

4.3 Archetypes at work

Let's see how knowledge of archetypes can help us quickly get a grasp on a complex situation.

Reading through the press, I came across this article on reuters.com entitled "Europe warns against escalation in South China Sea dispute" about a dispute over territories in the South China Sea involving China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, the Philippines and more recently Australia and the US. Control of the South China Sea has important economic consequences as 5 trillion dollars of trade pass through it every year. For the past two years, China has been building artificial islands on top of coral reefs that it is today accused of militarizing. The US navy has sent warships to the area and has announced that it will conduct regular patrols within 12 nautical miles of the islands. According to the article,

"China's navy commander has warned that a minor incident could spark war in the South China Sea if the United States did not stop its "provocative acts"."

There are a number of indicators that point to a generic structure of escalation at work here. In a situation of escalation two individuals or organizations are convinced that their success will come at the other's expense. When one makes progress, the other feels threatened and reacts to take back the advantage. Things escalate and can quickly get out of hand. An important clue can be found in the language used by protagonists. Here, the language used is one of conflict: China's navy commander evokes the possibility of war in response to "provocative acts".

We are often confronted with situations of escalation. A short click through the press and we are pretty sure to find examples of conflict, argument or competition. We compete and fight for many different things such as girlfriend, recognition, economic security, market share or prize money. As we saw in our previous unit, we can describe an escalatory situation using two balancing feedback loops. We can visualize this situation graphically. The graph shows a line for each party in the conflict. Their activities oscillate and intensify, following one another and exchanging the "balance of power". Conflict continues until one party leaves the fight, both agree to deescalate or both parties lose what they were fighting for.

We can see this story through the lens of our iceberg. An incident, such as that related in the article is the event. Below the event is the tit-for-tat sparring between regional rivals to gain the upper hand in negotiations for territorial control or freedom of movement in the South China Sea. At the bottom of the iceberg lays the generic structure made up of two balancing loops.

It's true that there are often many issues involved, but the key drivers of escalating conflict are two balancing feedback loops that react to each other. The archetype lies at the heart of the causality. We place it in the middle and then build up around it. Archetypes help us build operational thinking in a situation.

Throughout history, all armed conflicts can be understood through an escalation archetype. Trench warfare in France and Belgium during World War 1 can be described using the escalation structure. The balance of power is the territory taken by the enemy. Corrective actions are the assaults launched from the trenches to gain the upper hand, or retake what was lost the day before. And so the fighting went on until successful allied attacks in the summer of 1918, a faltering economy and withering domestic support led to the German army retreating and eventually signing an armistice that put an end to armed conflict on November 11.

Another example was the arms race during the cold war. Linear thinking led to a massive increase in stockpiles of weapons by the US and the Soviet Union. The US invested in weapons in response to the threat felt from the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union invested in weapons in response to the threat felt from the US. Both nations felt that the other was the aggressor. A systems thinker can see that they were both caught up in a feedback loop, or more precisely in an escalation archetype.

A situation of escalation will keep going forever unless one or both of the parties stop reacting to the actions of the other. You have no doubt heard of the Hundred Years' War that was waged between the kingdoms' of France and England. The conflict actually lasted 116 years and was over England's possession of the duchy of Guyenne, not too far from Toulouse and the English king's right to the French throne. The main variable driving the balancing loops was the amount of French territory conquered by the English. As history [dot] com tells us,

“the end of the conflict was never marked by a peace treaty but died out because the English recognized that the French troops were too strong to be directly confronted”.

There was another interesting example of escalation in the French mobile phone market back in 2012 when Free Mobile launched a mobile offer to compete against the major entrenched players. Orange's CEO, Stephan Richard was confident and announced that Orange had a “battery of sales measures to counter any strike by Free”. Sounds like war, right. Well it did start off a commercial battle for market share. Actions included price cuts, service offers and aggressive marketing. Commercial conflict escalated and resulted in job cuts and store closures by the majors in an effort to stay in the business. Escalation is really make or break!

So, what can companies, individuals or nations do to avoid conflict escalating and lasting more than one hundred years? Well, it's simple really: we just need to stop the action of the balancing loops. We need to find a way for both sides to feel they have won or have achieved their objectives at the same time. We can also question our objectives. How important is the prize we are fighting over? Is it worth the cost? Can I really afford for this thing to escalate? We should also look at the data that we are using. Are we sure that we know what your adversary's results really are? Do we have a way to get better information? We could also invite the parties to agree on a balanced or de-escalated situation even as an experiment. If none of that works, you only have two alternatives: throw in the towel or start digging trenches.