



Capacity Building  
Solutions



# **SYSTEMS THINKING ASSESSMENT FOR SMALL TO MID-SIZED BUSINESS OWNERS**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Introduction	03
<hr/>	
Instructions	06
<hr/>	
Part 1: Systems Awareness	06
<hr/>	
Part 2: Stakeholder Integration	07
<hr/>	
Part 3: Systems Intervention	08
<hr/>	
Part 4: Learning Organization Practices	08
<hr/>	
Part 5: Strategic Application	09
<hr/>	
Scoring and Interpretation	10
<hr/>	
Total your scores from all 25 questions:	10
<hr/>	
Reflection Questions	11
<hr/>	
Next Steps and Resources	12
<hr/>	
Recommended Resources:	12
<hr/>	



# INTRODUCTION

Running a business is never as simple as solving one problem at a time. Every decision you make—whether about people, finances, operations, or customers—creates ripple effects across the entire organization. Too often, leaders treat issues in isolation, only to find that quick fixes create bigger challenges down the road. That’s where systems thinking becomes essential.

Systems thinking is about seeing the connections. It’s the ability to recognize how different parts of your business interact, how small changes in one area can create large impacts in another, and how to anticipate unintended consequences before they surface. For small and mid-sized business owners, this mindset can mean the difference between constant firefighting and building a business that runs with clarity, resilience, and long-term sustainability.

This assessment is designed to help you evaluate your own systems thinking capabilities across five key areas:

- ▶ **Systems Awareness** – recognizing patterns, root causes, and ripple effects.
- ▶ **Stakeholder Integration** – considering how decisions affect employees, customers, suppliers, and communities.
- ▶ **Systems Intervention** – identifying leverage points and anticipating consequences.



- ▶ **Learning Organization Practices** – creating a culture of reflection, adaptation, and continuous improvement.
- ▶ **Strategic Application** – applying systems thinking to uncover opportunities, shape strategy, and strengthen decision-making.

The goal isn't to assign a label but to spark awareness and growth. By working through this tool, you'll see where your perspective is broad and strategic, and where it may still be too narrow. Stronger systems thinking won't just make you a better problem-solver—it will make you a more effective, adaptable, and visionary leader.

## How to Use This Assessment

The value of this assessment lies not in the score itself, but in the insights it sparks. Systems thinking is a mindset, and developing it requires reflection, practice, and ongoing adjustment. Here's how to get the most out of this tool:

- ▶ **Create the Right Environment** – Set aside dedicated time without distractions. Systems thinking requires slowing down and considering patterns that aren't always obvious in daily operations.
- ▶ **Rate Honestly** – Use the 1–5 scale with integrity. Answer based on how you actually lead today, not how you wish you did.
- ▶ **Capture Examples** – For each question, note a real-world example. These matter more than the number—they reveal the real patterns in your business.
- ▶ **Review Results by Category** – Don't just look at the total score. Compare results across the five areas to see where you're strong and where you need to grow.
- ▶ **Use the Scoring Guide as a Mirror, Not a Grade** –
  - **100–125:** Advanced systems thinker.
  - **75–99:** Proficient.
  - **50–74:** Developing.
  - **25–49:** Emerging.Treat these as signals for awareness, not judgment.

- ▶ **Reflect and Act** – Use the reflection prompts at the end of the assessment to identify strengths, gaps, and next steps for immediate action.
- ▶ **Apply It with Your Team** – Consider sharing parts of the assessment with your leadership team. Systems thinking grows stronger when the whole organization embraces it.
- ▶ **Revisit Over Time** – Repeat the assessment every 6–12 months. Track progress and notice how your perspective evolves as your business matures.

## Final Thought

The purpose of this tool is not perfection—it's progress. By approaching it with honesty and openness, you'll begin to see your business not as a set of isolated parts but as a living system. And once you start leading with that mindset, you'll gain the clarity, agility, and foresight needed to guide your business toward sustainable growth.



# INTRODUCTION

This assessment is designed to evaluate your systems thinking capabilities as a business owner. Systems thinking is the ability to understand how different components within your business interact and influence each other, rather than viewing challenges in isolation. Strong systems thinking skills can help you identify leverage points, anticipate unintended consequences, and create more sustainable solutions.



