Caring for Our Veterans
Successful Transformation Requires Systems Thinking

VA has begun an ambitious transformation effort designed to enable the Department to become a "high-performing" organization that is the number one customer service organization in the federal government. Early efforts include developing leaders, establishing new capabilities, and making tactical improvements to increase Veteran access to services and improve the quality of their interactions with the Department.

In order to build on this momentum and help transformation take root, VA must now address systemic and "root cause" issues. Adopting a systems thinking approach to problem solving will help the Department address these issues by empowering employees, enabling holistic problem solving, and enhancing the implementation of solutions. These changes in capabilities will improve the delivery of consistently high–quality care and benefits to our Veterans.

Why Systems Thinking?

Systems thinking is the ability to see the big picture and examine its parts. Systems thinkers strive to solve problems by understanding the linkages and interactions among the elements of problems so that they can identify and address root causes instead of wasting valuable resources on solving the symptoms. A systems thinking organization is a learning organization in which individuals take time to plan before they act and then study the results to improve future planning.

The systems thinking approach fosters the integration of mindsets, behaviors, analyses, data, and resources. Its methods enable leaders and managers to positively engage the workforce because problems are reframed into opportunities for improvement and solving them is predicated on the universal recognition that components of the whole need to be working together.

Systems thinking approaches are well established in many industries, including healthcare. Without systems thinkers, an organization will constantly be challenged to solve problems and will not develop a culture of continuous improvement.

Systemic Issues Identified

The MITRE–led Independent Assessment of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) in 2015, performed in accordance with the Choice Act, is an example of systems thinking in action. The assessment arrived at four systemic findings: 1) a disconnect in the alignment of demand for services, resources to meet that demand, and eligibility rules for benefits; 2) uneven bureaucratic operations and processes; 3) non–integrated variations in clinical and business data and tools for making decisions; and 4) leaders who are not fully empowered due to a lack of clear authority, priorities, and goals.

> **The findings and recommendations from these assessments revealed interrelationships that demand a holistic understanding of VHA.**
>
> –VETERANS CHOICE ACT INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT (SECTION 201)— INTEGRATED REPORT, SEPTEMBER 2015

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These were labeled systemic findings because a solution aimed at addressing one of the findings would invariably impact the others. The findings point to complex, interwoven problems, and any solutions must take into account people, processes, and technology as well as the relationships among these elements. As noted earlier, VA has taken initial steps (through the "MyVA" initiative) to address these findings. Now is the time to apply systems thinking to enable holistic, integrated problem solving to further address these findings in the context of overall transformation that achieves successful healthcare outcomes for our Veterans.

Applying Systems Thinking to Realize Transformation

VA can best understand how to provide superior Veteran–centric integrated care only when its managers and employees understand the interdependencies of their offerings. Delivering on the vision of an integrated Veteran–centric, community–based healthcare and benefits delivery network calls for a systems thinking approach.

Systems thinking will enable the Department to understand the connections among its various "service offerings" (e.g., Healthcare, Benefits, and Memorials) and enablers such as research investments, human capital, information management, technology, and facilities management. Systems thinking will allow VA to model these interdependencies and formulate approaches that optimize organizational structure, authorities, and technology solutions as well as the operations of both headquarters and field offices. This approach will also provide VA management with a solid framework for evaluating competing priorities and making informed decisions. To enable transformation,

VA should accelerate the development and adoption of linked analytical structures, frameworks, and methodologies to support decision making and effective governance throughout all levels of the organization. Ultimately, systems thinking can help VA employees to collectively streamline the delivery of healthcare and benefits to Veterans, improve the quality of these services, and cut costs.

Areas of Opportunity for VA Management

Over the next year, VA can take steps to proliferate a systems–thinking culture throughout the organization by:

· Establishing and empowering authoritative analysis and integration activities that will deliver the artifacts and data needed to enable employees to make sound decisions at all levels of the organization

· Investing in trained and experienced strategic planners, engineers, and architects able to embrace holistic views of problems, requirements, alternatives, and solutions

· Developing highly proficient program and project managers who are systems thinkers who can balance scope, schedule, cost, and complex vendor contracts to develop and deliver the large and complex systems and services required by our Veterans

· Promoting transparency across the organization by making it safe for leaders and managers to share data and results of their successes and failures in support of true collaboration and real problem solving throughout the organization

For further ideas about applying the guidance in this paper to your agency's particular needs, contact federaltransition@ mitre.org.

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