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mentoring human action



**Leadership Through Learning
 Part 3M: Reflexive Practice
 and Systems Thinking:
 “I Have No Time!”**

by Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“What’s the rush? Good question for most of us in these turbulent times. With all the stresses and demands on us, it seems we must run faster and faster just to keep up. But where is all this rush getting us? Is it satisfying for us? Are we doing more tasks, but finding less meaning in them? If so, it’s time to take stock”.

— James Ballard, **What’s the Rush? Step Out of the Race, Free Your Mind, Change Your Life** (1999)

In the next three newsletters, we’d like to show you how to use systems thinking and reflexive practice together to analyze and deal with a relational system. To do this, we’d like to examine your relationship with time. Everywhere we go, whether it be in organizations or in our personal relationships, we have noticed one common complaint — people tell us that they have no time! In this newsletter, we’ll examine this

relationship with time using the MHA approach to systems thinking (see **InfoMine**, Vol. 10, No. 4 to Vol. 11, No. 6). To begin, you need to identify the negative archetypes that are usually operating when you are feeling the pressure of having no time (see **InfoMine**, Vol. 10, No. 6).

In the course of your day, you are asked to do things by a number of different people. A typical reaction to being asked to do something is to say *yes*. This simple word *yes*, that slips so easily off your tongue, starts a repeating pattern of behaviour that leads you to believe that you have no time. This generic pattern of behaviour is shown in the operational system map below.

Each negative archetype in the map is explained in more detail in the rest of this newsletter. As you read the explanations below, ask yourself the question: In what ways are these descriptions of the negative archetypes similar to your

own experience with having no time?

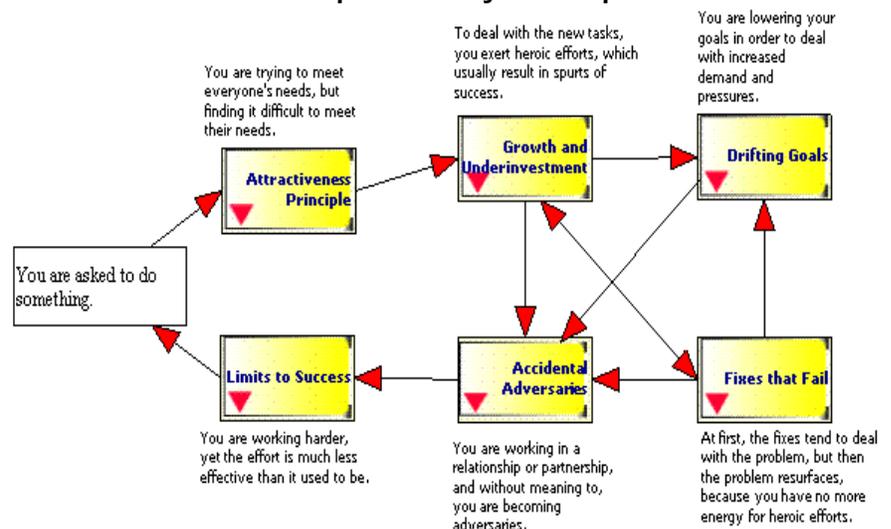
Attractiveness Principle:

Saying *yes* is a part of Western culture. You don’t even think about saying *no*; you just say *yes*. If you did think about it, you might consider why you say *yes*:

- You may be afraid that if you say *no*, you may be punished in some way.
- You may believe you are the only person who can do the task.
- You may believe that it is polite to say *yes*.
- You may believe that it is your job to say *yes*.
- You might believe that you have no choice but to say *yes*.

What is even more intriguing is how you feel once you have said *yes*, and how you react when you realize that you may not be able to do what you just said *yes* to. When you say *yes* to doing something, you move into a stance of fitting what you said *yes* to into your schedule. You seldom even think about why you said *yes*, or even if you have time to do what you said

Operational System Map



yes to. You believe that you don't even have time to think about whether or not you can do what you are being asked to do. You simply say *yes*. Every once in while, you realize that you can't do what you said *yes* to. But, instead of challenging your automatic response of saying *yes*, you simply fit the extra workload into your schedule. At some level you know you are overloading yourself, but you believe that you have no choice. Although you often share your feelings of frustration with colleagues, you seldom if ever share feelings with those to whom you have said *yes*.

Growth and Underinvestment:

As you fit the unending stream of things you said *yes* to into your schedule, you move into a *heroic* mode to accomplish all of these things. Human beings have a reservoir of heroic effort that is there for you to use in times of great need. This reservoir is there to be used sparingly, and for a short duration of time. This reservoir gives you a source of energy and focus that allows you to accomplish a lot in a short period of time. At an extreme, it is this reservoir that allows some people to pick up a car off a person in an accident. However, in today's world, you tap this reservoir daily to help you deal with your overburdened schedule and your belief of having no time. You perform above and beyond your capacity, getting the tasks done at great expense. At first, the energy released by the heroic effort makes you feel really good about what you are accomplishing, and gives you more energy for more heroic efforts. But as the heroic effort reservoir becomes drained, you move from feeling good to feeling tired, and then exhausted. What is astonishing is that you accept this feeling of being tired as part of the heroic effort. You can easily convince yourself that you will get a second wind if you just

keep going. The extremes of this behaviour can be seen everywhere: people taking work home, people working longer hours and on days off, people not taking lunch or coffee breaks, and people multi-tasking (talking on the phone and doing e-mails at the same time).

Fix that Fails:

What is most disturbing about the heroic effort is that supervisors see this as normal behaviour, thus raising the standard for performance to this heroic level. Now, the expectation is that everyone will perform at a heroic level *all of the time*. This makes saying *no* even harder to do.

Drifting Goals:

In a very short period of time, the heroic effort reservoir empties. By this time, you have little or no energy, and are often very tired, so tired that you may even have difficulty sleeping at night, which increases your exhaustion. This loss of energy causes you to *drift your goals* in all areas of your life. You justify this drifting by saying you're only going to do this for a short period of time, not realizing that this has been going on too long already. The quality of your work drops. You stop being able to complete tasks. Some things drop through the cracks and are forgotten. You double- and triple-book meetings. You are always late for everything. And your excuse for your behaviour is that you have no time.

Accidental Adversaries:

Drifting goals, breaking promises, being late, and not getting work done cause ripple effects in your relationships with others. People become frustrated with your behaviour, because your behaviour is putting pressure on them. They are just as caught in this pattern as you are. Others are doing the same thing to you, creating more frustration and difficulty. This can easily lead to conflict and difficult relations that seem

impossible to mend.

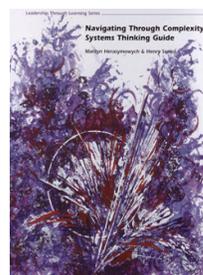
Limits to Success:

At the end of the day, you feel you have accomplished little or nothing. You have reached your *limit to success*. You still have no time, you now have no energy, you believe you have no support, and you have no way to deal with being overwhelmed. And because you have no time to think about what has happened, the next time someone comes into your office and asks you to do something, you simply say *yes* without even thinking about what this means. And the patterns start all over again.

In the next newsletter we will examine this relationship using reflexive practice. In the following newsletter, we will share the strategies people have used to create a healthier pattern of behaviour.

“Experience is not what happens to us; it is what we *do* with what happens to us. This means we don't need to change the world, but the way we look at it”.

— James Ballard, **What's the Rush? Step Out of the Race, Free Your Mind, Change Your Life** (1999)



Navigating Through Complexity: Systems Thinking Guide, see www.mhainstitute.ca for more information

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