

Conventional vs. Systems Thinking in Groups

Conventional or Dominant (white) Thinking	Systems or Indigenous or wholeistic, Thinking
To optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts. Emphasis on individuals, events, etc. (e.g., behavior of an individual)	To optimize the whole, improve relationships among (interaction among, organization of) the parts. (e.g., how are people communicating with each other, who is communicating, and what structures influence these communications)
Primary focus is on objects and content (What do we need to talk about?)	Focus on relationships/process as well as content. (How do we best approach what we talk about?)
Quantity (counting and measuring things, people and actions in organizations and groups) (e.g., how many....)	Quality (assessing, experiencing, grasping the gestalt) (e.g., Flavor, feeling, character, degree of warmth, kind of energy etc...)
Linear cause-and-effect; connection between problem and cause is obvious and easy to trace (The team is dysfunctional because one person keeps pulling everyone off-track)	Feedback loops; relationship between problems and causes is indirect (Lack of clear objectives contribute to lack of clarity which then leads to broad discussion which further muddies the objectives)
Looks for the “right” (objective) view or “truth”	Incorporates different points of view because knowledge is subjective and contextual
Hierarchies as organizing principle (there is someone in charge of a group)	Networks as organizing principle (group has no central control; facilitator supports network in reaching goals, everyone participates in leadership)
Short-term; addressing immediate issues will help in the long-run	Short-term or band-aid solutions often have unintended consequences and can undermine long-term goals
Blame lies outside	We have a real role in creating our own problems and can exert influence and control in solving them