



Is Life Speeding Up...or is it just me?

Two rules for sanity.

My to-do list is out of date as soon as I write it down on paper. One item on the list is connected to another item not on the list and then the time melts away trying to figure out how to untangle the web of responsibilities and get something done. The reality is that untangling the web is impossible.

Intricate interconnections are signs of the new, web-based age we are now in, and I'm talking about more than the internet. Everything DOES touch everything else. Things are happening faster because something over here changes and tips something else out of balance which requires a compensating change over there, and, more often than not, it's an unexpected surprise with unanticipated outcomes. Connectedness is the nature of life. How to maintain sanity?

Rule #1: Don't be surprised by surprises. This ancient teaching is today's wisdom. When outcomes are different from personal opinions and judgments, the tendency is to lock in our heels and resist. As interconnected as everything is, surprises are occurring on all scales, large and encompassing, small and seemingly insignificant, and you may begin to notice that they are occurring more and more often. Instead of digging in your heels, consider taking a new perspective. Considering new perspectives makes you more adaptable. Can you release control of pre-conceived ideas? Can you find the new opportunity in the unexpected outcome? There always is one. Remember, Post-It notes were invented when glue turned out to be "defective."

Rule #2: Look at everything systemically. When everything touches everything, even the most insignificant actions have consequences somewhere. Thinking of the impact of your actions on the entire organization rather than just on your job, or the goals of a single department, you become aware of a broader range of consequences that affect everybody. Here's a recent and real-life example:

I invited several friends to attend a music recital at a private college. One day before the event, I double-checked the website to be sure the recital was still posted, so you can imagine my confusion the night of the event when I arrived to find the location open and no signs of life. Even the campus librarian could not find any information about it in her sources.

On Monday morning, I learned that the event had been cancelled internally for several days. They had forgotten about the brochure mailing that went out to the public and was posted on the web *because that brochure went out from another department*. In the course of the conversation, I also heard that, “we have no control over that department,” and “we’ve asked IT but they won’t do...” etc. Who dropped the ball?

What’s missing here is systemic thinking. Various offices did their jobs: the music department scheduled the event, the PR office designed the brochure and marketed the event; the IT office posted information online, Security unlocked the building and the librarian looked for details. They each did their jobs, separately. The problem is that processes did not allow for communication at the front lines. Replace departments in this case with people and you have an example for what happens in small nonprofits when communication links fail.

Systems thinking would have accounted for communication all the way to the front lines where action could be taken. Nothing in these processes links departments for an exchange of accurate and rapid information, back and forth, among people at the front lines, who can take action, on the weekend.

“Businesses (for profit and nonprofit) face information explosion and unprecedented need for flexibility in a rapidly changing marketplace...” This doesn’t mean a superficial shift in job descriptions. It is a rethinking of how to respond to a new business environment in this post-industrial era – dubbed the information economy.”ⁱ

Who are the systemic thinkers in your organization? The more people who understand the concept, the more adaptable your organization becomes as the world grows in complexity. Can you take a bird’s eye view of how information travels throughout the organization and explore what happens when it skips a place? Where are the missing links? When you find those, you make the whole system more adaptable.

These two rules for sanity are starting points to becoming prepared for a new, faster paced world. Adaptability is the goal.

Want to learn more?

Learn more about networks to prepare for a world of constant change. For a good book on the science of networks, I recommend *Linked, The New Science of Networks*, by Barabasi.

ⁱ Barabasi, Albert-Laszlo; *Linked, The New Science of Networks*; Perseus Publishing; Cambridge, Mass. 2007; p. 201.