



Stress Cycles

The perception and resolution of problem intensifying system dynamics

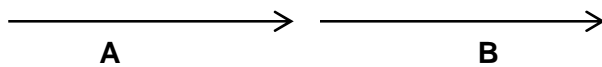
Dr. Stefan Hölscher

Contents

1.	Stress cycles as a driving force of conflicts	3
2.	The fate of the Californian ants	6
3.	Indicators and types of stress cycles	8
4.	Problem shift and success to the successful	12
5.	Resolution of stress cycles	16
6.	Literature	18

1. Stress cycles as a driving force of conflicts

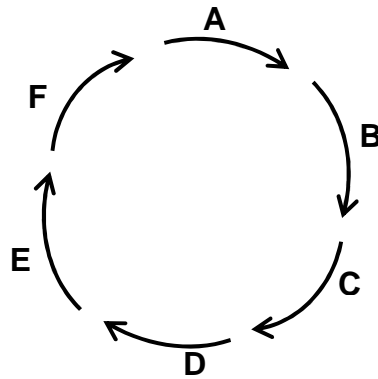
Our intuitive thinking about causal connections follows a linear logic. We regard particular circumstances A1, A2, A3... as giving rise to or at least helping to give rise to facts B1, B2, B3...and these facts for their part are possibly the cause of further circumstances C1, C2, C3... The logic of our causal thinking is especially shown in conflict situations and above all, when we are the person affected in a conflict. To put it in exaggerated terms, we often view the things as such:



There is a person A and a person B. A does something, something is done to B. A is the culprit, B is the victim. B has to suffer, A is guilty for B's suffering; in which one – how could it be otherwise – naturally views the situation simply by identifying with B who has been mistreated by A.

Viewing the situation in such a way has at least three big advantages: Firstly: everything is simple and clear. The rather sweeping culprit-victim setting is in fact relatively black and white, but to view the world in such a black and white manner, brings with it more clearness of course, than having to consider every possible grey area and shade of colour. Secondly: it is relieving to identify oneself with the role of the one, who – as brave and innocent as he is – has been very badly treated, and finally a third point ensues: it is apparent, who has to change himself here, namely A, and who doesn't, namely B.

We have a tendency in the majority of the conflict situations, in which we ourselves are affected, to identify ourselves with the role of the (poor) B, so the rule holds, that the stronger our emotion (our rage, our anger, our wrath etc.) is, the more distinctive (and often also un-reflected) our dichotomy of culprit-victim-thinking precipitates. In contrast to this intuitive way of viewing, it is obvious though when looking more carefully, that almost all of the intense conflicts do not have a (straight) linear logic, but rather have an underlying circular logic. There are certain, repetitive interactions or patterns of circumstances, which seek to create, respectively intensify effects that are viewed as disturbing effects. These are roughly illustrated in the following basic diagram:



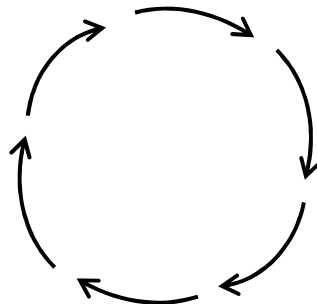
Particular circumstances of the Type A lead to circumstances of the Type B, which in turn trigger off circumstances of the Type C until N, which again very often produce even more intense circumstances of the Type A, which produce (possibly intensified) circumstances of the Type B etc. Obviously we are dealing here with **particular specific feedback loops or interaction patterns**, therefore not with linear successive, but rather reciprocal dependent-on-each-other situation structures, which one can describe as **stress cycles or vicious circles**, because they not only stabilize but often help to intensify disturbingly felt effects. One can intuitively visualize that there are really such repetitive patterns and cycles, which in varying degrees are the hidden driving force in conflict situations, as people tend not to discuss a particular problem if it only ever happened once: The employee, who only once comes to work too late or the piece of cake, that one spoils himself with only the one time, are “no problem”. Problems or conflicts emerge though, if an employee regularly comes to work late, or if somebody never goes by a piece of cake without scoffing it. Certain situation patterns are repeated here: for example with the cake in sight, this leads to a total uncontrolled appetite for cake, which some time later – upon consumption of the pieces of cake – causes a slight guilty conscience, that is then expressed through frustration, which in turn finds its consolation in more pieces of cake. Or the employee, who because of firmly placed rules, like for instance punctuality rules, feels that his freedom is being curtailed, so, in order to feel freer, he follows his own feeling for time and appropriateness, which leads to the employee being urged more strongly to adhere to the rules of punctuality, and the consequence of this is that he will yet again feel more restricted and so his need will grow to disregard the rules completely.

