# MODEL FOR AN EMERGING WORLD

## by Allen Quist

# Model for an Emerging World:

# Systemic Organizational Design

**Dr. Allen H. Quist**

## Abstract

Because of the rapid and continuous change in nearly all areas of an organization's internal and external environment, leaders must continuously study and engage all forces influencing their organization. They need clear understanding of their organization as one living in an environment while keeping all policies and procedures in alignment and working together. This article argues a systemic organization learns from its environment and adapts its internal systems to meet its emerging challenges.

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## Introduction

Is your life flying by like images on a television screen when someone else has control of the remote? Do you feel like you are running down a steep slippery grass slope and you cannot slow down? Can do to keep your eyes focused on where to step while staying in balance and not slipping? Do you feel like you have some sense of control over a piece of your world, but you face an emerging world outside your control and desperately look for a way to control it?

Similarly, organizations scramble to stay in balance on their slippery slopes – the complex and rapidly changing world in which they work. Yoo, Boland and Lyytinen (2006) discuss this slippery slope as the world moving from the current age with its goal of management control into the emerging world centered on knowledge "with unprecedented levels of complexity and dynamism" (p. 215). Leaders face complexity needing wisdom and understanding about how to deal with it.

How can you deal with this rapid metamorphosis? How can you behave to survive and thrive? The answer may be to behave systemically more like the human body, learning about the condition of the internal and external environment and responding suitably. To help the reader, this article will discuss:

- What is organizational design?

- What is a systemic organization?

- Where have we been?

- The need.

- How does a systemic organization deal with the emerging world?

- A biblical example of system thinking.

- What can you do to survive and thrive

# The Systemic Organizational Design

## What is organizational design?

Your organization has its own unique design consisting of all its systems and how they work together to fulfill your vision and strategy for success. To design an organization is to "plainly" create and improve an organization (Dunbar and Starbuck 2006 p. 171). Organizational design creates and improves the parts and interaction of those parts. For maximum success, there must be efficient link between the "strategy, structure, process, rewards, and people" (Galbraith, 2002, p. 14). Daft (2004) confirms the importance of component and systems interaction as he argues that it is necessary for the components and systems to "fit" to maximize "organizational effectiveness" (p. 65).

Your organization's design is not static. Think of the changes you have seen in your organization in the last ten years—new products, new personnel with different skills, new technology, new customers, and new production schedules. All of these have affected your organization's design. Since your organization will continue to change with the demands of the emerging future, you will need to constantly re-create your organization's design.

## What is a systemic organization?

A constantly changing, adapting organization describes a systemic organization. The idea of systemic organizations flows out of biological images representing organizations as living organic systems or flowing, moving, and adjusting patterns contrasted to two-dimensional fixed blueprint patterns (Overholt, Connally, Harrington, & Lopez, 2000, p. 41). A sound system illustrates the systemic view of organizations. Putting the components together completes only half the effort. For the music to be beautiful, the systems must be fine tuned and constantly monitored to adapt to the changes in the room and the sound input (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, and Kerr (2002) pp.62-63). Your organization, likewise, needs to be constantly monitored to adapt to the changes around you.

Leading a systemic organization is like sailing from the Pacific coast to Hawaii. When sailing, you do not set the sails and rudder only once at the beginning of the trip. Similarly, in a systemic organization you do not set the organizational design and the systems only when you create your organization. When steering either the organization or the sail boat, you must continually discern the forces acting on your craft or organization and make minor adjustments frequently and continually through the entire life of the trip or organization.

# The Emerging World

## Where have we been?

In the past, leaders and organizations have tried to succeed by improving their organizational controls. According to Daft (2004), since the birth of the industrial age in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century businesses have used "hierarchy" and "bureaucratic organizations" (p. 24) to preserve organizational control. Wren (2005) wrote that throughout the twentieth century the rational view of scientific management provided the platform from which we are launching the adventures of tomorrow (p. 255).