## Instructions

Rate yourself on a scale of 1-5 for each question below:

- ▶ 1 = Rarely or never    ▶ 2 = Occasionally    ▶ 3 = Sometimes    ▶ 4 = Often  
▶ 5 = Almost always or always

## Part I: Systems Awareness

1. I consider how changes in one area of my business might affect other areas before implementing them.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

2. When analyzing business problems, I look beyond immediate symptoms to identify underlying patterns and root causes.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

3. I can identify and map the key feedback loops (reinforcing or balancing) operating in my business.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

4. I consider both short-term and long-term consequences when making strategic decisions.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

5. I recognize that time delays exist between actions and their full effects in business systems.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

## Part 2: Stakeholder Integration

6. I regularly consider how my decisions might impact different stakeholders (employees, customers, suppliers, community).

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

7. I seek diverse perspectives when addressing complex business challenges.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

8. I understand how external systems (economic trends, industry changes, regulatory environment) interact with my business.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

9. I consider how employee behaviors, motivations, and mental models influence business outcomes.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

10. I can articulate how my business fits within larger systems (supply chains, market ecosystems, community).

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

## Part 3: Systems Intervention

11. When implementing solutions, I identify potential unintended consequences before they occur.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

12. I use visual tools (maps, diagrams, models) to understand complex relationships in my business.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

13. I can identify leverage points where small changes might produce significant improvements.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

14. I test assumptions and mental models that guide my business decisions.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

15. I experiment with small-scale changes before implementing major systems transformations.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

## Part 4: Learning Organization Practices

16. I promote a culture where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_



17. My organization captures and shares knowledge effectively across departments or functions.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

18. I encourage employees to challenge assumptions and existing ways of operating.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

19. My business regularly reviews outcomes and adjusts approaches based on what we learn.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

20. I invest in developing systems thinking capabilities in my team members.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

## Part 5: Strategic Application

21. I use systems thinking approaches to identify new business opportunities.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

22. I consider resource flows (information, materials, money) when designing business processes.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

23. I understand how organizational structure influences communication and decision-making patterns.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

24. I can anticipate how competitors might respond to our strategic moves.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

25. I consider environmental sustainability in my business model and operations.

▶ Rating (1=Rarely, 2=Occasionally, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Almost always):

\_\_\_\_\_

▶ Example from your business: \_\_\_\_\_

**Total Score:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Scoring and Interpretation

### Total your scores from all 25 questions:

- ▶ **100-125:** Advanced systems thinker. You consistently apply systems thinking principles across your business.
- ▶ **75-99:** Proficient systems thinker. You apply systems thinking in many areas but have opportunities to deepen your practice.
- ▶ **50-74:** Developing systems thinker. You understand basic systems concepts but could benefit from more consistent application.
- ▶ **25-49:** Emerging systems thinker. You're beginning to recognize systems dynamics but have significant room for development.



## Reflection Questions

1. In which areas did you score highest? What systems thinking strengths can you leverage more effectively?

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2. In which areas did you score lowest? What specific systems thinking capabilities would you like to develop?

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3. What are 2-3 complex challenges in your business that might benefit from a systems thinking approach?

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4. How might improved systems thinking help you achieve your strategic business goals?

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5. What specific action will you take in the next week to apply systems thinking to a current business challenge?

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## Next Steps and Resources

Based on your assessment results, consider these next steps:

### 1. For areas where you scored 1-2:

- ▶ Identify one specific business challenge where you can practice this capability
- ▶ Seek learning resources focused on this specific aspect of systems thinking

### 2. For areas where you scored 3:

- ▶ Look for opportunities to more consistently apply these capabilities
- ▶ Document results when you deliberately apply systems thinking

### 3. For areas where you scored 4-5:

- ▶ Share your expertise in these areas with your leadership team
- ▶ Mentor others in applying these systems thinking approaches

## Recommended Resources:

- ▶ "Thinking in Systems" by Donella Meadows
- ▶ "The Fifth Discipline" by Peter Senge
- ▶ Systems Thinking World (online community): <https://www.systemswiki.org/>
- ▶ Free systems mapping tools: Kumu.io, Loopy, Insight Maker

Remember that developing systems thinking is an ongoing journey. The goal is not perfection but continual improvement in how you understand and respond to the complex dynamics of your business.

