The Manager’s Guide to Systems Practice
To
June, Samantha, Alison and the memory of Mum and Dad
FAS

To
Geof and Freda Ford
CEW
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Acknowledgements

This book has been written to support three areas of learning. The first is to provide support for workshops, which we have found to be increasingly popular amongst busy managers looking for ideas that may be useful to them in dealing with their ever present, day-to-day problems. Second, for the student or practitioner who is studying methods of organizational enquiry and finally, for the more advanced learner who wants to know more about the ideas themselves. Some early parts of the text appear tantalizingly easy but as the reader progresses through the chapters, s/he will begin to discover that there is more to these ideas than at first appeared.

We have attempted to describe many, but not all, methods and ideas of Systems practice that we have found to be useful. In this respect the book is ambitious because it attempts to describe several approaches rather than being dedicated to a single method. We have written it in this way because we have spoken with managers, involved in ‘real world’ situations, and realize that they may require different methods to help make sense of changing situations. The style of text is suited to students too as it is right that they are made aware of the different ways of making sense of complex issues.

In order to achieve our ambition to produce a text that is of practical value but also provides some intellectual support for the ideas within we discussed the many facets of Systems practice with respected colleagues in the Systems community. They provided insight and critical feedback to our idea which has helped structure the text. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues who have helped us and encouraged us to write this text.

The idea for The Manager’s Guide to Systems Practice: Making Sense of Complex Problems sprang from the success of the Systems practice for managing complexity network (SPMC). This network begun in 2001 with a three-year EPSRC research grant which had been awarded to Ray Ison (OU) and Frank Stowell (DMU now UoP). (Note: The
The spmc web page is currently hosted by the University of Northumbria -spmc- http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/spmc.) The network continues to offer one-day workshops for managers and practitioners at various locations throughout the UK and has become self-sustaining.

The network would not have flourished were it not for its contributors. To this end we wish to acknowledge some of the many contributors and participants who have been a part of the network over the past ten years: in particular, Petia Sice at the University of Northumbria, Monica Shelly and Jacqueline Eisenstadt at the Open University. These colleagues have organized a number of management and practitioner workshops over the years dealing with topics as varied as regional police reorganization, tourism, the NHS computer project and some workshops on urban regeneration. The early chapters in the text have been written by taking into account the response and feedback we have received from these workshops.

In addition to the feedback which shaped the early chapters we also invited comment about some of the early drafts of the later chapters from undergraduate and postgraduate students: their feedback has been reinvested where appropriate in these chapters. Thanks are due to undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Universities of Portsmouth and Northumbria, for feedback received.

We also acknowledge the Stowell and West text Client Led Design (1994) from which some ideas have been included albeit refined and developed. Some ideas contained within the text have been the result of various research projects with which we have been involved. These include the work of Donna Champion, who has made contributions to both Client Led Information Systems Creation (CLICS) and to the thinking about Organisational Intervention. Shavindrie Cooray, who took the ideas embedded in CLICS and developed them a step further by exploring and using the ideas of Sir Geoffrey Vickers. The work of Ying Laing and Junkang Feng’s research into technical definition has also contributed to the thinking about ways of bridging the gap between client needs and their technical fulfilment.

Susan Smith’s research and the management workshops have added to the lessons about using AIM as a means of gaining understanding of the many strands involved in complex decision making. Peter Bednar’s work, focusing on socio-technical analysis and contextual dependencies, has also contributed to thinking about user-driven design by providing a framework to explore unique individual perspectives on systems of interest.

The pioneering work and ideas of Sir Geoffrey Vickers, Peter Checkland, Stafford Beer, C. West Churchman and Russ Ackoff have provided inspiration for much of the

This text has also had the benefit of feedback and criticism from a number of respected colleagues including Stephen Probert, John Martin and Peter Bednar. Members of the Joint Systems Department at DSTL Portsdown West have helped us by using and evaluating earlier versions of Parts 1 and 2 of the text. We have also benefited from ideas generated through the Community of Practice of business improvement professionals led by Tammi Sinha of Portsmouth Business School and Nigel Ward of the National School of Government.

Finally we would like to thank the enthusiasm of Neil McBride who suggested the need for a text which would cater for new Systems practitioners and for those practitioners and students who wished to learn more about Systems. Thanks are also given to the UK Systems Society Board of Directors, namely Laurence Brookes, Stephen Probert, Pam Hearne, Ian Roderick and Jennifer Wilby for their enthusiastic support for Systems thinking and practice at a time when the use of these ideas has never been more important.
The idea for this book grew out of many years’ experience in using, and teaching others to use, Systems concepts, methods and techniques to address complex problems. The usefulness of Systems ideas has been proven over many decades but anyone wishing to inform him/herself about them is obliged to search through many different sources, each dealing with a different aspect of Systems theory or practice, some of which are no longer in print. When leading workshops for managers, or teaching Systems concepts on undergraduate or postgraduate courses, we have often been asked the question ‘What should I read in order to gain an overview of the principles and techniques of Systems?’ This has been a difficult question to answer since the available literature has mainly been comprised of books and articles dedicated to particular perspectives or methodologies.

This book is therefore intended to meet the needs of three groups. First, managers who attend professional development workshops to explore useful Systems techniques require a primer with which to consolidate the skills and knowledge they acquire for practical purposes. Secondly, members of academic communities (staff and students) need a text that provides both a practical and a theoretical guide to Systems ideas. The third group are people already well versed in Systems as a framework for thinking about complex issues, who wish for a reference work with which to add to their knowledge. These might be members of the UK Systems Society, the Systems Practice for Managing Complexity Network, the International Society for Systems Science or one of the many Systems Societies from around the world. The text is therefore divided into four sections which are intended to satisfy the beginner, who may be attending a one-day workshop (Chapters 1–3), the learner who wishes to understand how the various ideas from Systems can be brought together as problem-solving methods (Chapters 4 and 5); and the advanced learner who wishes to understand the theory behind the practice and the origins of modern Systems thinking and practice (Chapters 6 and 7). A fourth section (Chapters 8 and 9) provides case studies that can be used in a classroom situation.