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USE OF SYSTEM ARCHETYPES IN SOLVING COMPLEX MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

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The article analyses the application of system archetypes in solving complex management problems within organizations. Traditional problem-solving methods often prove insufficient when faced with the complexity of interconnections and dynamic behavioural patterns in organizational systems. In response to these challenges, systemic approaches, including the use of system archetypes, are gaining importance. The aim of this paper is to examine how archetypes support the identification of problem sources and the design of effective strategies for their resolution. The research question posed is: “How does the literature describe the use of system archetypes in solving organizational and team-related problems?” The analysis is based on a systematic literature review (SLR). The results indicate that archetypes such as “Shifting the Burden” and “Limits to Growth” are most commonly applied, as they enable organizations to recognize recurring problem patterns, avoid short-term fixes, and design sustainable interventions. Archetypes are valuable both for organizations and employees – they support decision-making processes, improve team efficiency, and facilitate daily work by reducing the risk of recurring problems in the future. Integrating archetypes with problem-solving methodologies can deliver significant operational and strategic benefits.

Keywords: problem-solving, systems thinking, system archetypes, organizational management

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern organizations operate in a dynamic and complex environment, where effective problem-solving becomes a key success factor. However, traditional methods for analysing problem often prove insufficient when faced with the complexity of interconnections and behavioural patterns within organizational systems. In response to these challenges, systemic approaches are increasingly important, as they allow for a holistic view of organizational functioning (Chowdhury, 2024). One such approach is the use of system archetypes (Senge, 2012).

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Drawing on the existing literature, this article examines how system archetypes are used in organizations to solve problems. The analysis focuses on the ways in which archetypes can support teams in identifying the root causes of problems and in developing strategies for their resolution. The research question is as follows: “How has the literature identified methods of using system archetypes to solve organizational and team-related problems?”

To answer this question and identify examples of the use of systemic analysis tools for solving complex problems, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted. The article highlights how archetypes can support decision-making processes, enhance team effectiveness, and minimize the risk of recurring issues. It also discusses the potential benefits of applying systemic analysis, such as gaining a better understanding of the interdependencies among organizational elements, identifying problem causes more effectively, and developing sustainable solutions.

2. PROBLEM-SOLVING AND SYSTEM ARCHETYPES – THEORETICAL APPROACH

2.1. Problem-solving methods

In today’s rapidly changing management environment, the ability to solve problems effectively is crucial to organizational success. In the labour market, problem-solving has become a key skill, and dedicated positions, departments, or internal project groups are increasingly being created to support organizations in addressing challenges. These problems faced by managers vary in both nature and complexity; hence understanding these differences and developing appropriate methods for solving them is essential for the effective functioning of organizations. A problem can be defined as a situation in which there is a discrepancy between the current state and the desired state, requiring action to resolve it. Problems may be simple, with their causes easy to identify and eliminate, or complex, when they require the analysis of multiple factors and the use of various tools (Obora, 2021). A complex problem is characterized by numerous interrelated elements, dynamically changing conditions, and ambiguity. Such problems often have multiple causes and effects that are difficult to predict. They require a holistic approach that takes into account different perspectives and organizational levels (Dobrowolski, 2025).

The differences between simple and complex problems are significant from a management perspective. Simple problems can be solved using standard procedures and tools, whereas complex problems demand more advanced methods, such as system analysis and strategic thinking. Developing problem-solving skills is one of the key competencies for employees. Modern organizations operate in an environment full of uncertainty and variability, which requires leaders to be flexible and able to adapt quickly to new conditions. Managers and employees should be

equipped with tools and techniques that enable them to effectively identify, analyse, and solve problems – both simple and complex (Obora, 2021; Dobrowolski, 2025).

W.L. Bittel describes a problem-solving method consisting of several key steps: identifying the problem, analysing it, generating possible solutions, evaluating and selecting the best solution, implementation, monitoring, and assessing the results. This method is characterized by its simplicity and ease of application, which makes it adaptable to current organizational needs (Bittel, Newstrom, 1990).

Another method used in organizations is PDCA problem-solving, based on Deming's cycle, which uses the following stages: Plan, Do, Check, and Act. The essence of this method lies in using the cycle for continuous organizational improvement through problem-solving (Sokovic, Pavletic, Pipan, 2022). Applying the PDCA cycle to problem-solving brings numerous benefits that can significantly improve organizational efficiency. The method supports decision-making processes by enabling the analysis and evaluation of results, thereby ensuring that decisions are in line with organizational needs and address the root cause of the problem (Isniah, Purba, Debora, 2020).

