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September 1, 2000

EDITORIAL

The First Law of Systems: Survive at All Costs by John Renesch 2000© John Renesch

There's an excellent book that few systems theorists are aware of - a book that is tongue in cheek yet quite insightful about the way systems operate. The book was first published in 1986, four years before Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* which opened the door to systems thinking for popular audiences. This unique book is entitled *Systemantics: The Underground Text of Systems Lore*. This book was not published by an academic. Nor was the author a member of the consultant ranks. The author, Dr. John Gall, is a podiatrist! That's right - a foot doctor.

Gall has created a masterpiece in this book, loaded with corollaries and theorems, seeded with wonderful humor while being incredibly on target. Praised by Kevin Kelly in the *Whole Earth* catalogue, "The author is having fun with a serious subject...insights come in the form of marvelously succinct rules of thumb..." The book's tag line is also revealing: "How Systems Really Work and How They Fail."

Recognizing that "Complicated systems seldom exceed five percent efficiency." Gall proposes among other rules of behavior that systems always kick back, get in the way, and tend to oppose their own proper functions. This certainly matches most people's experience of working in organizations, particularly bureaucracies.

He also postulates that "The system itself does not do what it says it is doing" - one of the most obvious unspoken truths about organizations.

As I read this book over a decade ago, I came away with my eyes opened wide, finally realizing that systems inevitably replaced their stated purpose with one that is common to ALL systems - their own survival. As a result, any attempt to change a system can be viewed from within it as a threat - a threat to its "life" and therefore resisted in ways that aren't even visible.

However, once this truth is known, the system can be engaged more wisely...that is unless one forgets this very basic truth. If one does, then one is not only a fool but also wasting one's time.