

# Systems Thinking

We are at a very scary but exciting crossroads. There is an amazing confluence of evidence and circumstance that provides unparalleled opportunities to either improve or destroy the human condition and the greater economy and ecology of our planet. Our solutions will require holistic, systematic, and systemic approaches and true collaboration among stakeholders worldwide. Improving the health and thriving of employee populations will require a similar level of thinking and true cooperation among stakeholders of organizations.



## Poor Health Is a Wicked Problem

While it may sound harsh to characterize poor health as “wicked,” it clearly fits into the category of an especially intractable and “wicked problem,” as defined by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber in 1973.<sup>1</sup> The term wicked problem represents a special class of social or cultural problems that

are difficult or impossible to solve for many reasons. Wicked problems often have a large economic or social burden, and they are usually interconnected with several other issues or problems. They often have no definitive answers, and enacting solutions to wicked problems requires that many people change their mindsets and their behaviors.

Most organizational wellness programs, as well as medicine, pharmaceuticals and other disease-oriented strategies, have been trying to address employee health using the level of thinking, tools, and methods designed for “tame problems.” Tame problems can be clearly stated, they have well-defined goals, and they stay solved. The implicit assumption underlying wellness programs and medicine is that once identified, people with health risks and disease will be motivated to change the behaviors that led to those risks and conditions. Because health is influenced by many factors including social, emotional, environmental, and cultural influences, this is a very simplistic and unrealistic assumption.

Wicked problems, including poor health, are socially complex, so solving a wicked problem is fundamentally a social process and requires highly creative solutions. To have an effective impact on employee health and well-being will take a greater mindfulness of the influences of the complex social systems, environments, and cultures in which people work and live. We must strive to improve our understanding of the many domains of health, and increase our awareness

of the most positive potential levels for each of health's dimensions. Ultimately, we must work to create the conditions that help people become outliers on the positive end of a health continuum that includes vitality, thriving, high energy, and capacity for extraordinary performance. We recommend using principles and methods from systems thinking and human-centered design to improve the environment, culture, and climate for employee health in organizations.

## Systems Thinking—Beyond the Focus on the Individual

Merriam-Webster defines a system as “a group of related parts that move or work together,” as “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole,” and as “a group of interacting bodies under the influence of related forces.” Given these definitions, most people would agree that employer organizations are systems. But for most of its nearly forty-five-year history, the wellness industry has adopted the medical model and primarily focused on improving the health and well-being of individuals within the system. We have only marginally recognized the larger set of influences and interdependencies within and surrounding the system.

Systems thinking allows us to use a broader lens to understand the whole system-level impact on health and to map and understand relationships between parts of the whole. Improving employee health and well-being will take systems thinking on a number of levels. We must think not only about individuals as complex, dynamic systems but also about groups of people and the dynamic interplay of their coexistence and cooperation. We must think about the microsystems within our organizations and about our whole organizations as complex and dynamic systems. We must also think about the place and role of our organizations in the larger ecosystems of our communities and societies.

*Organizations must support the health and well-being  
of employees as a system-wide undertaking.*

The five pillars outlined in *Zero Trends: Health as a Serious Economic Strategy* are the product of a type of systems thinking. We used systems thinking again as we developed a strategic, systematic, systemic, and sustainable approach to creating thriving workplaces and workforces. Systems thinking helps us recognize the influences of the workplace, home and community on the health of employees and the health of the organization. We have expanded our knowledge of the impact of the original five fundamental pillars through observing and helping organizations develop healthy, high-performing, thriving, and sustainable workplaces and workforces. We believe that workplace environments and the programs, policies, benefits, and initiatives that organizations offer can help employees truly flourish. But it will take systems thinking and a more "human-centered" design process to create an integrated strategy rather than a series of seemingly unrelated programs.

<sup>1</sup>Rittel, Horst WJ, and Melvin M. Webber. “Dilemmas in a general theory of planning.” *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973): 155-169.