



Continuous Improvement Associates

The Crisis Syndrome When Archetypes Gang Up!

Too much firefighting?

Here's why it happens so easily.



What leads to crisis?

When we attempt to relieve the symptoms of a problem, rather than improve the true health of the system, powerful structures drive us to become addicted to the activity that relieves the symptoms. When the activity has negative "side effects," this can develop into a fast downhill slide.

This paper describes the dynamic for a person's quality of life and then shows that the same structure applies to organizational behavior.

Feel better fast, but ...

Figure 1 shows that we can address **perceived quality of life** being too low (i.e., it is lower than **target quality of life**) by applying a fix. Here the fix is the **use of drug of choice**, but it could be any personal addiction. This increases our **perceived quality of life** and forms balancing loop **B1, The Quick Fix**.

But Figure 2 shows that the more drug is in our system, the more it wears off ... we need more (loop **B2, Time for Another Fix**). That would be OK, but there are side-effects: drugs degrade the body and mind. **R3, The Downhill Slide**, shows that over time (the delay is shown by a slash across the link) **quality of life** falls and eventually **perceived quality of life** does as well. It's a downhill slide because we need even more of **The Quick Fix** to

What is systems thinking?

Seeking to understand system behavior by examining "the whole" ... instead of by analyzing the parts.

feel OK again.

B1 & R3 form a "Fix that Fails" archetype, a combination of a balancing loop and a reinforcing loop with a longer delay. Adding a balancing loop (**B2**) that quickly drains off the good feeling associated with the fix prompts more drug use, especially as **quality of life** is degraded. This "Addiction" structure isn't known as an archetype, but it's prevalent and powerful and deserves that recognition.

The other choice

Figure 3 shows an alternative: work on life skills to increase **quality of life** (**B4, Focus on Fundamentals**). But that can be difficult, because it takes a lot longer. Besides, no matter how beneficial, "different" isn't what we're used to ... it often feels uncomfortable (**R5, This Doesn't Feel Natural**).

Loops **B4** and **R5** appear to form a "Fix that Fails." But in a "Fix that Fails" the balancing loop gives quick apparent benefits, and we later see the negative impacts. In Figure 3 the balancing loop yields benefits after some delay and the reinforcing loop negatives appear immediately. This combination might be called a "Corrective Action that Fails" ... an appropriate corrective action takes a long time to yield benefits, but we immediately feel the negative side effects ... and stop.

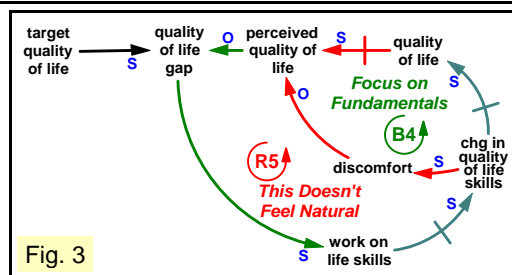
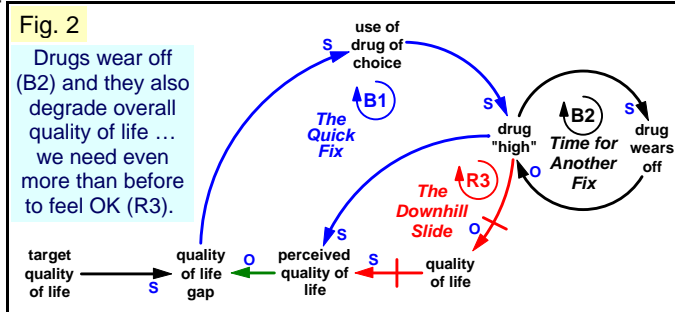
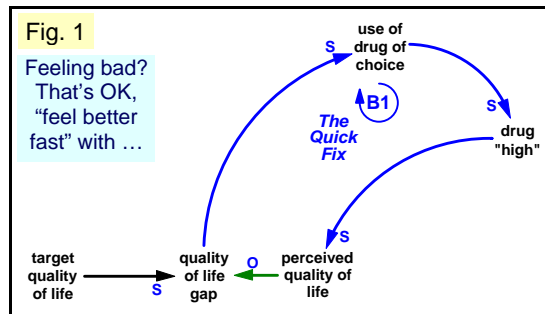


Fig. 3 An alternative is to work on our life skills (B4) to feel better, but that takes longer. Besides, at first that can feel uncomfortable (R5).

The Driver of Addiction

"One reason that many people become addicted is that they rarely experience the worst consequences of their behavior soon enough to override the pleasure." *Psychology Today*, Oct. 1994

The Impact of Addiction

"Every year about half a million men, women, and children in the United States die from the effects of using nicotine, alcohol, and illegal drugs: one of every four American deaths." Research Institute of Medicine

