

**Employing System Thinking for Building Shared Vision in a  
Youth-led NGO  
(the materials of the Workshop on System Thinking  
conducted in “Model United Nations of the Russian Far  
East”)  
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Abstract:

*The paper describes how system thinking archetypes were employed for solving a persistent problem of a youth-led NGO in Russia (Model United Nations of the Russian Far East), where the author served as an Assistant Managing Director since 2007 till 2011. Even though the projects conducted by MUNRFE branch in Vladivostok within the previous six months had reached their targets, there was always an implicit concern over the way those projects were conducted. Throughout a one-day system thinking workshop the presidential team elaborated the archetype called "Dissatisfaction with successful projects". The archetype made explicit an important mental model: MUNRFE projects were considered to be truly successful only if they served as learning opportunities for project team members. As the coordinators lacked the capacity to develop shared vision among team members with diverse perspectives, that important mission of the projects was not fulfilled. Model United Nations of the Russian Far East (MUNRFE) is one of the biggest youth-led organizations in that region of Russia.*

The mission of MUNRFE is to create the future through providing young leaders with opportunities to develop. This mission is accomplished by different means: open forums for discussing urgent international issues in the format of the United Nations (UN); projects that have a social impact on the region (one of the biggest one is an annual summer educational program in English for high-school students “FireStarter”); trainings and seminars in the sphere of international relations, leadership and management for University students.

MUNRFE was founded in 2001 by Jeffrey Lindstrom who was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Russian Far East at that time. Although Jeffrey does not live in Russia any more, the organization still exists and performs sustainable growth in a number of its members and activities. The impact of MUNRFE on personal development of its members is incredible. Personally I had covered a way from a newcomer to the Assistant Managing Director of the whole organization.

Almost two years ago, when I was the president of MUNRFE Club in Vladivostok, I was invited to participate in a class conducted by Jeffrey Lindstrom within the curricular of the Institute of Sustainable Development, another organization that he had founded. The class was about leadership and concepts of sustainable development. After the class I asked Jeffrey what books I should read so as to perform better as the President of MUNRFE Club. Jeffery showed me “The Fifth Discipline” and said that this was the book I should start with.

The idea of a learning organization appeared to be close to my vision of what Vladivostok MUNRFE Club should be. And while being the leader of the Club I applied the practices and principles of five disciplines to the work of the organization. I found the disciplines of shared vision and team learning to be particular helpful as their influence on the Club's performance proved to be significant. Yet, I discovered the value of the fifth discipline, system thinking, only after having read "The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook".

At that time I was preparing for International MUNRFE Conference, an annual event that is of great significance for all members of the organization. The winners of the Conference are credentialed to compete with other schools at the annual international Model United Nations of the Russian Far West session in San-Francisco (CA). The whole process of preparation for the Conference is a great teamwork and leadership experience which is both difficult and exciting. The idea of the Conference was to find alternative solutions to complex military and socio-economic problems that had been persistently restraining the development of Africa. In that context it was particularly important to understand why the measures that had been employed by the UN before had not brought any significant results.

For such complicated conflicts as African ones, where there are numerous factors in play and each cause is the effect of another cause, system thinking approach seemed to be the most adequate. And indeed, after having acquainted with the five basic archetypes I realized that "Shifting the Burden" is an appropriate framework for African problems. The whole continent seemed to me as being trapped into the "shifting the burden to the intervenor" case. As for military conflicts, the UN had been acting in Africa by dispatching peacekeeping missions. However, the peacekeepers did not improve the capacities of African people themselves to tackle problems. As soon as peacekeepers left (but in most cases even while they were present), severe conflicts arose again.

Several months later I represented MUNRFE at the 58<sup>th</sup> session of MUNFW in San-Francisco and the knowledge of system thinking archetypes contributed a lot to my performance there. Not surprisingly, I decided to go deeper into system thinking.

