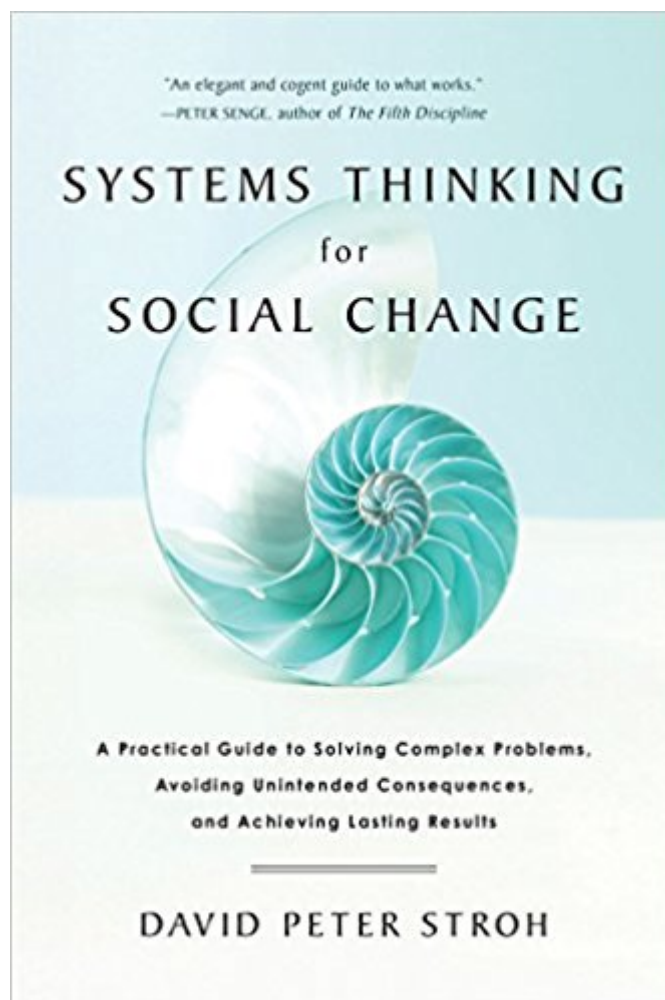


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# Systems Thinking For Social Change: A Practical Guide To Solving Complex Problems, Avoiding Unintended Consequences, And Achieving Lasting Results





## Synopsis

Donors, leaders of nonprofits, and public policy makers usually have the best of intentions to serve society and improve social conditions. But often their solutions fall far short of what they want to accomplish and what is truly needed. Moreover, the answers they propose and fund often produce the opposite of what they want over time. We end up with temporary shelters that increase homelessness, drug busts that increase drug-related crime, or food aid that increases starvation. How do these unintended consequences come about and how can we avoid them? By applying conventional thinking to complex social problems, we often perpetuate the very problems we try so hard to solve, but it is possible to think differently, and get different results. *Systems Thinking for Social Change* enables readers to contribute more effectively to society by helping them understand what systems thinking is and why it is so important in their work. It also gives concrete guidance on how to incorporate systems thinking in problem solving, decision making, and strategic planning without becoming a technical expert. Systems thinking leader David Stroh walks readers through techniques he has used to help people improve their efforts to end homelessness, improve public health, strengthen education, design a system for early childhood development, protect child welfare, develop rural economies, facilitate the reentry of formerly incarcerated people into society, resolve identity-based conflicts, and more. The result is a highly readable, effective guide to understanding systems and using that knowledge to get the results you want.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“I don’t know of another book in this field that presents the ideas of systems thinking in such a clear and practical way, with so many real-world examples.”--Janice Molloy, managing editor, *Reflections: The SoL NorthAmerica Journal on Knowledge, Learning, and Change* Publishers Weekly- "This dense volume will be of genuine use to many in the nonprofit world ... Stroh has a valuable insight to impart: Becoming a more effective systems thinker is not just an analytical task 'but also an emotional, physical, and ultimately spiritual one.' For those dedicated enough to stay with Stroh’s message, this book will be a useful beginning.”

