

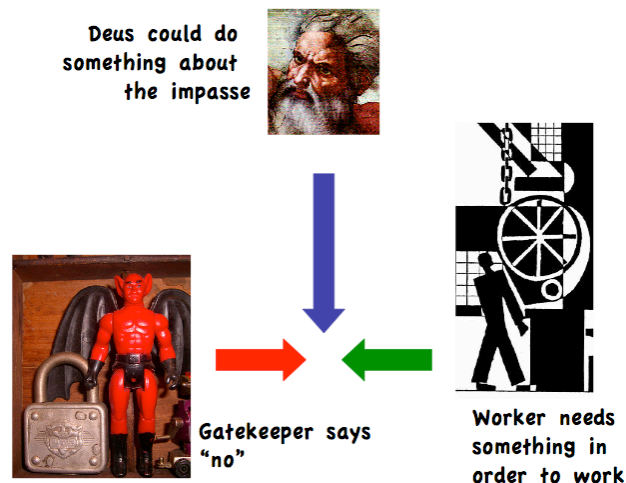
## A Vicious Triangle of Organisational Conflict

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### Summary

This essay describes a pattern of organisational dysfunction I've encountered in medium and large organisations. Simply stated, an individual or group in one part of an organisation needs something that is aligned with the organisation's stated goals, yet a policy exists which hinders access to that resource. It's particularly common (and particularly pernicious) when a change program is under way: it provides ample pitfalls to demonstrate ineffective leadership, and can initiate or sustain in individuals and teams the sort of cynicism that defeats the most optimistic and visionary change initiatives.



### A vicious triangle

Here's a situation I've seen many times. More often than not I find it in large rather than small organisations, but a company doesn't have to be huge to suffer from some variant of this.

Someone (let's call them "Worker") needs access to a resource to get their job done. They have to apply to a second person ("Gatekeeper") to get this done. For some reason, there's an organisational policy in place that

determines that Worker is not allowed access to the resource. Somewhere in the organisation there's a third person (who we'll call "Deus ex Machina", or "Deus" for short) with the authority to override or change the policy.

Examples of a resource might be (say) a particular server, an administrative or operational system, a repository of documentation or VPN access. The policy may hold that workers of a particular sort (say, contractors or consultants rather than permanent staff) are not permitted access to that resource for security or IP protection reasons. It's important to realise that the request is not an arbitrary one: our Worker really does need access to the resource to work effectively. Other than this, the details aren't important. I'm sure you've seen this situation, and can fill in your own examples.

### **Who's responsible?**

Now this is the point at which it gets interesting. It's all too easy to blame the Gatekeeper, yet they are only doing their job. In fact, as their role is defined, they are in all likelihood doing it well. It's also easy to find fault with Deus too, or the organisation as a whole, but this doesn't help. In many cases Deus simply doesn't know that the situation has arisen, or indeed could arise: organisations are large and complex, Deus is likely to have a whole different set of concerns to deal with, and it may be that Deus is a long way away from the day to day concerns of an individual trying to get their job done.

The system of the organisation itself is not a suitable target for recriminations. The feeling of frustration with "the organisation" experienced by our Worker is real, of course. However, the temptation is there for the Worker to superficially assert their independence and superiority from the system as a result of this conflict (I am not a number, I am a free man!). In my experience, this tendency is particularly evident in technical staff of all kinds, which goes some way to explaining the enduring popularity of Scott Adams' Dilbert cartoons. If this happens, the Worker is defining part of their identity in contrast to that organisation, an identity that will, therefore, be challenged if the organisation were to change. Dealt with in this way, the frustration becomes long-lived, and results in individuals and in some cases whole groups whose cynicism is institutionalised.

Before jumping in, identifying responsibilities and rushing to fix the situation, I'd like you to spend a few minutes holding this triangle in your mind: look at it from the point of view of each of the vertices and edges in turn, zoom out, zoom in. As leaders, managers, consultants and coaches, we're tempted to wade in and fix things, but it's good practice to hold the tension of a problematic situation in mind for a while before rushing in with a solution.

### **The conflicted organisation**

My first reaction to this sort of situation is that doing nothing is not an option. The negativity and general stuck-ness of many organisations is often a result of months or years of inaction, or ineffective action, around issues like this.

We're often tempted to apply a quick fix or workaround: that too is avoiding the issue, but to allow work to continue it's often necessary. The danger is that these fixes accrete and add to the complexity of the organisation as a whole, impose their own restrictions on how teams and individuals can work, and end up being less efficient than addressing the root cause.

### **Dear God...**

If the problem is that Deus is not aware of the problem, then as Worker your simple solution is to tell them. It might mean an email to your CEO (the title of this section is the start of your email, not an exclamation!), but if that's where the buck stops... Most management teams nowadays preach openness and communication: this is your chance to see if they walk the walk. Avoid simply complaining or dumping the problem at Deus' door: make some proposals, and put yourself at the service of a solution by offering to talk to whoever Deus identifies as someone with responsibility to change things.

### **Persistence of bureaucracy**

If you are Deus, then as soon as you hear about a situation like this you must do something. In the example above there's a conflict between hiring policy (we will use contractors) and security policy (we won't give them access to what they need to do their job). If it isn't fixed, you'll end up with organisational behaviour that matches the psychological dysfunction that arises when individuals try to operate under conflicting goals – schizophrenia, depression, psychosis. One or other (or both) of the policies needs fixing. It needn't be the obvious one: if confidentiality is so important, for commercial or regulatory reasons, and you're particularly concerned about the loyalty of your external contractors, then you'd better not hire any. Bureaucracy in an organisation persists, and becomes very difficult to shift. Talking about change and then not providing evidence of it is one of the worst things a leader can do, but correspondingly, getting rid of bad and outdated policy is a powerful and visible sign of change.

### **The gatekeeper's dilemma**

If you are Gatekeeper you're probably in the most difficult position. If this circumstance arises frequently, then you might be able to identify and escalate it (though in a service group in a large organisation, chances are your manager is also a Gatekeeper). It's harder for a part of an organisation that's set up as a service provider to rethink itself into a problem solving mode, but if you can start acting actively in this way the benefits – to the group, individuals working in it, and the organisation as a whole – will be considerable.

Just remember – doing nothing is not a healthy option.

## **David Harvey**

David has over twenty years experience in software – as a developer, team lead, manager, technical architect, CTO, coach and trainer. In the 1990s he helped numerous organizations adopt best practices in object-oriented design and implementation: in investment banks in the 2000s he was responsible for defining, designing and implementing large-scale infrastructure for complex and changing businesses. From 2004 to 2008 he was CTO of Sibelius Software, bringing two significant versions of the world's leading music notation program to market.

David combines his technical expertise and extensive knowledge of the software business with his well-developed people skills - managing, mentoring and nurturing people and teams to deliver successful high-quality products. He's been active in introducing new thinking into software practice, through sessions at conferences, in his work in teams and organizations and in the UK's software community, and through his chairmanship of the British Computer Society's specialist group on advancing software practice.

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