

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 Schaeff, *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: Schaeff & Fassel, *The Addictive Organization*, 1988. Some statements are drawn from this source, others from the systems literature.