Lean problem-solving is a systematic, data-driven approach to identifying, analysing, and solving problems within an organization. Its goal is to maximize value while minimizing waste. The methodology is based on several key principles: focusing on customer value, eliminating waste, continuous improvement (kaizen), respect for people, and making decisions grounded in a long-term philosophy (Liker, Convis, 2023).

Another important method is Design Thinking, which focuses on user needs. It is typically divided into five stages: understanding user needs (empathy), defining the problem, generating as many ideas as possible, creating a prototype solution, and testing it. This innovative approach emphasizes the user and their needs. Design Thinking is widely applied across industries – from technology to healthcare – to create products, services, and processes that better meet user expectations (Martin, 2009; Brown, 2009; Nguyen, Pham, Nguyen, 2021).

The most critical stage of problem-solving is often considered to be problem definition. Clearly and precisely defining what the problem is, why it matters, and what its boundaries are makes it easier to identify effective solutions. Applying the right technique can help refine this process. Techniques such as brainstorming, Ishikawa diagrams, the 5 Whys method, and system analysis combined with the appropriate use of system archetypes can all be employed. Using these tools enhances the effectiveness of solutions, enables a situation to be viewed from multiple perspectives, and helps identify responses tailored to the organization's specific context (Brodnicki, 2015).

2.2. System Archetypes

When systemic tools are used to solve organizational problems, it is valuable to apply archetypes to examine the issue and develop an appropriate solution.

System archetypes are recurring patterns and models of behaviour that make it possible to understand the dynamics of complex systems (Krzakiewicz, 2014; Anderson, Johnson, 1997). They help identify the root causes of problems and support the development of effective responses.

Several archetypes are distinguished in the systems-thinking literature, including ‘Shifting the Burden’, ‘Fixes that Fail’, and ‘Limits to Growth’ (Senge, 2012). Systems thinking views an organization as a hierarchical structure with control processes operating at the intersections between organizational levels and imposing higher-level constraints on lower levels. Effective control requires a sound model of the operating system and feedback on its functioning. Monitoring the system is therefore a crucial function, as it collects information from multiple areas and provides essential knowledge for managerial decision-making (Kontogiannis, 2012).

Once the type of archetype has been identified, related knowledge can be used to explore the specific system or problem and to develop intervention strategies. In organizations, system archetypes can serve to (Kim, Anderson, 1998; Matusek, Zoleński, 2012):

- identify recurring problem patterns,
- understand system dynamics and predict behaviours,
- design effective interventions.

Recognizing archetypes requires in-depth analysis, systems thinking, attentiveness, and familiarity with systemic tools. It is essential not only to identify recurring patterns but also to understand their causes and the mechanisms that drive them. This enables organizations to make more informed, long-term decisions and reduces the risk of repeating the same problems in the future.

To identify system archetypes, organizations may use the following:

- records of recurring problems and events,
- cause-and-effect analysis,
- observation of action consequences.

System archetypes have numerous applications in various business contexts. They are used as tools to understand problem complexity and identify potential intervention points. Examples include analysing respiratory disease issues in cattle operations (Cummins et al., 2023), supporting change management by maintaining transformational intentions and selecting strategies (Fazey, Leicester, 2022), modelling dynamic systems for sustainable development (Selina et al., 2023), and exploring interactions between water management and agriculture (Nyami et al., 2020). Systemic analysis, particularly through the use of system archetypes, is an effective tool for solving complex management problems. This approach facilitates a holistic view of the organization, helping to identify behavioural patterns and structures that influence how systems function, especially during the stages of problem identification and definition.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), a method for integrating scientific evidence that involves identifying, selecting, critically evaluating, and analysing data from relevant studies included in the review (Okoli, 2010). Literature searches were conducted in the Scopus database, and when articles were unavailable, the search was extended to EBSCO and Google Scholar.

Table 1. Stages of the Systematic Literature Review

Stage	Description
Planning	The following research question was defined: How has the literature identified methods of using system archetypes to solve organizational and team-related problems? Based on this question, keywords were established: system archetypes, problem-solving, teams, and use, forming the foundation of the search.
Selection	Keywords were applied in various combinations, considering two main criteria: language and publication date. Literature was searched in English and Polish, with a time restriction to articles published after 2015. Five searches were conducted in the database using different keyword combinations to obtain the largest possible number of publications: – In the first search, the phrases “system archetypes” were looked for in titles, abstracts, and keywords, and “problem-solving” in abstracts. This search yielded 31 literature items. – In the second search, three main phrases were searched in abstracts, titles, and keywords: “system archetypes”, “problem-solving”, and “use”. This search returned no results. – In the third search, “system archetypes” and “problem-solving” were searched in abstracts, titles, and keywords. 35 items were found. – In the fourth search, the same keywords as in the third were used, but all three phrases were searched in titles, abstracts, and keywords. – In the fifth search, “system archetypes” were searched in abstracts, titles, and keywords, and then a filter was applied to abstract, where “use” and “problem-solving” were searched. 47 items were found. The results of all searches were exported to MS Excel, where the items were combined into a single table and duplicates were removed. The initial searches indicated 41 articles, of which, after abstract analysis and duplicate removal, 17 items were excluded due to lack of relevance to the research topic. Ultimately, 24 articles were qualified for further analysis, of which only three answered the research question. The literature review was conducted between February 6-8, 2025.

