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## Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results

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*Hispanics in Philanthropy*

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# **Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results**

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Editor's Note: This article, first published in print and online in 2015, has been republished by The Foundation Review with minor updates.

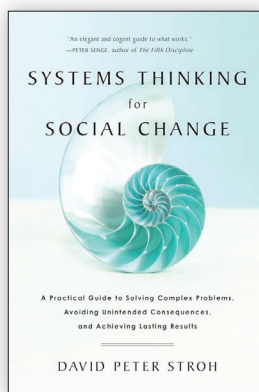
# Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results

Book Review by Hilda Vega, M.A., Hispanics in Philanthropy

When I began working in the field of philanthropy, I joined a foundation where the general philosophy was, “We are here to work ourselves out of a job.” By and large, we wanted to change conditions so that we, as grantmakers, would no longer be necessary. We accepted that we were just one of the conduits in a larger process of social change. As in any organization, though, our actions were not always a direct reflection of our goals or beliefs, but rather in reaction to demands by leadership, changes in the economic and political context, or even our own biases about the role of philanthropy.

One of the most important messages in David Peter Stroh’s *Systems Thinking for Social Change* is that in our efforts to do good, we often get so caught up in the immediacy of finding a solution that we misunderstand or put off the need for long-lasting systemic and structural change. At times, Stroh rightly points out, our short-term choices can actually undermine our goals.

*Systems Thinking for Social Change: A Practical Guide to Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, and Achieving Lasting Results* is another contribution to the literature that seeks to move the social sector into a more efficient and productive stage (e.g., Pallotta, 2012; La Piana, 2008; Crutchfield & Grant, 2012).



*Systems Thinking for Social Change*  
by David Peter Stroh  
Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015

Stroh begins by explaining the framework of systems thinking, which he defines as “the ability to understand ... interconnections in such a way as to achieve a desired purpose” (p. 16). Systems thinking as an approach to problem solving is not new; the concept was developed by former MIT professor Jay W. Forrester, as part of his research into system dynamics as

a way to address problems stemming from social rather than physical systems in corporate management. In the past decade or so, systems thinking has increasingly made inroads into the

nonprofit sector as a more holistic approach to complex social challenges.

There is no doubt that those of us in the field of social change feel as though we continue to talk about the same problems with little sense of significant progress. I admit, I had that feeling when I began to read this book: How is it possible that we are still talking about ways to solve challenges we have been working on for so long? What’s really holding us back?

Stroh sets the stage for understanding some of the issues that hold us back by looking at some organizations that are trying to improve their impact. Stroh returns to these examples throughout the book so that we can see this evolution and feel a connection to these efforts.

*Stroh details the structure of systems thinking and how the set of tools offered by causal loop diagrams can be useful in understanding systems. For Stroh, this approach helps stakeholders see the big picture — the one we often forget to look for — and our role in it. Systems thinking also offers a more thoughtful approach to pointing out barriers to problem solving and how to overcome them.*

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Wisely, he also chooses some unconventional topics, like criminal justice, to move beyond the more traditional examples of troubled school systems or food pantries. Using these examples, Stroh details the structure of systems thinking and how the set of tools offered by causal loop diagrams can be useful in understanding systems. For Stroh, this approach helps stakeholders see the big picture — the one we often forget to look for — and our role in it. Systems thinking also offers a more thoughtful approach to pointing out barriers to problem solving and how to overcome them. The context of systems thinking is rounded out by a discussion of how to use stories and storytelling to shape and share systems narratives for stakeholders.

In this initial section, Stroh points out how systems thinking helps reinforce collective impact. He returns to collective impact and its connection to systems thinking several times; I found this distracting and a bit confusing. Systems thinking can surely be applied with or without the structure of collective impact, so the references seem to come out of nowhere. I

wondered if this was a subtle pitch for collective impact and its developers, or if there was more of a connection that was never fully explained.

The second section more explicitly maps the process of implementing systems thinking, with chapters on the four implementation stages: building a foundation for change, seeing current reality more clearly, making an explicit choice about what is important, and bridging the gap between aspirations and the current state. Critical to these stages are the development of relationships with stakeholders, the ability to walk them through a process in which they see themselves and others as a factor throughout an entire endeavor, and making a deliberate decision to commit to long-term and meaningful change — thus overcoming the temptation to find a quick fix. This section continues to draw on the book's earlier examples, which at times becomes a bit repetitive.

The final chapter in this section addresses leverage points for ongoing learning and describes ways to expand the process using learning and scale-up strategies. These final lessons are touched upon only briefly, however, and it would have been useful for readers — presumably professionals with more advanced experience in nonprofit management — if Stroh had expanded on ideas such as learning from experience, expanding the resource pool, and scaling what works to more thoroughly illustrate how to connect such efforts with his earlier concepts. Such an approach could also have served to segue into the final section, which covers broader applications of the systems-thinking approach.

Stroh then moves to a short set of chapters on application in the context of planning and evaluation. This use of systems thinking shifts the framework from addressing a specific problem that is impeding progress in a system to using systems thinking as a mechanism for improving work over time. Here, he provides a series of examples and graphics to illustrate how stakeholders can build their understanding of a situation and map out how it should evolve in order to identify opportunities and challenges. While some of the graphics become a bit

overwhelming as the examples become more complex, they do show that comprehensive organizational planning is neither simple nor linear, especially if it reflects the reality of everyone involved. The chapter on systems thinking in evaluation helps to highlight the role of formal evaluation, but it is very short and skims over potentially useful tips on creating an evaluation framework that loops into the systems-thinking process from beginning to end. Given the challenge evaluation poses for so many organizations, additional guidance on making the connection between evaluation and systems thinking could prove useful to practitioners.

In the final chapter, on becoming a systems thinker, Stroh reasserts the moral imperative of the use of systems thinking. His overview of the very personal nature of our intentions to create change is, with the opening of the book, one of the more powerful aspects of the narrative. Yes, we need strategies and frameworks to help organize and guide our thinking. But Stroh's key assertion is that systems thinking helps change agents avoid some of the pitfalls that have been holding back progress, including how we frame our intentions, how we contribute to unintended consequences, how we can shift our thinking to look at long-term and lasting solutions, and how we can maximize the use of our limited resources.

At some points, Stroh verges on undermining this important message with a few references to the importance of measuring outcomes in terms of efficiency and effectiveness metrics. I wish, as well, that he paid more attention to the role funders play in creating systems — sometimes directly — and influencing the intentions and choices of front-line actors. A deeper consideration of these issues would have led to a more complete discussion of the context in which all of us in the social sector operate. Still, *Systems Thinking for Social Change* offers a strong argument for exploring how we all, as individual actors, can influence outcomes in unexpected ways. It provides tools and tips for using systems thinking in a variety of situations and engages readers with clear examples. And it reminds us that we need to see beyond the day-to-day, and

make hard choices, in order to create genuinely better conditions for those we seek to help and empower.

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