The use of systems thinking can certainly improve an organization by helping an individual or team to understand what is occurring in a situation and to plan how to address the problem in a positive way. Thus, I chose to use the Weatherford Independent School District Executive Cabinet, consisting of three assistant superintendents, our executive director of technology, our director of communications, and me, to address a key issue together. Holly Teague and I used the systems thinking process together with this group to examine a mutual problem.

Because we are relatively new learners to this process, we used an informal approach with the systems thinking process. We used an existing meeting time on a Monday morning to conduct the process. We asked the participants to block out their calendars for the morning for us to do some problem-solving. The team is used to working together. Thus, we did not have to spend any time getting comfortable with each other. As a result, we explained that we were going to teach them to use a problem-solving tool as a team and that we needed their involvement to ensure the tool’s success.

I have to admit that we were worried that teaching the archetypes to the uninitiated would be difficult. We decided to simply “fake it” when we began our session, acting as if we knew exactly what we were doing. We began by teaching them the archetypes. We used the large archetype cards and the blue handout with descriptions of the archetypes. We began with the negative archetypes, taking turns teaching each negative archetype. We explained that we would be using these archetypes in our problem-solving but that we would be able to use the blue handout and the large cards in our discussions. We then taught the positive archetypes. We were very surprised at
how easily the participants understood the archetypes. They were not confused by them at all but related them to real-life happenings and examples in our discussions.

Once we completed the teach piece, we began to use the purple handout entitled, “Action Learning Process Using Systems Thinking: Solving a Team Problem Quick Step.” We asked the group to choose a problem that would be important to the group. Then we asked each person to answer the first five questions individually and then each person shared his/her answers. We instructed them to listen carefully to each person’s responses and not to speak until that person was finished. Then the group chose the problem that they wanted to address. That problem involved two principals that were at odds with each other over a solution to a mutual problem. The problem involved students who have failed the ninth grade and when those students can move from the Ninth Grade Center, a separate campus, to Weatherford High School. The principal of the Ninth Grade Center wanted to get the students out of his campus even though they had not earned enough courses to be deemed sophomores. The high school principal did not want the students to attend his campus until they had earned enough credits to be tenth graders. One meeting with the two of them had proven to be fruitless and ended with no solution.

All in the room felt that this problem needed to be solved the worst of any mentioned by the remainder of the group. The next step was to analyze the problem using the archetype cards. Holly posted the large archetype cards around the room and asked the team to choose first the negative archetypes working in this situation and then any positive archetypes they saw in the situation. Then they posted their archetypes selected on the appropriate large cards.

Again, we were surprised at how much their views were similar. The archetypes selected were nearly identical. Then with the selected archetypes, we walked them through the process of mapping the situation. Once the map was complete, we ask them, “Does this map represent the story as you understand it?” Then the individual who had given us the problem told the story for the rest of the group.
At that point, we asked the group to create summary statements about this situation. Again, they did not seem to have a problem with this task. The summary statements were very similar, but the one that the group selected was not the one written by the individual who gave us the problem. Again, the selection process proceeded relatively easily. The group truly seemed intent on working together in getting this issue fixed. The summary statement selected, however, did not directly resolve the problem. Instead, the summary statement centered on the lack of open and honest communication between the two principals and their lack of focus on what's good for students.

At that point, we asked the participants to look at the archetypes that they had selected and choose those that were the noisiest. We very briefly explained the meaning of noise and how it might look. We asked them to place a sticky note on the archetype or archetypes that evidenced noise in their minds. The group was unanimous in selecting the Fixes that Fail archetype as the noisiest. Then we directed to the page in our workbooks that outlined the choices for the leverage points. Again, they used post-it notes to select what they felt would bring the best solution.

At that point, we congratulated the group of choosing a course of action. We also asked the group if anyone had thought about the solution selected before the meeting. The answer to this question was “no.” In fact, one individual related that he thought coming into the meeting that he would simply be the arbiter and determine what the solution should be. With the solution selected after going through systems thinking, he felt more comfortable that the answer would come from the two principals. The team’s solution was to allow the two individuals to share their concerns and their view of the problem, asking them to use empathetic listening to each other’s concerns. Then the principals were asked to determine the best solution for students.

The entire meeting took about three hours, and the group did not get tired or bored. All participated, and all seemed to feel that they had
been a part of a problem-solving team. We were very pleased that the process worked so well with a group that had had no formal training in using systems thinking. Frankly, the process made us look really smart! We were reminded that sometimes we say that we don’t have time to spend three hours in problem-solving, but by spending the time to truly understand the issue at hand, we ended up with a solution that worked! The principals came up with a solution that was right for students and that both supported.

In short, Holly and I were amazed at how easy using the Systems Thinking was in an informal setting. We had an expectation that this activity would be difficult, but we were wrong. The power of the tool will work in spite of us! We were glad that we had this experience. It has helped us to gain confidence in our journey toward becoming certified parishioners.