There is one more project within MUNRFE that I consider to be one of the most important for leadership development of its members. This project is of internal education and called Advanced Leadership School (ALS). As a lot of things in MUNRFE, ALS was also initiated and conducted at the first time by Jeffrey Lindstrom. The idea was to provide key leaders from MUNRFE clubs in different cities of the Russian Far East with conceptual knowledge that will be helpful for them while running clubs. In spring 2008, when I became the Assistant Managing Director of MUNRFE, I conducted ALS for Vladivostok MUNRFE Club. It proved to be successful and I received a request to proceed with ALS further during summer. For a new ALS I decided to focus on questions "What is a learning organization?" and "How to make MUNRFE a learning organization?" However, the whole discussion turned into a deep immersion into system thinking with the insights neither me nor participants had expected.

The task for the workshop was to choose the most persistent problem of Vladivostok Club, tell the system thinking story of this problem and attempt to develop strategies for solving it. To a great surprise of the participants, even the first part of the exercise appeared to be challenging. Although Vladivostok Club has always been considered to be one of the strongest clubs within the whole organization, a brief

brainstorming resulted in, at least, twelve problems to discuss: from the lack of leadership to the reputation of an “irresponsible country club”. Looking at such a list, one could ask “How does Vladivostok MUNRFE Club exist at all?”

The next step was to pick one problem out of twelve suggested. I encouraged participants to concentrate on an issue that was both persistent and of more relevance to them, the one which had always been “crying” for attention but ignored by the leaders of the Club. After a long discussion the participants decided to concentrate on the problem “the lack of successful projects”.

To understand the problem itself better we tried to look critically at how the Club had been developing for the recent six months. It was revealed that although three big projects had been organized and ended with significant results for the Club (Model UN Master Classes, a project that attracts new people into the Club; Handbook on Model UN documents, a guide how to write the best documents for participation in Model UN Conferences; Fire Starter’08 marketing campaign), neither of them was considered to be successful by the participants of the workshop (among the participants there were the President and Vice-President of the Club and the members of the Cabinet).

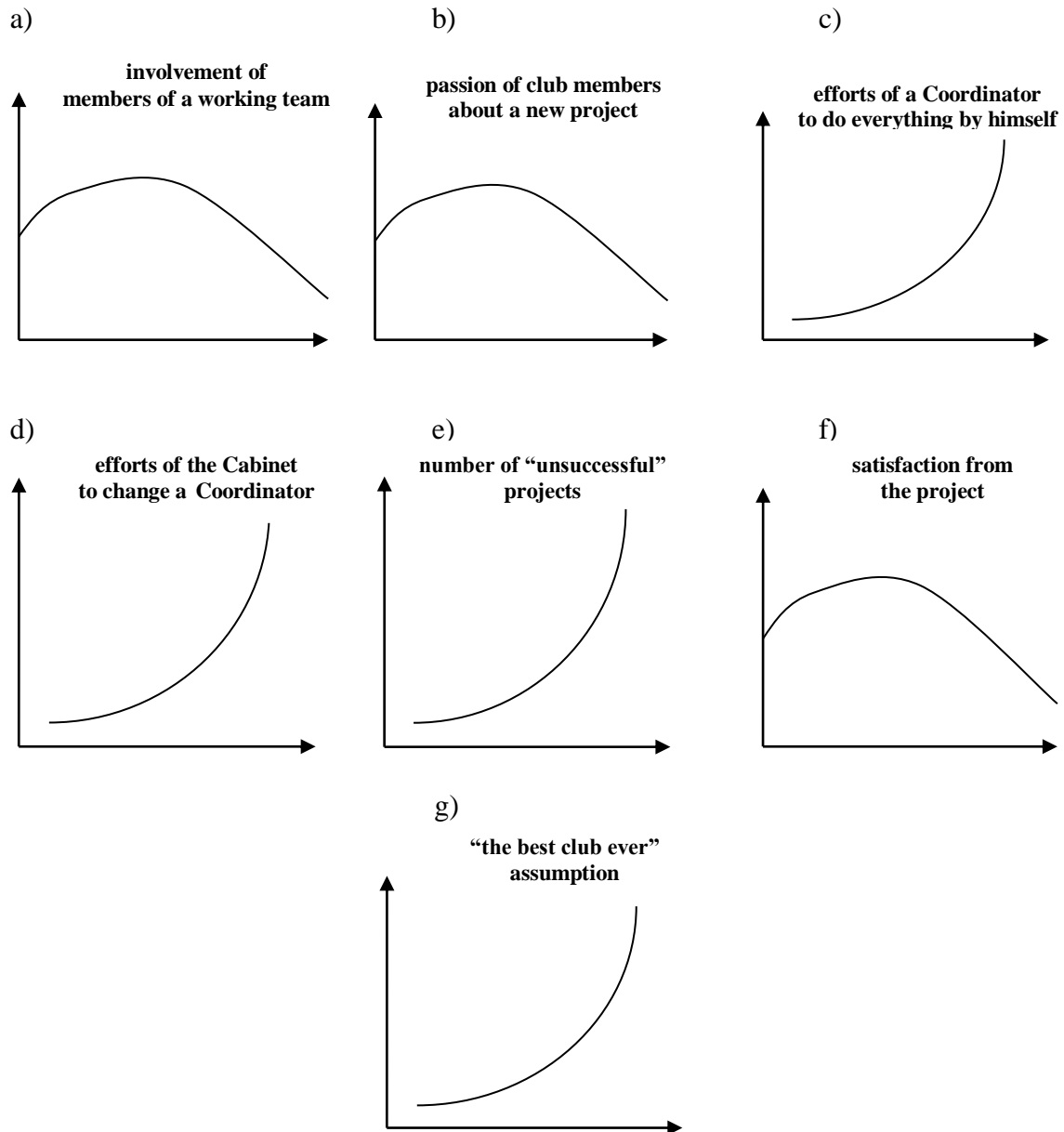
It was interesting that people felt “something was wrong with those projects” but were not able to explain what exactly was wrong. To help them reveal their unconscious thoughts I proposed to analyze the projects using the exercise “Multiple Perspective” from “The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook”. As the participants looked at the projects not only from their points of view but from the perspective of others, including the coordinators of those projects, we were able to elaborate several “patterns of behavior”.