Even behind events, which appear in their negative perception to be totally out on their own, like for instance the terrorist attack of September 11th, more often than not, one will discover upon more careful attention, that particular interaction relations and patterns are concealed, which produce such events as an effect and simultaneously the pattern which is lying behind them will continue, respectively intensify. So the American resistance against the terrorist act, which apart from some guilty parties also of course hit many innocent victims, increases the hatred of the American system even more, which smoothes the way yet again for further terrorism, so that it appears that more and maybe even stronger resistance is necessary...

Such cycles of conceived circular or systemic causality depict a logic which is clearly a more adequate description of the dynamic of countless conflict situations compared to our linear logic, but this way of viewing often brings with it a little-loved side effect for the people involved: As one can already see in the above-outlined diagram, it makes little sense with circular causality to speak of "the cause" and "the effect", or of "the culprit" and "the victim". Every circumstance, no matter at what stage man contemplates it, always has instead both the function of something causing as well as of something being caused, or to put it in causal-attributing action terms: Viewed in this way, everyone involved in the conflict is both culprit and victim at the same time.

2. The fate of the Californian ants

The story of the Californian ants is a vivid example of a stress cycle and its unpleasant consequences. The ants once formed a magnificent ant colony, in which there were two central rules of life. The first rule read: “If you see an ant in front of you, then follow it, because it will lead you to food.” Rule number two read: “If you don’t see any ants in front of you, then look for food yourself.” One day the ants went in the following way:



It doesn’t take too much fantasy, to imagine what happened then: Every ant starved. They stayed true to their iron rules right to the bitter end though. System therapists often speak of **first order solutions** in such cases. First order solutions are distinguished by the fact that they make the actual problem worse. One believes that one knows the one and only sensible thing to do with regard to an existing problem. This apparent problem solution leads however to a further intensification of the problem, in which the perceived intensification of the problem then triggers off further and mostly more intensified attempts at first order solutions, which in turn intensify the existing problem even further... The ants, who realize that they have found no food with their cycle up to now, run even more industriously after the ant in front of them, because it just “must” lead them to food.

In order to get out of such stress cycles and vicious circles, solutions are necessary which view the first order solutions themselves as problems and resolve them. Such solutions can be described as **second order solutions**. So that the ants can escape certain death from starvation and at least have a chance of food and survival, one could let the most variable second order solutions come to mind, for example, one could introduce a third rule, which says, that if an ant goes by the same place so-and-so often, without finding any food, then rule number two is valid again (“Look for food yourself”). Or one could fundamentally broaden the rule system to allow additional – sensible and adequate to the situation – rules. One could also simply place a stick between

the ants, so that an ant, because it now has to go around an obstacle, gets out of track (as it doesn't have any ant in front of it anymore) and therefore automatically looks for food itself. Or one could call an ant conference and speak with the ants about, what they are actually doing and also about whether they really want to be doing exactly that. If yes, then the ants may carry on with pleasure – bearing in mind that one can naturally decide as an individual (ant) just like as an organisation or society – rather to sink or starve as opposed to deviating even just a millimetre from the handed down rules. In the case that the ants feel on the other hand, that they do not want to operate in the way they have up to now, then they could think over together, what they actually want to do instead, so that their chance of finding food increases, and this could again lead to the first mentioned second order solutions.