Stage	Description
Acquisition	During the search, eight indicated sources could not be accessed, likely due to lack of availability or absence in required databases.
Execution	A detailed analysis of the selected articles was then carried out. This analysis identified cases of system archetype application in various industries, as well as examples of their use in organizational and project teams. Ultimately, five articles answered the research question.

Source: own elaboration.

The literature review indicates that system archetypes are a valuable tool for solving problems within teams and organizations. A key element of the study involved selecting appropriate publications that enabled further, in-depth analysis. However, their application is not limited to team problem-solving alone. Examples of the use of system archetypes in various business areas are discussed in the theory section, which provides an overview of system archetypes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the systematic literature review indicate that system archetypes are used in the analysed studies primarily as a diagnostic and interpretive tool for understanding complex organizational and team-related problems. Rather than offering universal solution templates, the reviewed publications show that archetypes help identify recurring systemic mechanisms, distinguish symptoms from underlying causes, and support the design of interventions better aligned with the structure of the problem. In this sense, the findings presented in table 2 should be understood not only as examples of applying archetypes, but also as evidence that systems thinking can enrich managerial problem-solving by introducing a broader, more relational perspective.

A clear pattern emerging from the analysed articles is the prominence of archetypes associated with delayed side effects, symptomatic correction, and structural constraints. In particular, ‘Shifting the Burden’ appears repeatedly in contexts where organizations respond to pressure with short-term measures that reduce immediate tension but leave the deeper source of the problem unresolved. This recurrent presence is significant because it suggests that many managerial problems are not caused solely by isolated errors or poor execution, but by decision patterns that reproduce dependency on temporary fixes. At the same time, the literature also highlights the ‘Limits to Growth’ archetype as an important interpretive framework, especially in situations where progress is slowed by resource constraints, organizational complexity, or institutional barriers that are not visible at the initial stage of problem-solving.

At the same time, the reviewed studies demonstrate that the usefulness of archetypes depends heavily on context. The same archetype may describe different mechanisms

in safety management, quality management, project governance, social entrepreneurship, or organizational transformation. This means that its value lies less in simple categorization and more in guiding contextual analysis. Table 2 not only therefore summarizes which archetypes were identified in the reviewed articles, but also how they were linked to specific types of managerial problems and proposed responses.

Table 2. SLR research results

Article	Problem	Archetype	Solution
Mohammadi, Tavakolan, 2020	The article analyses the issue of accidents in construction, which often result from recurring systemic behavioural patterns among workers in managing construction site safety.	Shifting the Burden	Avoid blaming workers and focus on a comprehensive analysis of accident causes to prevent recurrence.
		Fixes that Fail	Pressure to meet deadlines leads to increased working hours and a faster pace of work, which raises the risk of accidents. The solution is to analyse the project schedule and identify better ways to compensate for delays instead of relying on short-term fixes that may worsen the situation.
		Shifting the Burden*	Motivational programmes, although initially effective, can create a reactive compliance culture that weakens safety culture. The solution is to strengthen a positive safety culture rather than relying solely on external incentives.
		Limits to Growth	Financial constraints of subcontractors affect payment timeliness, worker quality, and safety focus. The solution is to select subcontractors with stable financial conditions and eliminate factors limiting safety growth.
Elia, Margherita, Secundo, 2021	The article proposes a systemic approach to project management aimed at better understanding and addressing this complexity.	The article examined 10 system archetypes, including Limits to Growth, Shifting the Burden, Erosion of Goals, and Success to the Successful, to demonstrate how each of them can transform project management.	The article proposes an integrative project management model that incorporates systemic dimensions, flows between components, and system archetypes. This model aims to support contextual management of project complexity and improve project governance. Examples of solutions include developing a long-term project vision, focusing on causal relationships, and prioritizing sustainable solutions.

