Knowledge Worker
The Systems View
(January 2019)

Human Performance Systems. Learning Systems. Open Systems. Feedback Systems. Reward Systems. Appraisal Systems. Operating Systems. Data Processing Systems. Living Control Systems. The concepts and the realities of systems and the systems view permeate our world and our work. Revisiting a poem I wrote long ago about "the systems view" strikes me as a good way to start the new year. I must confess I am no poet and what follows is at best forced rhyme; it does, however, contain a few small truths about behavior, people, organizations and systems. A much earlier version was published in the mid-1970s in *The OD Practitioner* and, simultaneously, in the *NSPI Journal.*

The Systems View: A Poem of Sorts

Things coming in are routed about, molded and shaped on their way out. Outputs exchanged for inputs coming in and the cycle starts all over again. Systems are *loops*; they're cycles of events. Focusing on "parts" doesn't make much sense.

If you would make use of the systems view, here's some well-meant advice from me to you: When observing systems from the outside, trace their outputs back to their input side: for what systems "do," or so I believe, is act to control the things they receive.

A system's first purpose is to survive; it takes new inputs to keep it alive. Some are changed, transformed, and these pass on through; others nourish, they sustain and renew. Outputs for inputs: these interactions are more technically known as "transactions."

For the human race, it is much the same; we all are involved in the systems game. But stand well clear of the digital view; it doesn't fit me, it doesn't fit you. Our lives are continuous, not discrete. Besides, bits and bytes don't love, sleep, nor eat.

Though behaviorists rant, and some might rave, stimulus in doesn't make us behave. The S-R model is a mindless one, human as "black box" - an automaton. Conditioning can't work, so why the fuss? We human beings are autonomous.

Behavior results in things rearranged, the measure of which is perception changed. Saying what should be requires believing; gauging what is depends on perceiving. Perceptions tightly linked to intentions; any gaps soon closed by interventions.

Made up of people and thus perceptions, organizations are not exceptions. Remember; all those goals and objectives are nothing more than human directives conveying some boss's valued "druthers" (to be achieved through the labor of others).

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Problems regarding what other folks do can best be resolved from the systems view. Step One is to Align the Reference. Mind you, this is more than mere preference. Feedback is not found in your words to me; it's found comparing my goals with what I see.

Perception; reference; these are the keys to unlocking mysteries such as these: Why? Why do we humans do what we do? Who's in control? Is it me? Is it you? The answers are there, waiting to be found in studies of loops going 'round and 'round.

There is a moral, a point to this rhyme of cycles of events tumbling through time: Listen with great caution to those who shout for you to focus on what you put out. Their self-serving clamor, their raucous din, should not distract you from what's coming in.

There are no hard rules for what should go out save this one: It will somehow come about that what goes out will affect what comes in. What you produce is irrelevant, then, except in light of its impact on you. That is the essence of "the systems view."

Enjoy these few small truths, ponder them well, and perhaps someday, in turn, you can tell someone you know – be it family or friend – how there is no beginning and no end, no cause, no effect, not one can be found in closed loops going around and around.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of Distance Consulting LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Workers' Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers.