Systemic Thinking

The ability to see connections and inter-relationships across disciplines, functions, organizations, people, trends, and cultures in ways that lead to insightful analysis and innovative, sustainable solutions.

When Traditional Thinking Is Not Enough

Sir Isaac Newton’s apple* may have inspired him to develop the Universal Law of Gravitation, but he could not identify and understand the genetic, organic, chemical, and climatological factors that caused the apple to fall at that exact moment. To Newton and the scientific innovators of his time, the only way to understand a complex phenomenon was to reduce it to its most fundamental parts, believing that once we understood each part, we understood the thing. This linear thinking was essential to the Age of Enlightenment and the rise of the modern world.

This form of thinking has been useful for more than 350 years and it remains productive today, including for chief diversity officers and other D&I practitioners. However, it is no longer enough, as it becomes more important for us to understand how changes in one system influence activities in others—and as we wrestle with interactions and interdependencies linking environmental and human systems in convoluted relationships.

The new complexities of changing demographics, advancing technologies, financial upheaval, and the need to balance self-interest with interdependence, drive the need for a new way of reasoning—systemic thinking.

For the D&I field, we define it as follows:

Systemic thinking is the ability to see connections and inter-relationships across disciplines, functions, organizations, people, trends, and cultures in ways that lead to insightful analysis and innovative, sustainable solutions.

Diversity practitioners, in particular, must become systemic thinkers to influence the complex, integrated structures and processes that shape our

* Many believe Newton’s apple to be as apocryphal as President George Washington’s cherry tree but the scientist apparently told the story to William Stukely who documented it in his Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton’s Life.
workplaces and companies. Systemic thinking enables us to understand and align our actions with the laws of sustainability, which have the powerful “bridging capacity both in terms of an intellectual link between disciplines as well as a practical link between traditionally disparate groups within society.”

This new reasoning is a powerful instrument we can employ to advance diversity and inclusion:

Systemic thinking enables us to apply and introduce interdisciplinary approaches to diversity analysis and diagnosis while accounting for multiple dimensions, such as talent, procurement, compliance, marketing, business ethics, technology, and others. With systemic thinking, we can recommend multipronged, multifaceted interventions that ensure sustainable, systemic change, yielding transformative results.

Further, advanced communications and computing technology also enable us to systematize immense amounts of data, making this new form of reasoning possible.

In this chapter, we compare linear and systemic thinking and explain why we must become adept at both. We explore how systemic thinking will help us meet the diversity and inclusion challenges of the future while recognizing the difficulties of learning and practicing new reasoning that is alien to behaviors we have practiced all of our lives.

**The Lasting Power of Linear Thinking**

Let us be clear: Of all the next-generation diversity competencies, this is the hardest one to grasp. This is because we are the products of more than 300 years of the linear thinking at the core the scientific method that propelled the Industrial Revolution. To better understand systemic thinking, we must first call forth our current linear thinking mental model so we can draw a clear contrast with systemic thinking and, in that, grasp its meaning, implications, and required behaviors and skills.

Linear thinking launched a period of discovery and innovation that continues to transform our lives today. We use this reductionist, mechanistic, and scientific approach every day. When we create a plan, we are exercising linear thinking. A traditional plan is a series of activities arranged in sequential arrangement in a specific order, and we implement the plan by completing each step before moving on to the next. If someone wants to drive across the United States, he or she designs a route with a series of steps, such as Boston to Buffalo, Buffalo to Chicago, and so on until he or she reaches San Francisco. Linearity is also inherent in the scientific method, which consists of a series of ordered steps delineating a methodical process of investigation (See Chart 1).

**Chart 1: Linear Thinking and the Scientific Method**

This form of linear thinking has been the foundation of scientific discovery, enabling Newton to prove that white light is not pure light but a complexity of fundamental colors; Jean-Bernard-Léon Foucault to employ a 62-pound iron ball suspended from the dome of the Panthéon in Paris to demonstrate the earth’s rotation; and Louis Pasteur to develop an effective treatment for rabies. Linear thinking is the logic behind science, technological discovery, and societal transformation (e.g. the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the Information Age). We use linear thinking to drive personal productivity; it facilitates organization, setting priorities, and getting the job done. It is simple, straightforward, effective, and easy to reproduce and teach.

And it then drives so many of our diversity and inclusion approaches. Think of the diverse talent pipeline metaphor – it is a linear model. Listen to our own language of yearly cycles: kick-off meetings, task-based project plans with critical paths, project swim lanes, climactic summits, training rollouts, etc. Of course, these are proven approaches that lead, when well executed, to high-impact results. Just reflect on how ingrained this linear thinking is in pretty much everything we do.

This all-encompassing way of being, thinking, and executing, however, has its limitations. This default position hampers our ability to innovate in a D&I field of extraordinary complexity and in a world of hyper complexity.

The bottom line is that linear thinking is no longer enough to drive innovation on its own.
Linear thinking has drawbacks, which become ever more apparent as our society evolves. Its advantages of focus and simplicity become disadvantages when they impede our ability to adjust to new conditions or unanticipated consequences. Since our world functions through systems within systems, the reductive approach focuses on parts when the crux of a problem may instead be in the interaction of systems and their components. According to Stephen G. Haines, author of *The Complete Guide to Systems Thinking & Learning*, analytic thinking’s “weakest link and the reason it’s not working in today’s world is that it doesn’t take into consideration, the environment, other systems and the multiple and/or delayed causality that surrounds each cause and effect.” In short, linear thinking can hinder us from seeing the big picture and how numerous systems and operations are working or not working in concert.

This is where systemic thinking helps us see the bigger picture.

### Systemic Thinking

Systemic thinking addresses these limitations by approaching phenomena from the opposite perspective, looking at the whole rather than the parts. Systemic thinkers focus on the connections and interrelationships that crisscross disciplines, functions, organizations, people, trends, and cultures. It enables them to develop and advocate for innovative, sustainable solutions, and reintegrate “political, social, and ethical perspectives into management.”

Systematic thinking offers professionals tools with which to manage the complex structures of our wired world. As relentless global expansion and the driving demand to find new markets transform the business, we all struggle to comprehend and control the interplay of multitudes of moving parts. Advanced information technologies—from massive, sortable databases to the Internet and social media—accelerate the growth and proliferation of network systems, increasing the complexity, but also provide the means to manage them.

As diversity professionals, we need to understand and employ systemic thinking, because it will help us manage differences, create productive, inclusive workplaces, and serve our clients more effectively. This approach is an essential asset in dealing with the interlinked forces of globalization, changing demographics, and social, professional, and economic change.

Systemic thinking enables us to understand a company’s role within a complex web of “economic, social, and ecological systems.” It also provides options that are not available through linear thinking. For example, a linear thinker might respond to a decrease in line workers’ productivity by cutting workers’ lunch hours in half. A systemic thinker would consider all the workforce, operational, management, and process factors to determine and address the root cause of the decrease, such as delays in the supply of product components to the assembly line or the impact of lower engagement on motivation and, therefore, on productivity. While the linear thinker’s quick fix might further degrade productivity by harming morale, the systemic thinker’s approach could solve the problem without antagonizing workers.

Systemic thinking helps us examine events and patterns from broader perspectives, enabling us to create solutions that are more comprehensive. Imagine you have been asked to create a strategy for increasing the number of women participating in operations. If you are a linear thinker, you might opt for a singular, short-term approach, such as a communication program to encourage women to apply for operations positions. This approach might provide a short-term boost, but it does not provide a systematic solution to an engrained, systemic problem.

If you are a pattern thinker, you might adapt hiring policies and procedures to make them more robust in training women to succeed in a traditionally male-dominated work environment. However, this status-quo approach also tinkers around edges and does not drive fundamental change.

A systemic solution might transform the operations organizations by working with operations, training, information technology, marketing, public relations, and human resources, community leaders, and college and university academics to rigorously evaluate the internal and external factors that discourage women from seeking positions in operations.

The systemic planner would work with his or her diverse team to construct a package of actions, such as:

- New approaches to promotions and development
- Special educational programs for undergraduate or graduate students
- Training to encourage existing women employees to consider transferring to operations
- Forming an employee resource group for women in operations
- Providing diversity training for the engineering staff
- Creating an orientation program for new hires, which could include pairing each new employee with a veteran partner/mentor

Information technology may design an application to identify potential candidates. Marketing could design a campaign to promote the value of following an operations
career. Instead of providing a short-term solution, the systems approach facilitates an ongoing flow of qualified women into operations, provides resources to help them succeed, and enhances the workplace.

**Do We Have a Choice?**

We have portrayed the strengths and limitations of linear and systemic thinking in Chart 2, which suggests that we must use both approaches if we are to serve our stakeholders effectively.

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**Chart 2: Linear and Systemic Thinking**

**Strengths and Limitations**

**Linear Thinking**

- Familiar (Engrained in us from birth)
- Cause and Effect (A causes B; B causes C; C causes D; no opportunity to adapt)
- Rigid (Sequential and inflexible; unable to incorporate new factors)
- Productive (Has driven innovation since “the Enlightenment”)
- Repeatable (Easy to explain and duplicate)
- Logical (Standard rational approach)
- Scientific (The basis of the scientific method)
- Reactive (Responds to issues when they arise)

**Systemic Thinking**

- Interdependent (Systems derive purpose in relation to other systems)
- Circular Feedback (A leads to B leads C leads back A; Feedback loop allows system to adapt to unanticipated problems and issues)
- Holistic (Focus on unified whole)
- Proactive (Action & results oriented; addresses issues before they become problematic)
- Long Term (Lasting solutions)
- Integrated (Components interact, interrelate, and are independent)
- Boundless (No clear end points or limits)
- Unwieldy (Systems hard to manage because of their size, complexity, and multiplicity of components)
- Alien (Unlike traditional modes of thinking upon which we depend)
- Fragmented (Focus on individual components & not system)
- Mechanistic (Focus on physical phenomena & avoidance of human factors)
- Logical (Standard rational approach)
- Repeatable (Easy to explain and duplicate)
- Scientific (The basis of the scientific method)
- Simple (Clear boundaries & outcomes)
- Reactive (Responds to issues when they arise)

**Systemic Thinking and its Unique Challenges**

Our decision to adopt systemic thinking faces us with challenges, not the least of which is learning and adopting systemic thinking. We have a natural disposition to linear thinking; it is engrained in our culture and our being. For most of us, linear thinking is, well, thinking. We read from left to right and write linear sentences
Meeting Next-Generation Challenges

The initial mind-bending experience of thinking in ways contrary to how we have been trained can lead to breakthroughs in new systemic ways of thinking. According to Haines, when we begin to recognize that the circularity of systemic thinking is patterned on the circularity of systems, the “complexities fade away.” We can learn systemic thinking by observing and practicing the behaviors of systemic thinkers and applying them to our discipline.

Let us check out the stories of leaders and practitioners in the field who have successfully applied systemic thinking to key D&I challenges. In the following chapters, we will tell the stories through the lens of the skills and behaviors that are part of this systemic thinking competency.

The Components of Systemic Thinking Competence

HR and D&I practitioners who practice systemic-thinking share three analytical behaviors:

- Accounting for interdependencies when developing strategies for sustainable D&I.
- Planning in multiple dimensions to meet present and future challenges.
- Building relationships across their organizations to ensure D&I efforts positively impact parts and the whole of enterprise.

These three ways of thinking and behaving provide us with performance indicators that we can use to assess our own levels of systemic thinking.

Let us look at these three common characteristics and how they are manifested by the systemic-thinking diversity professional. As you will see in the chapters that follow, our narrative strategy is to explore how D&I professionals practice each of the eight competencies in the three main stages of their careers:

- Early-Career Professional/Individual Contributors
- Mid-Career Professional/Leveraged Contributor
- Senior-Level Executive/Leader
Taking Interdependencies into Account

The Early-Career Professional/Individual Contributors
Like most effective HR and D&I professionals, you should develop a thorough knowledge and understanding of the visions of your D&I organization and employ this awareness to ensure that all of your activities and actions support it. You should also become familiar with the strategies, goals, and objectives of your corporation and its business units and organizations. This awareness enables you to provide knowledgeable support to all the organizations you serve.

The savvy, early-career D&I professional assiduously expands and updates this knowledge by asking questions to identify and engage with stakeholders (colleagues, internal managers and leaders, external partners, others) whose input is critical to D&I-focused learning. You must be proactive in seeking these stakeholders out to gather their guidance and wisdom, and you should volunteer for roles in programs and projects that give you opportunities to work with these stakeholders. In addition, you should devour web sites, written plans, strategy documents, and reports to enhance your understanding of all facets of your the enterprise.

Armed with this knowledge, you will be prepared to apply your diversity expertise to identify and address spoken and unspoken needs and D&I-related issues that arise throughout organization. You must articulate your insights and discoveries to your manager and other D&I and HR leaders. Your informed observations will enable rapid responses to D&I issues and help shape and implement the D&I strategy.

The Mid-Career Professional/Leveraged Contributor
As a mid-career professional, you have a systemic, comprehensive knowledge of the issues and goals of your company and its industry to envision and develop D&I strategies and action plans that are synchronized with the enterprise’s other key initiatives. Your grasp of the fundamental challenges facing your company, as well as its strengths and weaknesses, will give you the intellectual firepower to leverage synergies within and without the company.

You see the D&I organization as an essential element of a complex system. This system, which is the fundamental structure that supports the entire operation, integrates a series of puzzle pieces (products, services, processes, markets, talents, and expertise) that interconnect to make an integrated whole. Your job is to actively explore these elements and the intersections between each puzzle piece to determine how D&I can fortify the linkages and produce a more cohesive and productive whole. Your over-arching goal is to advance the D&I mission by questioning, observing, challenging, pondering, and judging. You will need to test each of the points, exercising candor and skepticism while building productive, close relationships with insightful colleagues. You will also need to develop the credibility and courage to voice your insights about the D&I-related needs and issues across the organization and bring them to the attention of the Director/CDO.

The Senior-Level Executive/Leader
As a systematic-thinking senior-level executive, you already work closely with executive and functional leadership to gain their respect and demonstrate your knowledge of the business, its needs and challenges, and the ways D&I can advance the interests of the company and its workforce. You need to have the gravitas and expertise to advocate successfully for implementing and funding D&I initiatives, projects, and requests. You must be able to convince executive leadership and board members to participate in D&I programs, demonstrating their commitment to D&I initiatives.

By demonstrating your business acumen and your understanding of the company’s many components and how they must interact to ensure sustainable profitability, you will influence business planning at the highest levels, because executive and functional leaders will look to you for information on how D&I issues—from cultural and ethnic considerations and workforce morale to multi-cultural marketing and talent acquisition and retention—relate to project planning and resource investment.

You will also earn the respect of the members of the D&I organization, because they know their work is respected and welcome in all corners of the company. They also recognize that their success is based, in part, on your high expectations, especially your insistence on integrated D&I solutions from the D&I team. In addition, they recognize the importance you place on incorporating societal, political, and economic factors in the planning and implementation of the D&I strategy.

Plan in Multiple Dimensions to Meet Present and Future Challenges

The Early-Career Professional/Individual Contributors
As an early-career professional, you must develop a systematic approach to understanding the needs of your colleagues, stakeholders, and organizations, as well as how their roles drive the corporate mission. This includes analyzing each entity’s functions, responsibilities, and interactions, and incorporating your findings in D&I project and task planning. As a systemic thinker, you have a clear understanding of the cultural, social, and religious factors that affect stakeholder availability, attitudes, and preferences. For example, you know it is wise to plan a customer appreciation event in Tel Aviv on Yom Kippur or schedule a business lunch in Cairo during Ramadan.
Early-career professionals are also keenly aware of the internal and external event schedule rhythms of D&I, and they ensure that these are taken into account by the groups with which they work. They also have a deep appreciation of the vast amounts of knowledge they do not have and the essential need to obtain the input of others to make data, content, and information about external factors that may impact a D&I project available in advance of project initiation to save time and costs.

The Mid-Career Professional/Leveraged Contributor
As a mid-career professional, you balance and calibrate the timing and pace of initiatives, projects, and requests to meet short-term and long-term D&I goals throughout organization. You consider social, business, cultural, and religious factors such as business cycles, holidays, and major events when planning a D&I project. Thus, you are used to hearing, “I am glad you thought of that. It never occurred to me.” You have made yourself and expert on organizational holistic interdependencies from your own and others’ past experiences to develop innovative integrated solutions to complex D&I issues. You use this information to ensure that inter-related factors in D&I decision-making, goal-setting, and problem-solving (i.e. costs, talent needs, logistics, management support, and timing) are taken into consideration when planning D&I program launches.