There is usually no lack of conceivable way outs of stress cycles and vicious circles. This is obvious in the fact that such cycles live by the motto “**more of the same**” and “**even more of the same**”, so that just by “**doing something other than the same old thing**” is already an interruption of the cycle in every case and with it constitutes at least a candidate for a sensible second order solution. Something else though proves more difficult than finding possible way outs: Whoever conveys the message to a social system (it doesn't matter if the message comes from within the system or from outside it) that one is going around in circles and is in a problem intensifying (and possible at the end a deadly) stress cycle, must reckon with decisive resistance from part of the system. This resistance will generally turn out all the more drastic, the longer and the more intensive the system is used to the cycle. The biggest stress cycle production virtuosos will produce the biggest resistance. The forms of the resistance can be quite variably. It is very likely, that the person, who brings attention to the unpleasant roundabout, will not be heard at all, no matter how hard he roars. Or, provided that someone actually listens to him, he will be labelled as crazy or at best, as being “a little off track”. Or he will be accused of the planned sabotage or at least of evil ignorance ...

Such reactions are definitely plausible from the internal perspective of the cycle marcher, because whoever fervently produces the same eternal reactions to the same eternal circumstances, believes that every other form of reaction would just make the thing worse or is not possible at all. As a result, the pattern stabilizing behaviour is often further produced virtually on reflex. Along with the feeling, that the produced behaviour only means the slightest of nastiness, are often positive reasons, as to why the maintainers of a stress cycle do not deviate from their behaviour. Therefore, the never-ending route of the Californian ants possibly has, apart from the aspect of obeying the rules, the highly regarded worth, that one can thereby avoid unpleasant surprises, because at least one knows the way to go permanently round in circles.

It is advisable for the person, who would like to draw attention to the conduct of the “circle goers”, to bring an extreme high frustration tolerance with him. It is possible that a lot of energy, imagination, goodwill and redundancy are necessary, to even achieve the smallest of successes. And it is extremely likely, that even if the circle goers have left their well-worn route once, they will nevertheless very quickly – and almost automatically – come back to it, because it is so familiar to them, so that on top of everything else, one needs a lot of patience and forbearance, in order to eventually re-orientate the previous circle goers more and more, respectively, to re-orientate more and more of the previous circle goers. And certainly all the occurring difficulties, resistances and possible backward steps will show up, not only with the addressed circle goers, but also rather to the ones, who speak to the others about the roundabout, and this even more so, the more they themselves belong to the used-to working roundabout system.

3. Indicators and types of stress cycles

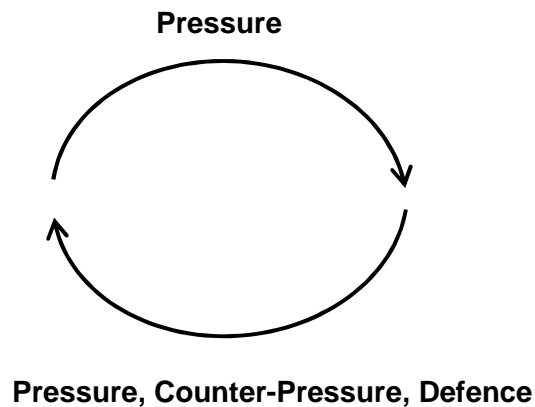
One does not have to go to the legendary world of the Californian ants, to come across a “real” example of a stress cycles. Our personal relationships, partnerships, economic and political world are also full of such cycles. Not every stress cycle leads straight away to the starvation of the people, which produce it. Some are much less harmful, so that they actually disrupt something or even more than just one thing, but even so one can manage very well with them, others are at the least not life-threatening, again others are just beginning or reveal themselves – through interaction with other factors – sometimes more, sometimes less etc. It is obvious though, that one has a better chance of stopping a stress cycle – that is of course if one really wants to stop it - if the stress cycle is still at the beginning stages. On the contrary: The more well-worn, routine, self-evident etc. such a cycle is, the more strenuous and painstaking it can become to interrupt it, because it has assumed a higher stability and “automatically runs (further)”. In every case it is therefore worth sharpening one’s own awareness for the tendency towards a pattern of critical interaction, so as to be able to intervene more quickly and effectively if necessary, in order to prevent the formation of stress cycles as well as possible.