“Stroh has offered an important gem in his new book, *Systems Thinking for Social Change*. Both illuminating and immediately useful, the book shares the key dynamics and success factors gleaned from his long career of working with organizations struggling with society’s most persistent issues. A must read for anyone whose aim is to make a difference on the ground.”--Kristina Wile, co-president, Leverage Networks, and managing partner, Systems Thinking Collaborative

“If there is only one book you read on systems thinking, it should be *Systems Thinking for Social Change*. If you’re new to systems thinking, I consider this a must read. If you’ve been involved in systems thinking for some time and want a renewed and extended perspective, I highly recommend it. Stroh’s new work covers all the relevant areas appropriate for a solid introduction to systems thinking, though it doesn’t stop there. It makes a serious contribution by detailing a number of real-world situations that have been investigated and improved using the approach presented in the book. And it does very well something that I’ve not seen done before: it not only shows how to map the current system, but also shows how to then create a revised map of how the system is intended to work in the future. This approach ends up identifying where measurements should be made on an ongoing basis to ascertain whether the system is undergoing the intended transformation.”--Gene Bellinger, director, Systems Thinking World, Inc.

“The philanthropic sector has shifted from a ‘charity’ mindset to a focus on changing systems to create sustainable change. *Systems Thinking for Social Change* offers practical tools for those serious about improving communities and organizations. It doesn’t minimize the complexity, but rather empowers social-change agents with tools to understand the complexity and identify the leverage points.”--Teresa Behrens, director, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning

“Over fifteen years ago, David Stroh was instrumental in introducing systems thinking to the peace-building field, using tools that have proven to be powerful for improving the effectiveness of our work. This book is a valuable resource for our field. It’s a must read for all practitioners who have been seeking practical and easy-to-understand guidance

on using systems thinking for conflict analysis and strategic planning for better impacts.

—Diana Chigas, professor of practice, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and co-director of collaborative learning, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects

“This is a must read for public leaders and citizens who are interested in the learning disciplines required for a sustainable, proactive approach to preserving our shared resources.

—Georgianna Bishop, president, The Public Sector Consortium

“For those who have worked for many years in the social-service sector, and who have grown cynical or disillusioned as to whether it is even possible to effect major social change, David Peter Stroh’s book, *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, is a must read. It is a clear, thoughtful, and practical guide for those desiring to create lasting social change. But reader beware! Systems thinking is more than a new way of thinking. As Stroh puts it, it is a new way of being. It requires the ability to look at things in a new way, to interact with others differently, to have a clear vision of where you want to go, a willingness to see things the way they are and, finally, the courage to take responsibility for why the system as is isn’t working. If you want to help create long-lasting, effective social change, if you want to say we’re doing it we’re actually making progress, then read this book.

—Anne Miskey, executive director, Funders Together to End Homelessness

“David Stroh, in his invaluable new book, shows that good intentions are not enough for those who aspire to make lasting progress on fundamental social issues and also how the language and tools of systems theory can provide a deeper understanding of the root causes and help identify the leverage points for productive and sustainable change.

—Russell Eisenstat, executive director, Center for Higher Ambition Leadership

“Societal problems are a swirl of causes, effects, interactions, and contributing relationships. Yet, too often, simplistic answers are applied by the well-intended that only touch on one strand of what is (in reality) a complex and interconnected web. Stroh’s work provides an actionable guide on how to model these relationships and more importantly how to have a meaningful and lasting impact on them.

