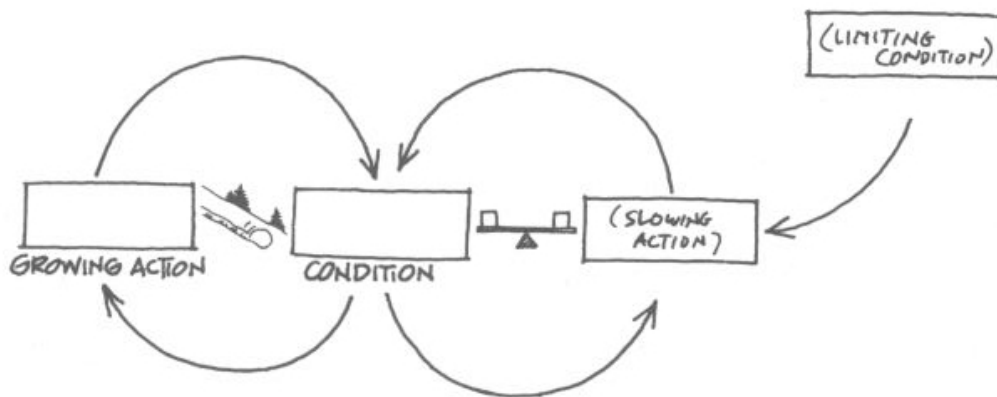


A Limits to Growth Story

One of the more powerful archetypes Senge describes is called Limits to Growth. A reinforcing (amplifying) process is set in motion to produce a desired result. It creates a spiral of success but also creates inadvertent secondary effects (manifested in a balancing process) which eventually slow down the success. **The Management Principle:** Don't push growth; remove the factors limiting it.

One of the best ways to understand the workings of such archetypes is to discover examples in your own experience. Most people have many limits to growth structures in their lives. The easiest way to recognize them is through the pattern of behavior. Is there a situation in which things are better and better at first, and then mysteriously stop improving? Once you have such a situation in mind, see if you can identify the appropriate elements of the reinforcing and balancing loops:



First, identify the reinforcing process--what is getting better and what is the action of activity leading to improvement? (There may be other elements of the reinforcing process, but there are always at least a condition which is improving and an action leading to the improvement.) It might, for instance, be the story of an organizational improvement: an equal opportunity hiring program, for example. The “growing action” is the equal opportunity program itself; and the condition is the percentage of women and minorities on staff. For example, as the percentage of women in management increases, confidence in or commitment to the program increases, leading to still further increases in women in management.

There is, however, bound to be a limiting factor, typically an implicit goal, or norm, or a limiting resource. The second step is to identify the limiting factor and the balancing process it creates. What “slowing action” or resisting force starts to come into play to

keep the condition from continually improving? In this case, some managers might have an idea in their minds of how many women or minority executives are “too much.” That unspoken number is the limiting factor; as soon as that threshold is approached, the slowing action--manager’s resistance--will kick in. Not only will they resist more equal opportunity hires, but they may make life exceptionally difficult for the new people already in place.

Once you’ve mapped out your situation, look for the leverage. It won’t involve pushing harder; that will just make the resistance stronger. More likely, it will require weakening or removing the limiting condition.

For the best results, test your limits to growth story in real life. Talk to others about your perception. Test your ideas about leverage in small real-life experiments first. For example, you might seek out one person whom you perceive as holding an implicit quote for “enough women,” but who is also approachable, and ask him.

Your assignment is to create your own “Limits to Growth” Story and share it with us in the form of an informative presentation. Use the Senge (template) diagram to help us visualize what you’re explaining.

You’ll have four and a half minutes for the presentation proper, and another minute or two for Q. and A.