It appeared that the patterns of behavior were quite similar for all three projects. At first, a number of people enthusiastic about a new project was growing and the whole work was going on effectively. However, at some point people became less involved into the project (pattern a) and almost everything was done by a coordinator rather than a working group. Surprisingly, a passion of Club members kept falling down (pattern b). The coordinator either by himself/herself or with the help of few people “pushed” the project forward and it ended with results (pattern c). After Spring Model UN Master-Classes about 30 new students entered the Club and the first Handbook on MUN documents in the history of MUNRFE was written. Situation with the FireStarter camp was quite different as the Club found much less children for the program than it was supposed to do. But still, the project was accomplished. However, both the presidential team and club members were not fully satisfied with it as if there were an invisible gap between expected and real results.

Moreover, we tried to look at how the leaders of the Club (the presidential team and the cabinet) reacted on this and we saw that after each such “unsuccessful” project they lost credibility to a coordinator and tried to choose another person for the next project (pattern d). However, we have already shown that that measure did not make things better. With a new project, a similar pattern came into play (patterns e, f).

The paradox of the situation was that it did not really matter who was in charge of a project. The projects that we were discussing had been conducted by MUNRFE for several years. Although each time new elements were introduced and the projects became more and more advanced, the core mechanism of a project remained the same. And if a coordinator wanted to achieve good results he/she just needed to follow that mechanism. It means that regardless an exact person as a coordinator, the projects seemed to be effective and the assumption that Vladivostok Club is the best Club ever (“We even do not need to care what kind of person is in charge, the project will be great

anyway!”) was reinforcing on itself (pattern g). But the problem was that projects within MUNRFE had never been conducted only for results. A project had always been considered as an opportunity to develop club members through teamwork, to help those people who joined the organization several months ago try on their first leadership roles. A project had been seen as a great learning process for both a coordinator and the members of his/her working team. However, with a coordinator doing almost everything alone, no leadership/teamwork experience could be gained either by club members or a coordinator himself/herself. That was the invisible gap between expected and real results, the answer to the question “What is wrong with successful projects?”



