

# Exploring Ethical Dilemmas Using the Drifting Goals Archetype

Journal of Management Education 30, (1) pg 134 – 149, 2006

**E. Anne Bardoel**

Monash University  
Department of Management  
Faculty of Business and Economics  
PO Box 197, Caulfield East, Victoria, Australia, 3145  
Telephone: + 61 3 9903 2675 Facsimile: + 61 3 9903 2718  
E-mail: [anne.bardoel@buseco.monash.edu.au](mailto:anne.bardoel@buseco.monash.edu.au)

and

Tim Haslett  
Monash University  
Department of Management  
Faculty of Business and Economics

**Abstract**

Systems thinking tools, management education, systems archetypes, ethical dilemmas,  
drifting goals

## Exploring Ethical Dilemmas Using the Drifting Goals Archetype

This article describes how the systems archetype ‘Drifting Goals’ can be used in the classroom to explore ethical dilemmas. Systems archetypes are a systems thinking tool that provide a framework that shifts the focus from seeing ethical dilemmas as stemming from the acts of individuals to a focus on the systemic interrelationships and interactions within the organization. The use of the ‘Drifting Goals’ archetype provides a pedagogical approach that exposes students to new ways of thinking about ethical problems and the structures that create them.

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The recent highly publicized instances of questionable business practices in well known organizations prompt questions about the effectiveness of the many laws, policies and programs that have been written and developed to prevent ethical breaches. It also prompts a questioning of the role business educators have or should have in 'teaching business ethics'.

A common approach to teaching business ethics is to give students case studies of "ethical dilemmas" or ethical breaches in workplaces and organizations. As is appropriate in the study of ethics, this focuses on individual values and decision making. The rationale for this approach is that this will give students the tools for improved ethical behavior in the workplace. Essentially it is a focus on the role of the individual in business ethics and the assumption underlying this approach is that educating individuals to be ethical will lead to ethical behavior in the workplace. An additional strategy is to develop and explore the structural and systemic factors that lead to ethical breaches. This approach explores the tension between the role of the individual and the role of organizational structure in determining behavior. This pedagogical approach is discussed in Bardoel and Haslett (in press) and is directed at exposing students to new ways of thinking about organizational problems. This is in line with Goekler's (2003) conclusion that often problems occur because of the ways we think, learn and communicate and if we want to make changes, classroom discussions should provide an alternative lens that encourage students to understand the patterns of events and the structures that create them.

Systems thinking provides a set of tools for understanding the forces and interrelationships that shape the behavior of systems and can direct students to think about ethical issues using a paradigm or mental model that considers individual ethical decision making in a structural context. What do we mean by systems thinking? The definition that is used for our purposes is that systems thinking focuses

on understanding “...the system as a whole with interdependent elements, subsystems, and networks of relationships and patterns of interactions.” (Werhane, 2002, p.36). A successful application of systems thinking in teaching involves exploring management issues in terms of the influence of feedback systems (both amplifying and dissipative), behavior over time, and systemic interactions. This encourages students to see the whole picture or context of a situation and its interconnections to the environment. Central to this is the fundamental tenet of systems thinking that “structure determines behavior”. King and Acklin (1995) argue that an important insight for students to contemplate is that the ethical dilemmas faced by managers are often symptoms of deeper systemic processes. Understanding these systemic processes is important if managers are to evaluate a system and begin to change it. Using this approach it is possible to understand that changing individual ethical behavior may need to be supported by changes in the structures in organizations that encourage and maintain that behavior.

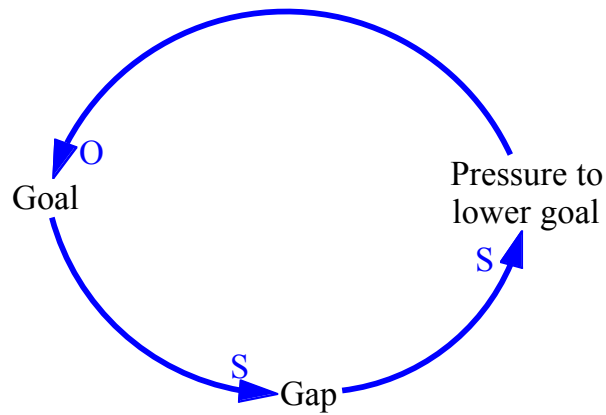
Systems archetypes are a particular type of systems thinking tool that provide a visual illustration of the common challenges that occur in all kinds of industries and organizations (Bardoel and Haslett, in press). When organizations are faced with the same types of problems recurring then there is likely to be a systems archetype operating in the background. In the *Fifth Discipline*, Senge (1990) identified eight archetypes which he believed constitute consistent patterns of behavior in organizations. Kim (1990) defined systems archetypes as a set of common dynamics that recur in many different situations. The use of the archetypes can assist students in identifying common systems behaviors that may fit into one of these recurring patterns (Kim, 1990). This paper develops a systems archetype that highlights the commonality of systemic structures that lead to ethical failures. The archetype used in

the paper is “Drifting Goals”. Use of this archetype places ethical failure in broader context of the organizational dynamics that can lead to an erosion of standards.

