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Leadership Through Learning Part 2H: Riding Through the Storm of Complexity

by Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

"Even though people primarily use [systems thinking] to solve problems and to examine opportunities, our approach works because it is about much more than this. It is about *learning in action*. This means that you have to act, and then learn from those actions, in order to create the system you desire."
— Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Navigating Through Complexity: Systems Thinking Guide** (2002)

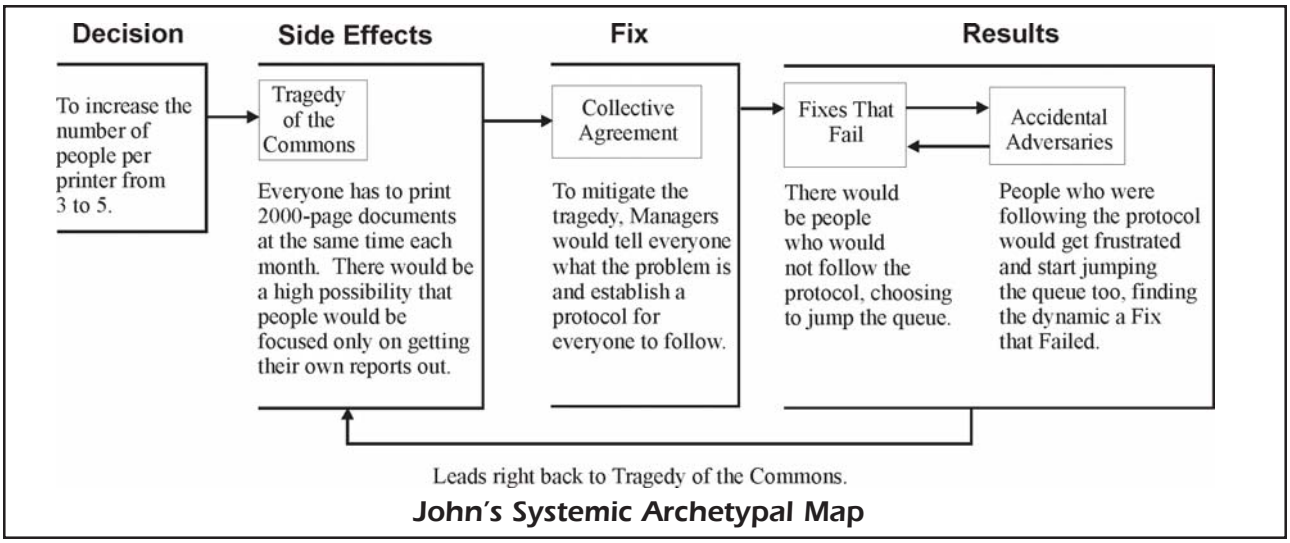
In the last few newsletters, we identified both negative and positive systems archetypes, and showed you how systemic archetypal mapping works. To finish this series of newsletters, we want to show you another way in which you can use systems thinking: for scenario planning once a decision has already been made. We also want to show you that systems thinking is a *just-in-time tool* that can be used quickly and effectively in the *time-starved workplace*. It can seem that learning the archetypes and systemic archetypal mapping takes a lot of time. However, it is much easier than you think to learn this approach, because archetypes are easy to spot in everyday life. Once you know the archetypes and how to map them, using systems thinking becomes second nature. In fact, in daily work, people can use systems thinking in as little time as 5 minutes. The case described below occurred in less than 20 minutes.

John is an information technology professional working in a large public-sector organization. His organization has been under pressure for years to manage its costs, resulting in a number of management decisions to reduce costs. John believes that many of these decisions have been made without thinking of the larger system, and the possible negative side effects that may occur. He believes that this scenario probably happens in a number of organizations, due to increased pressures to deal with a lack of resources. John has a solid understanding of systems archetypes and systemic archetypal mapping, and uses these tools in his work. His case study below explores the question: "How can you use systems thinking once a decision has been made, especially if the decision is likely to have negative side effects, and you are unable to influence or change the decision?"