## The need

Yesterday's "blueprint" for leadership with a fixed analytical "to-do" list for success is inadequate for the rapid decisions needed in today's world; your "ten year plan" may be obsolete with tomorrow's technology. Thinking forward, Daft (2004) asserts the "mechanical systems" we have been operating in will change to a more "natural and biological system" (p. 27). Just as all the systems of your body have to respond to changes in terrain as you run down a slippery hill, your organization will have to redesign continually to adjust to internal and external changes in your environment. For example, you have a coffee shop, selling gourmet coffee beans. Your major competitor suddenly starts selling coffee through a website. You discover you are losing customers to your competitor's new technology. You have to adjust your marketing design to meet the internet demand and save your customer base.

## How does a systemic organization deal with the emerging world?

Overholt et al. describe a systemic organization as a "living system" or pattern, continuously interpreting and reacting to its surroundings. A systemic organization continuously changes its "internal" "subsystems" "anticipating, responding, or reacting to changes within the organization." Systemic organizations focus on a "survival strategy, exploiting and filling niches in the markets." Systemic organizations communicate in a manner to assure internal alignment (p. 39).

You are already changing and adapting within your organization. Compare today's routine with your routine ten or twenty years ago. You don't wait for interoffice mail deliveries; you email. You carry a cell phone for instant availability. Phone and live video conferencing replace time lost traveling to meetings. You are constantly learning to adapt the latest technology so you are prepared for tomorrow's emerging world.

Daft (2004) emphasizes that in our new world, leaders will find it necessary to design their organizations toward what he calls a "learning organization" (p. 28). Daft describes this system as an "open system," a system that engages its environment, learning the necessary information, and making adjustments in response to the information (p. 14). Dunbar and Starbuck (2006)

confirm that learning is a necessary factor for successful design (p. 174). Brown (2007) argues that given all the coming and continuous change, organizations will have to keep themselves "flexible, nimble, responsive, non-bureaucratic—adaptable" (p. 38).

Do those descriptions describe your organization? Are your people continuously learning so they will be prepared for tomorrow's unknown challenges? Is your organization's structure adaptable enough to deal with an unknown emerging world that will be its future? What changes do you need to make so that your organization is "flexible, nimble, responsive, non-bureaucratic—adaptable"?

## A biblical example of systems thinking

While systems thinking may be new thinking in some of today's organizations, we see the systemic pattern in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 we find a wonderful picture of the body of believers working systemically. Although a body has distinctly different parts (nervous systems or cardiovascular system) performing unique, seemingly independent functions, all are subsystems of one body (the entire biological system) (12:12, 20). Each system needs the coordination of every other system for survival. A similar design should be apparent in the body of Christ (12:12, 27); we are all joined together by the same Spirit into the body of believers.

In Ephesians 4:4-16, we again see God's intention for Christians to work in harmony systemically as members of Christ's body. Using our spiritual gifts, every member works harmoniously to build the body of Christ. Within the body there are some with gifts "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (4:12). This responsibility is similar for leaders in all organizations; leaders build their people and systems for the health of the organization.

Consider applying the metaphor of the body to your organization. Are all of the parts (systems) working in harmony for a healthy organization? Do all the systems recognize the value the other systems play in the health of your organization? Do they see each other as joined together by the same spirit, the same goals, the same purpose? Are you as the leader equipping your people to build your organization in ways to meet the challenges of a fast-changing world?

## What can you do to survive and thrive?

As your organization scrambles to stay in balance on your slippery slope – the complex and rapidly changing world in which you operate – your organizational design needs to adjust to the emerging world around you. As a leader, you must behave systemically to align and coordinate all the systems within your organization – your management systems, the information gathering systems, communication systems, cash management systems, control systems, human resource system – with every other system. On this inherently slippery slope of our emerging world, you must continuously read your changing world and then react suitably. Keidel (1995) states that with systemic thinking, managers and leaders will become "pattern masters" (138-139) constantly

adjusting the pattern of your organization similar to the way your body makes adjustments as you run down a slippery, grassy slope.

Begin today to look at your organization as a living, changing systemic pattern. Ask yourself how well the systems are adapting to the emerging challenges and how your organization can successfully overcome them. Design more flexibility into your organization to meet the unpredictable challenges.

There will be no smooth sailing into your future unless you keep your eyes on your organization's preferred destination and constantly tack against the multiple elements of change in your emerging world. Get on board and happy sailing.

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