The Senior-Level Executive/Leader
As a senior-level executive or chief diversity officer, you have earned the trust and respect of the executive and functional leadership and are able to position, and gain support for, the launch and pacing of D&I initiatives, projects, and requests. You also are a strong and convincing advocate for informed product planning that considers a wide range of issues of which other company strategists may be unaware or view as insignificant. Your knowledge of the significant cultural, religious, economic, business-cycle, and social concerns or sensitivities that might be problematic for your stakeholders allows project managers to deal with potential hazards in the planning stage before harming your brand, antagonizing stakeholders, or weakening profitability. Of course, you also ensure that your staff is fully apprised of these factors and understands the consequences of not considering them when planning and implementing D&I strategy.

Build Relationships to Ensure D&I Efforts Positively Impact the Enterprise and its Components

The Early-Career Professional/Individual Contributors
As an early-career professional you must develop and maintain constructive and productive relationships with D&I team members, knowledgeable hourly, managerial and executive employees outside the D&I organization, and external D&I and community partners. Understanding the value of maintaining respectful relationships throughout organization and beyond motivates you to seek out employees who are in the know at all levels. This also includes working with ERG teams and fostering collaboration within the teams and with other ERGs within and outside your company. You also need a broad awareness of the global reach of your company, your industry, and key stakeholders (customers, suppliers, competitors, regulators, and suppliers).

The Mid-Career Professional/Leveraged Contributor
As a mid-career professional, you are a reliable business partner, trusted, admired, and valued by the D&I community, your company, and community stakeholders. You have developed this reputation by demonstrating respect and consideration for others’ agendas, needs, and work outcomes. In addition, your genuine regard for each individual’s role and contribution to the organization without regard to rank or status has further enhanced your reputation as a valued partner. You use this valuable asset to strengthen existing mutually beneficial alliances and form new ones with internal colleagues, external D&I partners, and others outside the company. This skill enables you to leverage new resources, extend the D&I reach of your organization, build a global and culturally diverse network from which to derive value for your stakeholders, and troubleshoot and resolve problems swiftly and effectively.

The Senior-Level Executive/Leader
As a systemic-thinking, senior-level executive, you actively endeavor to fortify and optimize mutually beneficial connections throughout the D&I organization and the company. You espouse a “pay-it-forward” philosophy that results in mutual benefit for the D&I organization and the community at-large. Through effective communication and leading by example, you infuse the D&I team with the understanding that their contributions nourish and strengthen the entire corporate system and amplify its presence in the marketplace.

You engage in strenuous, ongoing efforts to ensure that the company’s internal and external stakeholders perceive the D&I function as an essential business partner. You build the D&I organization’s brand by starting and developing supportive, service-oriented partnerships with other departments and engendering good will. Your perspective is broad and deep; you demonstrate this by nurturing, expanding, or creating a global and culturally diverse network that provides a solid base from which to serve local, national, and global customers, partners, and colleagues.
Obstacles to Systemic Thinking

We should not underestimate the difficulty of becoming a truly systemic thinker, but it is not as challenging as one might think. In fact, most successful professionals already exhibit many of the behaviors and skills that typify systemic thinkers. You can become a systemic thinker by strengthening these attributes, monitoring your thinking processes, and deliberately striving to practice the behaviors we have described. In addition, you will need to avoid the practices and attitudes that undermine the systematic approach. In many ways, the main obstacle to systemic thinking is not linear thinking—but narrow, uninquisitive thinking. Let us imagine a D&I professional—an avatar—who spends his or her career without becoming a systemic thinker. Our avatar exemplifies the professional whose qualities and modes of thinking block the path to systemic thinking and personal success.

