

LEARNING *IS* THE JOURNEY:  
FROM PROCESS REENGINEERING TO SYSTEMIC  
CUSTOMER-SERVICE DESIGN AT THE UNITED  
STATES DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS,  
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION

A Monograph

by

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## ABSTRACT

LEARNING *IS* THE JOURNEY: LEARNING *IS* THE JOURNEY: FROM PROCESS REENGINEERING TO SYSTEMIC CUSTOMER-SERVICE DESIGN AT THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, by Mr. Andrew Graf, 70 pages.

This monograph borrows from multiple disciplines to argue for an organizational shift from process reengineering to system design within the realm of improving government customer-service delivery. It is within this framework that this monograph challenges readers to distinguish the *complicated* and the *complex* associated with disability claims processing and introduces the novelty of viewing the system from a different perspective. The argument follows that the claims process and its inherent tasks are complicated. However, because the process exists within a larger system, a system driven by the exchange of information between human beings, the system itself is complex.

This monograph proposes that in order to transform customer service, as a function of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) delivered through the VA disability claims process, a systemic approach embracing analytical understanding, holism, and emergent learning is required. The proposed system design is an attempt to reach a systemic construction that places the disability claims process within a larger environment encompassing multiple dimensions of customers. The argument is rooted within the activities recommended to construct the VA disability system through a guided process of learning. Building a learning organization through a systems construction implies the ability to understand, visualize, describe, and direct novelty developed from an inside-out perspective along with applying external concepts appropriately to the VA problem set.

Finally, this monograph presents five integrated recommendations to address how to approach a systemic design of the VA disability system using two planning models to help guide the manner of thinking and discovery. The essence of this monograph is to view the entire system design as customer service delivery and focus all customers on the design associated with delivery of services so that all customers receive a better product. Based upon these models, the monograph concludes with a tangible example of how to synthesize and employ the ideas presented with current best practices already underway.

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## ACRONYMS

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| ADM   | Army Design Methodology                  |
| ADP   | Army Doctrine Publication                |
| ADRP  | Army Doctrine Reference Publication      |
| BVA   | Board of Veterans Appeals                |
| CA    | Claims Assistants                        |
| DoD   | Department of Defense                    |
| FY    | Fiscal Year                              |
| GAO   | Government Accountability Office         |
| NCA   | National Cemetery Administration         |
| RO    | Regional Office                          |
| RVSR  | Rating Veteran Service Representative    |
| SSA   | Social Security Administration           |
| STAR  | Systematic and Technical Accuracy Review |
| VA    | Veterans Affairs                         |
| VASRD | VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities      |
| VA    | Veterans Benefits Administration         |
| VBMS  | Veterans Benefits Management System      |
| VCAA  | Veterans Claims Assistance Act           |
| VHA   | Veterans Health Administration           |
| VSO   | Veterans Service Officer                 |
| VSR   | Veteran Service Representative           |

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## INTRODUCTION

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.

-F. Scott Fitzgerald

The information you have is not the information you want. The information you want is not the information you need. The information you need is not the information you can obtain. The information you can obtain costs more than you want to pay.

-Peter L. Bernstein

This monograph challenges the construction of service delivery within the government sphere by proposing an opposing dualism built upon embracing simplicity and complexity, along with harnessing the creative tension that exists between them.<sup>1</sup> Through the presentation of multiple models and concepts inspired by operational art and the Army Design Methodology (ADM), this monograph uses the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as a case study to propose a system design that seeks to view the delivery of service functions from an inside-out perspective. At the core, the system's design features stem from three foundational, interdependent, agent focused logics.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the proposed system is a design for analysis, synthesis, and learning where the result of which is the construction of an entirely new perspective, the "VA Disability System." It is argued that only from such a systemic view can true organizational and service delivery transformation occur; in which, the organization can

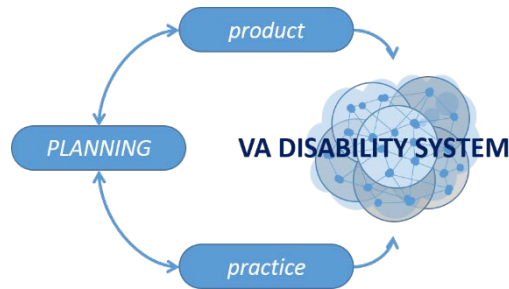
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<sup>1</sup> Peter Senge, "The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations," *Sloan Management Review* (Fall 1990): 9-10. Senge uses the term 'creative tension' to distinguish between traditional problem solving that focuses on fixing an issue within a given status quo and the energy associated with creating a destination where an organization wants to end up, i.e. a vision versus a solution.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Axelrod and Michael D. Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity, Organizational Implications of a Scientific Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 4. This monograph uses authors Axelrod and Cohen's definition of an agent. In general, an agent is any noun (person, place or thing – including individuals, groups of individuals, and in the author's example, even computer programs interacting with other computer programs) that interacts with its environment and other agents. Typically, an agent responds to what happens and acts in a purposeful manner. Lastly, an agent has properties of location, capabilities, and memories.

understand, learn, reflect and respond to future environmental changes.

Figure 1. VA System Design<sup>3</sup>



*Source: Author*

Additionally, this monograph proposes that to transform customer service, as a function of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) delivered through the VA disability claims process, a systemic approach embracing analytical understanding, holism, and emergent learning is required.<sup>4</sup> The proposed system design is an attempt to reach a systemic construction that places disability claims processing within a larger environment encompassing multiple dimensions of customers. The argument is rooted the activities recommended to construct the VA disability system through a guided process of learning. Building a learning construction comes through the ability to understand, visualize, describe, and direct novelty developed from an internal inside-out perspective along with applying external concepts appropriately to the VA

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<sup>3</sup> This monograph argues that this model (Figure 1) which uses product, planning, and practice, paired with the guided process of learning, can be used to develop and codify the VA disability system. Because human thinking is about building, accessing, and applying mental models in a variety of circumstances, this simply model provides the initial framework within which emergent learning can occur.

<sup>4</sup> Holism is the theory that parts of a whole are interdependent upon each other in such a manner that complete understanding cannot occur through analysis of the independent parts alone. Furthermore, holistic thinking is the art and science of dealing with the interaction of the interdependent variables.

problem set. In order to achieve design of this system from a novel perspective, this monograph proposes three forcing functions of learning through design: product, practice, and planning.

First, the product element of the VA disability system is best articulated in the concept of task alignment.<sup>5</sup> Although VA has many direct and indirect inputs and outputs, the focus of the design is product output of an accurately completed disability claim. The first task is to identify and map all producers and suppliers; direct, indirect, and supporting entities; as well as customers and clients (collectively referred to as agents) across the entire system aligned with the product. The key to this activity lies in identifying the novelty associated with the critical exchange of information that drives the VA disability claims process. The larger argument contained within this monograph requires that readers understand the shortfall in viewing the disability claims process as a cousin of a manufacturing process. Whereas the critical exchange between entities in a manufacturing process is a physical material, the entire VA system relies almost exclusively on the exchange of information and the application of tacit knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Through analysis of task alignment and the centrality of the product output, this monograph will explain the previous *mismatches* associated with the types of analyses undertaken.

Second, the practice component of the VA disability system is the relationships and interactions that occur between all customers and clients as mapped in the task alignment design. Whereas the previous task alignment design sought to undertake analysis and break the system apart, here, the design focus seeks synthesis as applied through the sum of the reconstructed parts

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Beer, Russell A Eisenstat, and Bert Spector, “Why Change Programs Don’t Produce Change,” *On Change Management* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press), 179. The authors define task alignment as, “...directing employees’ responsibilities and relationships towards the company’s central competitive task,” where managers focus energy on concrete work actions and products, not soft and unquantifiable abstractions.

<sup>6</sup> Tacit knowledge lies in the expertise associated with know-how, know-why, and care-why, which is opposite what is typically present in bureaucratic organizations in the form of explicit knowledge (the ability to organize, to systematize; to translate a vision into a mission statement, into operational guidelines). See Table 3 for additional information.

into a comprehensive whole. This is the first instance when meaningful design can begin to emerge. Two questions should drive this synthesis effort. One, what information and in what mode will the information be exchanged? Two, how is the information exchanged: is it in the best interest of the sending or receiving customers? The essence of this exercise is to view the *entire* system design as customer service delivery and focus all customers and clients on the design associated with delivery of services so that the immediate end user/customer receives a better product.

Third, in this proposed VA disability system, planning is the link between analysis and synthesis that allows for the development of a learning path. More precisely, planning, as codified by the U.S. Army, is the “art and science of understanding a situation, envisioning a desired future, and laying out effective ways of brining that future about.”<sup>7</sup> Planning, however, should not be confused with a plan – the product of planning – “a directive for future action.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, VA has demonstrated the ability to do this already. However, as this monograph will explore further, VA has focused too exclusively on the disability claims process. As a result, they misinterpreted the complicated and ignored the complex, limiting the transformation of service delivery. Ultimately, the proposed design, recommendations, and this monograph are about “the creative act of synthesizing experiences into a novel strategy.”<sup>9</sup>

#### Creative Emergence of a Novel Strategy: *Internal* Customer Service at VA

In explaining the strategy for the argument contained within this monograph, one must be

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) No. 3-0, Unified Land Operations, October 2011* (Washington, DC Government Printing Office), 10.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) No. 5-0, The Operations Process, May 2012* (Washington, DC Government Printing Office), 2-1.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Mintzberg, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” *Harvard Business Review*, (January-February 1994): 109.

conscious that obtaining a desired future need not be the same as achieving a desired end state. A critique of the current transformation plan is the emphasis placed on the agency's "business process and technology-centered improvements designed to eliminate the disability claims backlog and achieve the goal of processing all claims within 125 days with 98 percent quality by the end of 2015."<sup>10</sup> While worthy targets, the operational problem VA faces is not one in which achieving a given end state can lead officials to declare the problem fully solved.<sup>11</sup> While the emphasis placed on business processes and technologies will lead to improvements, it will not transform the organization as originally intended.<sup>12</sup> Figure 2 below offers a simple illustration that argues technology modernization (or solely customer service modernization) does not meet the intent of transformation; *both* must be explicitly present (and across multiple dimensions) in any codified plan for VA.

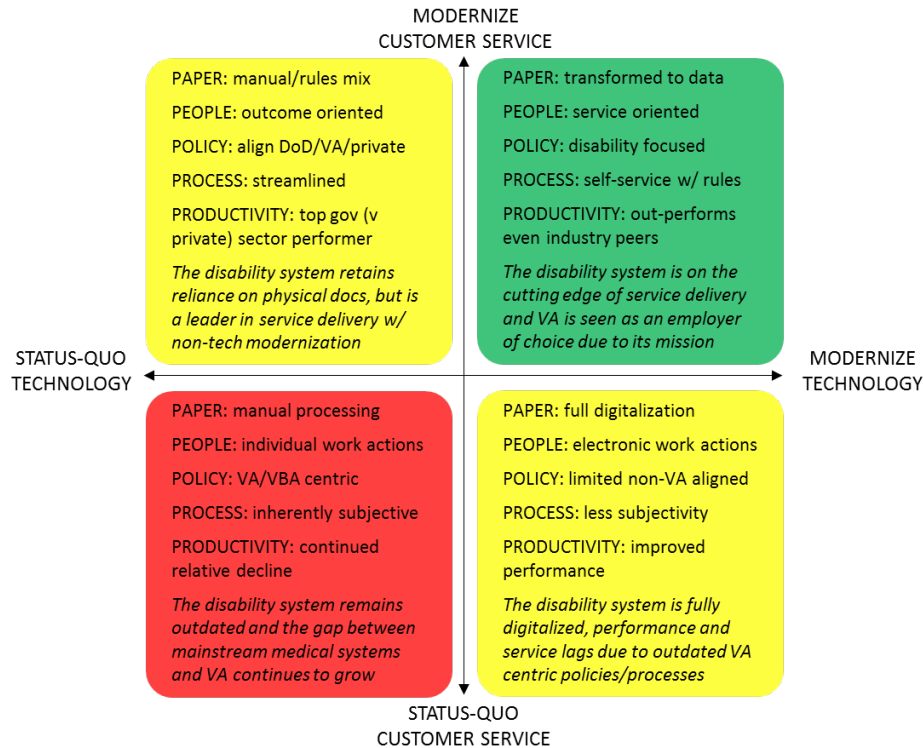
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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Transformation: How Will VA Look When Its Complete," Veterans Benefits Administration, [http://benefits.va.gov/TRANSFORMATION/Trans\\_endstate.asp](http://benefits.va.gov/TRANSFORMATION/Trans_endstate.asp) (accessed March 2, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> The U.S. Army outlines an operational problem as a discrepancy between the state of affairs *as it is* and the state of affairs as it *ought to be* that compels action to resolve it. In terms of VA, this monograph argues the operational problem is *customer service* at large, not the *processing* of VA disability claims.

<sup>12</sup> Secretary Eric R. Shinseki, "VA's Challenges," Address to Veterans Benefits Administration Leadership Workshop, Washington, D.C. February 25, 2009. Secretary Shinseki stated his strategic mission was to fulfill President Obama's vision to transform VA into a 21st century organization. Reaching the goals of 125/98% will indeed show a marked improvement, but in terms of service delivery, this monograph argues the core aspects of customer service have the potential to remain unaffected.

Figure 2. Potential VA Futures



Source: Author

In order to distinguish how the strategy for this monograph differs from the current Transformation plan, it is necessary to first briefly present contextual definitions for “strategy,” “novel,” “emergence,” and “creativity” below, followed by the larger context of the operational problem. In the context of this monograph, strategy is more than an overarching logic governing the achievement of a goal. Rather, “strategy” refers to a plan for attaining continuing advantage.<sup>13</sup> Characterizing the continuing advantage in the case of service delivery to veterans is analogous to continuously adapting to evolving needs and changing demographics; it means always being in front and driving change versus reacting. Likewise, a novel strategy in this case is more than a

<sup>13</sup> Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

new strategy. Because the underlying structure of this monograph highlights the human dynamic of organizations and specifically the information exchange between internal customers, this monograph chooses to define novelty in this context is the Novelty-Confirmation-Transformation Cycle as developed by Paul Carlile and Karim Lakhani. These authors point out that novelty is a reminder that not everything old is bad and not everything new is good. For them, old and new are more than the inherent creative tension, but a process of seeking out novel courses of action, confirming the value presented, and transforming that knowledge to develop further courses of action.<sup>14</sup>

For the purpose of this research, the classification of creative emergence builds off these definitions. Emergence, in this context, comes from emergent properties, which are properties exhibited by the system that the individual parts contained within the system do not exhibit themselves.<sup>15</sup> In short, this is often what analysis alone misses and is one of the underlying goals for constructing a system view of the inputs, outputs, and relationships inherent to VA. Following the logic presented by Jeffrey Goldstein, the creative process, or innovation, and emergence share many commonalities, and are maximized when appropriately constructed rather than self-organized.<sup>16</sup> This monograph carries the theme of construction throughout; it not only aligns with how one brings about a transformation of a system, but also helps to understand and learn from the structure of the problem itself.

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<sup>14</sup> Paul R. Carlile and Karim R. Lakhani, "Innovation and the Challenge of Novelty," Harvard Business School Working Paper, March 15, 2011, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Axelrod and Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Goldstein, "Emergence, Creativity, and the Logic of Following and Negating," *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, Volume 10(3), 2-4. Henry Mintzberg, noted business author, also alludes to a similar argument saying, "Strategies can develop inadvertently, without the conscious intention of senior management, often through a process of learning." This monograph presents the argument that one can construct the process of learning within a medium that amplifies creativity and innovation.

