Systems Archetypes: “Accidental Adversaries”

Themes

Actual or potential partners behave as if they are adversaries because at least one party unintentionally takes action that undermines the success of their partner.

Generic Story

Two parties have chosen to work together because they receive mutual benefit from the relationship. Each takes action to benefit the other in the belief that, if the alliance works, both parties will benefit.

The problem arises when one or both parties need to correct a local performance gap (often precipitated by an external change or pressure.) They take action to improve performance and accidentally undermine their partner’s success.

The impact of these harmful activities may simply create a sense of frustration and resentment between the parties, who remain partners, or it may actually reach the point of turning them into hostile adversaries.

Situations Ripe for Accidental Adversaries Breakdowns

- Between departmental or process groups
- Between client and support groups
- Between customers and suppliers
- Between sister divisions
- Between field and headquarters
- Between organizations

Patterns of Behavior over Time
The benefits of the partnership rise, may be stable at a high level for a while, then drop or crash. In this graph, benefits are shown as oscillating and declining over time.

Any partnership will produce some accidents, some accidents occur fairly early; these increase over time and eventually become predominantly adversarial actions.

**Generic Loop Diagram**

"Accidental Adversaries"

This is a complex diagram that evolves in three stages.

In the first stage, the partners form their alliance for mutual benefit. This is a virtuous reinforcing dynamic – we act in your favor, which creates success for you, and you are motivated to act in our favor, which creates success for us.
In the second stage, balancing dynamics arise as the partners take independent action to improve their own performance. This action is often precipitated by outside factors that are affecting success.

In the third stage, the partners' local corrective actions unintentionally undermine the other partner's success. This is a vicious reinforcing dynamic (similar to "escalation") that also has the effect of...
reversing the first stage virtuous cycle into a vicious cycle. In other words, the interior reinforcing loop is the battlefront where accidents turn into intentional adversarial actions, and the exterior reinforcing loop becomes vicious because there is less and less incentive to engage in collaborative behaviors.

**Typical Mental Models**

"Accidental Adversaries"

The mental models reinforcing the partnership include:

- It will benefit us to build a partnership / alliance / relationship with them, and they will benefit too.
- If we help them, they will help us.

The mental model leading to accidents include:

- To continue benefiting ourselves, we must take actions that are relevant to our business / goals.
- These actions don’t have any connection to our partnership.

The mental models leading to adversarial positioning include:

- They’re causing problems for us, while we continue to support the partnership in good faith.
- They’re intentionally ignoring or hurting us. Why don’t they realize what they’re doing and stop?
Example: “Working at Cross Purposes”
"Accidental Adversaries"

A large consumer products manufacturer and a major national retailer had a joint goal – to improve the effectiveness of their combined production/distribution system. But each felt the other was acting in self-serving ways that damaged their relationship.

Starting in the 1970’s, the manufacturer began to rely more heavily on price promotions to boost its market share and increase its profits. However, the promotions created enormous costs and other difficulties for the retailer. The retailer responded by stocking up, buying large quantities of a product when it was discounted, then selling it at regular prices when the promotion ended. That extra revenue improved their margins.

This strategy caused great swings in volume for the manufacturer. It added to their costs and undermined their profitability because the retailer would not order product for months at a time. To improve its results, the manufacturer pushed even more heavily on promotions and blamed the retailer for its problems. The retailer countered by stocking up even more.

Eventually, the manufacturer found itself putting effort into promotions at the expense of new product development, while the retailer concentrated more on buying and storing promoted products than on improving basic operations. Many of the short-term profits from the promotions were drained away in long-term costs.
When you create an “accidental adversaries” diagram, be as specific as you can. If you chose more specific variables than “effectiveness” (such as market share) or “problems” (such as unpredictable demand), that’s good. Even though you are likely to get some of the variables “wrong” if you base your label on little information, you create a great conversation starter! If you name the success variables inaccurately, the partners become clearer themselves as they correct you.

