

SYSTEMS CHANGERS

Systems thinking tool

Jennie McShannon

1. Rich pictures

The main purpose of the Rich Picture tool is to surface perspectives and convey an impression. It is a useful device to capture different views of a messy or complex area. What is most useful about it is that it gets beneath the surface of what people think and share on a rational level. It helps people become more conscious of the thoughts and feelings they might have about a situation but haven't really let those feelings in. It also helps people share things that they might consciously or unconsciously censor if they were to talk or write about it. It can make a conversation much more real and meaningful if people have been able to say how they really feel.

We are so used to conveying ideas with words through more conventional methods such as meetings, discussions, emails, reports that drawing a picture can take us out of that comfort zone. For some it can be a bit challenging the first time but once you get people to suspend their scepticism then they usefully find it really easy to engage with.

Drawing a rich picture

Rich Pictures can be done between two people, a group such as a team or board or at a workshop. It will really show up the different perspectives people might have on the same situation. Remember - seeing multiple perspectives is a fundamental element of thinking systemically

Elements:

- pictorial symbols
- keywords
- cartoons
- sketches
- symbols
- title

Conventions

1. To help interpret a situation, choose symbols, scenes or images that represent the situation. Use as many colours as necessary and draw the symbols on a large piece of paper. Try not to get too carried away with the fun and challenge to your ingenuity in finding pictorial symbols.
2. Avoid too much writing, either as commentary or as word bubbles coming from people's mouths (but a brief summary can help explain the diagram to other people).
3. Don't include systems boundaries or specific references to systems in any way (see below).

Guidelines

- a. A rich picture is an attempt to assemble everything that might be relevant to a complex situation. You should somehow represent every observation that occurs to you or that you gleaned from your initial survey.
- b. Fall back on words only where ideas fail you for a sketch that encapsulates your meaning.
- c. You should not seek to impose any style or structure on your picture. Place the elements on your sheet wherever your instinct prompts. At a later stage you may find that the placement itself has a message for you.
- d. If you don't know where to begin, then the following sequence may help to get you started:
- e. First look for the elements of structure in the situation (these are the parts of the situation that change relatively slowly over time and are relatively stable, the people, the set-ups, the command hierarchy, perhaps);
- f. Next look for elements of process within the situation (these are the things that are in a state of change: the activities that are going on);
- g. Then look for the ways in which the structure and the processes interact. Doing this will give you an idea of the climate of the situation. That is, the ways in which the structure and the processes relate to each other.
- h. Avoid thinking in systems terms. That is, using ideas like: Well, the situation is made up of a marketing system and a production system and a quality control system. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the word system implies organized interconnections and it may be precisely the absence of such organized interconnectedness that lies at the heart of the matter: therefore, by assuming its existence (by the use of the word system) you may be missing the point. Note, however, that this does not mean that there won't be some sort of link or connection between your graphics, as mentioned above. The second reason is that doing so will channel you down a particular line of thought, namely the search for ways of making these systems more efficient.
- i. Make sure that your picture includes not only the factual data about the situation, but also the subjective information

- j. Look at the social roles that are regarded within the situation as meaningful by those involved, and look at the kinds of behaviour expected from people in those roles. If you see any conflicts, indicate them.
- k. Finally, include yourself in the picture. Make sure that your roles and relationships in the situation are clear. Remember that you are not an objective observer, but someone with a set of values, beliefs and norms that colour your perceptions

Reference: Open University

<http://systems.open.ac.uk/materials/T552/pages/rich/richAppendix.html>