But how does a stress cycle actually become recognizable? By what can one notice that one is dealing with such a cycle? – If a non-involved person looks at the situation from outside, then these questions would likely not be posed, because a non-involved observer, even if he has absolutely no expert status in the respective things, which particular people deal with each other, generally sees or feels with real clarity, that certain things repeat in a pattern regularly and do not lead to an improvement of the situation. (This circumstance is of course also a rather good reason, why it is worth consulting an external view from time to time, regardless of what one does and also if one believes, that the things, which one is doing, are running well so far). The people, who are blithely going in circles, are usually lacking both the afore-mentioned clarity and distance and this is connected in the first place with the fact that the circle goers are extremely busy (the more severe the stress pattern, the busier), and that one internally – as circle goer – as already mentioned, is generally convinced, that what one is doing is still the best, if not the only action possibility. Whoever is “inside the circle”, will find it clearly more difficult at the beginning, to generate a good perception and knowledge distance.

Nevertheless, there are quite clear criteria, from which a non-involved person can notice, that one is either in a stress cycle or heading in the right direction to one. An infallible indicator is often the impression, that one, in order to finally achieve the desired effect, has to **produce yet more of a certain form of intervention**, because the administered dose was obviously not sufficient up to now. So, for instance, the flowers which are not blooming beautifully, get a little more water, and if they are still not blooming orderly by tomorrow, they will get more, and if the same happens the following day, they will get even more water, until they finally begin to bloom or what is more probable, decompose from below and the mould eventually appears on the surface. Other combined criteria for stress cycles of the “yet-more-indicator” type are for instance, the impression that, **although one makes a great effort, it becomes more difficult and harder, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness** become apparent or the thought **“I would really like to pull out, but I can’t do that because of the others, who cannot / don’t want to / dare not / should not do that.”**

Having knowledge of prototypic stress cycles is helpful for the individual perceptive faculty of stress cycles, apart of course from being sensitive to one’s own feeling of the situation and that of the others. The core of some cycles is likewise simple and effective, for example, the **classic-pressure-intensification-cycle**. If people (for example, employees, suppliers, customers, colleagues, partners, children etc.) do not want, what one himself wants, applying pressure on them is a readily chosen measure, so that the people finally move in the desired direction. Some of the people who are in a sense “being pushed around”, actually move then to the place where one wants them, others though don’t do

what is required of them, but instead produce a resistance, a counter-pressure or even an open defence, which leads the person, who is doing the “pushing around” and who incidentally does not have the people where he actually wants them yet, to push harder, which in turn means more resistance, counter-pressure and defence ...



Couples are a real treasure trove for every type of stress cycle. This is to do with the fact among other things, that in this type of relationship, one often values, likes and finds attractive, what oneself does not have, but would really like or has but would like even more of. Psychologists speak of **collusion** in this instance. The points, at which one partner really differs from the other and as a result is really attractive to the other partner, are also in fact the points at which the pair can get under one another's feet reciprocally: If for instance, one partner is clearly more structured and orderly than the other, then he/she will likely value the other's greater spontaneity; not though, the disorder (linked with it). The more the orderly partner experiences disorder, gets annoyed about it and demands order, the more it can occur, that the other partner, because he/she feels constricted and curtailed, creates scenes of disorder, which in turn reinforces the annoyance and the exhortation of the other ... Quite corresponding dynamics can also be produced, if clear wishes for closeness and wishes for autonomy, strong material orientation and strong relationship orientation, distinctive thrift and distinctive generosity clash in a partnership. One can naturally come across quite similar themes and dynamics in the interrelations in organisations. A quite usual constellation in this instance is, when a strong urge for tempo and change meets with a likewise strong tendency for reliability and leaving things as they are, If, for instance, some executives demand a very high tempo from their employees in processes of change, and they do this because they believe that at least some of their employees are working too slowly and are resistant to change, then it is likely that the more the executives press for tempo, that a further deceleration in tempo will result, which then leads to the executives pressing more vehemently