**Possible interventions:** The general guidelines for correcting a “fix that backfires” apply here. It is helpful for the partners to name some of the problems (with as little blame as possible) and figure out alternative approaches while also rebuilding the partnership. In this case, the manufacturer actually committed to ending price promotions with this retail customer, and introduced a policy of “everyday low prices” that produced stable prices somewhere between the regular price and promotional price at all times. The retailer reciprocated by regularizing orders over the course of a year, allowing the manufacturer to engage in better production planning. Eventually, the manufacturer was able to establish similar partnerships with other major customers.

An important intervention in these cases is creating some mechanism for each partner to understand the other as behaving rationally and with good intent. This mental model makes it possible to give the partner feedback about the unintended consequences of their actions in a way that is not argumentative and accusatory. While there are still accidents, this process of correcting them becomes one of the actions that reinforces the partnership.

**Implication & Leverage Points**

"**Accidental Adversaries**"

**Implications**

Any local corrective action has the potential for creating an accident; in interdependent systems, what appear to be independent actions may have unforeseen effects on other parts of the system.

In the absence of information, even an ally may assume negative motivations on the part of a friend or partner.

For a partnership to work, the partners need to constantly inquire how local corrective actions might harm the other partner.

No matter how well intended and well structured an alliance is, without constant attention, it can become negative.

What is required to maintain the success of both partners over time may look different from the actions envisioned during negotiations. A partner is most likely to assume that the other measures and values success in the same way, when pressures and circumstances are actually quite different.

When a partnership falters, the partners may take on the roles of victim and oppressor.

When allies feel threatened, they may protect their own interests - passively or aggressively.

Fear, threat, frustration or unwillingness to deal with difficulties in the relationship may lead one or both partners to end the relationship.
Generic Leverage Points

To manage or change the Accidental Adversaries dynamic:

1. Acknowledge the “accidents” and that damage was done, and build mechanisms for timely feedback. Begin the process by asking how your actions might be creating a problem for your partner.

2. Develop mechanisms to avoid accidents. Learn more about your partner so that you can anticipate unintended consequences and/or allow your partner an opportunity for input prior to implementing significant changes.

3. Identify mental models that may contribute to an adversarial relationship. Begin by assuming that harmful actions were taken to correct a performance problem.

4. Reaffirm the intent and benefit of the partnership; strengthen mutual understanding of each other’s needs and of the criteria by which each partner defines success. Establish shared goals. Do the actions taken by each party really help the other? Are others needed? What behavior must stop?
Guidelines: Draw Your Own
"Accidental Adversaries"

Instructions: Choose a situation in your own experience that appears to be a case of “Accidental Adversaries.” Note key events in the story; graph key variables, then draw the loops.

1. To get started, describe the SUCCESS measures for each party.
2. Finish the engine of growth for the partnership. What ACTIONS by each party support the success of the other?
3. Include your own MENTAL MODELS, beliefs and assumptions about the thinking and feeling driving the actions. If you are not the decision maker, you may need to speculate about the mental models held by others. It might be helpful to note alternatives and see if these are consistent with the story.
4. Note any OUTSIDE FACTORS that affect the success of either party.
5. Identify the CORRECTIVE ACTION that one or both parties take to restore its success. Complete the balancing loop. Add any MENTAL MODELS driving the corrective action.

6. Identify any UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES of the corrective action. Note how these affect either the success of the other party or the action in support of the partnership.

7. Identify possible LEVERAGE POINTS to limit the unintended consequences or to restore the partnership.

Check your diagram with your original story.

- Does your diagram explain that story? If not, what changed? Sometimes the process of diagramming sheds new light on a story, and the story changes. Sometimes, though, in the process of diagramming, it is tempting for force fit connections that are not true to real life.

- If you ended up forcing a connection, go back and ask yourself why you think this story is a “Accidental Adversaries.” Does it fit the theme? Does it fit the pattern over time of a situation where friends become foes?

- If it does, then review the variables and review your cause and effect links. You may find you don’t actually have all the information. In that case, you can create a theory about what happened.

- If your case does not fit the theme and the behavior over time graph, go back to the Archetype Family Tree and try another archetype as a template. Remember that you can always begin by identifying reinforcing or balancing feedback in a story and draw the loops as you hear them. An archetype may then emerge from your diagram.