An ethical dilemma has been commonly defined as occurring every time a manager has discretion to choose whether or not to pursue a course of action that offers the potential for personal and/or organizational benefit beyond what would normally be expected in the broader social or business context. Such a decision represents an ethical dilemma. Unethical practices develop in organizations for a range of reasons. One reason is that short-term considerations and the opportunity for “windfall” benefits may override long term ones and lead to an acceptance of ethical erosion over time.

The drifting goals archetype is a visual tool that can provide a vehicle for students to understand the interrelationships and patterns of change that often form the basis of ethical dilemmas and erosion of ethical standards. The emphasis with this systems archetype is developing an understanding of the dynamics of behavior over time. In other words, it allows a focus on the ongoing rather than immediate effects of ethical dilemmas. Ethical standards operating in organizations can diminish over time and the “Drifting Goals Archetype” (Figure 1) provides a basis for understanding the dynamics of why this is likely to occur.

**Figure 1: Goals are eroded over time.**



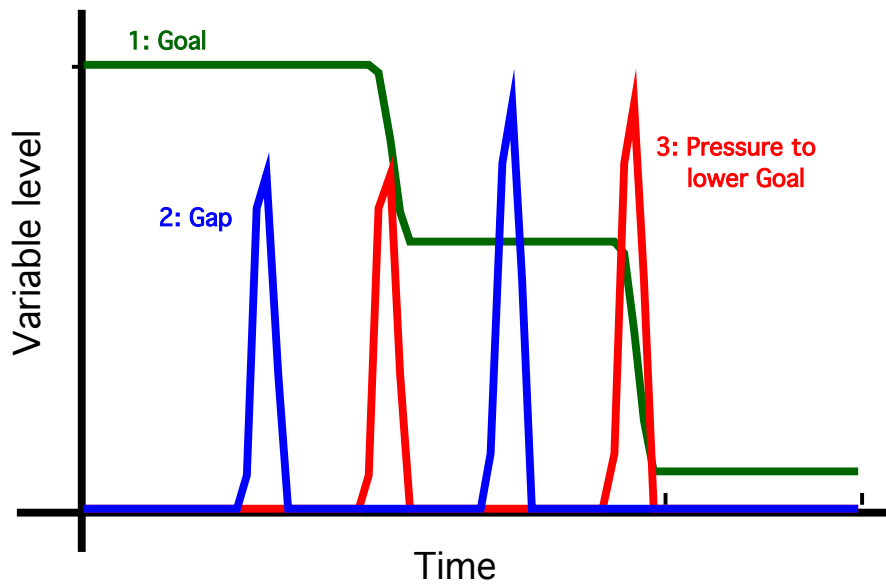
The iconography of an archetype is:

1. Arrows indicate causality
2. Causality make variables increase or decrease over
3. An “S’ indicates that a change in the level of a causal variable will lead to a Similar level change in the dependent variable
4. An “O” indicates that a change in the level of a causal variable will lead to an Opposite level change in the dependent variable.

In Figure 1, a gap develops between what the organization wishes to do (this goal or standard) and the immediate business demands. As this gap increases, it leads to increasing pressure to lower the goal or standard. If a decision is made to lower the standard, “just once, just this time”, it closes the gap between desired and expedient performance. However, effectively lowers the goal for next time.

