



The Think Sheet

A Monthly Flyer with Ideas and Information about Using Systems Thinking
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When something goes wrong, the first question that we often ask is, "Whose fault is it?" Blaming seems to be a natural reflex in many organizations... There's a problem with this, however: Where there is blame; open minds close, inquiry tends to cease, and the desire to understand the whole system diminishes.

Marilyn Paul
"Moving from Blame to Accountability"
The Systems Thinker
Volume 1, Number 1

Systems thinkers consider how a system is structured. They understand that the structure of the system determines how it will behave. For this reason, it's pointless to find fault with individuals because that strategy does nothing to move you towards a solution.
Develop the habit of focusing on structure not on blame.



A Quick Tip: Don't play the blame game!

There is a rule of thumb associated with systems that has a profound impact on how you approach improvements. It's the 85/15 Rule:

- 85% of the problems in a system are due to inherent problems with that system. They can be changed only through the intervention of the people who shape the system...
- Only 15% of the problems are under control of the individuals working with the system.

The 85/15 Rule teaches us that fundamental, systemic improvement requires action not only from the individuals closest to the issues, but support and involvement from the decision makers who designed the system in the first place. A systems thinker understands the futility and danger of blaming individuals for problems when most of the variation in performance is due to how the systems are designed.

The Handbook for SMART School Teams By Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill

Habits of a Systems Thinker

A Systems Thinker...

- Seeks to understand the "big picture"
- Changes perspectives to increase understanding
- Looks for patterns, trends and interdependencies
- Identifies complex cause and effect relationships
- Understands and considers how mental models affect current reality and the future
- Surfaces and tests assumptions
- Considers both short and long term consequences of actions
- Finds where unintended consequences emerge
- Focuses on structure, not on blame**
- Holds the tension of paradox and controversy without trying to resolve it quickly
- Uses understanding of system structures to assist in the identification of leverage action
- Monitors the results and consistently re-aligns actions as needed. "Successive Approximation"

What are Systemic Structures?

Structures include, among other things, how people work together, policies and procedures, school calendars and schedules, contracts, job descriptions, and how decisions get made. *The Handbook for SMART School Teams* By Conzemius and O'Neill



What Teams Can Do

When people work in an atmosphere of blame, they naturally cover up their errors and hide their real concerns--often to the detriment of the organization as a whole. Here are some tips for what teams can do to move from blame to accountability:

Step 1. Analyze the problem from a systems perspective and identify new ways to address the problem.

Step 2. Define the nature and scope of the work to be done and discuss what to do in the event of a misunderstanding or a failure to keep an agreement.

Step 3. Agree that, on this project, problems will be seen as learning opportunities.

- Allow time to address the issues.
- Reaffirm that the goal is to learn.
- Establish confidentiality.
- Be truly open-minded.
- Listen hard to other perspectives.

Step 4. Have a conversation in which you:

- Identify the data and assumptions from which you have drawn.
- Identify the pressures each of you is experiencing in the situation.
- Identify any stated or unstated expectations and reestablish shared agreements.

Adapted from the article, "Moving from Blame to Accountability" by Marilyn Paul