermore, within each area of concentration, the vast majority of tools and techniques covered in the classes focus on how to analyze a situation. While the ability to break a complex situation down into easily understandable components is still an essential skill, it is no longer sufficient. For several decades many experts have pointed out that managers need to recognize that their organizations are complex social systems and must be managed accordingly. One requirement for successfully managing a complex social system is the ability to think systemically. Unfortunately, several studies have shown that systemic thinking is not an innate skill for most people. Consequently, people must learn what systemic thinking is and how to apply it.

To ascertain how well business colleges are addressing this requirement, a survey of faculty at the top business schools in the U.S. was conducted. The results of the survey were disappointing. A very small percentage of the faculty surveyed indicated that they covered systemic thinking and required it in their classes. There are two primary hypotheses for this finding. First, the survey indicates that most of the faculty had a very limited understanding of the concept themselves. Consequently, their narrow perspective on the topic may have led some to feel that it was not important, should be covered in other classes, or can't really be taught at all. A second possible explanation for the low coverage of this concept could be that faculty feel that there is not enough time to cover existing course concepts PLUS systemic thinking.

In this workshop we will address the following issues:

- Provide a detailed definition of systemic thinking and tie its importance to the different fields of business.
- Present, in more detail, the results of the survey referred to above.
- Explore other possible explanations for the low coverage of the topic in business curriculum.
- Discuss and demonstrate tools and techniques that can be used to help students think systemically.
- Offer suggestions on how the topic can be integrated into classes to enhance understanding of the course concepts rather than supplant course material.