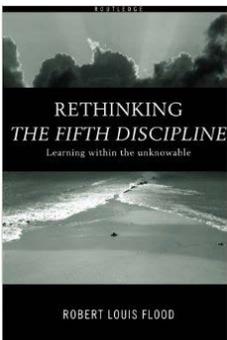# RETHINKING THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE

A review of Robert Louis Flood's Rethinking the Fifth Discipline

By Kristina Wile

Robert Louis Flood's 1999 book, Rethinking the Fifth Discipline: Learning Within the Unknowable is an informative and engaging read for those who are invested in any of the systemic schools of thought. While not a text for beginners, Flood provides an overview of several types of systems thinking that have developed over the past several decades, and considers the merits and deficiencies of each.

The utilization of many systems thinking ideologies is a core practice at Leverage Networks. As we build systemic communities, we remain open to using different systemic schools and tools, with a particular interest in highlighting those with proven on-the-ground benefits. We believe that each situation requires a unique combination of systems thinking methods and approaches to be effective. Rethinking the Fifth Discipline develops our appreciation for the roots of systemic thinking and contributes to the continued evolution of the systems thinking field.

In the first part of his book, Flood provides a synopsis of each of the following schools of thought, comparing each to Senge's fifth discipline framework:

• Senge's fifth discipline
• Bertalanffy's open systems theory
• Beer's organizational cybernetics
• Ackoff's interactive planning
• Checkland's soft systems approach
• Churchman's critical systemic thinking

This section of the book provides a useful primer of different approaches to systems thinking, and culminates with the recognition that there are limitations with The Fifth Discipline that may be buttressed by incorporating other approaches and ideologies (see fig. 1). Many of Flood's suggestions are reasonable, and in fact, have already evolved with the body of practitioners of these disciplines over the decades. Indeed, Senge has arguably evolved his thinking as well.

There are several commonalities among these schools of thought, including the intention to cope with dynamic complexity, rather than with detail complexity. All acknowledge the interrelated nature

Systemic School	Who	Key ideas	Commonalities
The Fifth Disciplne	Senge	System dynamics basis, feedback/systems thinking as key discipline along with 1) personal mastery, 2) team learning, 3) shared vision, and 4) mental models; reflective openness	*Coping with dynamic complexity; Undertanding interrelatedness by working in interdisciplinary groups; Challenging and releasing mental models, developmental paths, archetypes applicable across disciplines; scenario building*
Open systems theory	Bertalanffy	Historical foundation for systemic approaches; organization greater than the sum of its parts; self organization; similar systems across disciplines	
Organisational cybernetics	Beer	Historical foundation for feedback theory; operational research and management science	
Interactive planning	Ackoff	Key question: What can be done **now** to create the future?; Mental models as primary obstacles: Process: 1) Formulate the mess (including systems analysis), 2) Ends planning 3) Means planning 4) Resource planning 5) Design implementation and control; Plan or be planned for.	
Soft systems approach	Checkland	Action research: a collaborative process focussed on social process and employing reflective learning; Methodology includes logic based analysis (systems thinking) and cultural analysis focussed in individual and social meaning; Goal shift from goal seeking to relationship maintaining	
Critical systemic thinking	Churchman	Intense moral commitment; Toward increasing human purposefulness; Importance of boundary setting (whose purpose is served? Who is left out?); Expanding the boundaries to include all effected; Systemic approach begins when you see the world through the eyes of another; Every world-view is restricted; There ar eno experts in the systems approach. Ethical alertness comes from thinking systemically; Thinking systemically is about ethics, efficiency, and effectiveness.	

Figure 1: This matrix articulates the various frameworks outlined in Rethinking the Fifth Discipline. Source: Kristina Wile, Leverage Networks.

of reality and call for interdisciplinary teams working together. Each school of thought has a balance of strengths and weaknesses, but together they provide a formidable set of approaches for management.

In the second part of his book, Flood attempts to draw an additional, more unified framework. He acknowledges that there are multiple ways of seeing a concept of reality, and that each approach is valid and important. While Flood doesn't fully synthesize a new systemic method, he does demonstrate the utility and value of using several methods in different contexts. This demonstration of collective strength is likely a more valuable lesson than a separate, new methodology.

Throughout the book, Flood returns to the unknowable nature of reality, the importance of framing, and the ethical responsibility of deciding where the boundaries of any systems

exploration are. He cites several philosophical and spiritual ideas in support of his thinking , which may be important to consider, as sometimes a fundamental shift in thinking is required to fully apply these methods.

The collaborative nature of Flood's insights and the examination of each system methodology make Rethinking the Fifth Discipline an important book. Serious practitioners of systemic thought should be familiar with his work, as Flood helps us see the breadth of traditions from which our work has evolved. It reinforces the practice of including effective and innovative elements from other schools of thought , and certainly encourages us to appreciate the benefits of methods that differ from our own. Flood helps us see clearly that no single approach is a panacea for all circumstances, and that we all have an inherently limited worldview.

References: 1. Flood, Robert Lewis. *Rethinking the Fifth Discipline: Learning within the Unknowable.* Routledge, 1999.