



A Triptych Series

The Systems Thinking Lab®

**The Evolution of the Post-Great
Recession Weary Kansas City into a
Dynamic Smart City today**

*Consequential Systems Thinking Work of
Mayor Sylvester (Sly) James Jr.*

SYSTEMS THINKING BRIEF

Forward

The Systems Thinking Lab®'s triptych series commences with an experiential narrative of the mayoral tenure of Sylvester (Sly) James in Kansas City, Missouri, USA, from 2011 to 2019. This narrative illustrates how the Systems Thinking approach he embraced awakened the post-Great Recession weary Kansas City to kick-start the transformation journey that eventually led to the dynamic Smart City it is today.

The second part of the series will entail a *Challenge* that invites the systems thinkers and complex problem solvers to propose solutions to a simulated real-world systemic problem in a fictitious city of Rocka. In relation to the *Challenge*, but as a separate event, the Systems Thinking Lab® will then host a Systems Thinking workshop in KC, MO, in the 2026 Fall, to engage invited participants through a hands-on experience, demonstrating how the Systems Thinking approaches can be applied to tackle complex and challenging problems, including those presented in the *Challenge* itself.

The final part of the triptych concludes with an addition of the co-authors' own experiential stories related to how utilizing Systems Thinking approaches has yielded sustained success rates in their respective complex undertakings.

Thank you.

Tikajit Rai. Ph.D.
Co-author of the Triptych
Founder, Systemic Excellence Global

Think Different, Get Different

When I took office as mayor in 2011, Kansas City was tired.

We were dragging our way out of a recession, and City Hall felt like a reality show that had gone on three seasons too long. The civic mood was frustration mixed with resignation. There was more talk about drama than development and a greater sense of embarrassment than pride. We had returned to the habit of never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

That's when it hit me: before we could change what we were doing, we had to change how we were thinking.

The Attitude Problem

I've said for years that attitude leads action. If you have an attitude of "can't," then surely you won't. In our own city, our collective attitude was stuck. We measured ourselves by other cities' headlines instead of our own potential. We traveled to other cities to study their capacity without fully believing in our own. We looked outward for validation instead of inward for recognizing our own strength.

The problem was simple: we wanted different results while clinging to the same thinking that created the mess!

So, when I ran for mayor, my first "policy" wasn't about roads or taxes. It was about mindset. Because underneath all the noise, the real issue wasn't just a bad budget here or a vacant lot there. The real issue was how all the pieces fit together—the economy, neighborhoods, schools, transportation, safety, business, civic trust, and how we behaved inside City Hall.

It was a system. And if we wanted the system to behave differently, we had to think differently about how it worked.

The Method - From Mindset to Action

Mindset sounds abstract—until you start changing what you actually do every day. Here's what that looked like:

We began with language.

I pushed everyone to stop saying “they” and start saying “we.” Not “they need to fix the schools,” but “what are we doing to support kids and families?” Not “those neighborhoods have problems,” but “how does our system create or ignore those problems?”

Language is a map of how we think about power and responsibility. Change the map, change the course of action.

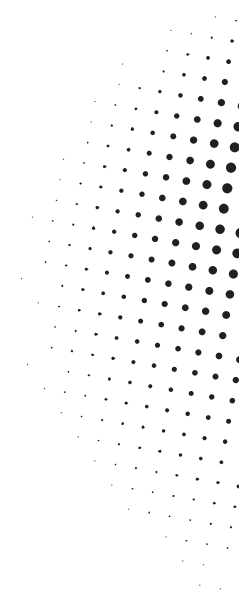
Then we changed how we looked at problems.

When I took office, I committed to making decisions based on facts and data—not subjectivity or political ideology. With the help and concurrence of the city Manager, we created KCStat, an internal system designed to aggregate all the data from 311 and 911 call systems, citizens and business satisfaction surveys, our open data portal, and individual departments. The goal was simple: use these datasets to identify inefficiencies and create better outcomes.

We analyzed departmental data and began conversations with each department about the insights it revealed. We quickly found that the approach was somewhat counterproductive because the department heads and managers started to feel or think that if their numbers were not right then their jobs might be at risk. That was the last thing that we wanted on their minds. Further, it was not helping to build any efficiencies within the department.

We knew we had to pivot. Instead of tackling issues department by department, we focused on the broader challenges raised by city council—problems that were rarely one-off. Rather than asking departments to work in isolation, we brought every team with a stake in the solution to the same table. By presenting them with the issue and the data behind it, we were able to find efficiencies between the departments, get them to talk to each other as ‘we’, and start to break down ‘our’ silos. That's where we found efficiencies and improvements.

One of the unanticipated benefits was that the workforce began to shift focus towards hearing citizens thank instead of cursing them. The evidence was clear, they felt more appreciated and *esprit de corps* increased.

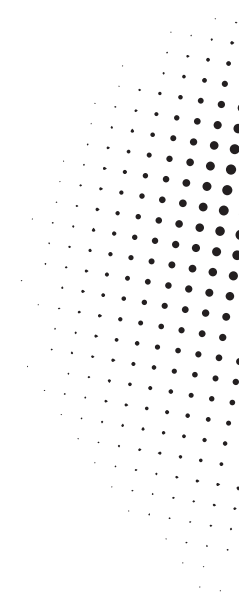


We broke down silo walls.

Government loves silos. They're comfortable, familiar, and deadly to real change. We broke that pattern by pulling people from different departments into the same room with the collective thinking: "We all own this problem together. Let's figure it out." Systems don't care about our org charts, and residents don't live their lives in departmental categories.