The Early-Career Professional/Individual Contributors

As an early-career professional, our avatar is unable to connect-the-dots or recognize the interdependence between D&I and internal divisions/functions. Consequently, she does not understand her place in the “big picture.” Our avatar is not a curious person and is uninterested in exploring, learning, role, and relevance of internal and external stakeholders to the D&I mission. So, she is not likely to develop and maintain constructive, and supportive, internal relationships with these stakeholders. Consequently, the avatar fails to take stakeholder issues into account when planning projects and managing schedules. Inevitably, the avatar’s indifference often results in delays, confusion, unnecessary expenses, and dissatisfied clients and customers, and projects and programs that fail to deliver.

The Mid-Career Professional/Leveraged Contributor

Our avatar has not learned from the setbacks that were common in her early career and continues to make decisions that produce duplication of efforts and overlapping initiatives. She fails to form alliances or seek synergies, vertically and horizontally, throughout the system. Our avatar enjoys initiating new projects and ideas, but she focuses more on logistical details and less on integrating D&I into business practices and solutions. Moreover, her lack of awareness and narrow perspective impedes her effectiveness in planning truly productive programs. Thus, the avatar’s projects usually fail to meet expectations, deliver sustainable solutions, or achieve their full potential.

The Senior-Level Executive/Leader

Despite her failure to expand her horizons and perspective, our avatar makes it to the executive suite. As could be predicted, she fails to earn the respect and trust of colleagues, because of her self-serving tendencies and indifference to the needs and interests of others, as well as her disregard for identifying and partnering with key internal/external people, at the right time, in the right way. When the avatar proposes D&I policies, programs, and projects, her reputation is determined by her success in recruiting allies, undermining her effectiveness as an advocate. This lack of success degrades the D&I organization’s productivity, damages morale, and harms its brand. Greater damage results from the leader’s failure to construct and promote a compelling system wide D&I strategy that aligns with existing initiatives.

Systemic Thinking in Action

While our avatar represents the extreme in non-systemic thinking, we suspect you have seen some of your colleagues practice one or two of these behaviors and may be guilty of one yourself. When we consider our avatar’s missteps, we may become determined to become ardent proponents of systemic thinkers. However, our ardor may wane when we consider the challenge. For most of us, becoming a truly systemic thinker is a leap well outside of our comfort zones. It is not an easy task. However, a look at the constructive impacts of systemic thinking provides a much more compelling argument. Let us consider the stories of two practitioners who have successfully applied systemic thinking to solve key D&I challenges. We hope that their successes motivate you to take the leap our avatar disdained.

Our two systemic thinkers—Daina C. Chiu and Sheena Wilson—earned their ways to the tops of their companies, in part, by adroitly employing the three analytical tools common to systemic thinkers: accounting for interdependencies, planning in multiple dimensions, and leveraging personal partnerships across their organization. Consequently, they exemplify the value of developing and exercising these tools whenever possible.

Daina C. Chiu and Flex at the McKesson Corporation

Systemic thinker Daina C. Chiu, senior vice president, talent management and diversity for the McKesson Corp., successfully manages a flexible work program, Flex, that she has called, “the glue that helps foster a culture of inclusion.” As reported in a Diversity Best Practices report on flexible work practices, Chiu made this comment to Karol Rose, chief knowledge officer, FlexPaths LLC.9

Chiu has championed Flex as a valuable asset that helps McKesson expand its business and engage its employees. She advises D&I professionals to develop programs based on a multi-level, comprehensive understanding of the business and its needs. “It is important to adapt and align company goals and activities in an evolving business environment,” says Chiu. “At McKesson, our goal with diversity and inclusion initiatives is to make sure that we harness all...
we are thrilled that she is being recognized for so successfully shaping and driving BNY Mellon’s diversity and inclusion programs.”

Wilson has introduced D&I programs that reflect her broad commitment to diversity efforts that integrate the needs of the global business and more 50,000 employees on six continents. Her Global Competency Map “ensures a gender and broader diversity neutral hiring, developing talent and succession planning,” and she reviews the succession benches annually for diversity representation. D&I objectives are included in the annual appraisals of all employees and the company has introduced training designed to guard against unconscious bias.

The metrics validate the wisdom and practicality of Wilson’s efforts. Under her watch, BNY Mellon ERGs have grown from 39 chapters in six countries to 106 chapters in 17 countries. With 60 percent growth in the number of women serving on the company’s three senior leadership bodies, she is meeting her personal goal to “ensure that no woman feels that becoming a leader in our company is impeded in any way solely by her gender.”

