BOOK REVIEW

Growing Wings on the Way: Systems Thinking for Messy Situations

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Growing Wings on the Way: Systems Thinking for Messy Situations
Rosalind Armson
© 2011 by Triarchy Press Ltd.
344 pp.
ISBN 978-1-908009-36-4

AS REVIEWED BY THEO THIADENS,
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The book of Rosalin Armson deals with systems thinking in messy situations. Messy situations are situations that defy our best efforts. These situations are bigger, more worrying and puzzling, go on longer and take more time, than the routines issues we deal with daily. Often there are no clear ways to deal with these situations.

One can only improve these situations step by step and so bringing them back to normal. The book Growing Wings on the Way describes how to deal with these situations using systems thinking with the aim to improve these situations. The book applies the ideas, tools and techniques that systems thinking offers. As such it illustrates practical applications of systems thinking and helps to understand the use of systems thinking in practice.

The book consists out of four parts. These parts are:

Part 1. In this part it is defined what messy situations are. The part distinguishes between difficulties and messes. It poses that messy situations can only be improved and indicates how to distinguish between messy situations and difficulties. The part clarifies, why people not always recognize messy situations and it advises to start thinking about improvements of these situations with the production of rich pictures.
Rich pictures make clear the knowns and the unknowns of messy situations. They enable to determine of the themes involved. Speaking about messy situations part one makes clear that people dealing with messy situations always are influenced by their own mental traps and their own complexity. This complexity expresses itself when one considers that people’s opinion are often influenced by amongst others the stakes involved, their capability to act and their initial views.

Part 2. In this part the exploration of the messy situations has central stage. It alienates a person’s position, it gives the theoretical base of systems thinking and it explains the use of diagrams to visualize messy situations. After reading this chapter the reader can make influence diagrams and cause and effect diagrams. The reader has also a clear picture of the different diagrams used in dealing with messy situations and their use of: the rich pictures to get a clue about knowns and unknowns and the diagrams used for further exploration of the messy situations by diagramming influences and cause/effects.

Part 3. This part continues with the exploration of purpose full action to improve a messy situation. The part starts to explain that every purpose full action has a reason; that for every action things have to be done and that one can choose how and when to do these things. Ex ante one can explore the effects of purpose full actions and ex post the efficacy, the effectiveness and the efficiency of actions can be evaluated.

Part 4. This part contains the final chapters of the book. It stresses the inquiring mind of persons involved in the improvement of messy situations. These persons have each their own personalities, they deal with messy situations, they define possible purpose full actions and they are confronted with the outcomes of the actions they have already taken. Part four accentuates that in dealing with messy situations one works step by step and systematic using a systems thinking approach.

One can conclude, that this book Growing Wings on the Way gives a perfect illustration of the application of systems thinking when dealing with messy situations. The book comprises lots of examples of applications of rich pictures, influence diagrams and cause and effect diagrams.

Reading the book readers will often reflect back how they dealt with messy situations. They recognize their own position, they recognize the limitations they were confronted with and they remember that in improving these messy situations they have taken -often without knowing- a step by step approach. I recommend the book for all people that daily have to deal with messy situations and that want to get a clue how these situations can be improved using systems thinking.

AS REVIEWED BY GIL REGEV, ECOLE POLYTECHNIQUE FEDERALE DE LAUSANNE, SWITZERLAND

There are many books on systems thinking. This one stands out because of its very personal touch, its balance between theory and practice, its epistemological perspective and its numerous references to a diverse set of books.

The personal touch, the frequent use of the first person form and the example of the author’s mother gives the book an authentic message and a set of examples with which the readers can compare their own views and behavior.

The balance between theory and practice is quite well implemented. Chapter 7 (Thinking about my thinking), for example, has some very theoretical language but also a concrete message about needing to challenge one’s view of ‘reality.’

The epistemological perspective, especially in Chapter 7, is a very welcome change with standard systems thinking books. Most such books, including the seminal works of
GIS and GPS Applications in Emerging Economies: Observation and Analysis of a Chinese Logistics Firm
www.igi-global.com/article/gis-gps-applications-emerging-economies/45876?camid=4v1a

Towards an Implicit and Collaborative Evolution of Terminological Ontologies
www.igi-global.com/chapter/towards-implicit-collaborative-evolution-terminological/6002?camid=4v1a