

# Syndromes, Characteristics & Processes of Addiction in Organizations \*



**Addiction is a policy process that operates, so when you observe the symptoms of a problem, you take an action that produces a consequence that counteracts the symptoms and makes the problem worse.**

Dennis Meadows presentation on "Shifting Dominance," Power of Systems Thinking Conference, May 1997

## Syndromes of Addiction in Organizations

Individuals and entities that can display addictive behaviors

### A manager or key person is an active addict.

- Sets the tone in the organization
- Behaviors are a constant drain on others
- More able to maintain when in a position less scrutinized

### Nonrecovering addictive and co-dependent employees replicate their dysfunctional family system at work.

- Family systems theory has long recognized that problems not solved at one level always occur elsewhere.

### Organizations function as the addictive substance and become central in employees' lives.

- 'Success to the Successful' archetype leads employees to neglect family; the more successful one is "at work" compared to "with family," the more one is attracted to work.
- "Workaholicism appears to be socially productive."

### The organization itself functions as an addict.

- "... the structure and function of addictive organizations tend to perpetuate and patch up problems instead of facing and solving them."

## Addiction Characteristics and Organization Parallels

Observed behaviors in addictive systems (individuals and entities) and example organizational parallels

### Crisis and Confusion Orientation

#### Addictive System

- Always in crisis mode, trying to predict what will happen next
- Drama
- "Provides an illusion of being alive", "... at least feeling I'm something"

#### Organization

- Always in a crisis mode with rewards for successful "fire fighting"
- Focus on defect correction, working harder and working faster; not on process and system improvement

### Self-centeredness

#### Addictive System

- Getting a quick fix is the center of life

#### Organization

- Organization's needs take precedence over family ... the "success to the successful" archetype leads to greater attention to pursuing success in the organization than to success at home
- Individuals pursue personal advancement at the expense of organizational success

### The Illusion of Control

#### Addictive System

- In an addictive system everyone tends to try to control everyone and everything else
- AA first step: Admit that one is powerless; "Lord, give me ..."

#### Organization

- Takes the "inside view" of projects: assumes controllable, sequential events, minimizing or even ignoring things that can go wrong (or have gone wrong in the past)
- As managers, we see ourselves as in control of people & events
- Mental model: "responsible managers" are "in control"

### Abnormal Thinking Processes

#### Addictive System

- "... founded on the worship of linear, rational, logical thinking."

- "... supports the illusion of control by simplifying the world to such an extent that it seems possible to have control over it."

#### Organization

- Use of linear extrapolation
- No feedback loops in mental models

### Dishonesty

#### Addictive System

- Lies to oneself, to friends and family, to the world at large

#### Organization

- Over-promises in marketing & proposals
- Doesn't promptly admit product problems to customers

### Denial, Avoiding Responsibility

#### Addictive System

- "I do not have a problem. Well, maybe; but not a severe problem."
- "... avoid taking responsibility for themselves and their lives."

#### Organization

- The problem's out there, not us
- It's the market, the competition, the economy, ... whatever ...

### Forgetfulness

#### Addictive System

- Forgets things and conversations
- Addict sometimes blacks out and cannot recall what happened

#### Organization

- Doesn't maintain Learning Histories (to avoid risk of being found at fault or of creating defensiveness and conflict)
- Without a memory of the past, there can be no learning

## Perfectionism, Defensiveness

### Addictive System

- Must always know the answers, always have the correct information, always do everything right, never make mistakes
- Something that is not defined exactly cannot exist, and does not have to be dealt with.
- Tends to paranoia. Makes unfounded assumptions and acts on them.

### Organization

- Employs defensive routines ... cannot “discuss the undiscussables”
- Cannot learn from mistakes when it pretends it makes none
- Knows that intangibles such as morale, fatigue and burnout are important, but discounts the need to address them
- Believes that, because intangibles can't be precisely measured, they can't be quantified and modeled
- Engages primarily in advocacy, finds dialogue difficult
- Tends to not follow the first Ground Rule for Effective Groups: Test assumptions & inferences

## Processes of the Addictive System and Organization Parallels

Observed patterns of behavior in addictive systems (individuals and entities) and example organizational parallels

### The Process of Promise

#### Addictive System

- “Things are going to get better. I'll quit tomorrow.” (“eroding goals” archetype)

#### Organization

- “As soon as this project is finished, or this product is released, we'll improve quality. Right now we're just too busy.”
- “We'll set higher standards the next time around.”

### The Process of Absorption

#### Addictive System

- “Things are terrible in this relationship, but every once in a while something different happens. I start believing we can make it.”
- Periodic, temporary “system shifts” from the Addictive System to a healthy system take place. The Addictive System calls this part of itself, then absorbs it to perpetuate itself.

#### Organization

- “Every so often the company comes through. It's not all that bad.”

### The Process of Illusion

#### Addictive System

- Believes that the constructs of the linear, rational, logical brain are real, that we see reality.

#### Organization

- Doesn't recognize that mental models are confining structures that can be changed.
- Doesn't recognize the traps of self-confirming attributions or self-fulfilling prophecies.

### The Process of Fabricating “Personality Conflicts”

#### Addictive System

- Purpose is to dismiss or invalidate input from some individual, if the person's input is particularly threatening.
- In treatment circles this behavior is called “protecting one's supply.”

#### Organization

- Creates a “smoke screen” to move the focus from the real issues.

### The Process of Invalidation

#### Addictive System

- “The process of invalidating that which the system does not know, understand, cannot measure, and thereby cannot control is so extreme that large areas of perception and knowledge are lost.”
- “A major function of any addiction is to make ourselves and our own processes invisible to ourselves and others.”
- “Whole areas of knowledge and information have been defined into nonexistence ...”

Anne Wilson Schaefer, *When Society Becomes An Addict* (1987)

#### Organization

- Knows that morale, fatigue and burnout are important. But discounts their effects and fails to define policies to address them, because they can't be precisely measured.
- Fails to take into account factors that are essential to driving human affairs.

### The Process of the External Referent

#### Addictive System

- Develops concept of self through external referents; that is, through what “other people think” of us.
- In doing so we learn to “give up our awareness of the messages inside ourselves that tell us what we feel and think.”

#### Organizations

- Excessive reliance on benchmarking.
- “None of the competition is doing this, so why should we?”
- “When all firms suffer similar quality erosion none serve as a role model to demonstrate the potential leverage of increased adjuster capacity. Entire industries can thus experience eroding quality standards ...”

Senge & Sterman, “Systems Thinking and Organizational Learning,” *Modeling for Learning Organizations*, 1994, p. 208

### The Process of Dualism

#### Addictive System

- Holds as true that, if one side of the dual is true, the other is false.
- Oversimplifies a very complex world to give the illusion of control.

#### Organizations

- “Either you're for the company plan or against it.”
- Results in “the” company plan instead of using scenarios

\* Reference for the syndromes, characteristics and processes of addiction: Schaefer & Fassel, *The Addictive Organization*, 1988. Some statements are drawn from this source, others from the systems literature.