

Continued from previous page
agement” into three components—
their perceived expertise in this area,
their desired expertise, and the actual
(or current) expertise.

By breaking the variable down, the
team was able to wrestle with a difficult
issue that had not surfaced before: the
gap between the company’s desired
level of relationship management skills
and its actual capacity. In fact, the
company’s relationship with its largest
customer was in serious trouble. Once
they had raised this “undiscussable” is-
sue, the managers were able to take ac-
tion to save this relationship before the
trouble reached crisis proportions.

As both of these examples illus-
trate, being aware of the distinction
between actual, perceived, and desired
variables—and looking for appropriate
opportunities to clarify those terms—
provides a level of precision that often
sheds light on areas of inconsistencies,
disagreements, or “undiscussable” issues
in a company. Once a team achieves
this level of clarity, it can then move
into a more informed discussion of how
to address the problems at hand. ■

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School Vouchers: Another Form of “Success to the Successful”

by Donella Meadows

I don’t know how any parent could
stand to send his or her child off to
a crumbling, dirty school with under-
paid teachers and hostile, possibly
armed, classmates. If it were my kid,
rather than do that, I’d exert some
“school choice,” whether the govern-
ment sanctioned it or not.

That’s why
the push toward
state-supported
school choice is so
insidious. The
“choice” it gives
every parent—do
what’s best for so-
ciety in the long
term or for my kid
right now—can
only be made one
way. My kid right
now.

School choice
promoters don’t
think they’re cre-
ating that di-
lemma. They be-
lieve that giving
every child a
voucher worth a
fixed amount to be used at any school
would force bad schools to shape up. I
think it would drain away from bad
schools most of the resources necessary
for shaping up. It would swamp good

schools with applicants, so they could
pick out the best students. It would
subsidize rich families who already send
their kids to expensive private schools,
and it would encourage intolerance as
parents pick schools that accept only
“Their Kind.” The poorest families
would be left to bestow minimal-value

vouchers on the
poorest schools.
For them, there
would be no
choice.

This kind of
school system
would set up a
vicious circle that
systems thinkers
call “Success to
the Successful.”

If you’ve
played Monopoly™,
you’ve experi-
enced “Success to
the Successful.”
Everyone starts
out equal. By
chance, some
players land on
and buy up valu-

able properties for which they can
charge rent. They use the rent money
to build hotels, with which they can
extract even more rent. The game is
supposed to end when one person has

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altruism is fatal in
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bankrupted everyone else, but most adults quit long before that point has been reached. The game gets too predictable and boring when the "hotels to the hotel-owners" stage kicks in.

Once our neighborhood offered a \$100 reward for the most impressive display of Christmas lights. The winning family the first year spent the prize money on more lights. After they had won three years in a row, the contest was suspended.

"Success to the Successful" is no fun.

To him that hath shall it be given: lower electric rates for big users than for small ones; lower postage rates for bulk mailers than ordinary folks; and lower taxes on capital gains than on earned income. Incinerators, dumps, and polluting factories located disproportionately in low-income neighborhoods. The poorest kids get the worst healthcare and the worst schools.

"Success to the Successful" is not fair, though the successful work hard to believe that they deserve the favors the system accords them.

Bill Gates's Windows software dominates the superior Macintosh system because Microsoft and IBM have more marketing muscle than Apple. Big companies can afford more advertising, investment, researchers, accountants, lawyers. They can lean on distributors, suppliers, workers, communities, politicians. The politicians create a system in which no one can run for office without being rich or courting the rich.

"Success to the Successful" can destroy both market competition and democracy.

The problem is the structure of the system, not the morals of the people in it. "Success to the Successful" rewards the winner of a competition with the means to win again. It is especially perverse if it also penalizes losers. Such a system produces inefficiencies and injustices not because people are bad, but

because people are smart enough to see that altruism is fatal in this game. It only takes parents who want the best for their children to ensure that other people's children will be Monopoly losers for life, always paying rent, never collecting it, never seeing the board cleared or the opportunities opened, until things get so predictable, hopeless and degrading that they either drop out of the game or kick over the board.


To avoid such explosions and to keep games interesting, the world of sports has hundreds of devices for interrupting the "Success to the Successful" cycle and leveling the playing field: handicaps for weaker players; switching sides so the wind doesn't always blow against you and the sun isn't always in your eyes; loser chooses; starting new games with the score even.

Societies also have ways to break the cycle. Private property and democracy were invented to escape the terrible "Success to the Successful" traps of feudalism and monarchy. In modern times, we have come up with such leveling devices as progressive income taxes, inheritance taxes, anti-trust laws, securities trading laws, social safety nets,

competence testing for jobs, affirmative action, and, the best invention of the lot, high-quality universal public education.

Our public school system has been one of the centerposts of democracy and fairness in America. It was never as equitable as it should have been, but at least we honored it in concept and worked at it in practice. We had a shared commitment to each other's children.

Now something has snapped. "Success to the Successful" is hailed as high wisdom. We refuse to pay for the education of other people's children. Parents must choose between the best education for their own children right now and a future in which all children will grow up well educated.

That's a choice no one should have to make. 

Donella Meadows is a system dynamicist and an adjunct professor of environmental studies at Dartmouth College. She is a MacArthur Fellow, and co-author of two best-selling books (*The Limits to Growth* and *Beyond the Limits*). She writes a weekly column for the Plainfield, NH Valley News.

