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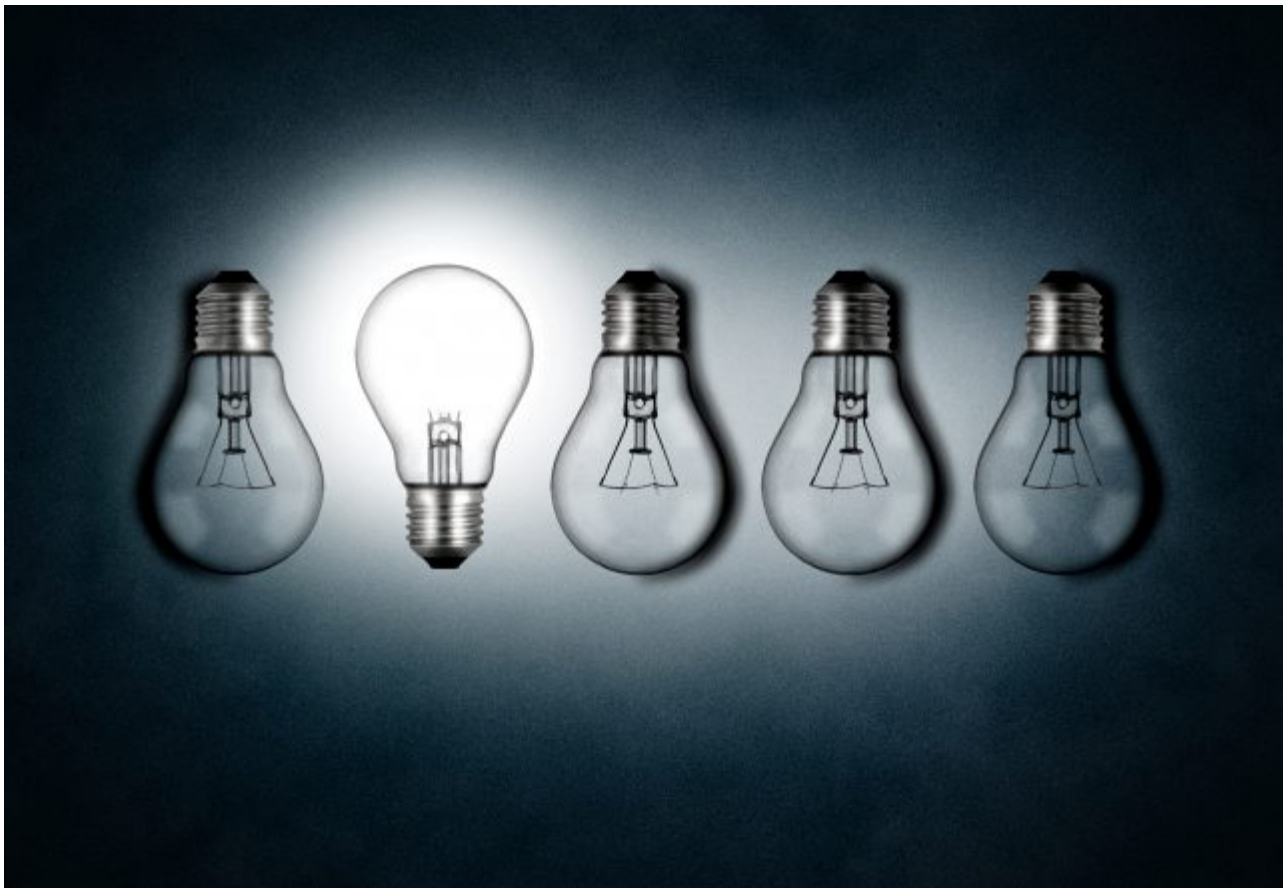
EDUCATION AND SKILL TRAINING OPINIONS

Considerations For A Systems Practitioner

By Rajneesh Chowdhury, Vice-President, The Practice - October 2, 2017

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In the first piece of this three-part series, I introduced the relevance of systems thinking for development and CSR. The second piece talked about how systems thinking can be applied in practice with a range of approaches and methodologies. In this concluding piece, I will reflect on some of the skills-sets desired in a systems thinker and the challenges they may face in putting systems thinking to work.