We put kids and families at the center.

If you want to know what a city really believes, look at how it treats its children. Early childhood wasn't a "nice-to-have" side project – it was the front end of everything else. You don't get a strong city by ignoring the brains being built from birth to age five. We tried, unsuccessfully, to show how early childhood education affected the economy, workforce, health, and legal systems.



The Results and the Reality Check

What We Actually Achieved

This wasn't theory—it was action. We built a streetcar system that reconnected neighborhoods and sparked billions in development. We built a new airport terminal that put Kansas City on the map as a modern, world-class city and created new economic opportunities. We reorganized how City Hall worked so departments actually talked to each other. We made early childhood care and education a priority, not just a press release.

More importantly, we changed the conversation. People started asking better questions. We stopped waiting for permission from other cities and started trusting our capacity to figure things out.

Now the Real Work Begins with Systems Thinking Approach

Here's the thing about **Systems Thinking**: it doesn't stop after a few wins. In fact, that's when it gets interesting—because you start to see the big picture and the interconnectedness of the parts. You begin to discern the feedback loops and how they shape the behavior of individual components to influence the whole. You start to understand emergent properties and how the system produces both intended and unintended consequences. Resultantly, it enables you to see the leverage point so that your small change can generate significant, widespread, and lasting improvements.

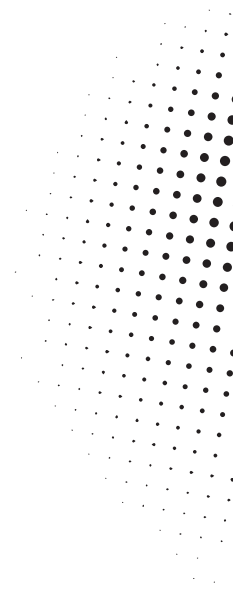
With the aid of a Systems Thinking approach, we know where some of the glitches are. We can see which systems work against each other. We understand what happens when one part of the machine speeds up while another drags. To illustrate, the airport terminal looks great—but how does it connect to neighborhood economic mobility? The streetcar is running—but are we using it to change land-use patterns, or just celebrating the ride?

Unfortunately, this is where many cities stall. They finish the big project, take the victory lap, and slip back into old habits. Or they treat “transformation” as a finished “transaction” instead of just a beginning. Kansas City’s history is full of examples: we advance, applaud, stop—and twenty years or so later, rinse and repeat. With a Systems Thinking approach, we broaden the boundaries to include all the interconnected parts that drive real transformation. This perspective gives us a vantage point to see both the individual components and the city as a whole system. More importantly, it equips us to move beyond old habits—solving complex problems with siloed, cause-and-effect, reductionist approaches—and instead apply an industry-proven Systems Thinking framework that fosters collaboration, advances equity, enables adaptability, and drives sustainable change.

We are Systems Thinking ready. We are next phase ready.

The next phase isn't about doing more of the same. It's about going deeper into how these systems actually work—and don't work—together. It's about identifying the friction points, the conflicts, the places where good intentions run into bad design. And then methodically, intelligently, fixing them in order to move forward better.

That's not sexy. It doesn't make headlines. But it's what separates cities that transform once from cities that keep transforming.



The Principles and the Path Forward

A Few Built-In Truths

What we learned has a few built-in truths:

Systems are perfectly designed to get the results they're getting.

If you don't like the results, you have a design issue. Nothing durable changes until you pay attention to how the system is wired—what it rewards, what it ignores, who has voice, where information flows, and where it gets stuck.

Culture eats strategy, and mindset shapes culture.

You can have the smartest strategy in the world. If the underlying attitude is still "this is someone else's problem," the strategy dies in a binder.

You can't fix downstream what you're breaking upstream.

If you underinvest in kids from birth to five, don't be shocked when you overspend on jails, emergency rooms, remedial education, and workforce development programs. If you ignore neighborhoods until they're in visible distress, don't act surprised when "public safety" becomes a nightly emergency instead of a shared expectation.

Leadership is less about having answers and more about changing questions.

When we shifted from "How do we look good in the next news cycle?" to "How does this choice play out across the system, and over time?" the conversation changed. And when the conversation changes, the outcomes follow.

The work isn't finished. It never is.

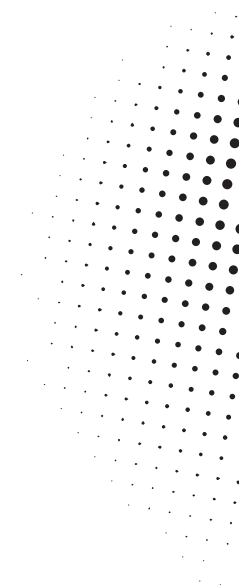
Because systems don't stand still.

They either evolve by design - or they drift by default.

The question is not whether change is coming.

The question is whether we are shaping it.

Stay tuned for the part 2: The Story of Rocka!



Sly James

Co-Founder

Wickham James
Strategies & Solutions

Joni Wickham

Co-Founder

Wickham James
Strategies & Solutions

Tikajit Rai, PhD

Founder

Systemic Excellence
Global

Aleem Khan

Director, Consulting

Systems Thinking
Alliance

Thank you!

Wickham James Strategies & Solutions

✉ sly@wickhamjames.com

🖱 <https://wickhamjames.com>



Systemic Excellence Global

✉ tika@systemicexcellence.global

🖱 <https://systemicexcellence.global>



Systems Thinking Alliance

✉ ContactUs@systemsthinkingalliance.org

🖱 <https://systemsthinkingalliance.org>

