

Continuous Improvement Associates

Thinking about Projects & Long-term Improvement

Barriers That Must Be Overcome to Achieve Perpetual Progress

Ranking Barriers: The amazing thing about the rankings below by experienced project managers is that influences like “inadequate systems thinking,” “too little use of the wheel of learning,” and “defensive routines” rank in the top 10 though participants had little, if any, exposure to these concepts. System dynamics gets barely a mention in the PMBOK. In addition, “poor business processes” and “not in

support of company value proposition” are generally not considered to be part of the project management problem. They are higher, systems level issues for which we might say, “The operation was a success, but the patient died.”

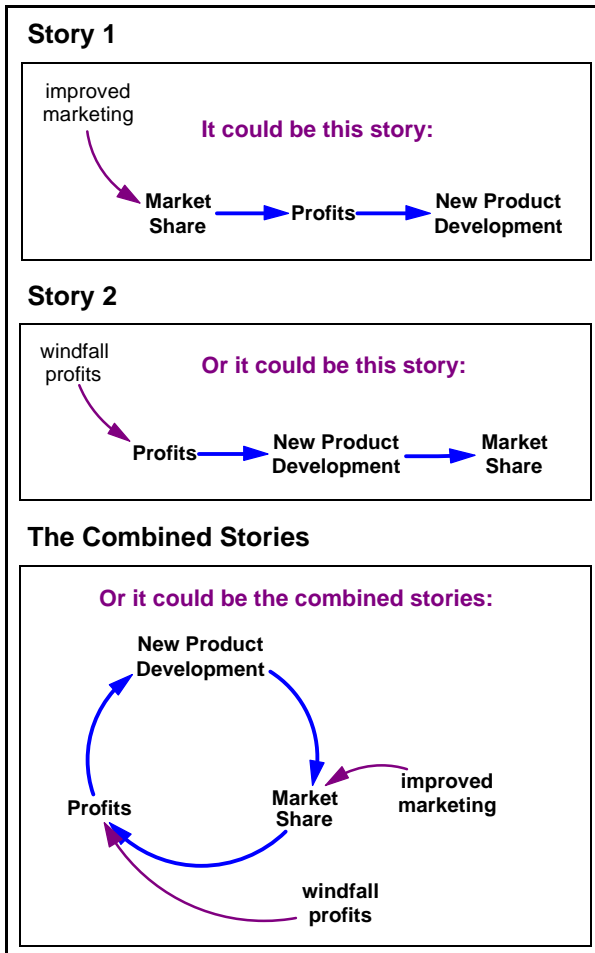
Quality professionals have comparable observations on barriers to long-term improvement.

Rank	From the 3/13/03 Pikes Peak Chapter of the Project Management Institute (PMI) Presentation on Project Management Dynamics - Root Causes of Project Failures Experienced Project Managers' Rankings of Influences on Project Failure	Number of Votes
1	Poor definition of the scope of the project	98
2	Lack of project management discipline	53
3	Fire fighting and crisis	44
4	Poor business processes	37
5	Incomplete specifications	31
6	Poor change control	26
7	Inadequate systems thinking	21
8	Group multiple personality disorder ... too little use of the “wheel of learning”	19
9	Project does not support company value proposition	18
10	Defensive routines ... that lead to “skillful incompetence”	18

Rank	From the 11/13/02 Colorado Springs American Society for Quality (ASQ) Presentation on Systems Thinking and Barriers to Long-Term Improvement Experienced Quality Professionals' Rankings of Barriers to Improvement	Number of Votes
1	Lack of Management Investment in Training	20
2	More Reward & Recognition for Firefighting than Prevention	18
3	Excess Short Term Pressure from Wall Street	17
4	Reactive Maintenance vs. Preventive Maintenance	16
5	Ad hoc Changes to Processes	15
6	Excess Focus on Correcting Defects	12
7	Job Insecurity Due to Fear of Blame	11
8	High Organizational Complexity	11
9	Attribution that People Are the Problem	8
10	Excess Scope of Initiatives	8

On Using Systems Thinking for Organizational Learning

A Major Barrier: We Don't "Think in Circles"



We tend to see "Thinking in Circles" with unfamiliar diagrams as *too difficult*, ... but it's not. Here's how people experience it:

Comments from facilitated systems thinking sessions using causal loop and stock & flow diagrams:

- "The environment feels open and accepting."
- "Whatever gets said is OK."
- "Full discussion of each item kept us from making snap decisions."
- "I like the hands on work with variables."
- "People who missed last time got a very clear picture rapidly about where we are ... thanks to the methodology of the causal loops."
- "We work together well. We have a fun group."
- "The system dynamics structure really helps the conversation and gives us a sense of progress."

The wisdom of cultures is passed down in stories.

Feedback loops tell stories.

Wisdom is at the top of the hierarchy:

- Wisdom
- Knowledge
- Information
- Data

Systems Thinking is about telling stories

"Stories do many things for us as individuals and as people united by customs, beliefs, hopes, and goals. Stories can make us laugh and cry, imagine and think, empathize with others, improve our personal values, see new ways to solve problems and conflicts, learn from the past, and make wise decisions for the future."

Storytelling Festival, Program Notes,
Northwest Florida Emerald Coast,
Sept. 27, 1997

Feedback is Power - Tap It

A feedback loop is only engaged if actions are taken at each point around the loop. To nurture a feedback loop, action must be taken and/or information supplied around the entire loop. Like a bicycle chain, one link cannot move unless all links move.

We can't just pick, say, the top 5 things to do (as in many strategic approaches).

Doing so may neglect critical links in critical feedback loops.

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