



Leadership Through Learning Part 2E: Positive Systems Archetypes

by Marilyn Herasymowych and
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“The archetypes that are described in the literature are negative in nature. ... We have discovered that you can look at a system as having two sides, and that each side is a specific form of that system called an archetype: a negative archetype that produces undesired results, and a positive archetype that produces desired results.”

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

In the last newsletter, we described how Scott, a police officer with a local Police Service, used the 10 negative archetypes to describe the complexity of what he was experiencing when attending to domestic disputes. In this newsletter, we introduce the 10

positive archetypes that can also occur within complex systems.

In 2000, we were testing our systems thinking approach with a group of people, when Esther Wilcox Hudson, one of our colleagues, questioned the perspective from which the 10 archetypes operated. Esther noticed that the 10 archetypes described a complex system from the perspective of *what was not working* — a pessimistic or negative focus. She felt that there was an important part of the system that was not being analyzed: the aspects of the system that *were working* — an optimistic or positive focus. From Esther’s idea, we created a set of 10 positive archetypes that are counterparts to the 10 negative archetypes (see *appreciative inquiry* in **InfoMine** Vol. 4, No. 3 and Vol. 4, No. 4).

To explain, consider one of the negative archetypes, called *Tragedy of the Commons*. In this archetype, there is a common resource that is being overused. The *tragedy* is that the common resource is being depleted. For example, in Scott’s situation, the Police Service, its officers, and the support services workers are the common resource. Most people do not act as if officers and support services workers are a common resource. Instead, they tend to act as if officers are there to serve them alone, thus creating a tragedy.

The counterpart to *Tragedy of the Commons* is the positive archetype called *Collective Agreement*. In this archetype, people understand what it means to use a common resource. Access to the common resource is regulated in some way, so that all parties benefit, and the common resource is sustained. Scott identified *Collective Agreement* as one of the positive archetypes that can occur in these domestic dispute situations. One of the characteristics of *Collective Agreement* is: *Everyone participates in conversations and decisions that focus on the common resources*. According to Scott, this archetype is occurring in a limited way among officers and support services workers. There is conversation about the problem, and greater understanding about how the common resources are being stretched in a number of directions.

You can think of the negative and positive aspects of the archetypes as if they are two sides of a coin: one side is the positive form of the archetype, and the other side is the negative form. Every system is dynamic, or in constant change. The system you are experiencing has a dynamic, sometimes manifesting its positive nature (positive archetypes), and sometimes manifesting its negative nature (negative archetypes) — like coins flipping and spinning. When you are getting desired results, it is likely that the system is displaying more of the positive archetypes. When you are getting undesired results, it is likely that the system is displaying more of the negative archetypes.

As in a previous newsletter (**InfoMine** Vol. 10, No. 6), the 10 positive archetypes are described below. The negative archetype that is the positive archetype's counterpart is listed last in the description. As you read this list, you may want to select which positive archetypes are occurring in your situation.

Plan for Limits (+)

Description: We identify, evaluate, and plan for limits.

Mental Model: Limits can be overcome by planning for them.

Negative Archetype:
Limits to Success (-)

Strut Your Stuff (+)

Description: Decisions are being made in allocating resources to give appropriate attention to all parties.

Mental Model: Our success is up to us.

Negative Archetype:
Success to the Successful (-)

Collective Agreement (+)

Description: Overall use of a common resource is collectively agreed upon.

Mental Model: This common resource belongs to everyone.

Negative Archetype:
Tragedy of the Commons (-)

Invest for Success (+)

Description: We take actions to invest in future capacity.

Mental Model: Investing in the future is the key to success.

Negative Archetype:

Growth and Underinvestment (-)

Be Your Best (+)

Description: We have boundaries of what we can and cannot do.

Mental Model: We cannot please everybody.

Negative Archetype:

Attractiveness Principle (-)

Fixes that Work (+)

Description: We identify possible side effects of short-term fixes.

Mental Model: We consider possible alternatives and their side effects before acting.

Negative Archetype:

Fixes that Fail (-)

Bite the Bullet (+)

Description: We are willing, and able, to invest in the time and effort required to implement the fundamental solution.

Mental Model: We take responsibility, and spend the time and effort required to be effective.

Negative Archetype:

Shifting the Burden (-)

Stay on Track (+)

Description: We monitor, evaluate, and adjust performance standards, in order to achieve goals.

Mental Model: We know where we are going, and what it will take to get there.

Negative Archetype:

Drifting Goals (-)

Cooperative Partners (+)

Description: We work together and communicate openly for our collective success.

Mental Model: There is always a way for us to work this out together.

Negative Archetype:

Accidental Adversaries (-)

Win/Win (+)

Description: All parties pay attention to their own behaviours.

Mental Model: We can work this out, so that everybody wins.

Negative Archetype:

Escalation (-)

“Archetypes are not actually *negative* or *positive*. The results that these archetypes produce are what you may define as either negative or positive. We use the terms *negative* and *positive* because that is what people in organizations are comfortable using.”

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

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