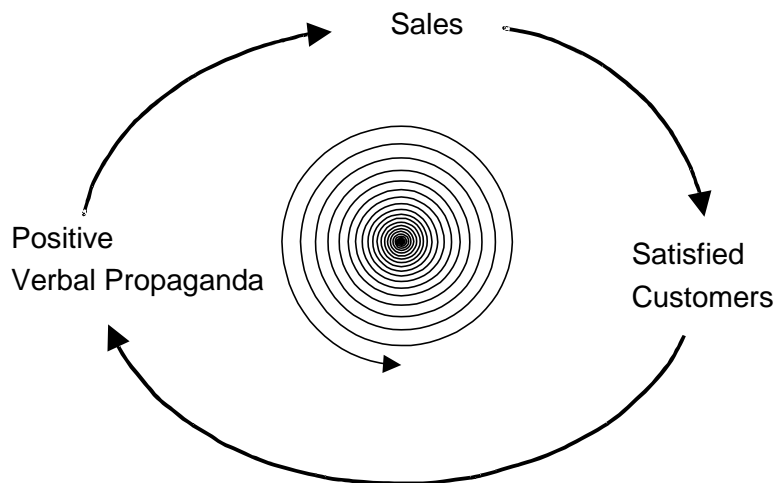
for tempo...Or a determined harder employee-orientated style of leadership and a softer employee-orientated style of leadership meet on two leadership levels, which are related to each other, and polarize each other reciprocally.

All of these examples can be described in the form of simple and – similar to the pressure-resistance case – on two variable traceable reinforcement cycles, regardless of how complex and serious the example individually may be in its effect. Not all stress patterns display such a basic structure, some of them are distinguished by a circumstance structure, in which different feedback loops and feedback types interact in a certain way. In order to illustrate this, two further pattern types will be briefly portrayed in the following.

4. Problem shift and success to the successful

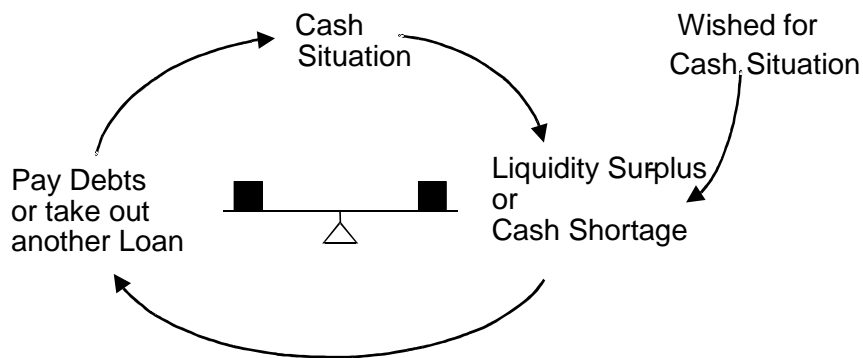
In his book "The fifth discipline" Peter M. Senge puts a series of classic system dynamics together, known as "system archetypes". There are two different basic forms of feedback processes – **intensified and balanced feedback** – which are the structuring units of these system archetypes.

With regard to the intensified feedback, the individual circumstances intensify reciprocally and produce a continuous stronger movement in the same direction. ("snowball effect", "fellow runner effect", "vicious circle").



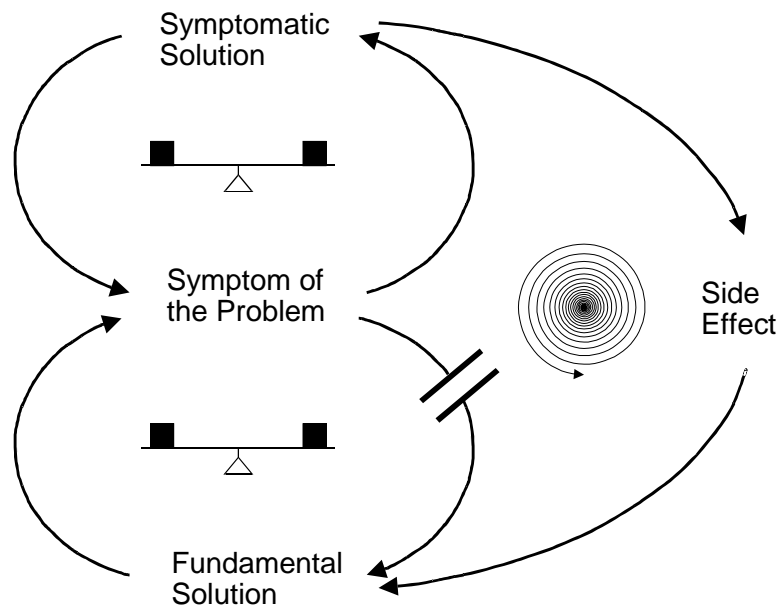
All of the stress cycles, which have been analysed up to now, were from this type of feedback, only in the form of the intensification of the critical effects.

