‘Systems Thinking’ Fires Up Your Brain’s Ability to Problem-Solve. Here’s How to Do It.

Systems thinking can help you manage and solve problems big and small.

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Being an entrepreneur is about problem-solving. On a granular level, there are dozens of issues to tackle each day. On a higher level, the big question is: how can I do a better job of delivering my product or service to my users?

Recently, I’ve discovered a new approach to handling the issues we face as entrepreneurs. It’s called systems thinking and it made me realize how often we go about problem-solving the wrong way — attempting to fix one isolated part, instead of focusing on the underlying system.

Take the New York Jets football team. Jets fans hoped that new head coach Adam Gase would bring better luck this season; maybe their team would even make the playoffs. Unfortunately, Gase seems to be following the same script he did as head coach of the Miami Dolphins — and delivering the same disappointing results.

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Because changing the roster isn’t enough. Improvement comes

through changing the system – in football terms, that means a new coaching strategy. For your business, it could mean many things, depending on your unique circumstances.

We shouldn't be so hard on Coach Gase. Many of us fail to recognize the systems that make up our world. But after we do, we can proactively take steps to achieve the results we're after.

As Donella Meadows, whose book *Thinking in Systems* first introduced the concept, writes:

> *"Once we see the relationship between structure and behavior, we can begin to understand how systems work, what makes them produce poor results, and how to shift them into better behavior patterns."*

If you're launching or running a business, there's never a shortage of challenges. Even when things are running smoothly, you can always find areas that can be improved, particularly if you're looking to scale up your company. Whatever your question, systems thinking can help you find an answer. As CEO of JotForm, I use a three-step approach for applying systems thinking to any issue.

But first, a closer look at the core concepts of this theory.

What is 'systems thinking'?

Before trying to apply systems thinking, here are some core principles:

1. Everything can be understood as a system: a startup, a product, a service – even a football team.
2. To understand or improve the system, you first have to understand each part and how they connect. A football team is more than just a bunch of athletes and a guy

wearing a headset. All of the elements of this system are dynamic and interact with each other.

3. If you can’t see or experience the entire system (i.e., most cases), you have to create a model. That’s the only way to understand how the parts work together — or how your team is currently performing, and how they can do better.

Let’s say your company produces widgets. To understand the system relating to those widgets, you’d have to put together a model that includes the entire picture, including the customer’s perspective. So, you’d want to regularly solicit user feedback to learn about their experiences. Using that model, you can discover how to improve the widgets to make them more useful.

With those core principles in mind, here’s an easy guide to applying systems thinking.

A quick guide to changing any system

1. Identify leverage points

To understand a system, you have to know where are its leverage points — the points you can tweak in order to adjust the whole. Meadows says they’re places where “a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything.”

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To demonstrate, say your organization is seeking to reduce pollution in a certain natural habitat. In this case, one leverage point would be increasing public awareness about harm flowing from the pollution. Sure, changing your own behavior

helps. But by promoting public awareness, you can benefit from a collaborative effort and a much stronger overall impact.

David Ehrlichman, the co-founder of Converge, provides common examples of leverage points including: expanding communication systems; adding constraints; and changing the rules that govern a system.

Once you identify your leverage points, you can come up with a plan about how to act upon them.

2. Look for patterns and trends

In any system, patterns and trends emerge over time and these all flow from underlying structures. By spotting patterns, we can determine which structures in our system need adjusting.

For instance, imagine your car runs low on gas faster than you expect. At first blush, you might assume it's a problem with the gas tank. But by zooming out and recognizing a pattern of bad gas mileage, you might realize that the problem lies in a separate structure entirely – your tire pressure is incorrect or your spark plugs are misfiring.

Only by taking a step back and observing patterns can we get to the underlying system issues.

3. Clarify the nature of the issue

There are people problems and there are systems problems. A bad hire that's stirring up negativity and draining morale is an example of a people-problem. Replacing that person would be your leverage point.

But 9 times out of 10, the problem is still systemic in nature. So maybe there's a blindspot in your interview process that led to the bad hire – in other words, a system problem. In that case, the leverage point would be somewhere in your hiring practices.

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If you’re trying to scale up your startup and it’s not happening fast enough, you’re probably not to blame. Instead, it’s likely a system that needs to be optimized. Maybe you need to offer more variety in your product to increase the utility or perhaps there’s a weak point in your sales process.

Systems thinking starts with establishing your vision

Whether your goal is to become a Super Bowl champion or a top startup on LinkedIn, it’s crucial to define your vision for your organization and share that vision with your team. You can host hack weeks or pen company-wide newsletters — whatever you choose, make sure your vision is known to all.

Otherwise, systems tend to break down — people lose sight of the bigger picture and the train runs off the track. But if everyone understands your mission, it’s easier to identify any weak links and shore up any faulty structures in the system.

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