USING SYSTEMS ARCHETYPES AS DIFFERENT "LENSES"

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So, you've chosen a problem you want to study using systems thinking tools. You gather together some co-workers, round up some flipchart paper and markers, and sit down to work. But, after an hour of trying to match the problem to a particular archetype and drawing diagrams that quickly look like spaghetti, you give up in despair. It all seems so simple when you read about it; why is it so difficult to actually do?

Applying archetypes such as "Shifting the Burden," "Fixes That Fail," and "Limits to Growth" to a specific problem can be a confusing and difficult process, especially if you believe there is one "right" way to use them. We can actually talk about using the archetypes in three different ways:

1. as different lenses;
2. as structural pattern templates;
3. as dynamic scripts (or theories).

By distinguishing between these different types of use, we can focus on increasing our capability in any one of the three ways, rather than being frustrated by trying to do everything at once. In this article, we will focus on using archetypes as lenses for gaining different perspectives on an issue.

I'll See It When I Believe It

Many of us at one time or another have said "I'll believe it when I see it," suggesting that we have more faith in things that we can see and touch. If, for example, there are 100 cases of beer in inventory, you and I can count them and both agree on that number. On the other hand, if we ask why we have 100 cases, our opinions will likely be very different and may be colored by our personal beliefs.

For example, if I think the 100 cases of inventory are a result of poor production scheduling, I will tend to find evidence to support that view. Or, if I think that individual error is re-sponsible for overstocking, I will focus on finding individuals to blame rather than look for any larger systemic forces that may be at work. We don't believe what we see as much as we see what we believe. Because we can easily fall into this trap, having tools such as the archetypes to help us look at broader systemic issues can be helpful for expanding our perspective.

Seeing Through Systemic Lenses

In many ways, using an archetype is like putting on a pair of eyeglasses. If we look at a situation through the lens of the "Shifting the Burden" storyline, we will ask different questions and focus on different things than if we were using the "Tragedy of the Commons" archetype. It is not a question of which is "right," but, rather, what different insight each archetype offers.

Using the archetypes as lenses requires a basic understanding of the main lessons, key elements, and outcomes or high-leverage actions that are embodied in each archetype (see "Systems Archetypes at-a-Glance," August 2011). This level of understanding allows us to go into a situation, identify potential storylines at work, explore their implications, and gain some initial understanding of the problem under study.

Boat Buyback Dilemma

For example, consider the problem of fish depletion in coastal waters. In order to address the dangers of overfishing and eventual depletion of certain species, the U.S. government launched a pilot program to buy boats back from fishermen.

The overfishing problem has all the classic features of a "Tragedy of the Commons" archetype (see "Too Many Boats on the Horizon," September 1994). A large number of players are competing for a single resource. The incentive is for each individual fisherman to catch as many fish as possible. However, the combined total of their efforts will eventually hurt everyone, as fish stocks become depleted. The irony of the situation is that despite the devastation in the long term, it is in no individual's interest to stop fishing in the short term. The lever-

TEAM TIP

Use the questions on page 8 to gain different insights into a problem.

age in a "Tragedy of the Commons" structure is to have a single governing authority manage the commons. From this perspective, the boat buyback program can be seen as an appropriate role for the government as resource manager.

If we look at the same situation through the lens of another archetype, however, we can see some other potentially relevant issues. For example, we know that the storyline of a "Shifting the Burden" archetype is that a problem symptom cries out to be fixed. In such situations, we have a tendency to implement a solution that alleviates the symptom in the short term rather than to invest in a more lasting solution. Implementing a quick fix reduces the pressure to examine the deeper structures that may be at the root of the problem.

From this perspective, we might be concerned that the government bailout will send the signal that Uncle Sam will provide a safety net whenever the fishing industry develops over-capacity. Therefore, when fishing stocks replenish, fishermen may be less concerned about taking risks and expanding their fleet. Over time, the fix may become so entrenched that it will turn into a permanent Band-Aid that will shift the wrong kind of responsibility to the government. In this case, the "Shifting the Burden" archetype reveals how the short-term solution shifts the burden of risk and over-extension from the individual to the government.

Productive Conversations and Deeper Inquiry

The buyback example illustrates how the archetypes can be used to gain different perspectives on an issue. Rather than spending time figuring out which archetype best matches your particular situation or trying to get your arrows to go in the right direction, you can use the archetypes to begin a general inquiry into the problem.

To see which lenses may be relevant, try using the questions listed in the accompanying sidebar to see what insight each archetype can add to your problem (see "Trying on Different Eyeglasses"). Once you have selected the most pertinent archetype(s), you can use those archetype(s) to develop action plans that will address the problem systemically.

Looking at the world through the lenses of archetypes puts our primary focus on systemic structures and not on individuals. This is particularly important at the initial stage of problem diagnosis, because it enables you to engage people in the process more easily without triggering defensiveness. This process of "trying on" different stories leads us to ask different kinds of questions and, ultimately, enables us to have more productive conversations. ◘

TRYING ON DIFFERENT EYEGLASSES	
Systems Archetype	**Questions to ask when putting on each of the archetype "lenses"**
Drifting Goals	• Are there goals or standards that are eroding over time? • Are people focused on achieving the goal or on reducing the discomfort of not being at the goal?
Escalation	• Are there two or more players of equal power whose individual actions can be perceived as a threat by the others? • Does each player have the capacity to retaliate with similar actions?
Fixes That Fail	• Have actions been taken to respond quickly to a crisis without much consideration of long-term consequences? • Have similar actions been taken in the past in response to similar crises?
Growth and Underinvestment	• Do investments tend to be made as a reaction to growth rather than in anticipation of growth? • Do problems created by growth, rather than long-range planning, act as the organizational signal to invest?
Limits to Success	• Are once-successful programs experiencing diminishing returns? • Are there limits in the system that are constraining the growth?
Shifting the Burden	• Are actions taken to alleviate problem symptoms shifting attention away from more fundamental solutions? • Are there additional consequences that systematically erode the underlying capability of the organization?
Success to the Successful	• Are there two or more equal options whose investment decisions are linked in a zero-sum game? • Does the success of either option depend on initial conditions?
Tragedy of the Commons	• Is there a large number of equal players who have free or equal access to a common and limited resource? • Is the system set up to be self-regulated, with no overarching governing body?

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