SHIFTING THE BURDEN: MOVING BEYOND A REACTIVE ORIENTATION

BY DANIEL H. KIM

Although the parable of the boiled frog has become a familiar story in organizational learning circles, it does not yet seem to prevent organizations from suffering the same fate. The story goes that if you toss a frog into a pot of boiling water, it will jump out to save itself. However, if you put it in a pot of lukewarm water and slowly turn up the heat, the frog will happily swim around until it boils to death. Not a pretty picture, especially if you don’t enjoy frog’s legs. So, why doesn’t the frog jump out in the second instance? The reason is that it is designed to detect sudden, large shifts in temperature, not small, gradual changes. So, it never senses the danger in the second scenario until it’s too late to respond.

As Peter Senge points out in *The Fifth Discipline*, many organizations suffer from the same learning disability as the frog. Their internal detection mechanisms are geared for responding only to quick, dramatic changes in their environment, not to slow, more incremental ones. Hence, the same businesses that would sound all kinds of alarm bells if they experienced a sudden 5-percent drop in market share will quietly adapt to an annual 0.5-percent erosion over 10 years without recognizing this slow downward spiral as a crisis.

Although the boiled-frog syndrome has often been associated with the “Drifting Goals” archetype, there are many ways in which an organization can “get boiled.” In the “Shifting the Burden” structure, things seem to improve in the short term, even as the water gets hotter and hotter over time. Therefore, this archetype warns us about the long-term consequences of relying on a symptomatic approach to addressing problems.

**The Urgency of Now**

The “Shifting the Burden” systems archetype produces behavior quite similar to that generated by the “Fixes That Fail” structure (see “Fixes That Fail: Why Faster Is Slower,” V10N3). Both archetypes tend to cause people to take actions in response to acute problems, and both tend to reinforce the use of quick fixes. In this way, the two archetypes are driven by the urgency of the here and now, which leads to unintended consequences that end up making the original situation worse in the future.

The difference with the “Shifting the Burden” archetype is that it requires a deeper understanding of what’s needed to keep the system healthy than does the “Fixes That Fail” structure. This is because addressing a “Shifting the Burden” scenario often necessitates identifying not so much a solution to a problem but rather the fundamental capability that the organization needs to develop over the longer term.

**Prudent Outsourcing or Shifting the Burden?**

Let’s look at an example. In “Boiled Through Outsourcing,” we see a situation in which a refrigerator manufacturer faces a shortage of engineers to work on a new product design (labeled “Problem-Symptom Peaks” in the diagram). Management knows that they need to add more engineers if the company is going to be able to handle these kinds of projects internally. But because they must begin

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work on the new product right away, they choose to outsource the engi-
neering to Company A.

At the same time, because com-
pany leaders recognize the need to
build up their own staff, they initiate
actions to hire and develop internal
capacity. However, those efforts
quickly wane when the problem
symptom—the need for experienced
refrigeration engineers—declines
because Company A is doing such a
good job. Other, more pressing issues
occupy the company’s attention, and
the capacity-building effort gets put on
the back burner until the next staffing
shortfall occurs. At that point, the
company repeats the same dynamics.

This approach leads to a pattern
of behavior in which the problem
symptom continually resurfaces. Each
time, the company makes efforts to
address both the symptomatic and
fundamental problems. However,
when the quick fix proves successful
in handling the problem in the short
term, the organization continues to
rely on that tactic over the longer run. As a result, efforts to seek a lasting,
more fundamental solution decline. If
left unchecked, the company will
eventually “boil” like the poor frog—
that is, face serious financial and per-
formance difficulties.

**Breaking Out of a Reactive
Orientation**

Although choosing to invest in the
more fundamental solution is better
than pursuing a symptomatic solu-
tion, both actions are inherently reac-
tionary. This is because the two
approaches are driven by the need to
solve what is currently wrong rather
than by the desire to create the future
you want. Hence, even opting for the
fundamental solution can produce
problem symptoms that come and go.
This is because no matter how the
symptom gets reduced, the amount of
effort devoted to its solution varies
with the severity of the symptom—it
rises when the problem is acute and
falls when it is “under control.”

Breaking out of this reactive ori-
tentation requires a shift from prob-
lem-solving to developing a vision of
what you want to create—a genera-
tive orientation (see “From a Reactive
to a Generative Orientation”). In our
example of the refrigerator manufac-
turer, this approach would mean hav-
ing a clarity of vision about the kind
of engineering capability the com-
pany wants to maintain and then
developing that skill base—regardless
of whether the organization is experi-
encing shortfalls at the moment or
not. The company may still experi-
ence problems with staffing shortages
during this time. However, when it
encounters them, the organization
will be able to use symptomatic solu-
tions as temporary stop-gap measures,
while it continues to steadily build its
underlying capacity.

Does our refrigerator manufac-
turing example mean that all out-
sourcing is a case of “Shifting the
Burden”? The answer to that question
depends on your organization’s vision
of what it wants to keep as its core
competencies. If you inadvertently
ended up outsourcing what you con-
sidered a core competency, such as
refrigeration design, then you would
be caught in a “Shifting the Burden”
dynamic. On the other hand, if you
decided that competence in payroll
systems and health-benefit programs
was not key to your core business,
outsourcing those functions might be
a prudent decision.

**Out of the Boiling Pot and . . .**

The “Shifting the Burden” structure
shows that, in addition to refining our
organizations’ mechanisms for detect-
ing slow, gradual changes, we need to
develop better direction-setting sys-
tems. Otherwise, we may improve at
making course corrections but never
clarify what course we really want to
take. That approach would be analo-
gous to our poor frog jumping from
one pot to another whenever it feels
the water heating up, but never pur-
suing a more fundamental solution by
seeking a nice lily pond instead. Even
with improved temperature-sensing
mechanisms, if the frog keeps hopping
from one pot to the next, the odds
are that, sooner or later, it will end up
on someone’s dinner plate.

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