Foundations of Critical and Systemic Thinking

Final Paper

Critical and Systemic Thinking Within Organizations

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<u>What is "systems thinking?"</u>

To effectively explain what systems thinking is, the concept of what a system is must be defined. "A system is a set of things – people, cells, molecules, or whatever – interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time" (Meadows, 2008, p. 2). The components of a system function interdependently to achieve the goals and objectives for which a system is designed. Additionally, systems – regardless of their respective designated function and operational goals and objectives, exist within the context of other systems. Systems impact systems. Ultimately, systems develop *identities* that are unique and specific to their operation, goals, and objectives. It is understanding that unique *identity* and its impact on system productivity and overall success and, its relationship with other systems that involves the process of systems thinking.

Throughout history man's ingenuity has consistently invented systems to replace systems however, the function or activity for which the system operates stays the same. Cars replaced horses and buggies as a primary system for transportation but the activity – transportation, remains the activity that moves people form one destination to another. Land line telephones replaced the telegraph as a primary system for communication and cell phones and computers have replaced land line telephones however, communication remains the activity through which people and businesses interact.

Systems evolve to provide more efficient, more effective, and more multi-dimension platforms to work, live, and play.

As a system develops and grows it can evolve into something that far exceeds the purpose and goals for which it was originally designed. The Internet is one such system. Computer networking was devised in the 1960s by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) to improve communication between academic and military researchers. The networking model continued exponential development, especially as semiconductors became more powerful and accessible, ultimately leading to the development and unlimited expansion of the Internet (Leiner, 2009). Today, the Internet is a system of networks that can connect electronic devices throughout the world in second's time. Access to the Internet impacts every facet and endeavor of life engaging every category of person or group. Consistent with a system's capability to evolve and grow because of its own activity; the Internet has become a primary system for communication, education, entertainment, retail, healthcare, security (and others) within the operations of those systems – literally a system within a system.

Systems thinking involves a process in which the components of critical thinking are applied. The goal of systems thinking is to apply the critical thinking process to assess and analyze a system's overall operation including its processes, goals, objectives, internal and external relationships, function, and purpose to determine if optimal results are being achieved. Systems thinking is about helping to maximize productivity however, without causing harm or detriment to other systems and the entities they affect.

The Value of Systems Thinking in Today's Organizations

The communication and technology revolution has enhanced the interaction and exchange of activity, information, culture, and knowledge across borders and within borders

more significantly than at any other time in history. The effort to regulate and manage this unprecedented global activity in a manner and process that is fair, equitable, and system sustainable has become increasingly complex and challenging. Systems thinking is a critical process in the management effort. A systems analyst will identify when a company uses too much common resource and disrupts marketplace equilibrium or, is functioning only to maintain the rules and processes that are designed to facilitate its operation. Because systems have the capacity for self-growth – expansion that develops as a result of their own process and function; systems thinking is necessary to recognize such growth and to develop strategies not necessarily to stop growth rather, to help make it fair.

Systems thinking will help organizations sustain productive performance outcomes, resist the internal noise and disruption of competing agendas, effectively navigate the common resource landscape, and ensure that systems operations are working towards organizational goals and objectives and not functioning to exclusively to maintain the operation. Systems thinking analyzes external forces or influences that may affect an organization understanding that derivatively all systems have a consequential impact on each other.

Over analysis however can focus too closely on an organization's system not recognizing the negative impact of external relationships and factors. Sometimes the solution to fix a failing organization is not within the system operational structure. The solution maybe ergonomic or the type of food being served at the company snack court both of which may be overlooked in an organizational systems analysis. It is important to step outside of the analytic process to gain perspective on the issues and problems.

<u>Systems and Critical Thinking for St. Paul Pentecostal Church</u>

As trite as it may sound the mission of the church is to save souls. Ostensibly saving souls is the goal for all churches or otherwise houses of worship or spiritual enlightenment. The mission is broad in scope and encompasses specific ancillary goals and objectives that support achieving the requisite soul saving goal which is to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Financial education and independence, education, freedom from substance abuse, social justice causes, health education, and familial and community umoja are some of the goals. The ancillary goals and objectives are preparatory however, complete mastery over their condition is not mandatory to be saved.

The church is in good standing. It has a building that is in good condition, steady loyal membership, and a leader who is respected and well suited to actualize all that is required to shepherd members on a path to achieve the mission.

The challenge that the Chief Executive Officer (the Pastor) and her staff (Deacons, Elders, Ministers) face is membership growth, especially in the male demographic. If the organizational mission is to save souls than the more souls there are to save the more the organization (church) is in line with trying to achieve its mission. There are myriad competing life circumstances whose genesis and perpetuation are antithetical to the themes inherent in soul saving. Those circumstances that manifest in incarceration, according to data from the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), significantly impact males more than women. Males represent 93.2 percent of total incarcerated population in comparison to 6.8 percent represented by women. This factor makes the Pastor's challenge more arduous when it comes to growth in male membership.

In addition to the membership concern, providing consistent, relevant sustenance to help encourage and support member's journey towards and preservation in the themes, values, conditions, and consciousness of being saved is an unremitting challenge and duty.

The leader of the church reflects its culture and essence. Members and visitors must be able to immediately know that the leader embodies and lives the values that represent the mission.

Membership behavior demonstrated in church is not necessarily consistent with behavior that is displayed outside of the church. It is important for the organization to embody proper behavior in all official and unofficial activities and communication. Positive organizational culture can have an assimilative affect on its members. Within the organizational system of the church, sub-systems exist as part of the overarching system. Choirs, boards, committees, and praise groups function as interdependent systems required to emulate behavior exemplified by the church. There should not be a discernable difference in organizational behavior, member behavior, and sub-system behavior.

BOT Graph and Causal Loop Diagram

The use of a BOT graph would be helpful in assessing membership growth patterns over time. The church was established on August 3, 1963, 57 years ago. It is logical to assume that there have been several iterations of membership growth and decline during that time. A systems and critical thinking analysis using a feedback loop would focus on similarities in growth and decline patterns commensurate with similarities in external variables to show potential causal factors for membership fluctuation. Quantitative data generated from a BOT graph or

loop diagram is critical because it discloses real patterns and variations relative to membership. The patterns and variations were influenced by variables consistent in systems with proportional operational function or those that had direct operational function with the church. It would be the job of a systems analyst or critical thinker to determine the provenance of the variables.

The mission of the church is not exclusively membership dependent. Saving souls is the mission of the church and that can be pursued via community outreach initiatives, various media platforms, and even the development of a school. In the short term a robust membership represents the most direct operational process to pursue the mission. I the long term, there are alternative processes that can be operationalized to pursue the mission of the church. Financial support that members offer is important for building maintenance and program support however, creative leadership can explore funding sources that are not exclusively membership dependent. Creating a business sponsored by the church could be an alternative funding source.

As outlined from a systems and critical thinking agenda, the problem for St. Paul Pentecostal Church is not existential in the long or short term. Increased membership will ostensibly help St. Paul pursue its mission using a more direct operational system. However, if membership is not increased or even decreases, there are options that can help sustain St. Paul's function as an organization and its mission to save souls.

The use of aggressive marketing tactics is not generally associated with wooing people to become members of a church or just come see what it has to offer. Thinking outside of the proverbial box however is what may be required to draw more people to come check out St. Paul.

A member invite challenge can help increase the number of church goers for St. Paul. Church leadership must convey the process and activity of this initiative with a level of passion and intensity that spurs serious commitment and intention. The solution is to get more members, the challenge is how.

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