With regard to the balanced feedback, the individual circumstances influence each other in such a way, that a gap between a strived for and an actual situation is gradually closed. ("Equilibrium process")



In more complex stress cycles, both of these types of feedback processes often appear in a certain kind of interaction with each other. This holds for example, for the very popular **problem shift** in all kinds of contexts.

Struktur:



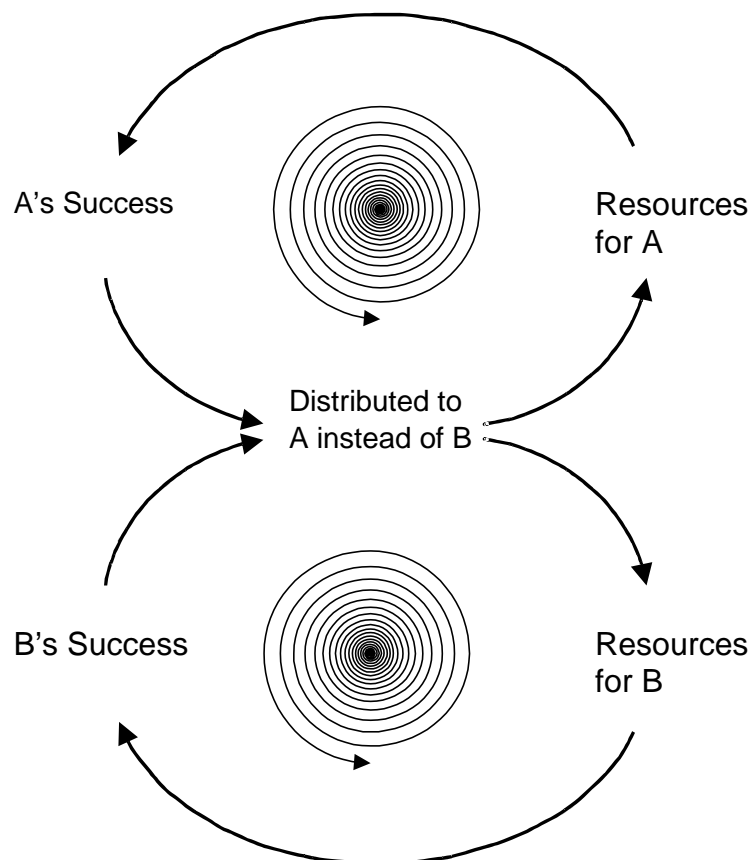
Senge describes this system archetype as follows:

“One applies a short-term ‘solution’, in order to correct a problem, which appears to produce an immediate improvement. While one grasps hard at this solution, fundamental and long-term correction measures are neglected more and more. In time the ability to use the fundamental solution withers away or loses its effectiveness, which strengthens the dependency on the symptomatic solution.”
(Senge, 1990)

Examples for this are all forms of dependency (for example, the intake of alcohol, tablets or drugs to reduce stress), but also for instance, the solving of problems through the boss instead of a sensible delegation for the problem and making the employees themselves capable.

A stress cycle which is just as frequent as the problem shift cycle is the system archetype – **success to the successful**:

Struktur:



Senge describes this archetype as follows:

“Two activities compete for limited support or resources. The more successful one of these activities becomes the more support it receives and takes away from the other.” (Senge, 1990)

A classic example for this is for instance, the balance between family and occupation. Many executives and of course also other ambitious professionals and others committed to their work, put more and more resources (time, energy, creativity etc.) into their occupation, whereupon they have a tendency here to notch up even more success (recognition, interesting challenges, promotion etc.). At the same time, resources for the private and family life are lacking, which can mean that more difficulties and failures arise, for example, reproaches, which the stressed executive has to listen to, when he – possibly late and internally not fully alert – is “at home” again. As people usually prefer to use their energy where they feel they are strong, successful and good, this “If-I-take-care-I-still-get-trouble” effect, can lead to even more resources being put into the professional, which leads yet again to more difficulties “at home”. Like many of the typical stress cycles, such a dynamic can develop in a relatively creeping way, so that it is sometimes virtually surprising for the affected, after a long time of thinking “Somehow-it-works-even-if-I-have-little-time-for-it”, that somewhere a point of irrevocable estrangement is achieved, which can lead to the ending of the relationship and separation.