### Ill-Structured Problems and the VA Disability Claims Process

The core of the working hypothesis in this monograph is in acknowledging that the VA disability system exists in the realm of social and policy planning. Furthermore, the issue at hand is an operational problem: A discrepancy between the state affairs *as it is* and the state of affairs *as it ought to be* compels action to resolve it.<sup>17</sup> These factors lead to problems that Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber have characterized as being “inherently wicked.” While the authors offer ten distinguishing properties of planning-type (“wicked”) problems (see appendix B for additional information, each of the author’s ten properties are cross-walked with scenarios encountered by VA), this monograph draws on the authors’ general observations along with a more robust investigation of their first distinguishing property of such problems.

First, Rittel and Webber distinguish between problems in the natural sciences that are definable, separable, and have solutions that one can find; versus the planning problems that are ill defined and are never truly solved, but *resolved* repeatedly.<sup>18</sup> Essentially, the authors have identified the structure of the problem as the driver separating planning problems from more familiar types of problems. In the chart below, the U.S. Army offers a summary of the classes of operational problems leaders may encounter according to structure, solution development, execution, and adaptive iteration. The working hypothesis of this monograph assumes that the construction of a VA disability system encompasses the attributes of an ill-structured problem

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Army, *TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500, Commander’s Appreciation and Campaign Design*, Version 1.0, January 2008, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences*, 4 (1973): 160. For example, the delivery of customer service is a problem that is resolved repeatedly. With ever-changing demographics and taste preferences, advancing technologies, and competing entities, only in the short terms are operational problems associated with customer service delivery ever really solved. In the long term, strategy – the search for a continuous advantage – must find a way to continuously learn, adapt, and anticipate such future circumstances and most importantly concluded that end-states are rather notional in most planning problems (or at the very least exhibit a codified hand-off from one entity to another, but are hardly ever truly self-contained).



outlined below.

Table 1. Types of Problems

|                              | Well-Structured  | Medium-Structured  | Ill-Structured   |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <i>Problem Structuring</i>   | The problem is self-evident and structuring is trivial           | Professionals can easily agree on the structure  | Professionals will have difficulty agreeing on problem structure and will have to agree on a shared starting hypothesis        |
| <i>Solution Development</i>  | There is only one right solution and it may be difficult to find | There may be more than one right answer; professionals may disagree on the best solution, but the desired end state can be agreed upon | Professionals will disagree on how the problem can be solved, the desired end state, and whether the end state can be achieved |
| <i>Execution of Solution</i> | Success requires learning to perfect technique                   | Success requires learning to perfect technique and adjust solutions  | Success requires learning to perfect technique, adjust solutions, and refine problem framing                                   |

Source: Table adapted from U.S. Army, *TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500, Commander's Appreciation and Campaign Design, Version 1.0, January 2008, 8.*

The second, perhaps the most important concept to understand, is the argument by Rittel and Webber that there is no definitive formulation of an ill-structured problem and the significance the author's findings entail for the hypothesis of this monograph. They argue that within the realm of ill-structured problems, one cannot simply understand, and then solve; the formulation of these types of problems *is* the problem.<sup>19</sup> This argument has vital implications for the remainder of this monograph, for Rittel and Webber are critical of what they term the *first generation systems* approach to problem solving because of the linear approach often taken to divide a project/planning approach to problem solving into analytical phases. What is missing from the analysis of the problem (the breaking apart - systematic) is the putting back together (synthesis - systemic). This is further emphasized in the realm of ill-structured problems because as Rittel and Webber cite, the information required to understand the problem encompasses knowledge of all conceivable solutions as well.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 161-162.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 162.

As previously alluded, the construction of the VA disability system is a desired outcome of the proposed strategy for this monograph. However, as Rittel and Webber caution, knowing, understanding, and collecting *all* the information required to construct such a system encompassing the totality of the VA disability claims process would be an insurmountable undertaking. Rather, one is brought back to the initial model (Figure 1) introduced in this monograph. The hypothesis of the monograph is that the proposed initial model should be the guide in constructing the system design. In this spirit, it is not the goal of the model to capture an understanding of the system and the problem by depicting all the information required. Rather, the effort of constructing an interpretation is sufficiently useful for dealing with the reality the system presents.<sup>21</sup>

#### Towards Designing the System: Why Learning Is So Important?

The goal of constructing the VA disability system is to find the creative emergence of a novel strategy, to understand the ill-structured nature of the problem, and ultimately, to design an adaptive system capable of continuous learning and improvement. This adaptive system could move service delivery beyond protecting the status quo, past reactionary to external events, and drive the evolution of adaptation to evolving internal customers, external customers, stakeholders, and most importantly veterans and their families. To attain – to design - an adaptive and learning system, this monograph takes an indirect design approach. Rather than designing the exact form of service delivery (the exchange of information between customers), but by creating a space for the purpose of information, governmental constraints, and legislative rule sets, it is possible to establish a frame for which actions and decisions occur.<sup>22</sup> The value lies in the “intensity of

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<sup>21</sup> John F. Schmitt, “A Systemic Concept for Operational Design,” United States Air University, [www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/mcwl\\_schmitt\\_op\\_design.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/mcwl_schmitt_op_design.pdf), (accessed January 14, 2013): 9.

<sup>22</sup> Alex J. Ryan, “Application of Complex Systems to Operational Design,” Booz Allen

learning” that occurs during the construction of the system.<sup>23</sup> It is within this intensity of learning that one seeks to understand the issues associated with tactical problem solving in more depth, but also moves towards the synthesis of constructing novel approaches. Such sound design requires the critically testing, breaking, and constructing not just the old, but the new as well.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the rest of this monograph flows towards the design of the VA disability system. A baseline understanding of system thinking, complexity, and the idea of learning through theory construction in design that drives the remainder of the argument follows a section on the current challenges and background surrounding organizational transformation. Because their critical application within VA as a case study is what follows in three parts, these sections remain intentionally brief.

First, an analysis of the current disability claims process and larger environment in which it operates will demonstrate key links to systems thinking and complexity. Second, an investigation of the Army Design Methodology as a tool for framing the VA disability system and as a way to providing synthesis aligned with the ill-structured nature of the operational problems VA faces is presented. Finally, by revisiting the initial model introduced in this monograph, the learning lens of a novel strategy will emerge as a whole. A final summary of

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Hamilton, <http://necsi.edu/events/iccs2011/papers/40.pdf> (accessed August 10, 2012): 1263-1264.

<sup>23</sup> Shimon Naveh and James J. Schneider, “Strategic Design: Theoretical Considerations,” The Center for Design Excellence, Booz Allen Hamilton (unpublished, 2011): 11.

<sup>24</sup> Huba Wass de Czege, “Systemic Operational Design: Learning and Adapting in Complex Missions,” *Military Review* (January-February 2009): 10. Another important note along these lines is the cautionary advice offered by Peter Checkland that this monograph attempts to articulate further during the exploration of the human dimensions behind the initial model proposed. Checkland states, “We should be rigorous in thinking circumspect in action. We should remember that many people painfully find their way unconsciously to world-view which enable them to be comfortable in their perceived world. Coming along with a process which challenges world-views and shifts previously taken-as-given assumptions, we should remember that this can hurt. So what right do we have to cause such pain? None at all unless we do it with respect and in the right spirit: no lofty hauteur.”

concepts and concluding arguments will be provided before the presentation of key recommendations and the models suggested for use in moving from theory to action.

Current Context, Systems, Complexity, and Learning: Defining the Critical Attributes of the Disability Claims Process, Environment, and Theory

Through three cornerstone administrations, Veterans Hospital Administration (VHA), National Cemetery Administration (NCA), and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), VA operates the world's largest integrated medical system composed of 152 hospitals, 300 Vet Centers, and 821 VA community-based outpatient clinics, which provide comprehensive medical care to veterans and their families. Additionally, VA owns and operates the world's largest network of 131 cemeteries comprising over 16,000 acres across the United States and territories. In addition, VA experienced recent success providing services to see veterans through the housing crisis and in leading the interagency attempt to reduce veteran homelessness.<sup>25</sup> Yet, in spite of these accomplishments and many more, recent headlines only speak of the backlog of disability claims and long wait times for veterans seeking a disability determination, as administered by VA. While many factors have contributed to the backlog, commentators cite the influx of new veterans into a weak economy, new rules that make it easier to file claims (including for Agent Orange-related conditions and post-traumatic stress), and a growth in the

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<sup>25</sup> During the recent housing crisis, VA was able to assist veteran homeowners that their families mitigate economic circumstances by finding a solution to foreclosure (default resolution rate) at the rate of 71.5, 76.3, and 83.0 percent in fiscal years 2009, 2010, and 2011 respectively. Furthermore, VA has maintained the industry's lowest foreclosure rate for the past 18 quarters and lowest seriously delinquent rate (90+ days) for the past 15 quarter for all loan types: Prime, Subprime, FHA, and VA. Similarly, since 2009, VA has funded \$1.4 billion to specialized homeless programs and \$4.4 billion to health care for veterans who are homeless, which has reduced in the total number of homeless veterans by 17.2 percent. VA, along with interagency partners, have demonstrated an ability to view the operational problem associated with homeless veterans through the lens of holism and have developed a comprehensive, systemic (versus systematic) approach that has shown initial demonstrable success.

average number and complexity of medical conditions claims as the most critical factors.<sup>26</sup>

The backlog is defined as any claim pending (received by VA, but not completed) over 125 days and has become the benchmark for measuring benefits service delivery to veterans. Despite a nearly 85 percent growth from fiscal year (FY) 2006 in VBA direct disability claims workforce from 7,858 full-time equivalent employees to an estimated 14,520 in FY 2013, VA has also seen a dramatic growth in the backlog.<sup>27</sup> For example, at the end of FY 2006 VA had a total pending inventory (regardless of the age of the claims) of 378,296; whereas as of March 4, 2013, VA total pending inventory stands at 860,570 with 69.7 percent of all claims considered backlogged.<sup>28</sup> National think-tank commentators have argued that VA must demonstrate significant improvements in this single arena because it is damaging veterans' perceptions of the VA and faith in its ability to deliver services.<sup>29</sup>

Within this context, this monograph seeks to investigate how a novel strategy based upon systems thinking, complexity, and learning can move beyond simply eliminating the backlog to obtaining VA Secretary Eric Shinseki's mandate to *transform* VA into a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization. As mentioned previously, this monograph presents a brief overview of system

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<sup>26</sup> Steve Vogel, "For VA, mountains of disability claims remain a problem as vets wait for help," *Washington Post*, November 10, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "FY 2009 Budget Submission, Volume III, Benefits and Burial Programs and Departmental Administration," 4B-6 and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "FY 2013 Budget Submission, Volume III, Benefits and Burial Programs and Departmental Administration," 4B-8, <http://www.va.gov/budget/> (accessed January 22, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, "2013 Monday Morning Workload Reports," March 4, 2013 MS Excel spreadsheet, <http://www.VA.va.gov/REPORTS/mmwr/index.asp>, (accessed March 10, 2013). Traditionally, VA has categorized work in terms of claims requiring disability assessments (called compensation and pension rating claims) as an overall proxy for incoming workload. While this does not account for the literally millions of other tasks that must be accomplished in order to support the delivery of benefit services to veterans and their families, this is seen as the critical milestone by numerous critical stakeholders.

<sup>29</sup> Phillip Carter, "Upholding the Promise, Supporting Veterans and Military Personnel in the Next Four Years," (Washington, D.C. Center for a New American Security): 18.

thinking, complexity and learning prior to investigating the claims process itself and the key features of the VA disability claims process. In the paragraphs that follow, it is fundamental to understand that this monograph moves beyond the singular goal of eliminating the disability benefit backlog, to transforming an entire sub-organization within VA. While the backlog may provide the media with catchy sound bites, developing a novel strategy to tackle the backlog has the potential to overturn traditional misconceptions and reinvigorate what true service delivery within the government realm can be.

By understanding and learning to apply systems thinking, one must have a clear definition of what a system is, be able to trace the evolution that brought about the systems logic, and align with the teachings of modern system principles. The literature on systems is quite extensive and continues to grow with advances in integration with varied disciplines such as neurosciences, philosophy, economics, and warfare; this monograph relies on uncontroversial terms related to system and its underlying theory. Generally, a system is a set of interrelated elements of any kind. Noted systems theorist and author Russell Ackoff also outlines three underlying properties of a system.<sup>30</sup> First, the properties or behavior of each part of the set has an effect on the properties or behavior of the set as a whole. Second, the properties and behavior of each part and the way they affect the whole depend on the properties and behavior of at least one other part in the set. Therefore, no part has an independent effect overall. Third, every possible subgroup of elements in the set has the first two properties. Each has an effect, and none has an independent effect overall. Therefore, the elements cannot be organized into independent subgroups. Additionally, to use an example presented by Axelrod and Cohen, a system indicates a population of agents, all the strategies of all agents along with the relevant artifacts and

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<sup>30</sup> Russell L. Ackoff, "Science in the Systems Age: Beyond IE, OR, and MS," *Operations Research* (May-June 1973): 663-664.

environmental factors.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, not only is it important to investigate the possibilities of development of a VA disability system, but one must also evaluate where in the current thinking the methodology for organizational transformation currently exists. For this analysis, it is fundamental to understanding how systems thinking have evolved and lies in the determining characteristics of how agents interact. Antoine Bousquet argues that modes of thought have gone through four regimes over time. He traces this evolution in warfare from the clock, engine, computer, and to the network, which he aligns with the underlying theory of mechanism, thermodynamics, cybernetics, and finally, chaoplexity (see Table 2 below).

While Bousquet uses the construct of warfare to trace his argument in the evolution of thought, the same regimes are applicable to modes of thinking beyond warfare to business and government. The VA disability system inherently exhibits properties of chaoplexity on Bousquet's regime timeline (non-linearity, positive feedback, and emergence), but efforts to tackle the backlog continue to bring the solution into the realm of thermodynamics or mechanism. For example, the strides made by lean six sigma and total quality management exist arguably within the domain of mechanism (or perhaps even thermodynamics), but are woefully unprepared to deal with the evolution of information exchanges between humans and focused in the realm of customer service delivery.

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<sup>31</sup> Axelrod and Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity*, 6-7. It is important to note that these authors define strategy as “the way an agent responds to its surrounding and pursues its goals.”

Table 2. Four Regimes of Thinking

|                     | Mechanism                                 | Thermodynamics         | Cybernetics                                    | Chaoplexity  |
|---------------------|---|------------------------|--|--|
| Key technology      | Clock                                     | Engine                 | Computer                                       | Network  |
| Scientific concepts | Force                                     | Energy                 | Information                                    | Information  |
|                     | Matter in motion<br>Linearity<br>Geometry | Entropy<br>Probability | Negentropy<br>Negative feedback<br>Homeostasis | Non-linearity<br>Positive feedback<br>Self-organization<br>emergence |

Source: Table adapted from Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity* (New York: Columbia Press, 2009), 30.

The concept of complexity has recently begun to gain traction in business literature owing to the increased interconnectedness brought about by the information technology revolution.<sup>32</sup> However, few have been able to capture and convey what complexity means to business and government in the realm of solving ill-structured problems. To help with this clarification and to provide an additional baseline for the analysis and synthesis of the arguments presented in this monograph, the next section will provide a working definition of complexity, distinguish between the complicated and the complex, and outline how linear and non-linear attributes help codify complexity.

In reference to a system, complexity refers to the fact that a great many independent agents are interacting with each other in a great many ways. These agents inherently exhibit traits of self-organization, adaptiveness, and a kind of dynamism that make them quantitatively different from systems that are merely complicated or even chaotic.<sup>33</sup> Complicated systems

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<sup>32</sup> Gokce Sargut and Rita Gunther McGrath, “Learning to Live with Complexity,” *Harvard Business Review* (September 2011): 1.

