

Causal Layer Analysis

Causal Layer Analysis is a foresight tool developed by Sohail Inayatullah to break down complex challenges into four layers:

- **Surface Level:** Immediate concerns and visible issues.
- **Systemic Level:** The broader systems and structures influencing those issues.
- **Worldview Level:** The beliefs and perspectives shaping those systems.
- **Myth/Metaphor Level:** The deeper narratives and stories underlying the worldview.

This exercise helps you examine the deeper structures influencing an issue by exploring multiple layers of meaning. By analyzing surface-level symptoms, underlying causes, worldviews, and core myths, you can develop a more comprehensive understanding of complex challenges and potential solutions.

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) encourages critical thinking and deeper reflection by pushing beyond surface-level understandings of an issue. This method enhances big picture thinking and fosters a broader perspective on how structures, beliefs, and narratives shape the future. By engaging with CLA, you develop the ability to uncover hidden assumptions, challenge dominant paradigms, and explore innovative solutions that may not be immediately visible.

STEP 1

Identify the Problem

Define a challenge or issue that you want to explore in depth. This can be a career-related dilemma, a societal trend, or a systemic challenge.

EXAMPLE

Overwhelm with the deluge of news and information encountered through social media platforms, and potential impacts on people's mental well-being.

STEP 2**The Four Layers of CLA**

1. Litany (Surface-Level Symptoms)

- This is how the problem is commonly discussed in everyday conversations and media.
- It includes statistics, trends, or complaints about the issue.

EXAMPLE

Social media is exhausting. There's too much negativity, misinformation, and constant updates.

2. Systemic Causes (Underlying Structures)

- What structures, policies, technologies, or economic systems drive the problem?
- These might include business models, government policies, and technological infrastructures that sustain the issue.

EXAMPLE

Social media platforms use engagement-driven algorithms that prioritize sensational content, leading to information overload and emotional fatigue.

3. Worldview (Cultural and Ideological Assumptions)

- What perspectives, beliefs, and cultural narratives support the problem?
- Consider societal expectations, dominant ideologies, and generational attitudes that may reinforce the issue.

EXAMPLE

The belief that staying informed means consuming as much news as possible, combined with a culture of digital immediacy, creates pressure to be constantly online.

4. Myth/Metaphor (Deep Narratives and Symbols)

- What underlying stories or metaphors shape our understanding of the issue?
- These are the subconscious frames through which people experience and relate to the problem.

EXAMPLE

"Drowning in information"—news consumption is framed as an overwhelming flood, making individuals feel powerless rather than in control of their knowledge intake.

STEP 3**Reframing and Solutions**

Once you have mapped out the layers, explore how shifting perspectives at deeper levels could lead to meaningful change.

- How can policies or systems be adjusted to reduce the problem?
- What kinds of deeper cultural shifts would help to address this challenge?
- What new metaphors could replace disempowering narratives?

You might map this process of transformation to the four causal layers, thereby tracing connections between everyday surface-level experiences and deeper systems, symbols, and ways of modeling and understanding the world.

EXAMPLE

- **Litany Shift:** *Encourage mindful media consumption rather than total disconnection.*
- **Systemic Change:** *Design social media algorithms to prioritize well-being and diverse perspectives over engagement metrics.*
- **Worldview Shift:** *Normalize selective news intake and taking breaks without guilt.*
- **New Metaphor:** *“Curating a balanced media diet”—news is something we consume with intention rather than being force-fed.*

Reflect

- How does analyzing different layers change your understanding of the issue?
- What new perspectives or insights emerged during this exercise?
- How might this approach be applied to other career or societal challenges?