The first challenge for a systems thinker to overcome is that of siloed thinking. Beginning from the time of Taylor, one of the founding fathers of modern management, we are trained in reductionist principles to approach work by dividing projects into individual parts as much as possible and applying a rule book for every part, in the name of efficiency. Time and again, we are told that once an objective is decided, we need to break it down in manageable chunks and conquer the goal step-by-step. This often makes us lose sight of the woods for the trees.

But the problem is more deep-rooted. Look at how Universities are structured by Departments under the overall segments of Arts, Sciences and Commerce/Management, disallowing the power of inter- and trans-disciplinary knowledge pollination. This pedagogy creates siloed thinking in a practitioner's mind and restricts them from approaching situations as a 'whole.'

The way out of this quagmire is to first overhaul the way we are trained to think. Education bodies need to encourage integrated thinking. This is to be facilitated not only in a way in which students have the flexibility to choose subjects from different disciplines but also at a higher level where the essence of design thinking, problem-solving and critical ontology are introduced in curriculum from an early age. We do see a welcome change with many of the new Universities in India introducing degrees that cut across disciplines and encourage students to work on real-life problem solving with an open mind, rather than sticking to the traditional approaches of textbook learning bound within Departments.

The second challenge is inherent in how we think and the expectations that govern us in designing development or CSR interventions. Although today we see an upsurge in giving, facilitated by individual philanthropy, CSR regulation and impact investments, there is also increasing pressure in measurement with the focus on quantitative indices to measure successes under time-bound metrics. Different corporations and foundations increasingly subject "beneficiaries" to report impact (normally understood in terms output and outcomes) under a regime of inflexible success measures.

However, a systems intervention often needs flexibility and agility. Often the systems need to be allowed to learn through the course of an intervention and course-correct or course-align as it proceeds. The feedback loop needs to be continual for constant adaptation and be able to "change the wheels of the car when it is still being driven". The need for the funder and the interventionist is to ensure open-ended processes and be able to approach both measurement and impact with flexibility. CSR projects here will need to look at a problem-solving approach, rather than a mere compliance-seeking approach. This means that results can take longer than what we are used to, but they are more meaningful and more sustainable.

The third challenge is more implementation-related. Systems thinking calls for the practitioner to be well versed with a range of approaches and methodologies to fully leverage the power of the discipline. In my last piece itself, I talked about eleven popular methodologies under three paradigms, and this was just touching the surface. In addition of these, there are a large number of tools and techniques that the systems world has to offer. This can sometimes lead to confusion and be intimidating to someone new who may want to start working in this discipline.

However, it is to be noted that a systems practitioner does not need to be an expert in every approach or methodology. But it is important to be having an overall understanding of what exists so that they can bring in the right kind of expertise for specific situations at hand. There are also frameworks in systems

thinking that help in organising different approaches in specific categories corresponding to the complexity of the situation and nature of participation. This supports the interventionist select the right methodology in combination for respective issues they are trying to resolve by taking a step-by-step approach. Total System Intervention (TSI) is one such framework. Developed by Flood and Jackson, TSI presents a framework that helps a practitioner to apply creative thinking to understand the situation, leading to the selection of methodologies in isolation or in combination, and finally in implementation with the model of continual learning inbuilt into the framework.

In light of this discussion, a systems practitioner needs the following skills to be able to optimally deliver on an intervention:

Openness in thinking

Critical thinking to look beyond the obvious and question the institution

Flexibility to move seamlessly between disciplines

Humility to call for support wherever required and accept that no intervention can be the best intervention in a human activity system

Patience; this helps in chasing impact and not immediate results

I conclude this series with the thought that development interventions, including CSR, do not merit a cookie-cutter-approach. As I discussed in my first piece, every situation is unique and calls for a unique resolution. Openness, learning and adaptiveness remain unquestionably the most important traits of a systems thinker. As the development sector becomes more sophisticated and organisations move forward adopting CSR at the strategic level, systems thinking will be more and more relevant in the increasingly complex world that we live in. Organisations need to endeavour to approach both business and CSR processes as integrated if the latter needs to be aligned to strategic objectives.



Rajneesh Chowdhury is Vice-President at The PRactice, a strategic public relations firm. His work focuses on stakeholder engagement strategy, corporate reputation advisory and employee communications. He publishes widely in the field of management systems thinking and application.

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Regards,

The CSR Journal Team

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