



As the lights dimmed and the crowd hushed, Larry suddenly realized that he had reached the Limit of his Success.

Leadership Through Learning Part 2C: Negative Systems Archetypes

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“In the 1960s, researchers began to notice that some more complex systems structures are generic — they apply to a wide variety of situations, including many organizational situations. These archetypal system structures suggested new, counterintuitive ways to deal effectively with a wide range of organizational and community problems.”

— Peter Senge et al., **Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Resource** (2000)

When we started developing our approach to systems thinking in 1996, there were 10 archetypes already developed by Jennifer Kemeny, Michael Goodman, and Peter Senge at MIT in Cambridge,

Massachusetts, USA. They studied systems thinking under Jay Forrester, a prominent researcher at MIT, and one of the greatest minds in systems thinking in the 20th Century. Forrester studied human and social systems, and discovered that there were some universal systems that could be explained by using *archetypes*. These 10 archetypes are universal systems that describe problems that humans encounter in their daily lives. Each archetype also has a set of strategies to solve the problem — strategies that use leverage points. Leverage points are actions that use the least amount of effort to produce the most change in the system. These two aspects of archetypes — universality and strategies — make them easy to use in solving complex problems.

Below are the 10 negative archetypes. Each negative archetype includes a *description*,

the *mental model* that drives the engine of that archetype, and a *key strategy* for dealing with the negative archetype. Think of a situation or problem at work that you or others may be struggling with. As you read these descriptions, list the negative archetypes that might be occurring in your situation. Feel free to modify the generic descriptions to better fit your situation.

Limits to Success (-)

Description: Success or growth is levelling off or declining.

Mental Model: We'll get bigger and better by continuing to do more of what we are doing now.

Key Strategy: Identify the limit that is causing the decline, then plan for these limits.

Success to the Successful (-)

Description: Decisions are being made in allocating resources, so that one party is getting attention and resources at the expense of another party

Mental Model: Because others are successful, they must be good, and we're not.

Key Strategy: Identify what is making others unique. Then, plan how to sustain your uniqueness, and to influence the decision-maker.

Tragedy of the Commons (-)

Description: Everyone is using a common resource that nobody owns. Overall usage goes up, but return to the individual goes down.

Mental Model: This common resource belongs to me.

Key Strategy: Identify the common resource, and how the tragedy is displaying itself. Then, plan how to allocate and/or limit access to the common resource.

Growth and Underinvestment (-)

Description: We neglect, or are unable, to invest in the capacity to succeed.

Mental Model: We can pass the present crunch by applying greater effort. After the pressure recedes, it's impossible to justify investing for long-term capacity.

Key Strategy: Identify the limit that is causing the heroic efforts, the goal, and how the goal is drifting. Then, plan for future investment in capacity.

Attractiveness Principle (-)

Description: We are trying to be all things to all people.

Mental Model: We must please everybody all of the time.

Key Strategy: Identify behaviours that are reinforcing your attractiveness, and what you are attracting. Then, make choices about what you will do, and what you will not do, and stick to your decisions.

Fixes that Fail (-)

Description: All the fixes that we have tried are not working, over the long term, and we do not know what to do.

Mental Model: Time is money, and neither time nor money should be wasted. Therefore, the first answer must be the right one.

Key Strategy: Identify the fix, and understand the side effects of the fix and how the fix has failed.

Shifting the Burden (-)

Description: We know the fundamental solution, but are unwilling, or unable, to invest in the solution, so we take action on a quick fix.

Mental Model: We know what we need to do, but it's too difficult to deal with, so let's get someone else to do it, or let's do a quick fix, or let's forget for now.

Key Strategy: Identify the addictive behaviour to quick fixes, and how responsibility and accountability are shifting. Then, commit to taking long-term action.

Drifting Goals (-)

Description: We have lowered our standards to close the gap between the actual and desired performance.

Mental Model: Our current level of activity is acceptable, even though it is below standard.

Key Strategy: Identify the goal and how it is drifting, and possibly redefine the goal. Then, stay focused on the goal.

Accidental Adversaries (-)

Description: Something that someone is doing is undermining the success of the relationship.

Mental Model: Accident: What we do doesn't affect anyone else.

Adversarial Position: Someone is undermining us or the situation.

Key Strategy: Identify the accident that caused the situation, and the adversarial positions created as a result. Then, seek out multiple perspectives.

Escalation (-)

Description: All parties see the other's actions as a threat, and respond defensively.

Mental Model: We're under attack or being threatened, and need to defend ourselves.

Key Strategy: Identify the threat, how it is perceived, and how it is escalating. Then, stop reacting to the situation.

In addition to these 10 negative archetypes, we have developed 10 positive archetypes that complement the 10 negative archetypes. When we work with teams in organizations, we use *archetype cards* that show the negative archetype on one side and the positive archetype on the other side. Teams use these cards to map the team's situation and to help the team to find a solution that works. In the next few newsletters, we will describe the 10 positive archetypes, and show you our unique mapping technique.

“As we learn to recognize more and more of these archetypes, it becomes possible to see more and more places where there is leverage in facing difficult challenges, *and* to explain these opportunities to others.”

— Peter Senge et al., **The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of a Learning Organization** (1990)

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