Article	Problem	Archetype	Solution
Ligarski, 2017	The article discusses a methodology for analysing problems in quality management systems using a systemic approach. The issue is identifying mechanisms behind adverse phenomena occurring in quality management systems and explaining their causes.	Destructive Cures, Shifting the Burden	Linking the quality management system with overall management, strategy, and business, rather than taking corrective actions that only address symptoms. The second solution emphasizes that quick fixes are not beneficial for the organization; a broader perspective is needed.
Molderez, Fets, 2021	The publication addresses issues related to the “dark sides” of social entrepreneurship, such as goal conflicts, unintended side effects, and adopting profit-driven habits.	Success to the Successful, Shifting the Burden, Limits to Growth, Growth and Underinvestment	The article highlights that the dark side of social entrepreneurship is a complex problem requiring a systemic approach. By identifying system archetypes and developing effective management strategies, social enterprises can mitigate negative effects and achieve their social and environmental goals.
Fazey, Leicester, 2022	Support for change management involves understanding its dynamics and drawing conclusions to effectively manage organizational transformation.	Smooth Transition, Capture and Amplify, Collapse and Renewal, Investment Bubble	Effective management of these archetypes can help maintain transformational intentions, as innovations may otherwise be absorbed by the existing system, preventing change. The key is to identify which archetypes are present in the organization and establish appropriate strategies for managing them.

* The repetition of the archetype was intended to demonstrate that the same systemic pattern may occur in different organizational contexts and lead to different consequences. To improve the clarity of the table, the descriptions of both cases may be further specified, or an additional clarification may be added indicating that the archetype refers to different aspects of the analysed problem.

Source: own results.

The material summarized in table 2 shows that system archetypes can support organizational analysis across a wide range of problem domains. However, it also suggests that their strongest contribution lies in explanation and diagnosis rather than in directly prescribing solutions. In the reviewed articles, archetypes are most often used to reveal why a problem persists, why apparently rational interventions produce unintended consequences, or why improvement efforts lose effectiveness over time. This is an important finding for management practice, because it positions archetypes not as standalone managerial techniques, but as sense-making devices that improve the quality of problem definition and strategic reflection.

At the same time, the findings should not be interpreted too narrowly. Although the studies included in the SLR most explicitly refer to archetypes such as ‘Shifting the Burden’, ‘Fixes that Fail’, and ‘Limits to Growth’, the broader

literature indicates that additional patterns, including ‘Erosion of Goals’, ‘Success to the Successful’, ‘Accidental Adversaries’, or ‘Tragedy of the Commons’, may also be highly relevant for organizational and team-related problem-solving. This means that the SLR results do not define a closed set of applicable archetypes; rather, they identify those most visible in the selected sample of publications. Consequently, the review captures a meaningful, yet partial, picture of how system archetypes are mobilized in management contexts.

A more critical reading of the literature presented in table 2 reveals several important limitations that affect the interpretation of the results. Firstly, the evidence base is small and heterogeneous. The analysed publications differ substantially in sector, research purpose, and level of analysis: some are empirical case studies, some are methodological or conceptual contributions, and some present broader reflective frameworks rather than direct evaluations of practice. As a result, table 2 combines articles that do not provide the same type or strength of evidence. Secondly, most of the reviewed studies focus on demonstrating how archetypes help interpret or structure a problem, but much less attention is paid to comparing the effectiveness of alternative interventions or to measuring long-term managerial outcomes after archetype-based analysis has been applied. Thirdly, the predominance of context-specific cases means that the transferability of findings remains limited. The table is therefore valuable as a synthesis of possible applications; however, it does not yet justify strong generalizations about the effectiveness of system archetypes across all organizational settings.

From the perspective of the SLR, this suggests that the literature is currently more advanced in illustrating the explanatory and diagnostic potential of system archetypes than in empirically validating their managerial effectiveness. Nevertheless, this does not diminish their practical relevance. On the contrary, the reviewed studies consistently imply that managers benefit from archetypal thinking when they need to move beyond reactive decision-making and understand the structural logic of recurring problems. For this reason, system archetypes appear particularly valuable at the stage of problem definition, where a broader causal perspective can prevent organizations from treating visible symptoms as the problem itself.