<sup>33</sup> M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 11-12. It is important to note that complex system are spontaneous and exhibit traits of disorder, but are “also a far cry from the weirdly unpredictable gyrations known as chaos.”



have many moving parts, but they operate according to structure and patterns. What often separates the complex from the complicated is the interaction of human beings and their relationships. Thus, it is within this framework that this monograph challenges the notion of increased complexity as associated with the VA disability claims process and introduces the novelty of seeing the system from a different perspective. The argument follows that the claims process and its inherent tasks are complicated. However, because the process exists within a larger system, a system driven by the exchange of information between human beings, the system is complex. This is a critical component of this monograph and further exploration is undertaken later, but to help codify this argument one must also understand the attributes that distinguish linearity and non-linearity.

Systems that exhibit linear traits obey the rule of additivity where the ratio of output to input continues to be constant throughout the entire range of experience.<sup>34</sup> The idea follows that if five employees can output fifteen claims in a day, adding an additional employee would result in the output of eighteen claims. While this is an extremely simple example, any system that can be broken into parts and described by sophisticated or complicated equations retains linearity; if a systems exhibits interaction between agents as a core component it is nonlinear, even if those interactions are relatively straightforward.<sup>35</sup> It is in this context that two challenges confront the planner or problem solver. First, the collective behavior that results from interaction between agents whose individual behavior is other than the emergent behavior itself, known as emergent behavior, is extremely difficult to plan for.<sup>36</sup> Second, the sensitivity to initial conditions makes

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<sup>34</sup> Linda P Beckerman, "The Non-Linear Dynamics of War," Science Applications International Corporation, <http://www.calreso.org/beckermn/nonlindy.htm>, (accessed July 13, 2012), 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (Winter 1992/93): 62-63.

<sup>36</sup> Beckerman, "The Non-Linear Dynamics of War," 3.

the prediction and control of outcomes nearly impossible. However, this does not mean all hope is lost. Recognizing the presence of complexity and nonlinearity is just the initial challenge; the greater challenge is how to approach problem solving and planning when such conditions present themselves.

Before exploring the VA disability claims process and the application of the Army Design Methodology in detail, a final section offers the argument that the art and science to approaching ill-structured, complex, nonlinear systems rests in orientation, designing, and learning. Like all concepts within this monograph, ideas are presented in a linear fashion, but it is the sum of the concepts together which represent the primary utilization. Thus, this monograph offers one last build prior to the direct investigation of the VA case study. John Boyd's widely known observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) loop is the origin of critical factors involved with orientation. However, orientation is much more than determining one's relative position; it harkens back to the essence of creative tension and planning to set the initial conditions for creative action, which allows for the structure of creative emergence. First, Boyd stressed the importance of orientation, he states, "orientation shapes observation, shapes decision, shapes action, and in turn is shaped by the feedback and other phenomena."<sup>37</sup> With the added dimension of incorporating *both* analysis and synthesis, the orientation loop allows for creative emergence. As previously discussed with respect to novelty (the idea that not everything old, or new for that matter, has value), novel creation must have familiar aspects or it would not be recognizable as a departure from the familiar.<sup>38</sup> To this end, Boyd provides the example of four scenarios: downhill skiing, riding in an outboard motorboat, riding a bicycle, and viewing tractors with

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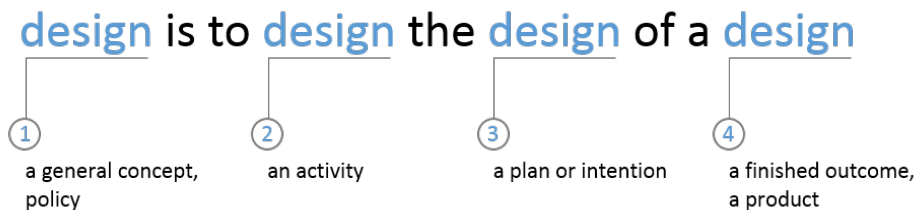
<sup>37</sup> Frans P.B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy, and War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 230. Additionally, components of the "big O" (orientation) include cultural traditions, genetic heritage, and new information, previous experiences, along with both analysis and synthesis.

<sup>38</sup> Goldstein, "Emergence, Creativity, and the Logic of Following and Negating," 8.

rubber caterpillar treads in a toy store.<sup>39</sup> From these examples, Boyd is able to create ‘snowmobiles’ by combining analysis and synthesis, acting on the orientation loop, and mimicking the properties of novelty.

While Boyd’s metaphor is certainly powerful, the immediate question that emerges is how one acquires the abilities to ‘build snowmobiles’ within an organizational structure? To answer that question, this monograph turns to the disciple of design. Attributed to professor John Heskett and presented by professor Michael Hardt, the graphic below is the starting point to orient this monograph to what is meant by design and seek further understanding as to how the cognitive activities of designers can assist in the achieving the outcomes associated with this monograph.

Figure 3. Design



Source: Figure adapted from Michael Hardt, *Design Definition “design, the term design,”* <http://www.michael-hardt.com/Professor/lectures.htm> (accessed December 10, 2012), 2.

To the accomplished cognitive builder of ‘snowmobiles,’ the definition above neatly captures the essence of design; for the nonprofessional, the definition cited by America’s International Technology Education Association (AITEA) authoritatively places the idea of design within this monograph. AITEA states that design is an iterative decision-making process

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<sup>39</sup> Osinga, *Science, Strategy, and War*, 202-203. Boyd further uses this metaphor to state, “A winner is someone (individual or group) who can build snowmobiles, and employ them in appropriate fashion, when facing uncertainty and unpredictable change.”

that produces plans by which resources are converted into products or system that meets human needs and wants or solve problems.<sup>40</sup> While this monograph will continue to use both definitions of design interchangeably, what is of greater importance is the cognitive activity associated with design and these definitions.

While much more will come in terms of exploring orientation, design, and the link to learning, this monograph presents one last argument that emphasizes learning prior to applying the basic outline to this monograph's chosen case study. Peter Senge introduced two critical concepts to the art of management in his learning organization and the idea of leader as designer. Senge explains that at the heart of a learning organization, a mind shift occurs where agents see themselves connected to the environment in which they operate. Agents go from seeing problems as caused by someone or something "out there" to seeing how their own actions create the problems they experience. Essentially, through learning, agents continuously discover how they create and operate in their constructed reality.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, within this construct, enthusiasm for the future is not enough; the mind shift must also entail cognitive movement from reactive thinking to generative thinking within a systems structure.<sup>42</sup> Senge argues that the leader as designer is a neglected leadership role. He uses the example of a ship designed without a rudder, saying it does no good for the captain to steer the organization in the right direction if key design flaws exist at the core.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Stefan J. Banach and Alex Ryan, "The Art of Design, A Design Methodology," *Military Review* (March-April 2009): 105.

<sup>41</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of a Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 52-53. The ability to discover the structural causes of behavior and where it exists in critical management and leadership levels of an organization is critical. One must be able to identify the operational problem (impediment or obstacle) inherent to the organizational structure or leadership behavior, which exists between reactive and generative modes of thinking.

<sup>43</sup> Senge, "The Leader's New Work," 10-11.

## SYSTEMATIC VERSUS SYSTEMIC MISMATCH: EXPLORING THE ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The initial task for system analysis of the VA disability claims process is to provide a short overview that allows for orientation. From here, a more robust investigation can begin. It is important to remember that the goal of this system analysis is not to provide all the information one needs to comprehend the entire inner workings of the organizational system. Rather, this monograph will focus on what makes the VA disability system distinguishable from more common service delivery systems. Focusing on the uniqueness of the VA disability system will allow this monograph to integrate and elaborate on previously cited ideas associated with the nature of ill-structured problems. Additionally, a closer examination of two critical steps that focuses on the core administrative and adjudicative process will highlight the system properties and complexity. Thus, at the end of this system analysis, one will have a more robust conception of the ill-structured nature inherent in the system, of system thinking, and complexity within the context of the VA disability claims process.

While VA administers numerous benefits across multiple business lines, this investigation focuses on delivery of disability compensation benefits.<sup>44</sup> The disability compensation program provides monthly monetary benefits to veterans with service-connected disabilities and any injuries or diseases incurred or aggravated due to military service, according to the severity of the disability.<sup>45</sup> Generally, VA must adjudicate eligibility and entitlement. To

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<sup>44</sup> VA administers benefits programs to include Compensation, Education and Training, Home Loans, Life Insurance, and Vocational Rehabilitation (see [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) for further information). Within each benefit program, multiple benefits and appeal procedures, along with outreach and awareness activities take place annually. While each program has a signature benefit, each program also has multiple ancillary benefits and maintenance activities that are required by law. For example, in FY 2011 VA processed 1.6 million actions in addition to the more commonly cited 1 million disability compensation claims processed.

<sup>45</sup> VA also provides additional benefits for dependent spouses, children, and dependent parents of veterans.

determine eligibility, the evidence must show a veteran served in the military on active duty, active duty training, or inactive duty training, and that the discharge was under other than dishonorable conditions. To determine entitlement, the evidence must show the following three conditions to establish service-connection: presence of a current disability, occurrence of an in-service event, and a medical nexus linking the current disability to military service (i.e, in-service event).<sup>46</sup> If a veteran meets all three conditions of service-connection, the next step is to evaluate the severity of each disability on the scale of 0 to 100 percent in 10 percent increments. The collection of evidence to determine eligibility and entitlement is the core of the administrative process, whereas the determination of entitlement and level of disability severity is the core of the adjudicative process.

Although the previous paragraphs outlines and provides an adequate summary of the disability compensation program, there are three additional parameters that help to orient, bind, and illustrate the unique (ill-) structural challenges that affect service delivery. First, VA has a mandate to assist veterans in obtaining the evidence that is required to establish eligibility and entitlement to benefits. The congressionally passed Veterans Claims Assistance Act (VCAA) of 2000 states that VA must notify veterans of what information is necessary to complete the application; indicate what necessary information has not been provided; make reasonable efforts to assist veterans in obtaining evidence and records; and notify veterans when VA is unable to obtain records.<sup>47</sup> While well intended, this law has significant unintentional consequences in

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<sup>46</sup> Compensation may also be paid for disabilities that are considered related or secondary to disabilities occurring in service and for disabilities presumed to be related to circumstances of military service, even though they may arise after service. Additionally, under certain circumstances, VA may conclude that certain current disabilities were caused by service, even if there is no specific evidence proving this in the particular claim. For example, the cause of a disability is presumed for veterans that were former prisoners of war and those exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam. However, evidence of a current disability is still mandated.

<sup>47</sup> United States Code (U.S.C.), Title 38, Part IV, Chapter 51, Subchapter I, §5102(b); §5103(a); §§5103A(a)(1) and 5103A(b)(1); and §5103A(b)(2).

practice. This issue arises when obtaining records from other federal agencies such as the Social Security Administration (SSA) or the Department of Defense (DoD). For example, a recent United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) report cites delays in obtaining military service and medical records from National Guard and Reserve member as playing a significant role in processing time delays for benefits due to the amount of time it takes to gather all the required evidence.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, VA accepts benefit applications from veterans on nearly any medium and showing minimal intent.<sup>49</sup> Owing to these policy and procedures just outlined, the issue of communication and navigating the system and what evidence/information is required tends to be further complicated. This becomes a three-step process in first deciphering the request, then determining the missing information, and finally notifying the veteran. The result of any misinterpretation during this phase leads to additional activities and time on behalf of veterans and VA.<sup>50</sup> These parameters, although meant to provide a high degree of customer service to veterans in the form of unprecedented access and service in obtaining records, often frustrate both sides. This circular notion (VA notifying veterans of information missing or required to complete an application as well as evidence needed to substantiate a claim for benefits) is very similar to the first premise of ill-structured problems. And this example comes very close to the argument

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<sup>48</sup> United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Veterans’ Disability Benefits: Timely Processing Remains a Daunting Challenge,” (Washington, DC Government Printing Office, December 2012), 18.

<sup>49</sup> Federal law only requires veterans to use an official form when applying for benefits the first time. However, VA will acknowledge an informal claim and provide veterans will one year to submit the required form.

<sup>50</sup> For every time a benefits application needs clarification and/or additional clarification, another benefits application does not receive attention by VA. One can see how this problem can quickly compound itself.

that “the information needed to understand the problem depends upon one’s idea for solving it.”<sup>51</sup> Essentially, VA must ‘know’ the solution prior to communicating with veterans.

Two additional parameters unique to VA compound the ill-structured nature inherent in the VA disability system. For example, the second unique property of the system is reasonable doubt. Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations, §3.102 states, “When, after careful consideration of all procurable and assembled data, a reasonable doubt arises regarding service origin, the degree of disability, or any other point, such doubt will be resolved in favor of the claimant.”<sup>52</sup> While the baseball fan will instantly recognize this as the “tie goes the runner” clause, it is not that straightforward. §3.102 also provides for reasonable doubt in the absence of official records. Stated in the way this clause is, subjectivity plays a role in every adjudication of benefits. Again, this is very similar to one of the properties of ill-structured problems, where solutions are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad.<sup>53</sup> Whereas questions concerning eligibility are usually true-or-false (i.e. does the veteran have the disability claimed?), questions concerning entitlement are usually subjective (i.e. Does the veterans’ records demonstrate an in-service event to substantiate a medical nexus to the disability claimed?) and often have less than perfect

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<sup>51</sup> Rittel and Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” 161.

<sup>52</sup> United States Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Title 38: Pensions, Bonuses, and Veterans' Relief, Chapter 1: Department of Veterans Affairs, §3.102. The remainder of the §3.102 is as follows: By reasonable doubt is meant one which exists because of an approximate balance of positive and negative evidence which does not satisfactorily prove or disprove the claim. It is a substantial doubt and one within the range of probability as distinguished from pure speculation or remote possibility. It is not a means of reconciling actual conflict or a contradiction in the evidence. Mere suspicion or doubt as to the truth of any statements submitted, as distinguished from impeachment or contradiction by evidence or known facts, is not justifiable basis for denying the application of the reasonable doubt doctrine if the entire, complete record otherwise warrants invoking this doctrine. The reasonable doubt doctrine is also applicable even in the absence of official records, particularly if the basic incident allegedly arose under combat, or similarly strenuous conditions, and is consistent with the probable results of such known hardships.

<sup>53</sup> Rittel and Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” 162-163.



information.<sup>54</sup>

The last unique parameter associated with disability compensation is that there exists no time limit between separation from military service and filing a claim for benefits, nor does there exist any limitation on filing subsequent claims following a veteran's initial filing. For example, it is quite common for VA to receive original claims from Vietnam veterans who separated from service over 40 years ago. In fact, over half of all veterans who began receiving disability benefits in FY 2011 were over the age of 55.<sup>55</sup> Regardless of average age or distribution of age at separation, this represents a significant lag between military service and benefits application, which only compounds the issues associated with the previously cited parameters. The other factor, the ability to file any number of claims after the initial filing, provides veterans with the opportunity to file a claim anytime a previously established disability worsens or a new disability arises, which also influences operations. In FY 2011, this workload represented 62 percent of all incoming claims.<sup>56</sup> Again, the theme of compounding matters is present. In the well-intentioned decision to allow veterans to file claims whenever new information and/or evidence is found, unintended consequences often result in multiple non-value added actions that further frustrate the system.

Understanding how the previously presented parameters shape the uniqueness of the system and compounds the inherent ill-structured nature of the operational problem is only part of

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<sup>54</sup> This is further compounded by the inherent *subjectivity* of 38 C.F.R. §3.159(c)(2) which states: VA will end its efforts to obtain records from a Federal department or agency only if VA concludes that the records sought do not exist or that further efforts to obtain those records would be futile.

