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Our Multi-Pandemic

By Larry M. Starr

City councilmember Brian Squilla remarked, “It’s something we’ve never experienced before.” He was responding to the anticipated 20% cut to Philadelphia city budgets attributed to the local effects of the global pandemic.

He is not alone in this absent experience. Others have expressed this sentiment including Glenn Beck, conservative media personality; Joe Rogers, Jr., cofounder and chairman of Waffle House; and Dr. Jasmin Moshirpur, dean and medical director at NYC Health + Hospitals, the largest municipal healthcare system in the United States.

The word that fully captures this awful situation is complexity. When referring to our experiences, complexity refers to the mismatch between what we now see and feel, and the internal cognitive map created from past experiences of how things are supposed to work. For millions in complexity there is no useful experiential map that helps us to respond to job losses due to closing entire sectors of the economy *and* shifting all education online *and* fear of an invisible infectious enemy if we have social contact with family, friends and coworkers, *and* more.

While WHO has called the novel coronavirus a global pandemic, the original meaning of pandemic from the Greek means anything affecting all the people. Our complexity is not merely due to the health system effects, we also have a pandemic in our turbulent systems of education, economy, social services, and much more. These are not separate, and they do not add together. They are interdependent, and they multiply together.

With so many quickly moving and interacting parts and so much uncertainty, this complex problem cannot be simplified. And an expert from one area such as infectious diseases or economics is not an expert in the whole multi-pandemic mess. No one has ever experienced anything like it.

Assuming previous causal relationships or predictions will operate in complexity is a false perception that decreases effectiveness of understanding and of decisions. Because the experience of complexity emerges from an inadequate cognitive map, the pathway through is to change the way of thinking.

Changing thinking does not occur automatically or quickly. It can take some people and organizations much longer because they are entrenched and committed to a way of solving problems that worked in the past. These people and groups move through phases described as shock and defensive retreat; continuing the same approach but increasing the scope; and trying to “weather the storm.” These produce limited effectiveness until there is a realization that they must adapt to a new reality, unlearn the rules of the past, and invent the future now.

To do this, leaders must adopt systems thinking. One description of systems thinking suggested by Israeli education researchers is seeing the whole problem beyond the parts and seeing the

parts in the context of the whole. Not seeing the whole problem contributes to the spread of the virus and more severe interactions with other systems. Applying systems thinking leads to improved social distancing and more awareness of interactions which slow the spread.

Application of systems thinking to identify and understand complex problems and to discover innovative ways to intervene has been advocated separately within public health, education, finance, and many other spheres of society. We need it now for the multi-pandemic.

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