The decision to reduce costs focused on increasing the number of people using a common printer from 3 people to 5. Management could see that this decision would create a common resource problem: everyone would be printing their 2000-page reports at the same time, because these reports were due at the same time each month. John identified the negative archetype as the *Tragedy of the Commons*. Management's response to this probable tragedy was to ask team leaders to make their people aware that the printer was a common resource, and that everyone needed to work together. Management established a protocol that would govern when people could print their documents by assigning an order for people to use the printer. This action is in line with a leverage point that can flip the *Tragedy of the Commons* archetype to its positive form, called *Collective Agreement*. However, John was not convinced that this protocol would work. So, he did scenario planning to explore what might also happen when action was taken on this decision.

Even though having a protocol is a legitimate leverage point, it does not take into account human nature, and the fact that each person on a computer network works in a separate cubicle. Human nature means that old patterns are hard to break. Being isolated from others means that it is easier to fall back into old patterns. This points to the fact that not every leverage point shown in the **Systems Thinking Guide** works. When selecting a leverage point, you also need to think about the possible *ripple effects* of taking action on a leverage point.

Despite the best of intentions, John believes that some people might not follow the protocol, jumping the queue to print their documents first. This could easily lead to *Accidental Adversaries*, because people who are



John's Systemic Archetypal Map

trying the follow the protocol might feel that they are being sabotaged by others. They might feel frustration and anger. Some of these people, who initially followed the protocol, might begin to jump the queue as well, feeding the dynamic of a *Fix that Fails*. Ultimately, this would flip back to *Tragedy of the Commons*, creating a vicious cycle. To deal with the *Fix that Fails*, it is likely that management would enforce their action of *Collective Agreement*, making sure everyone understands the protocol, and possibly turning people's actions into performance issues. This would easily reinforce the negative archetype of *Accidental Adversaries*. No matter how much management enforced the protocol, John believes that the pattern would continue to repeat itself over and over again, creating even more resistance to the initial decision.

Above is the systemic archetypal map that John drew to describe this scenario. It took him 5 minutes to identify the archetypes and another 5 minutes to draw this map.

John noticed that this same pattern showed up in many situations, not just the one that he was examining; management had often taken actions that failed to produce the desired results. John also realized that trying to address *Collective Agreement* would be a waste of time and energy. The map helped John to seek out other leverage points and actions that would deal with the decision in a way that might ease pressure on the system. In another 5 minutes, he came up with a number of different ways in which his department could manage the increased number of people per printer, and the 2000-page documents that had to be printed at the same time. Instead of wasting more time on *Collective Agreement*, John focused on creating a *Fix that Works*, a fix that might ease the pressure created by the *Tragedy of the Commons*. John realized that the tragedy would never disappear, but it could be mitigated.

John's ideas included:

- Sharing his systemic archetypal map with the team, and asking them what they think they could do
- Finding out how many reports have to be printed at the same time
- Finding out which reports have to printed, and which could be sent by e-mail
- Finding out if the whole report has to be printed, or just parts

As a result of his experience with systems thinking, John has been transformed. "With systems thinking in mind, I plan to leave silo thinking behind. I plan to plow through the grooves of our organization, uprooting problems and flipping negative archetypes like so many weeds, planting positive archetypes, and using scenario planning like a scarecrow to ward off negative archetypes that may be looming on the horizon."

"Now you know enough to start your journey through the storm of complexity. [Systems archetypes] are your navigation tools that will help you clear the storm. But there will always be more storms, and every storm will be different from the last. You cannot get rid of the storms, but you can be prepared to meet and ride through them. It is your thinking and acting that will get you through the storm in one piece." — Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Navigating Through Complexity: Systems Thinking Guide** (2002)

MHA Institute Inc.
Unit 248, Suite 205
259 Midpark Way SE
Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada

Phone: (403) 257-4597
Fax: (403) 257-4649
E-mail: info@mhainstitute.ca
Web: www.mhainstitute.ca