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Veterans Benefits Administration, Annual Benefits Report Fiscal Year 2011," <http://www.VA.va.gov/reports/>, (accessed February 17, 2013): 11. Of the total 223,007 veterans who began to receive disabilities benefits for the first time in FY 2011, 53% (117,950) were over the age of 55.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "FY 2013 Budget Submission," 4B-15.

the equation. One must also investigate the claims process itself, as well as how the previous parameters integrate or cause mismatches in the system. Often, analysis of the claims process separates its inherent policies and procedures from the larger environment. Too often, strict analysis of the process results in reductionist tendencies.<sup>57</sup> This is not to say analysis of the process does not have value, but without putting component parts back together through synthesis, key observations are lost. Thus, in this section, the focus is towards two critical components of the disability claims process, the administrative collection of evidence, and the adjudication of disability determination to show how the claims process exhibits key principles of a system. This understanding demonstrates the mismatch in viewing the disability claims process in a *systematic* versus *systemic* framework and the consequences that result.

When the investigation defaults to the usual technique of analysis – the division of a physical or abstract whole into its constituent parts - the claims process lends itself to a closed system characteristics. Many, including industry leading consulting experts such as Booz Allen Hamilton, view the disability claims process as a “typical batch-and-queue production model” where work is produced at each phase and moved in batches to the next step before it is needed.<sup>58</sup>

For example, the claims process is usually broken down and displayed by function, as shown in figure 4 below. The claims process operates in a serial workflow: establish the claim, collect and develop evidence, evaluate the claimed disability, award benefits, notify the veteran, and move to the next claim. At each phase, VA employees perform different, but critical functions to process veterans’ claims. At triage, employees establish the claim by entering initial demographic and work-type indicators into the computer system, and then perform mail review

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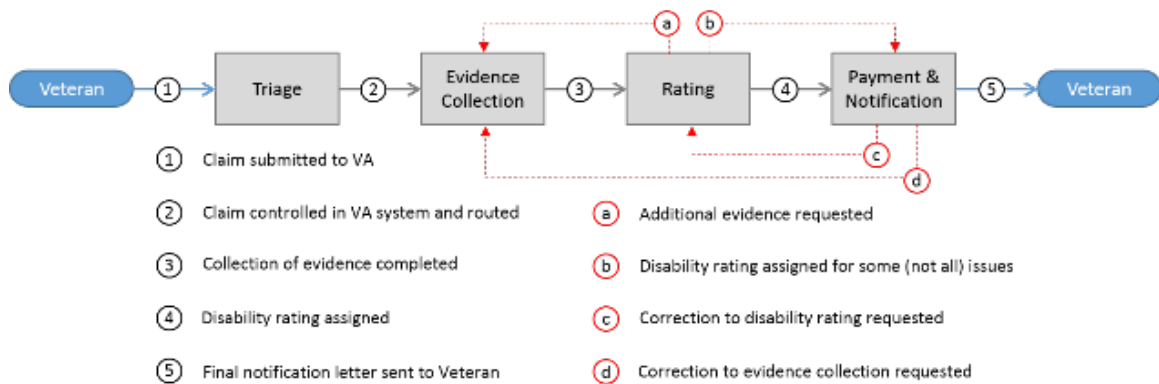
<sup>57</sup> In Ackoff’s words, “Analytic thinking is, so to speak, outside-in thinking; synthetic thinking is inside-out. Neither negates the value of the other, but by synthetic thinking we can gain understanding that we cannot obtain through analysis, particularly of collective phenomena.”

<sup>58</sup> Booz Allen Hamilton, “Veterans Benefits Administration Compensation and Pension Claims Development Cycle Study,” Final Report June 5, 2009, 13.

and routing duties. During the evidence collection phase, employees are responsible for collecting evidence necessary for making the disability determination. At rating, employees are responsible for determining if the veteran's claimed disability is connected to military service and if so, assigning a degree of disability as outlined in the Veterans Affairs Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD). Finally, at the payment and notification phase, employees' process, review award payments, and complete written notification that is physically mailed to the veteran.

What is inherent in the system, but seldom understood, is that at each phase in the process a VA employee must take action and produce an output that must be communicated to both another VA employee and the veteran. This dualism in the system creates additional complexity in terms of customer service due to how the process is designed (or not designed) to identify policy and procedures that maximizes service to the veteran and aligns employee actions with the laws and regulations that govern VA. As an organization, VA fundamentally understands this challenge, but has failed to get external stakeholders to appreciate or as this monograph argues, has yet to integrate into its larger transformation efforts.

Figure 4. Linear Claims Process



Source: Figure adapted from IBM Global Business Services, "Veterans Benefits Administration Claims Processing Improvement Study, Gap Analysis – Final," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, February 2008, 21.

Viewed in isolation, the components of the claims process display many characteristics of a closed system. However, the view of the claims process as outlined in Figure 3 above ignores two critical components of reality that leads to a more appropriate view of the claims process as an open system. First, a veteran's claim does not flow from team to team in the same manner that a simple widget moves down an assembly line where component parts are added. Instead, at each stage in the process, human agents must make decisions. These decisions not only affect the actions and activities at the current stage, but also are critical in how they support future decisions and activities by other human agents downstream. The most critical example is the relationship between VA employees associated with evidence collection and rating.

The employees associated with evidence collection team must gather information; determine what the right information is, and when the threshold of information necessary for a decision is reached. Yet, the employees associated with rating determine the actual decision. This inherent tension between employees in different job functions introduces ambiguity, instability, and variable goals; all are characteristic of an open system.

Second, the employees associated with evidence gathering must interact with actors outside the immediate claims process. Collecting information usually entails communication with the veteran for clarification and collection of personal accounts of events or records, other federal agencies for records (such as DoD records, which can further be broken down as different policies and procedures exist for prior active duty versus National Guard and Reservists), and VHA or private physicians for medical information. Within this collection effort, VA employees may interact with three or more different systems, each with their own unique goals, policies, procedures, decision processes, understanding of needs, and so forth.

This collection of information across and between multiple actors from various systems creates a critical flaw in the claims process. In fact, this sequential workflow of the claims process led the VA Claims Processing Task Force to state: "The current sequential workflow was not

designed to deal efficiently with rework (seen in Figure 4 as the red dotted lines that are oriented from right to left) reintroduced into the process.”<sup>59</sup> The dire consequences of this design are seen in the Booz Allen Hamilton study of the development process which found that “while the observed (Regional Offices) spend less than 8 hours of activity developing a rating claim, they required anywhere from approximately 100 to 200 days to get a claim ready to rate.”<sup>60</sup>

Thus, a more accurate (non-linear) picture of the disability claims process should account for both internal and external handoffs, interaction with other systems, and understanding of what components make the disability claims process so different from typically studied mechanistic processes. While there is value in understanding and mapping the process, one must also understand that the claims process operates in limited closed system only at each process step, and even then it is questionable whether or not the pre-determination and rating stages can truly be considered closed systems when analyzed tactically. The claims process as a whole operates as an open system. Furthermore, the claims process is also non-linear, another nuance of the claims process often ignored by outsiders.

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<sup>59</sup> VA Claims Processing Task Force, “Report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, D.C. October 2001, 28

<sup>60</sup> Booz Allen Hamilton, “Claims Development Cycle Study,” 12

Those who misinterpret the claims process as linear – or act as if it were - are able to point to inefficiencies, but fail to understand that it is nonlinear even if simple steps or equations describe steps within the process. The claims process and its inherent internal and external interactions are *irreducible features of the system* and these interactions are not linear. The false application of the rule of additivity would assume that an increase in VA direct claims processing employees would result in a corresponding (and linear) increase in service output. However, this ignores changes in the demographics internal to the claims process, the demographics external to the system, changes in laws and regulations, along with any modifications to the systems in

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which the claims process interacts.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, established nonlinear systems, those systems with feedback loops, delays, ‘trigger effects,’ tend to produce qualitative changes and surprises over time, often abruptly crossing a threshold into a qualitatively different regime of behavior.<sup>63</sup> When the inquiring mind approaches the claims process from a view that includes the environment in which it operates, it becomes quite clear that the claims process itself is simply one of many systems that operate in a greater context.

Furthermore, the nature of the work is a hybrid customer service/knowledge work that relies on the tacit knowledge of claims processors and leadership.<sup>64</sup> Presented below is a table that summarizes the properties of tacit and explicit knowledge. The underlying challenge is how to recognize and incorporate internal tacit knowledge transfer within the unique hybrid duties of VA claims processors and leadership. Just as a cognitive mismatch is present in depicting the disability claims process as linear, this mismatch is also present when planning activities attempt to engage organization change but fail to highlight the presence of tacit knowledge.

Table 3. Explicit versus Tacit Knowledge

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<sup>62</sup> This is illustration of where future research could shed light upon understanding the impact of positive and negative feedback in the system. For example, systems theory suggestions that established systems (organizations in this case) tend to revert to its nature steady state (equilibrium). Yet, in the system, competing traits of positive and negative feedback are present. A detailed investigation into the impact of the positive feedback associated with incoming workload balanced against the negative feedback tendencies of keeping employee ratios and production standards static could have the potential to introduce further opportunities for understanding, learning, and novelty.

<sup>63</sup> Beyerchen, “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War”, 63

<sup>64</sup> Peter F. Drucker, “Knowledge Worker Productivity: The Biggest Challenge,” *California Management Review* Vol. 41, No. 2, (Winter 1999): 79-94. Drucker presents a compelling argue for an approach to viewing the work environment and output of workers in the customer service sector that must also produce a product or provide a service that goes beyond traditional manufacturing components or simple service delivery (i.e. traditional customer service sector such as the restaurant or hospitality industries) that has a potential linkage to the concept behind the VA disability system.

| Explicit Knowledge   | Tacit Knowledge   |
|--|---|
| ○ Ability to disseminate, to reproduce, to access, and to reapply throughout the organization                      | ✓ Ability to adapt, to deal with new and exceptional situations                                 |
| ○ Ability to teach, to train   | ✓ Expertise, know-how, know-why, and care-why   |
| ○ Ability to organize, to systematize; to translate a vision into a mission statement, into operational guidelines | ✓ Ability to collaborate, to share a vision, to transmit a culture                              |
| ○ Transfer of knowledge via product, services, and documented processes  | ✓ Coaching and mentoring to transfer experiential knowledge on a one-to-one, face-to-face basis |

Source: Table adapted from Kimiz Dalkir, *Knowledge Management in Theory and Practice* (Boston: MIT Press, 2011), 8.

The environment is decidedly a systems environment, so has VA adapted a systems framework to tackle the problem? Yes and no: VA's transformation approach, which encompasses people, process, and technology, provide a solid starting point, and change management approach is also viable, but will it allow the organization to *transform* itself? This monograph argues that people, process, and technology, combined with a change management approach and the manner in which it is executed at does not cross the threshold into true systems understanding, thinking, and learning. Missing are two vital components, a true systems understanding of the human/information interconnectedness across multiple entities, along with the role that internal customer service and tacit knowledge play in shaping system outcomes.<sup>65</sup>

#### TO DESIGN OR NOT TO DESIGN? A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO CONSTRUCTING THE VA DISABILITY SYSTEM

Analysis of the disability claims process demonstrates that at the core of transforming service delivery dwells an ill-structured problem. Furthermore, the disability claims process and the larger environment operate in such a manner that mechanistic methods of thinking do not

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<sup>65</sup> Appendix A presents a detailed concept for VA to tease out key aspects associated with the art and science of information exchange, internal customer service, tacit knowledge, and systems thinking within a planning and learning construct.



align with the claims process, the environment, or the goal of transformation. With this in mind, the monograph now shifts its focus to a novel approach. The U.S. Army, like any business or government organization, employs a process when tackling operational problems. The novelty of the following investigation rests in the argument that (minus the violence) the fundamental nature of military operations is very similar to transformation (change) operations.<sup>66</sup>

In the chart below, the right hand side cites U.S. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, The Operations Process, Chapter 1, The Nature of Operations. The left side modifies the language to fit business and government. This comparison sets the stage for the investigation into the key methodologies the U.S. Army employs when confronted with ill-structured problems in complex environments. The goal of this next section is not simply to copy everything the U.S. Army has to offer, rather through a process of learning (including *following and negating*), synthesize discoveries of the previous section along with the material presented here to allow for the emergence of recommendations and strategies specific to VA within the appropriate context.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Military and cultural historian Peter Paret states, “Wars are not fought not to be won but to gain an objective beyond war.” So too is true with change management. Change management author John Kotter states, the goal in any change program, regardless of name, is “to make fundamental changes in how business is conducted in order to help cope with a new, more challenging environment.” What further makes the VA case study so much more appealing to this type of analysis is what was previously discussed – the ill structured nature of the VA disability system and the complexity inherent in an organization that must rely on the interactions between human agents with less than perfect information and subjective rules.

<sup>67</sup> In writing about the learning from the past and external entities, Paret argues, “Learning (is) more than copying; it should lead to the development of new responses.” Peter Paret, *The Cognitive Challenge of War* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2009), 86-87.

Figure 6. Nature of Military and Change Operations

**Military** operations are human endeavors, contests of will characterized by continuous and mutual adaptation among all participants. In **military** operations, **Army forces** face thinking and adaptive **enemies**, differing agendas of various actors (organizations and individuals), and changing perceptions of **civilians** in the operational area. As all sides take actions, each side reacts, learns, and adapts. Appreciating these relationships among human wills is essential to understanding the fundamental nature of **military** operations (ADRP 5-0).

**Change** operations are human endeavors, contests of will characterized by continuous and mutual adaptation among all participants. In **change** operations, **implementers** face thinking and adaptive **receivers**, differing agendas of various actors (organizations and individuals), and changing perceptions of **stakeholders** in the operational area. As all sides take actions, each side reacts, learns, and adapts. Appreciating these relationships among human wills is essential to understanding the fundamental nature of **change** operations.

*Source: U.S. Army, ADRP 5-0, 1-1, and Author*

The Army Design Methodology (ADM), a methodology for applying critical and creative thinking to understand, visualize, and describe problems and approaches to solving them, is the operational artists' cognitive force multiplier when it comes to planning and communicating plans. However, just like any other more traditional force multiplier, it is only useful when applied in the appropriate context. Ultimately, this section seeks to demonstrate that the ADM does not solve problems; it helps planners overcome cognitive mismatches and seeks to first identify the *right* problem, and then proceed in solving those problem sets.<sup>68</sup> This is at the heart of problem solving, regardless of methodology used, and contains valuable lessons for military, business, and government alike.

Understanding the ADM requires investigating its component parts and where it fits within the larger operations and planning context. First, the ADM is not the U.S. Army's methodology because it is trademarked or applicable only to the military, but in the sense that it

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<sup>68</sup> Cognitive mismatch in the context of this monograph refers primarily to misidentifying the problem in traditional analytical, linear, and mechanistic terms when the heart of the problem deals with human nature, which is anything but analytical, linear, and mechanistic.

has an assigned role in the doctrinally outlined operations process.<sup>69</sup> Second, design, as used in the ADM is both a noun and a verb; it refers both to a product and the process used to get there.<sup>70</sup> The cognitive process of the ADM is the critical activity because it sets the stage for detailed planning and products associated with the military decision making process (MDMP). Third, ADM is a methodology, a system of broad principles from which one uses methods or procedures to solve problems within the scope of a particular discipline. Thus, as doctrine is a guide to action rather than a set of fixed rules, so is the ADM.

