



CALMNESS: WHAT A SYSTEMS VIEW CAN BRING

BY DAVID W. PACKER

As I view the social landscape, charged with political maneuvering and economic trauma, I feel a certain calmness that comes through long association with the field of systems and with personally taking a systems view. It is not only a sense of calmness, but also optimism that movement in a favorable direction is possible, even probable, and that disaster is not the inevitable outcome of our current situation.

My reaction is like riding a roller coaster after already having done so for the first time, when terror builds as the car falls. With each subsequent ride, confidence in surviving the freefall emerges, along with the knowledge that there is a system at play (the design of the track and cars), and that the experience will even, amazingly, end up being really fun.

To better comprehend this sense of perspective, let's look at some of the characteristics in which systems thinkers are grounded and that help us understand and interpret what is going on, remain calm in the face of the storm, and adopt effective strategies for change.

Time delays are critical features of every social system. When, for example, will the economic stimulus have impact? When should we give up and change actions? Many of us, anxious for instant gratification, underestimate the time required for change to work through very complex systems by a factor of five to ten (according to Jay Forrester's assessment). We inevitably pull the plug and change course again and again, thus sacrificing the favorable results that the abandoned programs could have provided. I focused on this unfortunate tendency in two of my previous blogs ("Dangerous Times" and "Dealing with Delays in Momentous Times: a Call to Leaders"), simply

because I think it's important for us to understand and avoid falling prey to it right now. Knowledge of time delays gives us the patience to wait for changes to have their desired impact.

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Feedback is a fundamental element of system structure and a determinant of behaviors. In times of stress, new reinforcing loops show up in surprising ways. For example, as the economy deteriorates, people save more and spend less, causing the economy to deteriorate even further. Having the "antennae" to spot these loops deepens our understanding of why things are happening the way they are. Over time, systems thinkers develop this kind of antennae, enabling them not only to see but then to act on leverage points for fundamental change.

Stocks (or "bathtubs") are the things that accumulate in any system. The ability to see the important stocks in our social and economic systems in itself provides valuable understanding. For example, when we visualize the stock of unemployed workers (for more details, see "Taking Stock of Unemployment") and realize that it can only be changed by changing its inflows (such as the flow of those newly laid off or those entering the job market for the first time) and its outflows (such as the flow of people getting jobs or those giving up searching), we gain insight into the system.

This insight changes our view of how long change might take and so provides a factual base for assessing political claims as to how the current state was created or how long it will take to change. Understanding that important stocks are usually large relative to the associated flows can allay unnecessary frustration at the slowness of change.

Non-Linearities are simply relationships that are not always proportional. They are the "tipping points" and the "straws that break the camels back" as variables change. One thing influences another only slightly until a point is reached where the degree of impact shifts dramatically. It seems to me that strong non-linearities tend to be more prevalent in soft variables such as "morale" and "confidence" than in hard variables such as "inventory" and "cash." For example, morale can remain stable under many conditions, until a changing variable causes it to suddenly plummet or rise precipitously.

So these are some of the calming influences available to those who have developed a true systems view. There are others as well, summed up by pithy phrases such as "worse before better," seeing the "whole elephant," "unanticipated consequences," and "fixes that fail."

This all sounds playful, but in fact is deadly serious and very, very useful in steering a course through the charged economic, social, and political times in which it is our privilege to participate. ■

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