# Systems Archetypes at a Glance

**Archetype Template and Description**

**Drifting Goals**

In a “Drifting Goals” situation, a gap between desired performance and current reality can be resolved either by taking corrective action to achieve the goal or by lowering the goal. The gap is often resolved by a gradual lowering of the goal. Over time, the performance level also drifts downward. This drift may happen so gradually, even without deliberate action, that the organization is not even aware of its impact.

**Guidelines**

- Drifting performance figures are usually indicators that the “Drifting Goals” archetype is at work and that real corrective actions are not being taken.
- A critical aspect of avoiding a potential “Drifting Goals” scenario is to determine what drives the setting of the goals.

**Escalation**

In an “Escalation” situation, one party (A) takes actions to counter a perceived threat. These actions are then perceived by the other party (B) as creating an imbalance in the system that then makes them feel threatened. So, B responds to close the gap, creating an imbalance from A’s perspective, and on it goes. The dynamic of two parties, each trying to achieve a sense of “safety,” becomes an overall reinforcing process that escalates tension on both sides, tracing a figure-8 pattern with the two balancing loops in this archetype.

**Fixes That Fail**

In a “Fixes That Fail” situation, a problem symptom cries out for resolution. A solution is quickly implemented, which alleviates the symptom. However, the solution produces unintended consequences that, after a delay, cause the original problem symptom to return to its previous level or even get worse. This development leads us to apply the same (or similar) fix again. This reinforcing cycle of fixes is the essence of “Fixes That Fail.”

**Success to the Successful**

In a “Success to the Successful” situation, two or more individuals, groups, projects, initiatives, etc. are vying for a limited pool of resources to achieve success. If one of them starts to become more successful (or is historically more successful) than the others, it tends to garner more resources, thereby increasing the likelihood of continued success. Its initial success justifies devoting more resources while robbing the other alternatives of resources and opportunities to build their own success, even if the others are superior alternatives.

**Growth and Underinvestment**

In a “Growth and Underinvestment” situation, growth approaches a limit that could be eliminated or postponed if capacity investments were made. Instead, as a result of policies or delays in the system, demand or performance degrades, limiting further growth. This leads to further withholding of investment or even reductions in capacity, causing even worse performance.

**Tragedy of the Commons**

In a “Tragedy of the Commons” situation, individuals make use of a common resource by pursuing actions for their own enjoyment or benefit, without concern for the collective impact of everyone’s actions. At some point, the sum of all individual activity overloads the commons,” and all parties involved experience diminishing benefits. The commons may even collapse.

**Shifting the Burden/Addiction**

In a “Shifting the Burden” situation, a problem symptom can be addressed by applying a symptomatic solution or a more fundamental solution. When a symptomatic solution is implemented, the problem symptom is reduced or disappears, which lessens the pressure for implementing a more fundamental solution. Over time, the symptom resurfaces, and another round of symptomatic solutions is implemented in a vicious, figure-8 reinforcing cycle. The symptomatic solutions often produce side-effects that further divert attention away from more fundamental solutions.

**Critical Thinking**

- **To break an escalation structure, ask the following questions:**
  - What is the relative measure that pits one party against the other, and can you change it? If so, how?
  - What are the significant delays in the system that may distort the true nature of the threat?
  - What are the deep-rooted assumptions that lie beneath the actions taken in response to the threat?

- **To prevent a “Fixes That Fail” cycle:**
  - Break a “Fixes That Fail” cycle usually requires acknowledging that the fix is merely alleviating a symptom, and making a commitment to solve the real problem now.
  - A two-pronged attack of applying the fix and planning out the fundamental solution will help ensure that you don’t get caught in a perpetual cycle of solving yesterday’s “solutions.”

- **To prevent a “Tragedy of the Commons” scenario:**
  - Effective solutions for a “Tragedy of the Commons” scenario never lie at the individual level.
  - Ask questions such as: “What are the incentives for individuals to persist in their actions?” “Can the long-term collective loss be made more real and immediate to the individual actors?”
  - Find ways to reconcile short-term individual rewards with long-term cumulative consequences. A governing body that is chartered with the sustainability of the resource can help.

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