Applying the ADM requires investigating how the U.S. Army stresses creative and critical thinking skills in the form of systems thinking. Here is an outline of three of the more critical concepts: holism, complexity, and nonlinearity. Holism is about seeing the whole as greater than the sum of its parts. While analytical thinking breaks down sets of independent variables, holism is the art and science of handling interdependent sets of variables.<sup>71</sup> Complexity is about identifying variable sets between detailed and dynamic complexity. Detailed complexity is the presence of many variables, whereas dynamic complexity outlines situations where cause and effect are subtle and variable interventions over time are not always obvious.<sup>72</sup> Essentially, dynamic complexity highlights the relationships between variables and recognizes the value in understanding feedback mechanisms.

In systems, seeing the whole, mapping, and understanding relationships between

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<sup>69</sup> See U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) No. 5-0, The Operations Process*, for additional information on the context and outline of the operations and planning process.

<sup>70</sup> Bryan Lawson, *How Designers Think* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Ltd, 2006), 3.

<sup>71</sup> Jamshid Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Ltd, 2006), 8-9.

<sup>72</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 71-72.

variables is critical; this enables understanding negative and positive feedback mechanisms.<sup>73</sup> Negative feedback occurs when an increase in one variable produces a decrease in another and vice versa; this feature is present in systems that seek a return to equilibrium. Positive feedback, on the other hand, occurs when an increase in a given variable produces a further increase in that variable, a decline, and a further decline. This feature is present in systems that appear unstable. While the science behind understanding systems in terms of feedback mechanisms and complexity is a product of recent research, the art embodied by a systems approach is nothing new. For example, Clausewitz understood that seeking exact analytical solution did not fit the nonlinear reality of the problems posed by war, and hence how the ability to predict the course and outcome of any given conflict is severely limited.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the ADM attempts to provide a way to frame and guide the *manner of thinking* needed to produce understanding and kick start the cognitive planning process in a complex, nonlinear environments.

While systems thinking is the underlying cognitive component, framing is the specific activity of the ADM that facilitates understanding, captures the essence of unfamiliar problems, and enables development of approaches for achieving the desired end state.<sup>75</sup> The first frame is the environmental frame; here the focus is on defining, analyzing, and synthesizing characteristics of operational and mission variables. The environmental frame seeks to invoke a systemic view of not just the current situation, but also the desired end state and space between as well.

Envisioning a desired end state within an environmental frame creates tensions in the form of

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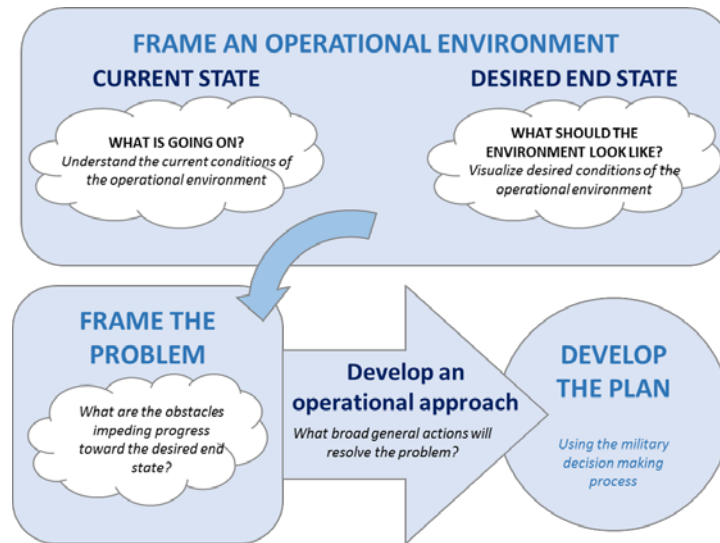
<sup>73</sup> Dietrich Dorner, *The Logic of Failure* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 74-75.

<sup>74</sup> Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," 61.

<sup>75</sup> During the activity of framing, planners actively engage in deciding what to include, as well as exclude. It is simply not possible to capture everything in the environment; there are simply too many variables. Thus, the art of framing is about capturing variables that have a tangible quality (nouns and action verbs) – as well as providing cognitive recognition of the variables not chosen for the framed environment, problem, or approach.

obstacles or issues that prevent obtaining the desired end state.<sup>76</sup>

Figure 7. Army Design Methodology



Source: Figure adapted from U.S. Army, ADRP 5-0, 2-6.

Within the ADM, two additional activities drive the framing process: developing a written narrative and visual models. These activities not only assist in understanding, but also empower communications between levels of planning echelons.<sup>77</sup> The tensions and operational problems encountered in complex, nonlinear environments are problems generally deemed ill-

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<sup>76</sup> As cited previously, Peter Senge uses the term ‘creative tension’ to distinguish between traditional problem solving that focuses on fixing an issue within a given status quo and the energy associated with creating a destination where an organization wants to end up, i.e. a vision versus a solution. For example, VA views paper in the system as an operational problem that needs to be solved. However, thinking in this manner remains in the realm of traditional problem solving. Rather, as this monograph argues for inclusion and focus on internal customer service, the energy associated with creating a new destination allows for moving beyond the status quo, but also can be operationalized – i.e. what is the impediment to achieving and codifying internal customer service?

<sup>77</sup> The general rule of thumb in planning and communicating in Army echelons is ‘one level up, two levels down.’ The commander approves and understands mission intent while lower echelons understand directed tasks.

structured or unfamiliar. At the root of this category of problems is the lack of professional consensus and agreement on the structure of the problem itself. Ideally, the environmental frame informs the problem frame; focusing on what is preventing the achievement and sustainment of a desired end state; and the problem frame informs the framing of an operational approach. Therefore, seeing the systemic nature of the whole, as well as explicitly linking all the components (environment, problem, approach) of the ADM is akin to the graduate level of understanding and managing planning activities.<sup>78</sup>

By shifting from examining the ADM in a military setting to possible application in a government setting, it appears VA has already embraced a design-like approach. The VA Claims Transformation website (<http://benefits.va.gov/transformation/>) provides an environmental frame with the current situation and desired end state, a (quasi) problem frame, and has outlined an operational approach. In fact, VA's Strategic Plan to Eliminate the Compensation Claims Backlog seems to follow the basic operations process of plan, prepare, execute, and assess.<sup>79</sup> However, closer investigation reveals the approach is design-like in nature only; for it demonstrates two possible traps associated with the misapplication of the ADM and its consequences when it comes to limited framing and confusing systematic for systemic.

Unfortunately when critics of the disability claims process say VA must eliminate the backlog, the environmental frame usually cited is the growing submission of claims, additional

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<sup>78</sup> Akin to a graduate level thesis, where one places just as much emphasis on staking a hypothesis, and the search to support or discover internal weakness and ultimately refine during the course of study, the ADM also encourages reframing as a way of continuous assessment and understanding. Reframing, in doctrine, is the activity of revisiting earlier design hypotheses, conclusions, and decisions that underpin the operational approach (as well as the problem, desired end state, current situation, and environment) because of changed conditions, modified mission, or unattainable goals.

<sup>79</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Strategic Plan to Eliminate the Compensation Claims Backlog," January 25, 2013. <http://benefits.va.gov/transformation/>

complexity of claims, and the paper intensive processes that govern the adjudication of benefits. However, this is only a portion of the environmental frame. In design, one conducts a robust understanding and framing of the current state, history, and future goals of all actors, not just the principle actor(s) within the operational environment. Framing the operational environment is by far the most demanding task associated with design and the very departure point where those that view the disability claims process fail to grasp the totality of the actors, policies, procedures, and constraints (both internally and externally imposed).

A key component to the actions that occur in the environmental frame and can often be overlooked to the detriment of planning and problem solving is that those engaging in the design of the environmental frame are “consciously choosing the perspective” from with the current and desired states are constructed.<sup>80</sup> In this realm, VA deserves credit for the approach it has taken. A quick review of the VA Claims Transformation website shows that VA has clearly identified an end state. In fact, VA has identified the end state for both veterans that engage the system and VA employees that are the engines of the system. However, this is still a limited perspective that is claim process centric and does not engage the totality of the system or invokes a systemic approach. As alluded to previously, a potential shortfall of the Transformation plan is not only the lack of a systemic view, but a tendency that is all too often present in today’s problem solving methodologies. A key argument of this monograph’s analysis is that VA has too quickly identified the solution (electronic claims processing) without fully understanding both the systemic nature and lack of approaches to tackling the problem.

The U.S. Army also teaches the many human thinking biases that are present when attempting to frame, understand, and tackle ill structured problems. In the VA case study, two biases are very useful in highlighting VA’s shortcomings. First, is the rational action of thinking

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<sup>80</sup> Ryan, “Applications of Complex Systems,” 1260.

as economically as possible, for the human conscious is inherently limited in the processing of complex and nonlinear data sets or seeing interconnected relationships.<sup>81</sup> This economic tendency of thought often leads to restrictions in information collection, planning, hypothesis formulation, and linear extrapolation.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, this economic tendency also influences another bias; putting too much weight on the observed problem. For example, by framing the environment around the disability claims process, VA has limited the scope of possible future end states, and thus problem sets as well as operational approaches. As previously stated, the holistic nature of the ADM is not just about systems thinking, but also seeing the interconnectivity and interdependencies of all variables associated with the environment, problem, and approach.

This initial misstep of limiting the environmental frame is critical, for it further exacerbates the impact of narrowing and putting too much emphasis on the problem identified by VA. An additional consequence of limiting the environmental frame to the disability claims process and outlining the problem in such a manner, is that the focus on the operational approach is systematic versus systemic in nature. In other words, by invoking words like *retraining*, *reorganizing*, *streamlining*, *implementing*, *improving*, and *redesigning*, VA has not moved beyond the detailed complexity associated with the disability claims process to the core issue, the dynamic complexity of the process. This is typical of human nature, mental models are for tackling the familiar, and humans seek to solve the problems they can see and control – even if they are not the ‘right’ problems. Thus, while the Transformation plan may very well meet the goals of all claims processed within 125 days at a 98 percent accuracy rate, VA will have improved the systemic assembly line nature of the process and done nothing to transform the

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<sup>81</sup> Dorner, *The Logic of Failure*, 185-189.

<sup>82</sup> Human thinking is about building, accessing, and applying mental models in a variety of circumstances. Because one’s time is limited and internal mental processing capacity is limited, the models tend to be overly simple. Thus, the cognitive challenge in the ADM is how planners and planning can overcome this mismatch.



systemic nature of the organization.<sup>83</sup>

Like any methodology, using the ADM does not guarantee success in planning and outcomes. However, by actively seeking to eliminate the mismatch between linear thinking models and nonlinear systems, organizations can begin to acknowledge planning traps and overcome inherent cognitive challenges. In the end, planning for a military campaign or for organization transformation ultimately comes down to the employment of operational art – from the top down and from the bottom up.<sup>84</sup> In the VA case study, this necessitates the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose not in relation to the disability claim, but in relation to ALL the customers in the system. In viewing the system from an inside-out customer service perspective – one focused on the dynamic exchange of information between direct/indirect and internal/external customers – a new holistic view in direct alignment with the strategic objective of transforming VA into a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization can emerge. The key to achieving this bottom up synthesis lies in the creative and critical thinking associated with the ADM.

#### EMERGENT LEARNING: THE KEY TO CONSTRUCTING THE VA DISABILITY SYSTEM

The last task of this monograph is to build off the argument that the disability claims process not only operates within a larger systemic structure, but also is itself a nonlinear complex system; along with building off the potential that design thinking has for tackling ill structure problems, such as the transformation of the VA disability claims process. To accomplish this

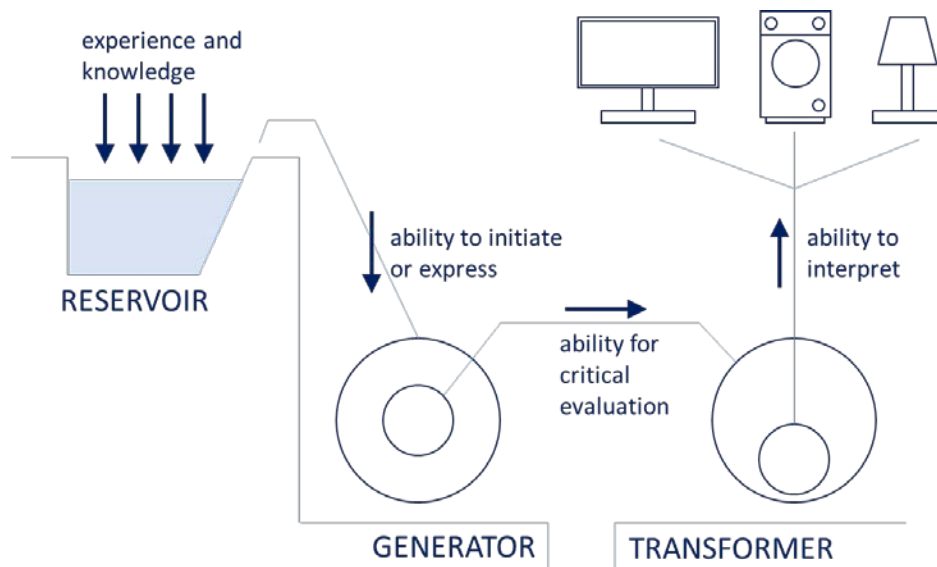
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<sup>83</sup> VA Secretary Eric Shinseki's original call to action surrounded the transformation of VA into a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization – not the specific linear targets of 125/98% placed upon the organization. The consequences of this are far reaching and are a large driver of the cognitive mismatch. However, this should not all be taken as a critique of the 125/98% goals – these are very real and very tangible; what is missing is the operational art of linking the tactical nature of 125/98% to the strategic objective of transformation.

<sup>84</sup> Huba Wass de Czege, "Thinking and Acting Like an Early Explorer: Operational Art is Not a Level of War," *Small Wars Journal*, (March 2004): 5-6.

task, the attention of the monograph returns to the initial model proposed and highlights the features of emergence. Recalling that the goal of the initial model is to provide a construction in which emergent learning occurs, i.e., learning through following and negating that lead to novel strategies and solutions.<sup>85</sup> Presented are additional models to serve as an underlying guide to enhance the way one is to interact with the proposed VA disability system construction. After this introduction, each of the components of the initial model is investigated in turn: product, practice, and planning. Lastly, a short wrap up concludes this section and transitions the monograph to the overall summary and recommendations.

Figure 8. Hydroelectric Plant as Learning



Source: Figure adapted from Bryan Lawson, *How Designers Think*, (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Ltd, 2006), 156-157.

The above model, adopted from M. Laxton's metaphor of a hydroelectric plant as

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<sup>85</sup> Goldstein, "Emergence, Creativity, and the Logic of Following and Negating," 7. Following and negating, as previously covered, refer to the "simultaneous continuing and undermining of extant rules, routines, and procedures."

learning, can help to clarify the intent for constructing the proposed VA disability system as outlined in this monograph. As repeatedly stated, the goal of constructing the system is to learn, and from learning, capture the novelty that emerges in order to tackle the ill-structured problem that is transformation in the disability claims processing environment. The beauty of this model is that each of the three components is already inherent in the key tasks that have been explored in the system analysis section of this monograph. Both the VSR doing the gathering of evidence and the RVSR who must adjudicate the decision draw on their previous experiences (what worked and did not work) and knowledge (current laws, regulations, and local rules) to ‘generate’ a collection or decision approach (ability for critical evaluation).

Next, the ability to interpret information to multiple audiences comes into play. What is of interest in this model is the space or movement between the reservoir, generator, and transformer. This is where the cognitive action occurs in the minds of decision makers.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, this is what the proposed model encompassing product, practice, and planning hopes to capture. In other words, the arrangement of the model seeks to capture novelty that emerges from an anacoluthian process: the processes through which “*constructional* in nature involving the building and building up of something, ones that involve the *passing* from one *construction* to another before the former is completed.”<sup>87</sup> As such, the model design is to serve as a vessel from which one can view, capture, and reframe the passing of information from one construction to another where each component has a specific and vital role.