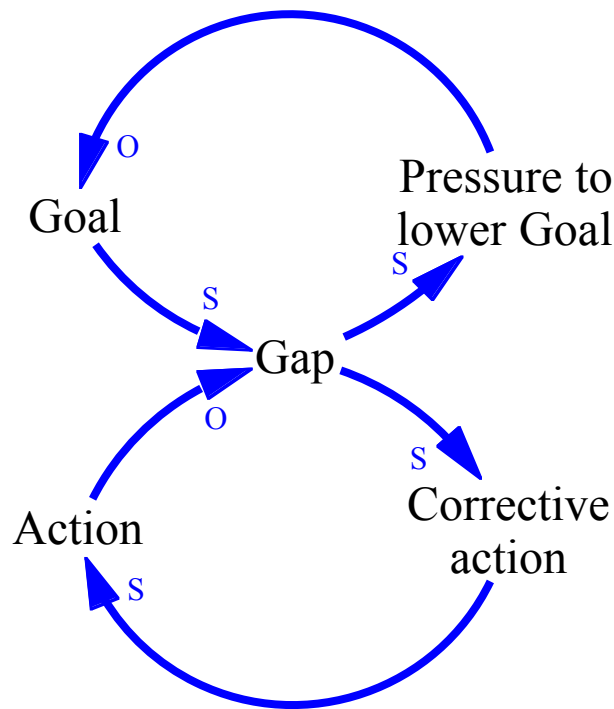
The behavior over time for this archetype is shown in Figure 2. A spike in the variable “Gap” indicates that there is a gap between the desired standard and the expedient standard. This is followed by a spike in “Pressure to lower Goal”. This in turn causes a decline the “Goal”.

**Figure 2: Behavior over time in the erosion of goals**



In a drifting goals archetype, a gap between the goal and current reality can be resolved by taking corrective action or lowering the goal. The critical difference is that lowering the goal immediately closes the gap, whereas corrective actions usually take time. The second half of the Drifting Goals archetype is added in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Complete Drifting Goals archetype**



Now the increase in the gap is met by corrective action (a change in policy, procedure or structure) and new action or behavior closes the gap, *in some way other than eroding the goals or standards*. The underlying dynamics of this archetype are that a company finds there is a gap between standards they aspire to and some set of new demands. A simple example of this is dropping quality standards to meet tight dead lines. The lowered standard can become the accepted standard and with each cycle through the loop, the standard drops again. The ‘quick fix’ is to lower standards to meet the pressures. This in turn makes it easier to lower the goal or standard next time. This cycle is also an excellent example of behavior over time being driven by system structure. The longer term, and often more difficult, solution involves making



fundamental changes that maintain standards and meet the new demands. However, the longer term solution involves a lag between the corrective action and the new performance at the desired standard (Kim, 1992).

### The Use of the Drifting Goal Archetype to Explore Ethical Dilemmas

The *Drifting Goals Archetype* (Senge, 1990) can be used to discuss how ethical standards erode over time. Once students have gained an understanding of the organizational dynamics that might be operating in ethical dilemmas, it is then possible to examine structural ways of changing the pressures that create the ethical dilemma. At this point, it is possible to bring in traditional theoretical ethical frameworks, such as moral rights, individualism, utilitarian or justice approaches (see Daft, 2003) to discuss the underlying forces that have caused the pressure to lower ethical standards.

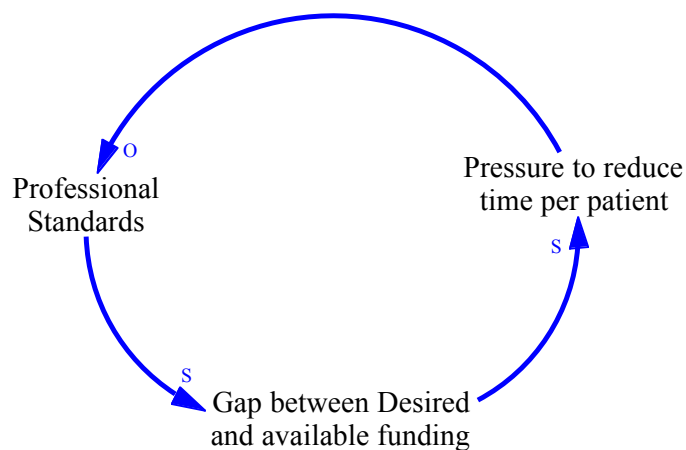
This teaching approach can be introduced in class by explaining clearly the dynamics of the archetype illustrated in Figure 3 to the student group. To begin with it is necessary to familiarize the students with the *Drifting Goals Archetype* using the simple example discussed earlier.