When the patterns of behavior became explicit, the problem itself was formulated into a precise statement that was easy to work with: **“For the recent 6 months no project of the Club, although having brought results, has fulfilled the expectations of club members”**.

With all these ideas in mind we came to the central task of the workshop: storytelling. It did not appear to be an easy process as well. At first we tried to tell the story regardless any archetypes so as not to fit it into any specific template and to involve all the patterns of behavior that we had discovered before. We were doing this for about three hours and could not come to any compromise: it was always the case that one or another pattern was found to be irrelevant with a loop we had constructed.

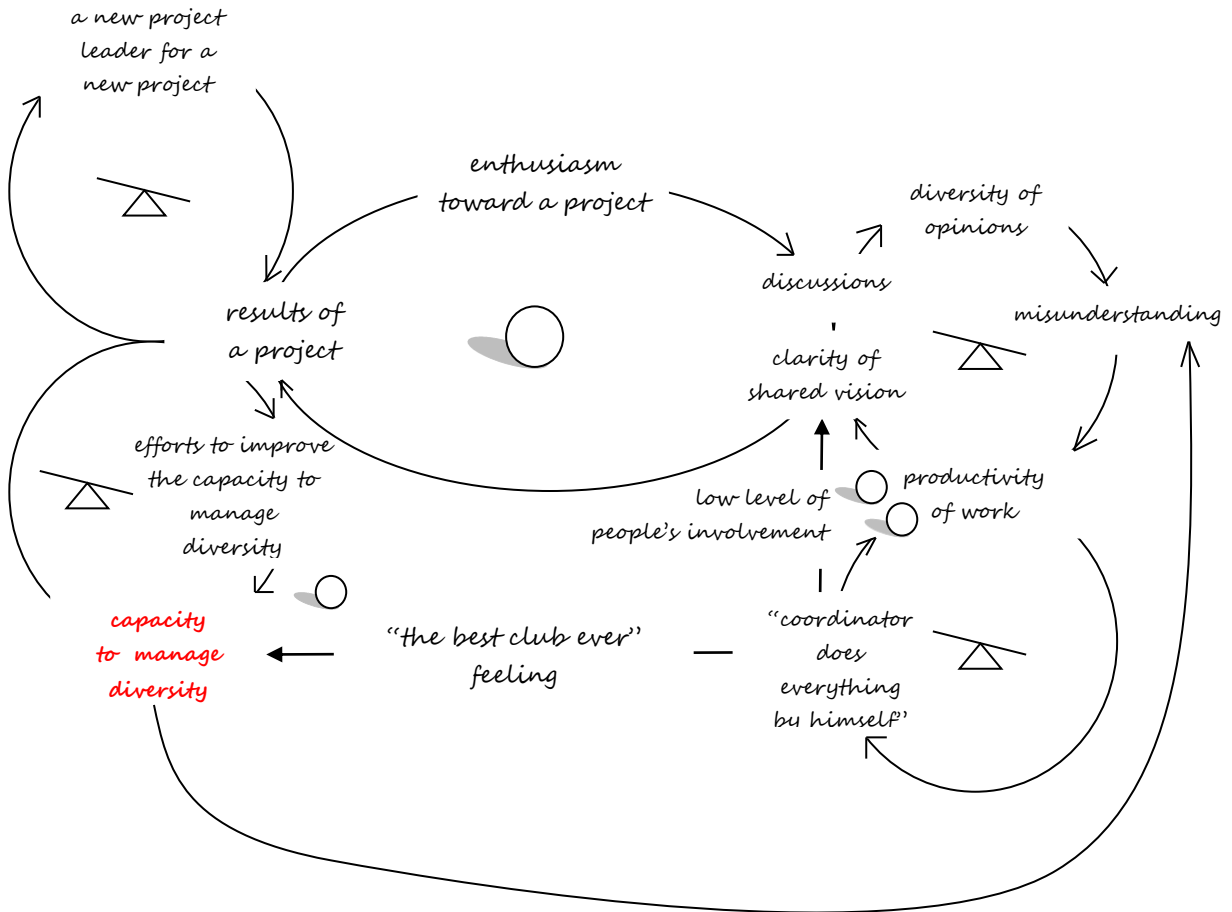
Having lost hope for any results of our endeavor we decided to take a break and talk about other four disciplines: shared vision, mental models, team learning and personal mastery. And as any solution comes when you do not think about it, our one struck us when we were discussing the concept of shared vision. While talking about all the four disciplines I encouraged participants to apply their knowledge in system thinking so as to understand better the ideas of those disciplines. When we were immersed into shared vision discussion I suggested drawing the process of building shared vision. A loop that was constructed happened to be quite similar to what P. Senge presented in “The Fifth Discipline” (“why visions die prematurely”). And then one of the participants just asked: “Doesn’t it remind you the situation with our projects? Each time we launch a new project, we have so many people who are eager to participate. More and more people come to meetings of working group. But as more people come, the more difficult it is for a coordinator to conduct meetings. There are so many opinions that the meeting gets counterproductive. It is natural for people to attend counterproductive meetings less often and, thus, to get less involved. Finally the coordinator has to do nothing but to “push” the project by himself/herself. In the worst scenario, like with the FireStarter the coordinator ended up as the only person who cared about the project.”