At this point in the monograph, it may seem like a backwards step, or at least counterintuitive to suggest that a key component in the building of the VA disability system is a

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<sup>86</sup> Systems authors Ackoff and Gharajedaghi remind their readers, that “to think about anything requires an image of a concept of it, model.” Thus, the continued importance stressed on developing and using models to structure the thinking and the key points this monograph seeks to capture.

<sup>87</sup> Goldstein, “Emergence, Creativity, and the Logic of Following and Negating,” 7.

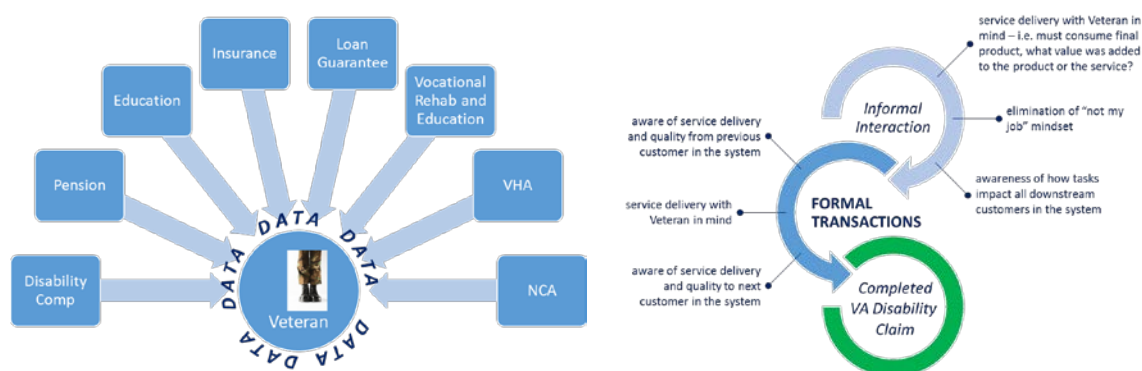
product, defined as the output of an accurately completed disability claim, but the reasons are very logical. Because there exists so many interdependences, which if not focused can seem disconnected, the product focus is where the model starts due to the ability of system designers to focus their efforts and appease stakeholders. Essentially, the product focus logic allows for a bottom-line business case analysis as well as a focal point from which to map the relationships that involve information exchange leading to a completed product.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, with a little creativity it also has the ability to capture and align all the ancillary and support duties that occur surrounding the claims process.<sup>89</sup> Finding the value that each employee adds, directly or indirectly, to *how* the claim is completed, marks the start of a truly interconnected and interdependent learning organization that can establish a *service identity* from the inside out. This marks a distinctive perspective in viewing the system, and somewhat deviates from the current path, but is not mutually exclusive from the more IT centric view of viewing the veteran-as-a-client focal point.

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<sup>88</sup> See introduction and definition of ‘task alignment.’

<sup>89</sup> It is an observation of this author (who is also guilty of this notion) that the backlog ‘problem’ is too often someone else’s problem. It falls into the camp of embracing the notion that the problem is not from the outside or other people, but every person in the organization has a responsibility associated with the problem. Senge explains this notion as a shift in thinking, “from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something ‘out there’ to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.” For example, any individual employee, group of employees, or manager of a group of employees that is meeting their assigned targets have every right to think they are not part of the problem – they are on target so it must be others that are not on target that are the problem. This example is further exacerbated when ancillary and support roles see their jobs and duties as disconnected from the claims process. The outreach specialist and budget analyst are sometimes so removed from the claims process itself, it is too easy to disconnect their linkage to customer service.

Figure 9. Veteran Centric and Claims Centric



Source: Author

For example, the two graphics above represent the proposed view as the claim output as the central focal point (left), while the other graphic represents the Veteran-Centric view (right). It is the argument of this monograph that the two views are not mutually exclusive. As previously stated, the Veteran-Centric view is more IT focused – within the VA disability system there should exist a common architecture in which key demographic data that supports all the functions of benefit, medical, and burial services can be accessed by multiple administrations, business lines, and individuals simultaneously without overlap and where all the data is consistent. Essentially this is the common data pool and allows the veteran what industry would term “one-stop shopping.” By providing one set of information requirements, a veteran should be able to apply and receive decisions regarding multiple benefits. This proposal is very different than the claim output focused graphic. The underlying difference is between the detailed complexity of data on the right and dynamic complexity of data on the left because of the relationships that exist in the VA disability system.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Senge, “The Leader’s New Work,” 15. Detailed complexity signifies multiple variable, whereas “dynamic complexity arises when cause and effect are distant in time and space, and when the consequences over time of interventions are subtle and not obvious to many participants

Lastly, by using output as a focal point, changes to the system can be quantified and reported to stakeholders. This is a pragmatic solution to what is a very real constraint within the larger system of government oversight and budgeting that the VA disability system is only a small subset. The recent GAO report criticizes the current Transformation plan for lack of measurement indicators.<sup>91</sup> What government and other stakeholders demand (fairly or unfairly considering their potential lack of understanding the system complexity) is to have measureable performance outcomes based upon changes to the system and/or changes to the monetary (employees, technologies, and other budgetary resources) input levels. By no means will this be an easy effort, for as previously cited, the VA disability system is nonlinear at best and stakeholders that do not appreciate this fact will retain the potential to misdiagnose the core issues.

At the very foundation of using output as a focal point is the ability to begin to construct the structural and interdependent relationships in the system. Seeing what Senge calls “interrelations, not things, and processes, not snapshots,” is the key to this component of the proposed model.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, a subtle underlying argument of this monograph is that VA is misusing the term complexity as it relates to incoming claims and this has an impact on the path going forward. VA cites that the number of claimed medical conditions per disability claim has increased from 3-4 conditions from Vietnam era veterans to 8.5 conditions per claims from Iraq

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in the system.”

<sup>91</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Veterans’ Disability Benefits: Timely Processing Remains a Daunting Challenge,” (Washington, DC Government Printing Office, December 2012), 28. The report states, “The planning documents do not include performance goals, measures to assess the effectiveness of each initiative, or their impact on claims and appeals processing timeliness.”

<sup>92</sup> Senge, “The Leader’s New Work,” 15.

and Afghanistan era veterans.<sup>93</sup> While this certainly has influenced claims processing, to say this is the driver of complexity under represents the challenges VA faces. This monograph argues that the increase in number of medical conditions filed has made incoming workload more complicated, whereas the system, because it is rooted in the patterns of interaction among agents, has increased in complexity due to the intensity of interactions among all agents specifically in the realm of information and interpretation.<sup>94</sup> Thus, in terms of practice, the goal is to map the relationships within the disability system and pay specific attention to the exchange of information between human decision makers.

The idea of mapping the relationships, specific to information exchange, and with the output as the focal point is where this monograph argues novelty can be generated through the inside out approach. Usually the VA places great emphasis on the veteran-as-a-client relationship as expressed by the frequently cited Omar Bradley quote, “We are dealing with veterans, not procedures; with their problems, not ours,” as they should. However, what is sometimes lost is the *internal* customer dynamics needed in a system that relies on the exchange of information and communication to multiple audiences simultaneously. Again, this monograph does not see focusing on the internal customer relationships as mutually exclusive to the veteran-as-a-client relationship. It is simply an additional perspective, one specifically used to embrace the complexity of the situation and obtain value from constructing the system based upon its complexity.

For example, as outlined in the systems analysis section, when a RVSR completes adjudication and communicates their decision through writing the narrative rating document, they

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<sup>93</sup> GAO, “Veterans’ Disability Benefits,” 13.

<sup>94</sup> Axelrod and Cohen, *Harnessing Complexity*, 26. The author’s state, “If complexity is often rooted in patterns of interaction among agents, then we might expect systems to exhibit increasing complex dynamics when changes occur that intensify interactions among their elements.”

write to a direct and *indirect* audience. The audience includes the veteran, local review board, local management, national review board (STAR), the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA), Veteran Service Officers (VSO) who may be assisting the veteran, congressional oversight members, and even taxpayers. All of these entities represent customers of information. Furthermore, the decision maker, the RVSR, is also a customer, for they must receive information from direct and indirect sources including: veterans, VSRs collecting evidence, VHA or other examiners, federal document holders (such as DoD and SSA), congressional laws, and court rulings, local and national management that provide interpretations on laws, regulations, and rules, and VSOs that provide additional information. Very quickly, the system becomes complex due to the multiple customers that must both provide information and are subject to communication based upon the information provided. Thus, it is with this systemic nature in mind, using the mindset of internal customers, that mapping the practice (hand-offs of information between internal customers) of the system with a focus on two key concepts – information and generative learning.

First, the entire disability adjudication system is rooted in information, the exchange of information, and the conversion of information. The internal complexity that has arisen in the last 10-20 years, paired with the outside factors cited previously, is the growth in the number of agents participating in the system, the rules surrounding information, as well as just the total amount of information available.<sup>95</sup> In addition, not just any information, information associated with tactic knowledge and choice. For with more information and more agents, comes more

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<sup>95</sup> The laws, regulations, and rules of government add another dimension to the complexity of information. It is rare in government for a new law, regulation or rules to replace an existing law, regulation or rule in a one-for-one manner. Rather, layers are added which make the interpretation of information more complicated (not complex, because while these represent many variable, they do not exhibit dynamic traits). The complexity, however, is increased with additional agents are added to the system that is complicated. For each agent in the system, and the system itself, along with the sub-systems and larger systems all display choice.



choice. In detailing the difficulties of dealing with a social systemic system where the parts and the whole displays choice, Ackoff and Gharajedaghi cite the impact that additional information has by stating, “As the amount of information received increased beyond the amount its receiver can handle effectively, they use less and less of it.”<sup>96</sup> This is true for employee and managers on all levels throughout the system. Thus, the goal of mapping the practice of information exchange is to discover what laws, regulations, rules (national and local), and best practices should be followed and which should be negated. However, when this has been done in past mapping efforts looking to ‘lean’ the system, the novelty of this approach is to treat everyone, both internal and external to the immediate claims process, as customers within a system. This requires a new perspective in viewing information and handoffs, no longer can an individual employee ‘just do their job.’ Rather, the interaction and dependency is made explicit, and the search for how the individual employee’s job affects others downstream becomes the effort. The argument for this novel approach is rooted in moving from adaptive learning to generative learning.

Adaptive learning is currently what VA is undergoing with its Transformation plan. The problem with adaptive learning and government bureaucracies is that the lag time is often too long due to the inherent structure of the system. The lag time from a new law, to best practices in local execution – to include IT mechanisms and external customers understanding the impact can take several months. This often introduces ‘work-a-rounds’ and other immediate adapting, but this is nothing more than a coping means and leads to addressing the symptoms rather than the underlying cause.<sup>97</sup> Generative learning on the other hand is about creating and requires taking a systemic view of the system. By creating the internal customer map from an inside out

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<sup>96</sup> Russell Ackoff and Jamshid Gharajedaghi, “On the Mismatch Between Systems and their Models,” [www.acasa.upenn.edu/System\\_MismatchesA.pdf](http://www.acasa.upenn.edu/System_MismatchesA.pdf), (accessed February 17, 2013): 11-12.

<sup>97</sup> Senge, “The Leader’s New Work,” 8.

perspective (what and how of information exchange) it forces an exploration of the system, its alignment, and forces the deep dive into tactic knowledge. Furthermore, this type of ‘thinking about thinking’ is very important and leads us to the link between the product and practice, planning.

Planning, as discussed in association with design, is both the art and science of understanding on a conceptual level and as a prelude to detailed planning; but can also provide a construction to thinking about thinking and produce better problem solvers.<sup>98</sup> Concerning planning, and the linking of the product and practice components introduced above, two ideas are highlighted. First, borrowing from the U.S. Army and is utilized in the ultimate synthesis manner – operational art. Second, this section concludes with the discussion of strategic flexibility within the context of tactic knowledge prior to offering concluding remarks.

Operational art, the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose, is decidedly a military construct.<sup>99</sup> Yet, operational art offers some very real applications beyond the military. It is an additional goal of this monograph to present an understanding of the cognitive activity associated with operational art as it applies to change in government.<sup>100</sup> Carl von Clausewitz insists that the first of all strategic questions is determining the character of war upon which one is embarking, “neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature.”<sup>101</sup> Current U.S.

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<sup>98</sup> Dorner, *The Logic of Failure*, 195.

<sup>99</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *ADP 3-0, Unified Land Operations*, 9.

<sup>100</sup> The author of this essay has participated, with various degrees of success, in the development of a transformation program, plan, and activities within VA, particularly associated with the delivery of disability benefits. Understanding and synthesizing operational art specifically aimed at change and transformation is a unique perspective the author hopes to bring back to VA.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *On War*, 8th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 88-89.

Army doctrine parallels Clausewitz in stating that operational art requires commanders understand their operational environment, the strategic objectives, and the capabilities of all elements of their force.<sup>102</sup> Focusing on change in government requires the same environmental scan and an attempt at understanding the totality of the situation. Specifically, to practice operational art (in both military and government), one must also attempt an understanding of the political dynamics governing the underlying situation. Operational art, like change, begins with the simple premise of knowing where you are, where you want to go, and what you have to get you there – it entails developing a path to solving a complex puzzle.<sup>103</sup> In essence, this is the simplistic elegance of planning.<sup>104</sup>

Huba Wass de Czege has equated operational art to campaigning in the military sense, and it is his argument that operational art is the cognitive activity of mediating and balancing the interaction between strategic and tactical reasoning.<sup>105</sup> Echoing this premise is Mintzberg’s need to have “left- and right-handed planners” in organizations to balance analytic thinking with strategic, creative thinking required to produce integrated plans and action.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, in terms of planning, the systemic view of the ADM holds many keys to building the conceptual framework associated with the VA disability system. What is being called for, is the strategic

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<sup>102</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *ADP 3-0, Unified Land Operations*, 10.

<sup>103</sup> The word puzzle is chosen here because once cannot solve a puzzle by analysis alone, the solution only appears through the application of analysis AND synthesis.

<sup>104</sup> U.S. Army doctrine defines planning as the “art and science of understanding a situation, envisioning a desired future, and laying out effective ways of bringing about that future.”

<sup>105</sup> Wass de Czege, “Thinking and Acting Like an Early Explorer,” 4. Additionally, U.S. Army doctrine defines a campaign as “A series of related major operations aimed at achieving strategic and operational objectives within a given time and space.” In this sense, there is little difference between a military campaign to defeat an enemy, a business campaign to capture additional market share, or a government campaign to roll out a new service.

<sup>106</sup> Mintzberg, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” 114.

flexibility inherent in systems thinking when applied to the true systemic nature of the disability claims process and the fact that its underlying components lie in tacit knowledge

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The proposed system design is an attempt to reach a systemic construction, placing the disability claims process within a larger environment encompassing multiple dimensions of customers and clients. The argument is rooted in the activities recommended to construct the VA disability system through a guided process of learning, which is focused on the hypothesis that internal customer service builds a systemic culture of external customer service. Building a learning construction comes through the ability to understand, visualize, describe, and direct novelty developed from an internal inside-out perspective along with applying external concepts appropriately to the VA problem set.

This monograph relies on the theme of construction throughout; it not only aligns with how one “produces” a system, but also helps to understand and learn from the structure of the problem itself. The goal of constructing the VA disability system is to find the creative emergence of a novel strategy, to understand the ill-structured nature of the problem, and, ultimately, to design an adaptive system. This adaptive system has the potential to move service delivery beyond protecting the status quo, simply reactionary to external events, and drive the evolution of anticipating the continuously evolving needs of internal and external customers, stakeholders, and, most importantly, Veterans and their families. To create this system, this monograph proposes an indirect design approach. Rather than designing the exact form of service delivery (the exchange of information between customers), one establishes a frame, for which actions and decisions occur, by creating a space for the purpose of information, governmental constraints, and legislative rule sets.