The next stage is to promote class discussions and encourage students to think of examples of where they have found recurring patterns of ethical standards being lowered as identified by the drifting goals archetype. During this stage of class discussions, we recommend that the class be divided into groups of four to six. Each group is asked to choose a business situation that they consider illustrates an ethical dilemma and present the situation using the ‘drifting goals’ archetype. Our experience is that student groups are able to identify examples that demonstrate the patterns operating in the drifting goals archetype. For example, one story told by a student was: *Where a company’s environmental protection standards are many times higher*

*than those required by legislation, a slight lowering of the company standards will produce greater profit. Once this has been done, the company runs the risk of having a continual and repeated long term erosion of environment protection standards.*

Another ethical dilemma that has been identified by one of our student groups involves reduced funding to public health services. In this example, students identified that professional care givers often find themselves increasingly unable to provide the level of professional care that they believe is appropriate given their professional training or ethics. Most students identified a lowering of some professional standard as the way of coping with the situation. The drifting goals archetype enables students to identify the dynamics of this situation. At this stage, a very simple causal relationship is established, that is, the pressure to reduce time per patient leads to a reduction in some element of the professional care that is provided as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Erosion of professional standards as a result of funding cuts.**

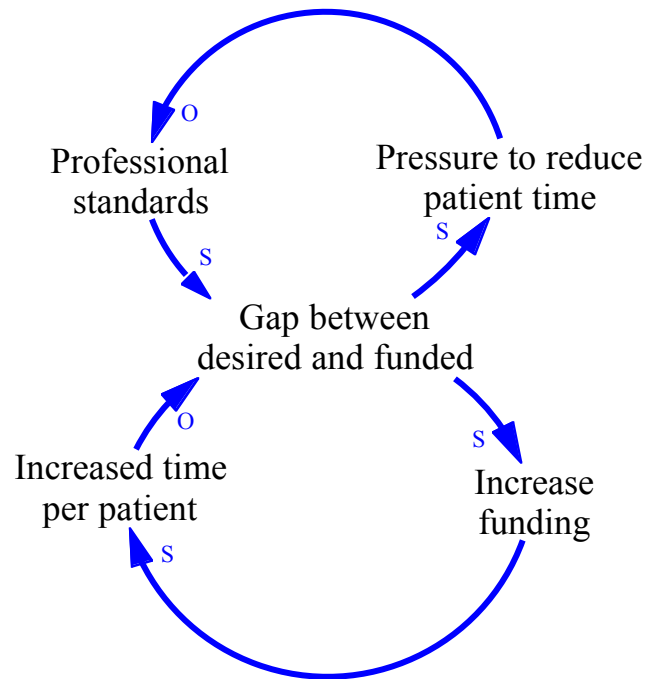


It is the resultant lowering of professional standards that creates an ethical dilemma, that is, a gap between what the professional wants to do and what they are able to do. The concept of the *gap* is extremely important in the drifting goals

archetype. In this example, students identify the gap as that which develops between the health professional's desired level of service and the level of service that can be funded. It is at this point that most students recognize the archetypal nature of this case given the widespread reduction in funding of many public services. The causal loop diagram below now represents the first balancing loop (B1) of the Drifting Goals Archetype (See Figure 4). This is a balancing loop because the professional achieves a balance between what they want to do and what they can do by lowering their professional standards. It is this set of organizational dynamics that creates the ethical dilemma.

The question is then posed to students, *Is there another way of closing this gap without creating an ethical dilemma?* The focus of the class discussion is on contrasting the short term nature of the solution of cutting patient time with the longer term. Cutting patient time is short term *fix* that needs to be repeated on a daily basis. The solution will be a long term solution that will be implemented once and have on-going influence on the system. The most obvious answer that most students identify is to increase levels of funding as shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Drifting goals and patient care dilemmas**