Another quite usual example of the same stress cycle is the case of two actually similarly qualified employees, one of which always receives more attention, recognition, promotion etc., and the other always less until finally the one – “as expected” – produces more and more first-rate work, so that he is further promoted and causes the other more and more difficulties, so that he is paid little or no attention and is in the end – likewise “as expected” – completely left to drop.

5. Resolving a stress cycle

What can one do now, in order to get out of stress cycles, in any case to get out of the ones which one actually wants to get out of? There are above all five necessary action steps for this.

(1.) The awareness of the respective stress cycle

In order to have a chance, of getting out of the cycle, in which one is in at the moment, one must first of all recognize it. It is not crucial, to show the complexity of the reality as precisely as possible or completely at all. Whoever attempts this, will not just have to make an endless effort, rather he will also systematically fail above all, since even the most complex model with regard to the reality must stay simplified, incomplete and distorted. In order to recognize the decisive points and mechanism of a stress cycle, is it on the contrary important, to simplify as well as possible and focus on some less fundamental variables. For the sake of clarity, it can be an immense help, to **visualize the perceived dynamic** similar to the examples above, in an easily understandable circular diagram.

(2.) The identification of one's own contribution

This step is possibly the most difficult and is considered a notorious stumbling stone. In order to achieve a productive resolution of a stress cycle successfully, then one must recognize his individual contribution to the previous maintenance of it: "What do I contribute, to make this stress cycle function so well and regularly?" Whoever cannot find an answer to this question and sees himself as the sufferer of the conduct of the others, has the best chance to further fuel the cycle.

(3.) Assumption of good intentions

The identification of one's own contribution is a good tuning for action step number 3. If one is successful namely, of recognizing his own active contribution to the existence of a stress cycle, then one has obviously taken a look, at which difficult effects one himself (co)produced. At the same time, with relation to one's own conduct, one in general finds loads of more comprehensible, more sensible, more respectable reasons for it. With that one has however made a central (and everything else as trivial) distinction. One can namely see, that good intentions don't just necessarily lead to good effects, and exactly this distinction holds not just for oneself but can be applied to the other person or persons involved in the stress cycle. By doing this, one does not conduct an opportunist swindle. Similar to the ants, of which one good thing can be said, that they adhere seriously and consistently to their rules, it can also be found with every person going-in-a-stress-cycle, that at least from his perspective, there is a comprehensible and ordered intention for his action. And as long as one has not found such an intention, in a way that one can actually see it and **hold it in high regard**, one can unfold a similar arrogant effect for the further development of the problem situation, as if one sees in his own contribution to the occurrence as just having become the "poor victim" of the others.

(4.) Doing something different

At the end of the day no stress cycle changes through pure recognition. One can recognize the occurring cycle, the individual contribution to it and one's good intentions and that of the others clearly, the unfolding and further strengthening of the cycle is not changed by all that. In order to get out of the stress cycle, one must also do something different, and for this there is – as has been shown – for the main part a whole host of possibilities. Not all of the possibilities will appear suitable as a result of one's evaluation of the situation, so that it is sensible to select appropriately. It doesn't matter though, what one has selected as an alternative: one should not expect a quick success (see above).

(5.) Applying patience, consistency and creativity

In every case one should examine, what effect a change in one's own conduct has produced, and if such proved successful, one should consistently stay on the ball, and if it remained unsuccessful, one should invest creativity, in order to find and try out other action approaches. Independent of whether one's own action has already contributed to improvements or has not yet contributed to them, one should be aware that patience is needed, and the longer and more fervent the cycle has been running, the more patience will be necessary. Rome was not built in a day and one can hardly resolve a well-used-to stress cycle in one attempt.

6. Literature

Kim, D., 1993: Systems Archetypes: Diagnosing Systemic Issues and Designing High-Leverage Interventions. Pegasus Communications

Senge, P.M., Kleiner A. et al., 2000: The Dance of Change. The Challenges of Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations. Nicholas Brealey

Senge, P.M., Kleiner A. et al., 1994: The Fifth Discipline – Fieldbook. New York: Doubleday

Senge, P.M., 1990: The Fifth Discipline. New York: Doubleday/Currency