



Leadership Through Learning Part 2D: Complexity and Domestic Disputes

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“Today, we live in confusing times, probably more confusing than in any other time in our history. In addition, we have another dilemma. Not only are we confused, but also we seem to have very little time to examine that confusion, in order to find a way out.”

— Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Navigating Through Complexity: Systems Thinking Guide** (2002)

In the last newsletter, we defined the 10 negative systems archetypes that can be used to describe aspects of a complex system. In this newsletter, we describe how Scott, a police officer with a local Police Service, used these negative archetypes as a way to describe the complexity of what he was experiencing when attending to domestic disputes.

Police officers are often called upon

to intervene in domestic disputes. Problems arise when they have to come back to the same situation time and time again to intervene with the same individuals. Most of the time, interventions in domestic disputes result in short-lived solutions. It is only a question of time before the police officers return to the same situation to resolve the same problems. This vicious cycle of *fixes that fail* leads to many police officers being frustrated at their seeming lack of effectiveness in helping people to resolve domestic disputes. Making the situation even more complex and difficult is the timing: police officers are usually called to intervene when the situation is reaching, or is already at, a crisis point.

The vicious cycle of domestic disputes is often perpetuated by a lack of communication, and an increase in alcohol and drug abuse. In addition, the parties involved in the situation often view police officers as social workers who are *owned* by them. These aspects and views add pressure to an already volatile situation, straining the stretched support resources throughout a city, and increasing the officers' level of frustration. Many police officers are saddened by the fact that other citizens often get a lower level of service because the officers are spending most of their time dealing with these unresolved situations.

This is good example of a complex problem in which using systems

thinking can be beneficial. In this case, police officers, as well as others, are encountering a repeating pattern in which the problem is not being resolved. In fact, it may actually be escalating out of control.

Identifying Archetypes

Below are a few of the negative archetypes that Scott identified in analyzing a typical domestic dispute situation. Following each negative archetype are characteristics listed in the **Systems Thinking Guide** (shown in *italics*). Then, there is an example of how Scott sees the negative archetype demonstrated, and his definition of the mental model that may be driving the engine of the archetype.

Fixes that Fail: *The problem is getting worse, requiring you to do more fixes. At first, the fixes tend to deal with the problem, but then the problem resurfaces.*

Example: Once parties have dealt with the police the first time in their domestic situation, the parties often become more comfortable with a police presence. They somehow lose the ability to try to work the situation out on their own, creating a repeating pattern in which they call the police more and more frequently. In turn, police officers continue to come to help, but what fixed the problem last time does not work now, since the parties involved are generally less willing to work cooperatively. Police often separate the parties for the night. If violence has occurred, they lay charges, and the court may impose conditions of no contact with the other

party. However, as time passes, the parties can make up, and ignore the court-imposed conditions. It is typically only a matter of time before the same parties are calling the police again to intervene.

Mental Model: We know there is a problem. We try to find a fix that will ease the pressure in the situation. But we also know we will most likely end up with the same problem!

Tragedy of the Commons:

Everyone involved is highly dependent on the common resource, because all are accustomed to the benefits.

Example: People call the police, and police officers take care of the problem. People treat police officers as if they are a common resource that belongs to them alone. Even if it is just a quick fix, people are still happy because someone has attended to their specific issue, and there has been some temporary resolution. Revisiting the same domestic situation is frustrating for all parties. In addition, other citizens, who require police assistance, often have to wait longer because the police officers are attending to a recurring situation.

Mental Model: I pay your salary, so you'd better come and fix my problem.

Success to the Successful: *You seem to be on the losing end of your situation, getting less and less of the available resources.*

Example: Street constables respond to the majority of domestic situations. In many cases, they are effective in meeting the immediate needs of the parties involved, if only in a temporary way. Unfortunately,

their success brings with it more work, with no additional resources, even though more resources would enable them to be more effective in addressing the real problem. This makes it harder for police officers to continue to maintain their success, because they spend more and more of their time returning to recurring problems, and less and less time on emerging issues.

Mental Model: Our success isn't a true victory.

Accidental Adversaries: *You are working in a relationship and independent actions are limiting your success. You are working in a partnership, and without meaning to, you are becoming adversaries.*

Example: The police services' partners are Emergency Social Services and other domestic-related counselling agencies. These partners do good work, but are not always available when the problem is occurring (e.g., at 2:00 a.m.). Thus, more often than not, after an incident occurs, little or no services are provided, since the parties have made up and often refuse any external help. The support services can become frustrated because their interventions seem like a waste of time. Police officers can become frustrated because they believe that informing follow-up services may be a waste of time. A finger-pointing exercise can result, when, in fact, no one is to blame. The dynamics of the situation itself are causing these unintended side effects.

Mental Model: Why aren't you solving the problem?

Escalation: *Each party is justifying their own position, and not considering the other party's view.*

Example: Both social workers and police officers get frustrated with each other's actions, or apparent non-actions, in the situation. Neither group has a full understanding of the efforts of the other group.

Mental Model: We are working hard to solve this problem. Why aren't you helping?

Note that the archetypes may not be a perfect fit with Scott's description. A perfect fit is not essential. Our approach is not about getting it right. It is about people conversing with each other about what they are experiencing, thus gaining a deeper and more full understanding of the complexity of the situation. In an ideal situation, Scott would be doing this analysis with others involved in the situation. In identifying these archetypes, Scott gained a broader and deeper understanding of the complexity of the situation — a first step to finding a pathway out of the vicious cycle.

“Of the several approaches to systems thinking that we have studied, we have found one approach that shows promise. This approach is called *systems archetypes* — a way of using simple system patterns to describe how a complex system may be operating.” — Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Navigating Through Complexity: Systems Thinking Guide** (2002)

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