This frame requires movement beyond the cognitive mismatch between traditional problem-solving and emerging thinking, which embraces the true systemic nature of the VA

disability system. The table below captures the movement from traditional thinking to emerging thinking about strategies for success. This monograph presents a viable case for why this transition is required, outlines some key challenges, presents an overview of a possible methodology for implementation, and identifies critical areas where VA can embark upon the construction of the VA disability system. In the end, given the recent news that the Obama Administration has proposed a 13.6 percent increase in funding specifically targeted for the effort to reduce the backlog of disability claims, it is imperative that VA demonstrate capacity to tackle holistic transformation.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the five following recommendation build of the arguments presented in this monograph in the spirit of learning, moving beyond process reengineering, and embracing a holistic systems approach through internal customer-service system design.

Table 4. Engineering versus Designing

| Traditional   | Emerging   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reductionism</li> <li>○ Linear causality</li> <li>○ Objective reality</li> <li>○ Determinism</li> <li>○ Survival of the fittest</li> <li>○ Focus on discrete entities</li> <li>○ Linear relationships</li> <li>○ Newtonian physics perspectives</li> <li>○ World is predictable</li> <li>○ Modern</li> <li>○ Focus on hierarchy</li> <li>○ Prediction</li> <li>○ 19<sup>th</sup> cent physics</li> <li>○ Equilibrium/ stability/deterministic dynamics</li> <li>○ Focus on averages</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Holism</li> <li>✓ Mutual causality</li> <li>✓ Perspective reality</li> <li>✓ Indeterminism</li> <li>✓ Adaptive self-organization</li> <li>✓ Focus on relationships</li> <li>✓ Nonlinear relationships</li> <li>✓ Quantum physics perspectives</li> <li>✓ World is novel and probabilistic</li> <li>✓ Postmodern</li> <li>✓ Focus on heterarchy</li> <li>✓ Understanding</li> <li>✓ Based on biology</li> <li>✓ Structure/pattern/ self-organization/ life cycles</li> <li>✓ Focus on variation</li> </ul> |

Source: Table adapted from Frans P. B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy, and War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 88.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

<sup>107</sup> Steve Vogel, “White House promises more funding to fix VA backlog,” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2013.

To emphasize clearly: The intent is for the following recommendations to *piggyback* and *integrate* with the current transformation plan and activities already underway. Yet, at the same time, the goal is to guide VA from process reengineering to systemic customer-service design through the application of the following recommendations. Thus, the key to implementing these collective recommendations exists in the operational realm. Any tactics chosen that meets the operational need and aligns with the strategic objective is welcomed. The debate, critical assessment, analysis and synthesis, of the proposed recommendations is also welcomed. What remains of vital importance is the action and energy associated with learning about the system from a novel perspective. In the end, any action and energy that embraces complexity and simplicity through synthetic learning is the right path towards success in constructing the VA disability system.

MAP THE VA DISABILITY SYSTEM: Operationalize opportunities through focus and emphasis on *internal customer-service*

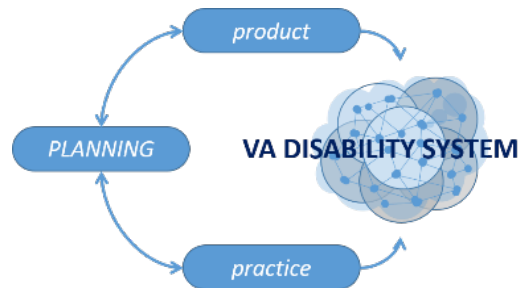
Anyone associated with the VA disability claims process knows that numerous groups have mapped the claims process for a wide variety of projects and goals. This is *NOT* a repeat of these previous exercises. This is a call to map the *interactions* between agents that participate in and support, directly and indirectly, the entire disability system across VA. The strategic goal of this mapping is to operationalize three themes associated with transforming the system.<sup>108</sup> The three overarching themes that drive the strategic mapping process is an “all-in” approach, eliminating the “noise” in the system, and driving the *right* behaviors. To achieve the goal of being able to operationalize the critical themes, this monograph recommends that the process that

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<sup>108</sup> In a very basic sense, “operationalize” means to make operational. In this recommendation, to operationalize internal customer-service is to explicitly align the products and services that agents provide with the products and service that other agents require to do complete their own products and services more accurately, with less level of effort (productivity), and more timely.

guides this mapping exercise focus on the key inputs of product, process, and planning as the optimal method used to construct the VA disability system.

Figure 10. VA disability system



Source: Author

**ALL IN:** every individual and stakeholder is part of the system and has a role to play; the key is how leadership designs the system in such a manner that aligns individual actions with organizational goals

**ELIMINATE THE NOISE:** getting to the bottom line and identifying critical variables is the goal; because the VA disability system is both large and complex, many variables are present, yet only a few drive towards veteran-centric outcomes

**DRIVING THE RIGHT BEHAVIORS:** every decision and metric should begin with the question of *What behavior is the organization trying to influence?* In the near-term, the answer to this question should be focused almost exclusively on *outcomes* associated with claims accuracy and claims output

In general, VA must understand and recognize that no map will be a precise representation of an objective reality, which is not the objective of this recommendation. The tension created between accuracy and clarity during the mapping process provides energy for learning. Again, the process of *learning is the journey* that this monograph argues will lead to transformation at VA (versus solely achieving process improvements). Thus, the emphasis of the recommendations included in this monograph requires a design view (versus process reengineering) focused on internal customers and internal customer-service as the forcing function for transformation. Accompanying the above three themes are the specific manner and

components that this monograph recommends how VA should accomplish the mapping of the VA disability system: product, practice, and planning.

PRODUCT: Map *agents* in the system to their value contribution(s) that aligns internal customer service and a completed VA disability claim

As previously outlined in this monograph, an agent is any noun that interacts with its environment and other agents. In order to operationalize internal customer-service, VA should map all agents in the system towards their value associated with three product-focused dimensions across a completed VA disability claim. The three dimensions include accuracy, timeliness, and productivity.<sup>109</sup> This activity requires two phases, first all agents must identify who they receive or send/provide information to (inputs and outputs). Second, for each interaction, VA should codify, across accuracy, productivity, and timeliness, *what* information (in terms of both products and services) are required to best meet the needs of the immediate internal customer, as well as all the second, third order customers (including the end customer – the veteran) in the system.

PRACTICE: Map the *exchange of information* between agents in the system

Once the ‘*what*’ has been identified, the ‘*how*’ can be examined. This recommendation nests directly within the above mapping schema. In the flow of information between internal customers, it is important to highlight not only the required information, but also how the

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<sup>109</sup> Accuracy in this context is aligned with ensuring that all current federal and VA specific laws, regulations, policies, procedures, and other rules that guide the VA disability process are met in the manner intended. This is different from what is more commonly referred to as ‘quality.’ Although the debate is rather semantic, this is an important distinction. VA currently measures accuracy across multiple objective criteria as outlined. However, this is not quality – i.e. the subjective measure of how veterans and stakeholders view the level of service provided. Productivity in this context is aligned with *level of effort*. Does the information provided, and manner of which the information is provided, by one agent to another agents result in the downstream agent’s ability to complete their tasks with less effort? Lastly, timeliness is all about the *pace* of information, products, and services provided.



information, product, or service is provided across the three value dimensions and lead to a completed VA disability claims. While this may overemphasize the key functions and positions of the claims process (VSRs and RVSRs), the true value lies in how *all agents in the system* receive information and incorporate functions outside the immediate claims process. An outreach specialist and managers are good examples. The outreach specialist's duties are to engage veterans and veteran groups to highlight the benefits associated with VA. However, do outreach specialists explicitly construct their message and engagement to support accuracy, productivity, and timeliness of their internal customers? A manager's job is to manage the inputs and outputs in the VA disability system and lead employees engaged with the system. Do managers plan and execute their interactions with employees, each other, and leadership explicitly across the dimensions of accuracy, productivity, and timeliness? How much 'noise' in the system are managers (or anyone that is associated with policy or execution guidance) themselves creating when they simply react to higher-level guidance without appropriately determining the system-wide and internal customer-service impact?<sup>110</sup>

#### PLANNING: Integrate *Operational Art* through VBA's Stat Reviews

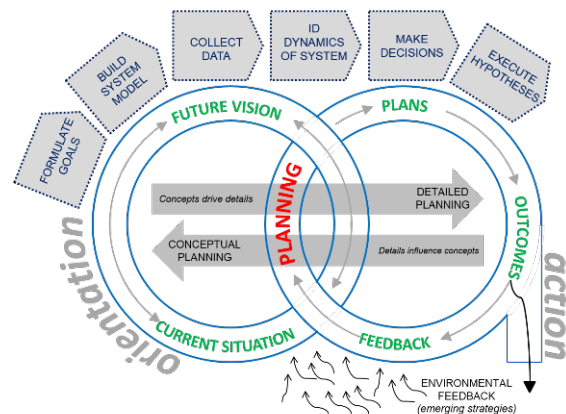
The planning component is the critical link between the product focus and the practice focus that this monograph argues is the needed methodology that will lead to the codification of the VA disability system build upon systems understanding and highlights customer-service. This

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<sup>110</sup> At first glance, this may appear as a call to 'lean' the system, but is much more complex than the complicated engineering processes of Lean Six Sigma. Identifying and eliminate the noise in the system is about the messages and activities that surround the claims process. Any given organization must complete thousands of tasks directly and indirectly related to their core missions. How are these aligned and conducted in a manner that supports the core mission is where successful organization demonstrates novelty. In the case of the VA manager, their internal customer-service and interaction (from supervision to mentoring) with employees must support both the management of the system, and the leadership/development of core customer-service attitudes of employees that understand that the VA disability system exists to deliver a service. Which, of course is linked directly to the critical theme of *driving the right behaviors!*

recommendation calls upon the VBA Stat Review process to be a driver of this methodology through the model of operational art. These reviews involve in-depth performance metric review with VBA's Office of Field Operations and other members of key claims processing leadership to analyze and manage performance more effectively.<sup>111</sup> Part of the process of analyzing and managing performance more effectively should incorporate a systems thinking methodology associated with the concept of operational art. Thus, the recommendation piggybacks of the concept of the VBA Stat Review to include a systemic planning component. Presented below is just one model of operational art for use at VA, along with an example for how to incorporate the elements of the model with the Stat Review process. Additionally, the appendix includes a complementary methodology that highlights planning.

Figure 11. Operational Art



Source: Author, “Understanding, Visualizing, and Describing: The Application of Operational Art in Government,” (essay, School for Advanced Military Studies, 2012), 3.

Every regional office work unit or staff office has a workload management plan. It should be an outline (*hypothesis of action*) of what goals the unit wants to accomplish over a given time

<sup>111</sup> Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, *VA Claims Process: Review of VA's Transformation Efforts*, 113th Cong., 1st sess., 2013.

period and how they envision going about accomplishing it. This is the essence of operational art, the pursuit of strategic objectives (what the organization wants to accomplish), in whole, or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions (how the organization goes about accomplishing it) in time, space, and purpose. Regardless of models used, the value in this task is framing where the organization is today, where the organization wants to be in the future, and stating the hypothesis for getting there.

By constantly revisiting the hypothesis of action, repeated mistakes can be avoided, strengths can be built upon, and tracking results (measurement and evaluation) becomes more transparent. The added elements of time, space, and purpose make the hypothesis actionable at a level that one can see what adjustments are necessary – especially when one takes the time to develop a model of the system. The call for a model in this situation does not entail anything of mass sophistication, simply a visual with associated narrative that describes the current system. For example, a model could be as simple as outlining the task-organization of a workgroup and how to align duties and outputs without overlap. Alternatively, task-organization models can be as detailed as developing a weekly spreadsheet of employees and job duties at the work unit level to show current workload, vacation and training schedules, potential incoming workload, in an effort to model unit outputs for the week. Ultimately, using a model like this helps to *see* the system and to think through how daily actions align with strategic objectives within the system construct.

#### Beyond Measurement: *Evaluation*

A final supporting recommendation that aligns with the two mapping exercises is the idea of moving from measurement to evaluation. VA measures thousands of pieces of data daily, but it rarely evaluates the data in a context that *allows for action*. Within the environmental frame of mapping internal customer relationships and the flow of information, measurement describes how many tasks and activities were completed and sent down the line; whereas, evaluation describes

how *well* an individual received the information. The development VSR may send six requests for information out daily, but VA needs to evaluate the percentage of those requests that result in the collection of *all* the data needed – this is the goal of an evaluation methodology. Another important aspect of evaluation is that a few key critical variables tend to tell a very large story. Those critical variables align with accuracy and output and allow for targeted interventions by constructing and mapping the system and starting with internal customer service. Finding the critical variables is a cross-organizational learning opportunity. It is imperative to find the one or two “new” metrics that tell 80 percent of the story – additionally, how will these metrics challenge or confirm leadership hypothesis?<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Acknowledged are the data and associated infrastructure limitation. However, business rules and the ‘to be’ future state and hypothesis of what such data could provide in terms of critical variables and metrics still have value in being captured and finding similar approaches or near likenesses.

## APPENDIX A: PLANNING & PERFORMANCE SYSTEM FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

Planning, as defined by military doctrine, is the art and science of understanding a situation, envisioning a desired future, and laying out effective ways of bringing about that future. This appendix provides a framework for planning associated with synthesizing actionable objectives aimed at eliminating the VA disability claims backlog. While *planning* is the framework, the specific synthesis of concepts contained within this proposal are inspired by the discussion presented in this monograph along with another VA employee's argument for performance leadership as outlined in the Performance Architecture Science Systems (PASS) methodology.<sup>113</sup>

### Science of Zero Backlog

$$\sum (completed\ claims)_{t \rightarrow FY2015} = (\sum (received\ claims)_{t \rightarrow FY2015}) + (backlogged\ claims)_t$$

1. At any given time, any given Regional Office, knows the number of backlogged claims
2. At any given time, any given Regional Office, can provide an aggregate estimate or forecast for future received claims from the current date through 2015
3. At any given time, any given Regional Office, can solve for the number of claims for which they must complete from the current date through 2015 to achieve zero backlog

While this equation provides for the necessary claims production i.e., a burn-rate, the science of zero backlog requires additional information. Critical to the task is determining the current state, i.e., the Regional Office's current production output levels. The delta between the current state of production and the formula above then becomes the burn-rate *improvement* target.

