



DREAM OF A SYSTEMS-CENTERED FUTURE

BY DAVID W. PACKER

I dream of a future where systemic thinking plays a central role. In my dream, here is what it will be like looking back from 50-some years hence.

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By 2050, people around the world broadly understand the necessity to take on issues systemically. They routinely talk of dynamic behavior over time as essential to seeing the challenges, of feedback processes that are key elements in creating the behaviors they experience, of time delays, and of unintended consequences. The media frequently uses the language that we have long termed “system principles,” and the general public increasingly comprehends this terminology. Major issues are charted and explained with various diagrams, and people engage in active dialogue about when models and simulation are vital to choosing the course ahead.

This broad sense of systemic understanding has stemmed from the bitter lessons of the early decades of the century, when the world was severely threatened by huge global issues that were long term in nature; when quick fixes not only often failed but visibly increased the threat; and when an expanding fraction of the populace recognized that deep, holistic comprehension was required for survival. These issues included, among others, resource

depletion, climate change, widespread famine, a string of disastrous speculative bubbles, and collapses of businesses, markets, and economies. As a result, billions suffered the consequences.

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Because of these challenges, interest began to build from the ground up for real, fundamental solutions. Rather small fields like systems thinking and system dynamics began to be rediscovered, and their earlier accomplishments became highly appreciated by an expanding network of practitioners that sensed their potential. Linkages to related fields were energized and fostered. The results spurred programs that incorporated the systems view from early education to graduate-level study.

Midway through the twenty-first century, those interested have easy access to numerous sources spanning the range from novice to expert. Many voters look for systemic approaches in their decisions to support political candidates. Numerous pathways for individuals and organizations to increase their competencies exist.

In brief, over the course of time, interest and activity have increased exponentially, reflecting both a base of broad grassroots awareness and top-down research and development. Systemic application is now recognized as a principal contributor to successful solu-

tions of many complex issues and is expected to continue at the core of future approaches to increasingly complex challenges. This progression has led to codification of the field of “System Studies,” which now appears in academic programs at major universities and at dedicated institutes throughout the world.

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Such a future is possible. Getting there, however, requires first believing in the possibility, then acting with courage. Achieving this goal will require focusing on the whole spectrum, from deep research to broad accessibility. We need to work collaboratively across this spectrum (which now contains approaches we call system dynamics, soft systems, systems thinking, organizational learning, and the like). We need more seminal publications like *Industrial Dynamics*, *Limits to Growth*, and *The Fifth Discipline* that capture attention and excite whole new constituencies.

Finally, we need to view all of these elements as components of a system that we nurture to expand reach and quality. We must work together on this system to achieve the dream of a world that routinely brings systems principles to bear on our most important human issues and is a far better place for doing so. ■

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TEAM TIP

By articulating a desired future state in relation to the actual current state, as Dave Packer does in this article, a group, organization, or even a country creates what Robert Fritz calls “structural tension.” Seek to resolve this tension and advance toward the goal by creating a robust action plan.

YOUR THOUGHTS

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