

Mastering the Archetypes of Social Change

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Why do popular solutions to chronic socioeconomic problems often fail, while less obvious ones frequently succeed? For example, how can we explain the following tendencies:

- Food aid sent to poverty-stricken nations leads to increased death by starvation over time
- More and more money is spent on police and prisons to reduce crime, but the streets are still unsafe
- Efforts to grow our way out of recession lead to even greater economic dislocation

Answers to these questions can be found in the field of System Dynamics, the "Fifth Discipline" recognized by Peter Senge in his book by the same name. These problems arise out of classic dynamics that appear at all levels of social system: whether it be in the form of co-dependence at the family level, ineffective downsizing policies at the organizational level, or socioeconomic decay at the national and global levels. They can be prevented if key stakeholders establish a shared understanding of the basic dynamics in advance of deciding policy.

A simple way to introduce people to these dynamics is by providing them with a hands-on understanding of several of the common systems archetypes or classic stories that underlie socioeconomic problems, debates, and alternatives. People develop insight when they take the following steps:

- 1) Learn the classic archetypes.
- 2) Use the archetypes to explain how typical social policy analyses and debates often lead to ill-conceived and short-sighted solutions.
- 3) Examine problems of particular importance to them that exemplify these dynamics.
- 4) Identify the mental models held by various stakeholders that determine many of the cause-effect relationships in these systems.
- 5) Clarify their own personal responsibility for perpetuating current problems.
- 6) Develop solutions with greater leverage in producing sustainable system-wide improvement.

Several archetypes stand out when working with social policy issues. They are presented below with examples.

Virtuous and Vicious Cycles - the sources of growth and decay in complex systems are often the same. For example, self-esteem can lead to satisfying employment, which leads to even greater self-esteem; however, the reverse is also true.

Balancing Processes With a Goal - goal-seeking behavior often misses the mark. For example, delays in developing real estate to serve an urban market can lead to frequent over- or under-supplies of housing and office space.

Fixes That Backfire - many quick fixes address problem symptoms temporarily while aggravating these symptoms in the long-term. For example, the reasons emergency food aid increase starvation are that 1) children saved from starvation go onto have children 10-15 years later, thereby increasing the population subject to starvation, and 2) food aid lowers prices for food produced locally, thereby reducing internal incentives to grow more food.

Shifting the Burden - certain quick fixes actually undermine the system's ability to implement lasting improvement. For example, investing heavily in police and prisons decreases money available to fund the socioeconomic development programs that fundamentally reduce inner-city crime.

Limits to Growth - all engines of growth inevitably slow down, and sometimes reverse direction. For example, trying to grow one's way out of a recession caused by market saturation can actually create even more unused inventory followed by yet harsher cutbacks.

Success to the Successful - the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The growing income gap between rich and poor people both domestically and globally is caused by an ongoing transfer of resources and resource development capability from the poor to the wealthy.

Tragedy of the Commons - everyone depletes a resource which no one is responsible for. This occurs with such resources as offshore fisheries, drinking water, and clean air.

Each archetype contains within it several leverage points, areas where often a small change produces sustainable system-wide improvement. Learning the archetypes enables people to identify these points. The challenge is that leverage points frequently are not obvious, and that the most obvious solutions often make things better in the short run but even worse in the long run. Uninformed citizens, pressured policy makers, and crisis-oriented media are easily drawn to the obvious solutions, and then are frustrated when the same or related problems return over time with even greater intensity. Moreover, the archetypes point to ways in which the principal stakeholders themselves unwittingly create their own problems. Such insights are difficult to accept when people leap to blame others instead of take personal responsibility for the world around them.

If people are to overcome these tendencies to adopt ineffective solutions, they must develop a life orientation aligned with system dynamics. Such an orientation is characterized by curiosity, clarity, compassion, choice, and courage. *Curiosity* is the

willingness to dig deeper to understand the root causes of problems when current solutions are ineffective. *Clarity* is the capacity to simplify complexity without losing its richness, to see the whole without losing sight of the parts. *Compassion* is the recognition that we are all in a problem together, often one we have created unwittingly, and that each of us is essential to resolving it. *Choice* is the appreciation that many alternatives may exist, some less obvious than others, and that several might need to be implemented in concert over time to be effective. *Courage* is the strength to confront the fact that the most obvious and easiest solutions often make a problem worse in the long term, and the ability to take a stand for lasting change.

Kurt Lewin once said, "If you really want to understand something, try to change it." Systems thinking can enable people to gain a deeper understanding of why things are the way they are, the role they play in creating and contributing to existing problems, and the reason that many popular solutions often fail while less obvious ones succeed. The deeper insights can help decision-makers to develop the clarity and courage to shape more effective policy.

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