4. The requirement is for each Regional Office to identify the operational problem and design an operational approach to meet or exceed the burn-rate improvement target given the following inputs for claims production

$$(\# employees) \times (time\ available) / (level\ of\ effort) = total\ completed\ claims$$

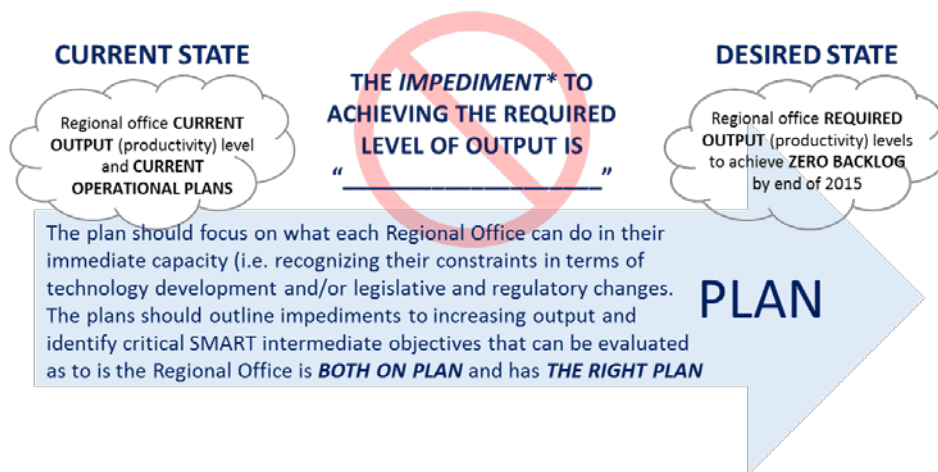
In terms of planning, Regional Offices should develop an operational approach with intermediate objectives that seeks any combination that increases the number of employees, increases the time

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<sup>113</sup> David Paschane, "Performance Leadership." Paper presented at 2012 Workshop on Information and Organizational Architecture, European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management (Brussels, 2012), 1-25. In summary, the PASS methodology is all about humanizing work and enhancing performance by creating a holistic infrastructure for success in terms of employee's work environments and engagements with each other, managements, and customers. Ultimately, PASS is a common sense approach for leadership to drive the right behaviors behind how work is being done and how it affects those doing the work. As a comprehensive discipline, PASS increases the number of employees who can contribute insights, innovation, and improvements to the organization's bottom line mission.

available, or decreases the level of effort, which in turn equates to a plan and hypothesis that aims to overcome or remove the operational problem identified. The critical link between the science and art of planning lies in the identification of the operational problem and development of intermediate objectives.<sup>114</sup> For example, each Regional Office should state the operational problem as such, “The impediment to increasing output from the current level to the level needed to eliminate the backlog is \_\_\_\_\_.” The key drivers of employees, time available, level of effort, or any combination of the three entail the science of planning. The art of planning is captured in looking beyond just the three ‘science’ drivers for novel ways of overcoming the operational problem identified – and starts with the identification for the problem. For example, below is a framework any Regional Office can use to start the planning process rooted in the ‘science’ of output and move towards the art of planning by incorporating additional constructs that have been highlighted in this monograph.

Figure 12. Planning Framework



Source: Author

### Art of Planning

Using critical and creative thinking skills to align tactical tasks (claims processing and other routine activities) within time and purpose that seeks to meet or exceed the burn-rate improvement target should be the goal of any comprehensive backlog elimination plan. A possible systems design of a plan could include outlining improvement actions horizontally and

<sup>114</sup> As previously discussed in this monograph an operational problem in this context is the discrepancy between the current state of output and the desired level of output. The key is to incorporate the argument of Peter Senge, where the “creative tension” between the current and future state produces energy for change. Simply using ‘science’ to solve the operational problem will not heed the objectives of this monograph. Additionally, because too often emphasis is placed solely on the end-state targets, VA should incorporate SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) intermediate objectives into planning. See Department of Defense’s “Theater Campaign Planning, Planners’ Handbook,” February 2012, pages 11-13, [http://www.almc.army.mil/ALU\\_DOCS/Planners\\_Handbook\\_Master\\_Final%20Draft%2002-22-12%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.almc.army.mil/ALU_DOCS/Planners_Handbook_Master_Final%20Draft%2002-22-12%20(2).pdf).

vertically across the dimensions of on-task concentration, off-task stimulation, and administrative necessities internal to any given Regional Office.

1. Horizontal – refers to the claims process and direct claims processing employees. The critical dimension in the horizontal system is the how and why information is exchanged between individuals i.e., how one does one employee complete his or her individual task so as to reduce the level of effort required by the downstream employees who receive the completed tasks.
2. Vertical – refers to the activities surrounding the claims process i.e., everyone (supporting and indirect functions) else in the Regional Office. The critical dimension in the vertical system is the how and why support functions (training, policy and procedural guidance, supervisory direction and feedback, HR and administrative support, workload analysis, leadership communication, etc...) are received and provided between individuals. For example, how one employee provides his or her support function to reduce the level of effort required by the downstream employees that benefit and/or interact with the support functions.
3. On-Task Concentration – refers to the core activities that an employee is directed to complete. Measuring on-task concentration can account for both raw time available, and the level of effort required to complete core tasks. These core on-task concentration functions are the services an individual provides for other employees or the organization.
4. Off-Task Stimulation – refers to the critical functions that employees often perform outside of their core duties, but usually volunteer for because of the non-routine stimulation they provide (for example, volunteering to provide training and/or join a working group). It is critical not to eliminate these tasks in order to increase the on-task concentration time, but to design the delivery of off-task stimulation and outputs to decrease the level of effort associated with on-task concentration.
5. Administrative Necessity – refers to the daily tasks associated with assigned job functions. Individually, these tasks often do not appear significant, but in the aggregate may have the potential to free additional on-task time and/or eliminate non-value added level of effort.

### Conclusion

The framework described here is one that seeks to answer the *WHY* tasks are what they are and lead to the current production level outputs as well as the *HOW* to align strategy and tactical actions to achieve the burn-rate improvement targets. This framework reluctantly recognizes that much of the robust analytical data necessary for developing a truly data-driven decision making process as presented above is currently lacking. Meanwhile, a concentrated effort to work with Regional Offices to engage in planning activities in the manner presented has the potential to produce best practices that are sharable across the system. In the end, it is not so much the plan itself that has value, but the discovery and novelty that planning uncovers. For, as Dwight D. Eisenhower was fond of saying, “Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.

## APPENDIX B: CROSS-WALKING “WICKED” PROBLEMS, THEORY AND VA

The following appendix expands upon Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber’s ten distinguishing properties of planning-type problems, i.e. wicked ones, and implications for VA. What follows is a brief crosswalk of Rittel and Webber’s ten properties as aligned with the challenges faced by VA within the context outlined by this monograph. This crosswalk analysis should by no means be considered fully conclusive, rather the goal is to illustrate the true nature of type of planning problems faced by VA both in the context of the Backlog as well as larger challenges associated with the environment in which the VA disability claims process, and VA system operates. In fact, this appendix should be viewed as an introductory guide for VA planners to cross-reference.<sup>1</sup> For each ‘wicked,’ planning, and/or operational problem tackled, the scope and scale of research, analysis, and synthesis allows for much more depth than covered in this brief appendix. Ultimately, any astute reader will see the tension that exists between the larger context of *customer service* in a government setting and the natural tendency to formulate problems and solutions in a linear fashion to avoid tackling the complexity associated with the true character of ‘wicked’ problems.

### 1. THERE IS NO DEFINITIVE FORMULATION OF A WICKED PROBLEM

“The formulation of a wicked problem *is* the problem!” As argued in this monograph, a systems approach to the Backlog is needed, but where exactly to start is not always apparent. While this monograph argues that technology alone will result in a shortfall in terms of transformation, the idea of internal customer service may not be the ultimate solution either. Ultimately, the debate surrounding the formulation and context of the Backlog will drive the solution space – this is evident in the current emphasis placed on technology. The internal customer service argument within a system construct of this monograph simply provides a different perspective. That is why the emphasis placed upon learning through a systems perspective is so vital. The argument follows that this methodology is the optimal path in which to reach a near-definitive formulation of the operational problems faced by government agencies in the customer service realm.

### 2. WICKED PROBLEMS HAVE NO STOPPING RULE

Whereas with mathematical equation, the problem-solver knows when the solution has been achieved, no such end-state exists for the planner. At first, this may seem counterintuitive to the example of the Backlog, one must view the larger context. For example, the Backlog has a definitive end-state (no VA disability claims pending over 125 days), but does this meet the goal of transforming the VA disability claims process or result in superior customer service? Certainly, customer service has improved – in terms of timeliness. However, what will veterans

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<sup>1</sup> Two valuable resources for any VA planner that must tackle planning in more depth is Rittel and Webber’s original article found at <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~ellendo/rittel/rittel-dilemma.pdf>. Additionally, the U.S. Army publication, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5-500, “Commander’s Appreciation and Campaign Design,” provides an example of how an organization can codify the ten distinguishing properties of ‘wicked’ problems to fit their unique operational environment and is accessible from the following website, <http://www.tradoc.army.mil/tpubs/pams/p525-5-500.pdf>.



and the public demand in terms of customer service outcomes in the future? The bottom line is that the Backlog end-state will simply result in additional planning challenges, within the construct of customer service; this monograph argues an organization never really achieves a codified end-state.

### 3. SOLUTIONS TO WICKED PROBLEMS ARE NOT TRUE-OR-FALSE, BUT GOOD-OR-BAD

Similar to the absence of a stopping rule, specifically in viewing the VA disability system through a customer service lens, customer service cannot be determined on a true-false paradigm, but “good” or “bad.” Consider Rittel and Webber’s point that many actors are equipped, interested, and/or entitled to judge solutions and outcomes, but none have the power to declared (definitively and authoritatively over other actors) a singular definition of success. Customer service, because of the personal experience that has been associated with this phenomenon in Western culture, will vary with each individuals or group of individuals’ interests, value-sets, and ideological preferences.

### 4. THERE IS NO IMMEDIATE AND NO ULTIMATE TEST OF A SOLUTION TO A WICKED PROBLEM

This property essentially follows the maxim that “no good deed goes unpunished.” Any solution implemented for a wicked problem generates waves of intended and unintended consequences that are virtually unbounded over time. When a system has as many actors as the VA system, the ability to map or anticipate consequences and repercussions beyond first and second order effects becomes extremely difficult. Furthermore, the cost/benefit of engaging in this type of exercise has little added value to the pure volume of future consequential “paths” that could develop from one such simple solution. For example, any change to a policy or procedural issue within the VA disability system has the potential to impact any number of first, second, third, etc. order actors within the federal government, private industry health care, research organization, individual behavior patterns, and so forth.

### 5. EVERY SOLUTION TO A WICKED PROBLEM IS A “ONE-SHOT OPERATION,” BECAUSE THERE IS NO OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN BY TRIAL-AND-ERROR, EVERY ATTEMPT COUNTS SIGNIFICANTLY

“Every implemented solution is consequential. It leaves “traces” that cannot be undone.” The simple fact of the matter is that no sterile lab environment exists in which to test solutions to VA disability claims. At the forefront of every claim is a human being where communication and outcomes have real world affects not only in the customer service dimension, but also economically in the monetary benefits either awarded or denied as well as the associated health care and ancillary benefits tied to the outcome associated with any one disability claim. Real world examples of this property abound for VA. Most significantly is anytime VA must “readjudicate” claims based upon previous policy, procedural, or legislative mandates that are modernized. While corrections or updates can be implemented for the claimant and the evidence of record, the bottom line is that the traces of the initial action will forever be present and add additional complications/complexity for future decisions.

### 6. WICKED PROBLEMS DO NOT HAVE AN ENUMERABLE (OR AN EXHAUSTIVELY DESCRIBABLE) SET OF POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS, NOR IS THERE A WELL-DESCRIBED SET OF PERMISSIBLE OPERATIONS THAT MAY BE INCORPORATED

## INTO THE PLAN

Unlike the game of chess, which has a finite set of rules, or mathematics and the natural sciences, which also lend themselves to laws, in the world of social policy no such explicit “tool chest of operations” exists. This phenomenon leads to not only ill-defined problems, but in turn, ill-defined solutions. It is simply out of the realm of social planners to identify and consider *ALL* potential problem variables, their interactions, and thus solutions. For every solution identified within the VA context, an entire host of other potential solutions have never been considered, or even entertained. What this situation then requires is feasible plans of action that rely on realistic judgment, which in the words of Rittel and Webber, is maximized only through the trust and credibility relationship between the planner and client. In the case of VA, this relationship for judgment of plans is multidimensional, in the fact that the VA must consider its relationship with multiple stakeholders.

### 7. EVERY WICKED PROBLEM IS ESSENTIALLY UNIQUE

“There are no *classes* of wicked problem in the sense that principles of solutions can be developed to fit *all* member of a class.” Rittel and Webber deem this the art of not knowing too early which type of solution to apply. Too often, in government and other situation, similarities are misapplied in terms of solutions. What may have worked for IRS and SSA in terms of electronic claims process or even the private insurance industry does not mean the same ‘class’ of solutions will have the same impact at VA. While no doubt exists that there are transferable best practices, the application of similar solution sets to dissimilar environments and problem frames is less often understood. Thus, the call in this monograph for the creative novelty constructed through the process of following and negating. At the macro level of VA, this requires robust analysis of solution sets from outside VA and how to mold the solution sets specific to capture the uniqueness of VA. Furthermore, at the micro level, solution sets must allow for local management exercise their expertise in applying solution sets appropriately to their environment in terms of demographics, challenges, and distribution of workload.

### 8. EVERY WICKED PROBLEM CAN BE CONSIDERED TO BE A SYMPTOM OF ANOTHER PROBLEM

Rittel and Webber identify problems much in the same way that the U.S. Army identifies operational problems saying, in general, “Problems can be described as discrepancies between the state of affairs as it is and the state as it ought to be.” It is thus up to the problem solver to identify the causal explanation of the discrepancy that exists and design a solution for its removal. However, this exercise often leads to the “peeling of the onion” and discovery of multiple symptoms that lead to higher-level problems. The implications of this property of wicked problems and VA and government at large, cannot be understated. The critical sweet spot for the problem solver and planner under these circumstances is to understand to arguments presented by Peter Senge as outlined in this monograph, but also understand that while problems should be attacked at the highest level – sometimes that level is simply not politically feasible for most solution sets. Thus, analysis of what level to attack problems must flow from the bottom up to avoid simply dealing with symptoms, but must also walk the analysis down from a strategic level to ensure taking on untenable solution sets. Throughout the argument of this monograph, this sweet spot has been determined to be the realm of internal customer service due to reasons aligned with this property of wicked problems.

### 9. THE EXISTENCE OF A DISCREPANCY REPRESENTING A WICKED PROBLEM CAN

## BE EXPLAINED IN NUMEROUS WAYS. THE CHOICE OF EXPLANATION DETERMINE THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM'S RESOLUTION

More so, than any other property cited by Rittel and Webber, this property explains the logic behind how the solution sets in this monograph came about. Rittel and Webber state that, "The analyst's 'world view' is the strongest determining factor in explaining a discrepancy and, therefore, in resolving a wicked problem." As stated in the introduction to this monograph, ideas and concepts for this monograph were generated and heavily influenced by U.S. Army doctrine. Paired with analysis of the VA disability claims process from the author's perspective and in an attempt to demonstrate novelty and synthesis, the tracing of the origin of solutions sets is easy to discern. The implications associated with this property of wicked problems calls for, what this monograph would argue is novel, is a new slant on diversity in constructing problem frames and solution sets. Too often in government, diversity is seen in the traditional manner of demographics, however, if diversity among demographics exists but no diversity in background, thinking, and experiences, the starting point for framing remains less holistic and synthesis of ideas are limited. Thus, as called for in the conclusion of this monograph, the arguments presented are simply a call for further analysis and synthesis. The constructed solution set in these pages stems from one individual with a specific "world view." More debate, analysis, and synthesis across a truly diverse set of planners is required to ensure the current VA challenges remain unduly bracketed.

### 10. THE PLANNER HAS NO RIGHT TO BE WRONG

Unlike the scientist, the planner's aim is not to find the objective truth, but to improve some characteristic of the world in which human live and operate. Because of this notion, planners, according to Rittel and Webber, are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate. The disability process at VA encompasses everything from monetary benefits to ensure monthly bills are paid to eligibility to critical health care and a whole list of services to ensure daily life improves. To delay this access or to misalign eligibility to benefits has real world consequences on real world people, indeed veterans whom have entered into a contract with their nation to provide a service, in which the nation in turn must uphold its promise. Additionally, VA must uphold the taxpayer's trust, as well as provide a commitment to the employees of the organization. In total, the planner's job is never done, and the problems the planner faces are like no others. However, when successful, when the planner does have the opportunity to improve the world in a manner for other humans, the planner is certainly valuable indeed.

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