—Jason E. Glass, superintendent and chief learner, Eagle County Schools

“With this book Stroh has produced an essential and long overdue guide to applied systems thinking. A few well-selected examples of initiatives that turned from ‘working’ to ‘transformative’ lay the foundation for how change makers can address chronic, complex social problems and deepen their impact. After helping the reader recognize what might be holding their interventions back, the book moves with ease into ways of finding leverage, the use of systems stories, and the power

of visioning. In Strohm's capable hands, systems thinking becomes a tool for defining personal or organizational priorities, for planning, and for evaluating success through measurable indicators. But the book is much more than a formidable toolbox from which to draw on a daily basis. It is, at its deeper level, a warm invitation to cultivate systems thinking as 'a way of being, not just doing' – so that on the way to long-lasting, desirable outcomes, change makers can become more and more the change they want to see."--Marta Ceroni, executive director, Donella Meadows Institute

"As philanthropic organizations increasingly seek to strengthen their impact, the perspectives, methods, and tools described in Strohm's book provide us with critical guidance for thinking and action to address complex social problems and for building all-in approaches to problem solving. Anyone in government, nonprofits, or philanthropy can benefit from this approach to solutions. And while it might take a lifetime to master the use of systems thinking for social change, reorienting how we think about problems in this way can immediately set us on a new path toward sustainability and greater likelihood of success."--Lexi Nolen, vice president, Episcopal Health Foundation

"It is not hard for people to appreciate that fragmented, piecemeal efforts to solve complex problems are ineffective. But having concrete approaches to an alternative is another matter. After almost four decades of applying practical systems-thinking tools in diverse settings, David Strohm has produced an elegant and cogent guide to what works. Research with early learners is showing that children are natural systems thinkers. This book will help to resuscitate these intuitive capabilities and strengthen them in the fire of facing our toughest problems."--Peter Senge, senior lecturer, MIT, and author of *The Fifth Discipline*

"Systems Thinking for Social Change" uses clear, down-to-earth language to explain and illustrate systems thinking, why it matters, and how it can lead to greater success in the social sector. The book is brief yet deep, big picture yet rigorously analytical. Strohm displays considerable narrative skill, especially when he shares numerous stories from his practice of applying various systems tools that led groups to new and startling conclusions. Reading this book will test the reader substantially, as the author invites us to a deeper level of introspection about our own role in systems failures of every kind – organizational and societal – and gently asks us to embrace a new way, not merely of thinking but of being in the world. A remarkable book."--David Nee, Growth Philanthropy Network; and former executive director, William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

"Drawing on a deep well of experience, Strohm masterfully weaves metaphor, story, and practical tools, modeling for us all effective systems thinking in action. Read it and get ready to take your game up a notch."--Linda Booth Sweeney, author of *Connected Wisdom*, and coauthor of

the *Systems Thinking Playbook*—“Systems thinking quickly gets very abstract and technical, often underplaying the social and storytelling dimensions. For a long time I’ve been looking for a more practical, readable, and engaging introductory book for my classes. Now, finally, here it is!”—Per Espen Stoknes, author, *What We Think About When We Try Not To Think About Global Warming*, and senior lecturer at BI Norwegian Business School—“David Peter Stroh has been a pioneer in the effort to bring principles of systems into the service of those striving for constructive social change. (I took a course from him over thirty years ago.) Many books tell you how to engage in systems thinking but not how to apply it. This is a very useful exception. Peter draws on many years of professional engagement with the important problems of our society. Of course reading his book won’t let you banish all those problems. But it will help you focus your effort where you can have the best impact, and it will show you how to enlist others in the effort.”—Dennis Meadows, coauthor, *Limits to Growth*, and former director, Institute for Policy and Social Science Research

David Peter Stroh is a founding partner of Bridgeway Partners ([www.bridgewaypartners.com](http://www.bridgewaypartners.com)) and a founding director of [www.appliedsystemsthinking.com](http://www.appliedsystemsthinking.com). He was also one of the founders of Innovation Associates, the consulting firm whose pioneering work in the area of organizational learning formed the basis for fellow cofounder Peter Senge’s management classic *The Fifth Discipline*. David is internationally recognized for his work in enabling people to apply systems thinking to achieve breakthroughs around chronic, complex problems and to develop strategies that improve system-wide performance over time.

