

## The Systems Game

<b>Timing:</b>	20 minutes
<b># of Participants:</b>	8 to 24. If you have more than 24, make the rest of the group observers.
<b>Equipment needed:</b>	A large, empty space in which people can move around without the risk of running into anything. The larger the group, the larger the space needed.

### PURPOSE/DESCRIPTION:

This exercise allows the group to explore some of the characteristics of systems in order to develop an understanding of what it may take to create systemic change.

### PROCESS:

1. Ask the group to stand in a circle.
2. Ask one or two people (depending on the size of group) to volunteer to leave the room. If you have a fairly knowledgeable group, be sure these are people who have not done this activity before.
3. Once they have left, give these instructions:
  - Without saying anything or indicating who they are in any way, each of you must choose two people in the group.
  - Ask if everyone has chosen. Once everyone nods that they have, say the following:
    - *There is only one rule in this game: You need to move so as to keep yourself an equal distance between the two people you have chosen.*
4. Demonstrate that you can move anywhere along a line that is equidistant from the two people. You don't have to be right in between them; there is a whole line along which you can achieve this goal.
5. Ask the group to start moving.
6. Once the group has been moving for a minute or two, call in the volunteers.
7. Give them a chance to observe and try to figure out what is going on, and then ask them:
  - *What do you think is going on?*
  - *Is this system working?*
  - *Do you think you could organize this process from the outside?*
  - *Try looking at it from a different perspective; get up on a chair.*
  - *Try to become a part of the system. Move into the mess and try to figure it out.*
8. Finally, while people are still moving, invite the volunteers to ask them what they are doing.
9. Have the group stand in a circle again and debrief the exercise.
10. Include both the participants and the observers in the conversation.
11. Ask, *What did you learn from this exercise?* Some possible responses are:

- Complex systems can arise from simple rules and mental models. Only one rule existed here, and look at the complexity that it created.
- Systems are composed of interdependent parts. When you change what happens in one part of the system, it affects the other parts of the system as well.
- This system can't be controlled or understood from the outside. You must step into the system and engage with those involved to see the whole.
- To understand the behavior of a system, you have to watch it in action over time. A single snapshot won't help.
- Not everyone moved at the same time. Delays often occur that we don't anticipate, which makes it harder to understand what is happening.
- This system is composed of interdependent parts. We wouldn't be able to understand the behavior of the whole by studying each part in isolation (piece by piece) or studying just the parts together. We need to see both the parts and the connections between them to understand the whole. We have to expand our view.
- We tend to expect the system to stop; we think that the goal is to find a stable point. In reality, this system could keep moving forever. The only constant is change. While systems may be goal seeking—that is, they try to reach stability—other processes prevent them from achieving equilibrium. The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.
- We often pay attention only to whom we are following and not to who is following us. How are our actions affecting those around us? Or those who are not in our line of sight?
- Even knowing the rules and parts, you can't predict exactly how the system will behave. The outcome is shaped by the rule, the free will of the parts, and the context, i.e., the environment. Point out if the area they are playing in is clear of hazards or if there are trees they had to avoid, etc. that affected their behavior.

12. Feel free to introduce any of the concepts above that group members did not come up with on their own.

13. Now ask, *What have we learned here that we can apply to systemic change processes?*

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