



## SYSTEMS THINKING IS LEADERSHIP

BY DAVID DIBBLE



For leaders in a fast-paced manufacturing environment, life can be hectic—even an on-again, off-again firefight. I know, having been in the business for 20 years before jumping out the window to save myself from the flames. I also know that much has changed in the business in the two decades since my leap from printed circuit board (PCB) shop owner into leadership and systems improvement consulting. Strange as it may sound, I found showing leaders how to improve their systems and businesses was almost as stressful as being responsible for 250 employees and always unreasonable and demanding customers. I found that you leaders are a hard-nosed bunch, often quite set in your ways. Imagine that.

Probably the most challenging shift for business leaders that I've seen over and over again is the buy-in to the fact that great leadership is, in my humble opinion, always circumscribed by good systems and growing, happy employees. The data strongly supports that great businesses always seem to have these two critical components. We can even make the case that the difference between good or mediocre companies and great companies is that one or both of these components is missing in the not-so-great companies.

Why, with all of the data to support the need for robust systems and employees who love their work, are there so few great companies? The answer, of

course, is that there are so few leaders who embrace the need to be systems thinkers or see their real job as constantly growing their people. A company is merely a reflection of the thinking and beliefs of top management.

If top management doesn't think in terms of systems and systems improvement, the com-

pany will have systems that are prone to creating mistakes, inefficiency, and drama. If top management doesn't care about the people, the people will care little about the company, the customer, and even each other. Soft costs usually go to the moon for a company when people dislike their jobs, management, or each other. Negative energy is just that—negative—for anyone associated with the company. Fear may work for a while to motivate

people, but it soon loses steam, leaving the company worse off than before.

Often, when confronted with the concept of systems thinking, I have seen leaders actually tilt their heads trying to make sense of it. This is because systems thinking is well understood by only the rarest of leaders. You see, systems thinking is not

something you do. It's not process improvement or Six Sigma or data collection. Systems thinking is something you *become*. A systems thinker sees the world in a more realistic, connected way than a non-systems thinker. It's a little like learning a foreign language. First one translates the foreign language back into native language to make sense of it. After expanding one's ability to make more and more translations, one day the speaker simply thinks in the foreign language and is then fluent.

Leaders today need to become fluent in systems thinking because, in many ways, systems thinking IS leadership. ■

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### TEAM TIP

To begin to see systems in your organization, look for the "hidden connections" behind one of your products or processes. For example, here at *The Systems Thinker*, we might look at the connections involved in creating and distributing an issue.

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