David Peter Stroh’s brilliant new book, *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, could not appear at a more important time for those working collaboratively for racial equity and social and economic justice in coalitions and partnerships. From my perspective, as a nationally recognized consultant in community and systems change collaboration, David has provided much needed clarity about, and very understandable explanations of how to effectively apply, systems thinking in collaborative social change efforts. Even with the best intentions, necessary multi-collaboration can quickly become overly complicated and very difficult to focus on the most prudent and effective methods for mission and goal achievement. To a large degree, this is because many of those working in partnerships do not think systemically about the complex nature of problems needing attention. As David points out, systems change requires asking questions revealing both the

likelihood of achieving the intended consequences of collective actions while not being overwhelmed or diverted by consequence that were not intended. He explains why social change also requires systems thinking in order to design and implement the best mutually reinforcing and mutually accountable strategic actions that can bring effective demonstrations of problem solving to scale. Importantly, David grounds his approaches to systems thinking in the power inequities, institutional racism and other repressive manifestations of our existing political and cultural realities that must be transformed. David Peter Stroh also clearly stands in solidarity with all those engaging in Tikkun Olam, Hebrew for repairing the world, to bring forth a common good for all people worthy of our best hopes and dreams for a decent, caring and sustainable global community.

Systems Thinking for Social Change fills a critical gap for those of us working to make lasting change in messy, "wicked" problems. Stroh provides a deeply experience-based and theoretically well-grounded set of tools for revealing underlying patterns and key leverage points in seemingly unordered, complex situations. But Stroh goes beyond sharing learnable, powerful tools in an accessible way, to compassionately point out the change in world-view and ways of being needed to intervene competently in complicated, multi-stakeholder spaces. Learning to use systems thinking at the high level Stroh does takes time and practice; but his generous sharing of his experience and how to go about it makes it feel achievable for the rest of us. I'm grateful to have this thinking and resource available to me and the rest of our field.

“System Thinking for Social Change” is a semi-useful book. David Stroh applies system thinking paradigm on how to address pressing social issues. The book gives some concrete guidelines on how to unfold a complex solution to resolve social problems like mass incarceration, homelessness, and universal pre-school program. The narrative supposedly walks a reader through “systems thinking” framework. Yet, the author lacks strong writing skills, and he can’t keep a reader interested throughout the book. Stroh has a couple of useful examples, which kind of explore system thinking. At the same time, this exploration misses the essence of those projects. To make it perfect, he needs to give more instances with essential info. Diagrams (figures) are difficult to understand. He doesn’t reveal how to create it. He says that main stakeholders, sometimes given key variables, should build these cause and effect diagrams. That sounds as an effective technique in the brainstorming process. How to perfect those diagrams at the late stages? How will the validity of cause and effect diagrams be checked? What if a diagram is biased? The book is semi-useful, so

you can find beneficial info on system thinking, but not comprehensive. This book will be helpful for social advocates and community organizers.

David has done a masterful job of making systems thinking accessible to anyone who is interested in tackling tough problems. This process is useful in animating and deploying adaptive leadership concepts in service of making progress on adaptive challenges facing society today. Using the process to diagnose situations aids in uncovering the underlying root causes of an issue, including our own responsibility in creating and sustaining the conditions for the problems we are trying to solve to thrive. The process also aids in getting clear on purpose, choosing between competing values, working across factional interests and identifying strategic choices to intervene into the system to achieve desired outcomes.

David's new book is ideal for those somewhat familiar with systems thinking, who want to go deeper and learn how to practically apply the tools to their work. We will be introducing and utilizing David's approach in an on-line course offered through the Academy for Systemic Change with leaders and practitioners who are working on critical issues in global systems, including food/agriculture, education, alternative financing, reconciliation and marine ecosystems/fisheries. His approach through the introduction of archetypes is both practical and accessible, and his work is completely aligned with ours: it is time for a new way of leading!

I currently facilitate a leadership development program. I have found David Stroh's book invaluable as a resource to develop a systems thinking mindset to leaders across sectors and across generations. He defines terms and concepts in a way that both appeals to our intuitive sense that there are connections and unintended consequences, as well as deepens an understanding of not only what systems thinking is, but how to use it in a practical and comprehensive way. I have been looking for a resource like this for a very long time and feel that is essential for anyone who wants to understand systems thinking and appreciate the depth of possibilities in solving complex wicked problems.

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