Indeed, MUNRFE has a good practice of conducting the projects through teamwork. And all the meetings are intended to build the shared vision about the project that will facilitate the teamwork. However, the more people we have in the team the more difficult it turns out to manage the diversity of opinions. The meeting gets into mess and the results are not productive. And the logical question is “what is the limit for the initially growing process of building shared vision? Now it gets obvious that the capacity of a coordinator to manage diversity is such a limit. Thus, we face nothing more but a typical “**Limits to Growth**” situation.

How does a coordinator respond to this problem? As meetings get counterproductive he/she switches to unilateral actions (“If the team is not able to decide, I will decide by myself!”) which is quite logical and temporarily brings some results: the business is being moved forward (“at least someone does something”). But in the long run, this fix backfires as people get less and less involved into the process. When a coordinator decides everything people get out of the process and have less and less enthusiasm to contribute further. Working on improving productivity of meetings, a coordinator actually contributes even more to degradation of the reinforcing cycle of building shared vision. So, for one growing process we have two limiting ones. In such a situation it does not take a lot of time to drain all the enthusiasm of people away. That is how a project fails in terms of being an opportunity for learning. Here we face another archetype in action: “**Fixes that Backfire**”

Another question was how the leaders of the Club responded to the situation. The pattern shows that each time the project failed the cabinet lost trust to a coordinator and tried not to choose that person for the next project. But still the number of such “unsuccessful” projects kept growing. The fix did not make the problem better. And

from the previous discussion it got clear why. The cabinet just changed people without addressing “the capacity of the Club to manage diversity”. Moreover, the fact that the project brought some results reinforced the feeling of “being the best club ever” and distracted the attention from the underlying problem. This is very close to the “**Shifting the Burden**” template. If to combine all the archetypes together, we get a complete story of the problem:



We called this model “**The Dissatisfaction With Successful Projects**”. It reveals the underlying cause of the problem – *the low capacity to manage diversity* (which itself is an integral part of leadership abilities). The low capacity creates the limit for projects to become successful not only in terms of results but in terms of being an opportunity for learning. To overcome this limit the Cabinet should think on strategies that can improve the capacity to manage diversity. It is worth noting that after the workshop the presidential team decided to devote the next cabinet meeting to elaboration of such strategies.

The power of system thinking to make even the most complex problems understandable is exciting. I personally believe in the fifth discipline after having seen what an impact it can have on organizational development. For me, system thinking is, first of all, a great tool to get people together and start the discussion of a problem. It helps to make the “unconscious” concerns and underlying reasons more explicit and, thus, much easier to struggle with. Without destroying the systemic nature of problems it makes them more manageable. The beauty of system thinking is that it does not

provide you with clear answers but, instead, limits the area of your unconscious concerns to the specific domain where you feel confident to make a difference.

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