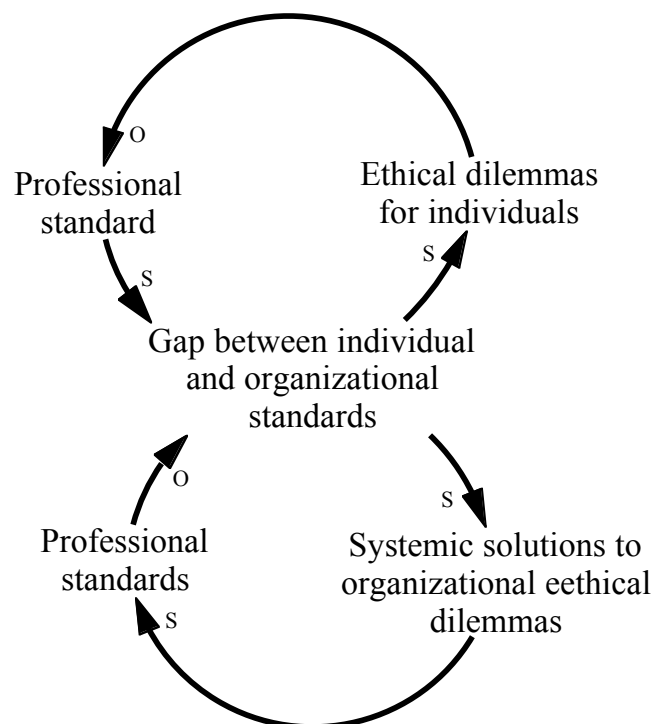


Students very quickly realize that while increasing funding effectively closes the gap, it may often be an unrealistic solution. However, at this point the students have gained a deeper insight into the dynamics of this archetype and the manner in which structural elements determine behavior, if not the solutions of solving this specific problem. Other solutions that have been identified include a focus on the practicalities of the situation e.g. the use of paramedics.

At this stage in the learning process, it is possible to broaden the discussion to an analysis of the types of solutions that may be found in the systemic structures. In class discussions, students often identify that broad systemic interventions produce better solutions. It is also at this point the major learning occurs. The central insight that this archetype often brings to students is that systemic interventions can close the gap and are more likely to remove the ethical dilemma. The deeper systems learning is that individual ethical dilemmas are often created at a systemic level (See Figure 6). Students complete this section of their course with an understanding that ethical organizations may operate ethically not because they impose a code of ethics, but

because they are able to avoid or eliminate structures that drive unethical behavior. It also shows how individuals achieve a balance between the demands of the organization and their own ethics in terms of patient treatment. Over time, they compromise the standard of treatment or service they can give patients. Often this starts out as simply reducing the amount of time spent on each patient. It is not until an organization moves into the lower loop, that the pressure on individuals to resolve these conflicts is removed. This is done by dealing with the problem at a systemic level and finding long term workable solutions to problems. It is important to emphasize that this is a shift from resolving ethical issues at an individual level to the creation of organizational structures and procedures that avoid placing pressure on individuals.

**Figure 6: The general archetype for Drifting Ethical Standards**



Issues with using systems thinking concepts as a tool for teaching ethics

This discussion uses a systems thinking archetype as a tool to explore the dynamics of ethical dilemmas. The drifting goal archetype identified by Senge (1990) embodies a particular theory about dynamic behavior that through group deliberations can further guide students to understand sets of interrelationships involving ethical dilemmas. Kim (1992) proposes that each systems archetype offers prescriptions for effective intervention. It is important that teachers emphasize to students that the drifting goals archetype is a recurrent, but not all pervasive, pattern of organizational life. Nonetheless, this should not detract from the message that once the archetypal pattern of drifting goals is established in an organization, it becomes a powerful determinant of ethical behavior.

This example of using the drifting goals archetype to explore the dynamics of an ethical dilemma is only one example of how ethical dilemmas can be explored using systems thinking tools. In a recent article, Werhane (2002) describes how systems thinking principles can be used as a methodology to encourage students to think more imaginatively about ethical issues, particularly when combined with integrating moral decision making into business decisions.

Systems thinking tools such as archetypes are clearly a visual language that may not work for all students. However, we have found that as an instructional method, systems thinking tools such as the drifting goals archetype creates considerable and intense debate because students are able to draw their view of the world and expose their cognitive frames or mental models. This friction is not surprising as people are drawing in diagrammatic form their view of the world (or at least part of it). Sometimes there is lively discussion when a model does not work and the key dependencies and directions of causality are disputed or difficult to identify. Nonetheless, student presentations of ethical dilemmas using the drifting goals

archetype are a powerful vehicle for discussion about how different parts of a system relate.

A sophisticated familiarity with the language of systems thinking and archetypes is not absolutely essential in using the drifting goals archetypes as a basis for class discussion. The use of systems thinking archetypes to explore recurring patterns that are often the basis of the erosion of ethical standards by managers do not replace traditional organizational behavior instructional approaches but do help explore issues from an alternative paradigm.

## CONCLUSION

The drifting goals archetype is best used in conjunction with a wide range of teaching techniques. A fundamental tenet of systems thinking is the provision of multiple perspectives on any given problem. As we have said, some students get more insights using these techniques than others. Some are more comfortable with traditional organizational behavior instructional approaches but the use of archetypes does help explore issues from an alternative paradigm. The drifting goals archetype is useful in explaining situations ethical dilemmas where key causalities can be identified and where it is important to identify long-term behavioral implications of management decisions. In this context, systems thinking lends itself to case studies and discussions of situations where recurring patterns of ethical dilemmas are likely to be present.

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