



INTRODUCING THE SYSTEMS ARCHETYPES: SHIFTING THE BURDEN

BY VIRGINIA ANDERSON

PART 6 OF 8

The articles in this series introduce the storylines of each of the systems archetypes to help you learn how to recognize and apply their principles and lessons without the use of diagrams.

As with the previous systems archetype that we discussed, “Fixes That Fail,” “Shifting the Burden” is about how the pressure of a worsening problem can lead us to institute a quick fix. In this case, we resort increasingly to a quick, symptomatic solution rather than work out a more fundamental solution that is often more difficult to implement. Also similar to “Fixes That Fail,” the relatively quick symptomatic fix often sets off hard-to-detect, unintended side-effects that frequently undermine our efforts to implement a fundamental solution and that can even accentuate the original problem.

The “Helen Keller” Loops

The basic storyline in “Shifting the Burden” has been compared to the story of Helen Keller, the blind and deaf child whose parents’ attempts to protect her only made her dependent on them. Even though Helen’s parents were well intentioned, they shifted the burden of responsibility for Helen’s welfare to *themselves*. Helen learned that no matter what she did, her parents would accommodate her. And each incident reinforced her parents’ belief that she was indeed helpless. If it had not been for the determined efforts of Helen’s teacher, Anne Sullivan, who refused to let Helen’s handicaps prevent her from becoming self-reliant, Helen may never have achieved her true potential.

“Shifting the Burden” to the Central Office Experts

Here’s the same sort of storyline, but in a company: A claims office in a local branch of Southeast Mutual, a large insurance company, is faced with a large, complex claim that requires more expertise than it possesses. The company’s central office responds by sending out its team of expert investigators and adjusters to take care of the situation while the branch office staff goes about their more routine business. All agree that the company

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cannot justify having teams of experts in every branch, given the cost and the fact that these complicated claims occur so infrequently.

Besides, everyone knows that people who want to get involved with complex, technically challenging claims either have to move to Southeast’s central office or work locally for a different company. Gradually, the most talented people take those options, and it becomes more difficult to replace them with equally capable adjusters. The branch office begins to rely more and more on the support of the central office. In fact, as the central office expert team grows increasingly efficient at handling crises around the region, the branch seeks their help more and more often as the number of claims that cannot be handled locally increases.

At Southeast, the problem symptom was the pressure to process complex claims outside the experience of the branch adjusters. The symptomatic solution was to ask the central office to process these complex claims. One possible fundamental solution was to strengthen the local branch’s ability to handle at least some larger, more complex claims. True, this solution would have required an investment of management attention, expertise, training, and time, both for learning and practice. But it also would have led to learning on the part of the local staff, and would have strengthened the branch office’s overall capability.

Beyond Band-Aids®

“Shifting the Burden” highlights an all-too-common human tendency to eliminate feelings of discomfort or pain as quickly as possible. This tendency usually leads us down the path of focusing on symptoms rather than on more fundamental causes. By using this archetype, you can map out several short- and long-term solutions, and explore the role of the symptomatic solution’s side-effect on various possible fundamental solutions. ■

This article was adapted with the assistance of Janice Molloy from *Systems Archetype Basics: From Story to Structure* by Daniel H. Kim and Virginia Anderson (Pegasus Communications, 1998).

Virginia (Prinny) Anderson is the founder and principal consultant at Design for Learning.

YOUR THOUGHTS

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