Conclusion: Are You Ready for Systemic Thinking?

Chiu and Wilson are masters of what, as Senge argues, is more art than business practice:

The art of systemic thinking lies in seeing through complexity to the underlying structures generating change ... it means organizing complexity into a coherent story that illuminates the causes of problems and how they can be remedied in enduring ways.

Through their successes and outstanding contributions to their organizations, Chiu and Wilson demonstrate the value of systemic thinking. Moreover, they provide us a foretaste of the potential of this dramatic shift to transform D&I practices and to enable us to bring greater value to our clients, customers, and organizations. However, this potential will not be realized without much learning, self-evaluation, and toil, and we have deliberately emphasized the difficulties facing those of us willing to accept this challenge.

At the same time, we have attempted to articulate the reasons why you should not hesitate to begin your journey today! In light of the great prospects of systemic thinking, and despite the labor and self-evaluation it requires, your decision should be easy. With so much to gain, there is no unassailable argument for delay.

Sheena Wilson and Global Diversity Talent Management at BNY Mellon

Sheena Wilson is another systemic thinker who has been recognized internationally for her extraordinary leadership. Wilson is the Global Head of Talent Strategy for the New York-based BNY Mellon, the global investments company, which provides financial services in 36 countries and more than 100 markets. The company has 1.6 trillion assets under management and $28.3 trillion in assets under custody and/or administration (third quarter 2014 figures). She is also a member of the company’s Corporate and EMEA Operating Committees. In 2012 and 2013, Wilson received the “Directing Diverse Talent” award from the Opportunity Now gender campaign in London.

Wilson has successfully implemented and managed a comprehensive, multi-faceted program that engages all employees in the company’s Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) agenda. She has been instrumental in promoting and attracting diverse talent and is a strong advocate for D&I who has earned the respect and support of the company’s top leadership. According to Kathryn Nawrockyi, director of Opportunity Now, “[Sheena] was able to hard wire diversity and inclusion into the company’s leadership agenda. By successfully integrating diversity and inclusion into the personal development plans for every BNY Mellon employee around the globe, Sheena has ensured real accountability across the organization.”

A company press release quotes Lisa Peters, BNY Mellon’s chief human resources officer, who describes Wilson as “a tireless advocate for diversity and inclusion and of our capabilities and talent to innovate and develop the best solutions for our customers. Flex allows people to bring their best to work.”

Chiu’s systemic approach is also evident in her integration of D&I programs in McKesson’s business strategy. She cautions us to:

• Invest our D&I time and resources in programs focused on advancing business objectives.
• Anticipate problems and objections to our projects and be prepared to spend time one-on-one with individual stakeholders who will raise questions and concerns. (If you have the respect of your colleagues, you should be able to “redirect the discussion to redirect the discussion to performance and outcomes,” Chiu says.)
• Create programs that are adaptable enough to meet the diverse needs of individual workers and organizations.

A company press release quotes Lisa Peters, BNY Mellon’s chief human resources officer, who describes Wilson as “a tireless advocate for diversity and inclusion and we are thrilled that she is being recognized for so successfully shaping and driving BNY Mellon’s diversity and inclusion programs.”
**Conversation Starters**

How will your organization transition its D&I strategy from a programmatic/tactical framework to one that systemically impacts every area of the company?

Who are the D&I function’s internal and external stakeholders? How does the D&I function partner with these stakeholders to advance the D&I strategy?

What future business challenges are anticipated that will require systemic thinking from the D&I function?

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**Endnotes**


13 Peter Senge, quoted on *Systems Thinking…Thinking Systems* hosted by Paul Stepanovich, professor of management, Southern Connecticut State University (last accessed November 17, 2014) http://home.southernct.edu/~stepanovicp1/Systems_Website/Quotes.html


15 Peter Senge, quoted on *Systems Thinking…Thinking Systems* hosted by Paul Stepanovich, professor of management, Southern Connecticut State University (last accessed November 17, 2014), http://home.southernct.edu/~stepanovicp1/Systems_Website/Quotes.html