The discussion also supports the argument that system analysis combined with the use of archetypes should be applied particularly at the problem-definition stage, which is central to virtually every problem-solving approach used in organizations. At this stage, archetypes can broaden causal analysis, make less visible interdependencies easier to identify, and help managers avoid premature closure around surface-level explanations. In practical terms, this means that archetypes can guide the selection of corrective actions by showing whether the organization is dealing with structural limits, escalating competition, dependence on symptomatic solutions, or depletion of shared resources. The value of such

archetypes lies not in replacing managerial judgment, but in improving the quality of that judgment.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that the most promising use of system archetypes in management lies in combining qualitative systemic interpretation with more explicit organizational evidence and context-sensitive intervention design. A qualitative perspective helps explain why a given pattern emerges and how it is reproduced, whereas quantitative or performance-related indicators can strengthen the assessment of its organizational consequences and the effectiveness of proposed responses. This combined approach would make archetype-based analysis more robust and more useful for managerial practice. Therefore, the results and discussion section points to a dual conclusion: while system archetypes offer substantial analytical value for understanding complex organizational problems, the current literature still provides only limited empirical confirmation of when and how their use leads to superior managerial outcomes.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Identifying system archetypes in organizations makes it possible to understand how different organizational elements interact and which patterns recur across situations. Using archetypes as structural templates can help focus a group's attention on the core of the problem. Peter Senge suggests that archetypes may emerge in everyday organizational issues that initially appear difficult to understand or solve.

Future research on the use of system archetypes in solving team problems in business environments should focus on several key areas. Firstly, an important direction is an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of integrating system archetypes with established problem-solving methodologies. Existing case studies suggest that archetypes such as 'Shifting the Burden' and 'Limits to Growth' can support the identification of hidden causes of team problems (Sanchez, 2020). Empirical studies could determine the extent to which applying archetypes at different phases of problem-solving – such as problem definition, root cause analysis, solution generation, and implementation – affects the quality and durability of solutions.

Another research direction involves exploring the impact of system archetypes on team dynamics in the context of cultural and organizational diversity. In global work environments, teams often encounter problems arising from differing values, communication styles, or approaches to problem-solving. Analysing how archetypes can facilitate understanding of these differences and help minimize conflicts represents a valuable area for further study.

Finally, another promising direction would involve conducting comparative studies across different industries in order to determine which archetypes dominate in specific organizational contexts and which strategies for their application are the most effective.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the research and analysis conducted, it can be concluded that system archetypes are a valuable tool for solving organizational and team-related problems. Their application enables the identification of root causes, recurring patterns, and system dynamics, while also supporting the design of effective interventions. As a result, organizations are able to make more informed, long-term decisions that reduce the risk of recurring problems in the future.

The article presents various examples of the application of system archetypes across different industries, which confirms their broad relevance and practical value. The findings of the systematic literature review demonstrate that system archetypes are not only theoretical concepts derived from systems thinking, but also practical managerial tools that support root cause analysis, organizational learning, and sustainable organizational improvement. The study identifies the most frequently occurring archetypes in management contexts, particularly ‘Shifting the Burden’ and ‘Limits to Growth’, emphasizing their importance in understanding complex organizational challenges.

The scientific contribution of this article lies in synthesizing dispersed knowledge about the use of system archetypes in solving organizational and team-related problems, as well as in classifying the ways in which archetypes support managerial decision-making in areas such as project management, quality management, safety management, social entrepreneurship, and organizational transformation. The article also highlights that combining qualitative systemic interpretation with quantitative organizational indicators facilitates a more holistic understanding of organizational dynamics and may increase the effectiveness of corrective actions.

In summary, system archetypes serve not only as diagnostic tools but also as mechanisms that support decision-making processes and organizational learning. Their integration with problem-solving methodologies can bring tangible operational and strategic benefits. Managers capable of effectively identifying and solving systemic problems are better equipped to manage teams, make sound decisions, and achieve stronger organizational outcomes. Therefore, developing competencies related to systems thinking and the use of system archetypes should become an important element of leadership education and professional development.

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WYKORZYSTANIE ARCHETYPÓW SYSTEMOWYCH W PRAKTYCE ROZWIĄZYWANIA ZŁOŻONYCH PROBLEMÓW ZARZĄDZANIA

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje zastosowanie archetypów systemowych w rozwiązywaniu złożonych problemów zarządzania w organizacjach. Tradycyjne metody rozwiązywania problemów często okazują się niewystarczające wobec złożoności powiązań i dynamicznych wzorców zachowań w systemach organizacyjnych. W odpowiedzi na te wyzwania coraz większe znaczenie zyskują podejścia systemowe, w tym wykorzystanie archetypów systemowych. Celem pracy jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób archetypy wspierają identyfikację źródeł problemów oraz projektowanie skutecznych strategii ich rozwiązania. Postawiono pytanie badawcze: „Jak literatura opisuje wykorzystanie archetypów systemowych w rozwiązywaniu problemów organizacyjnych i zespołowych?” Analiza oparta na systematycznym przeglądzie literatury (SLR). Wyniki wskazują, że archetypy takie jak „przenoszenie ciężaru” i „granicę wzrostu” są najczęściej stosowane, ponieważ umożliwiają organizacjom rozpoznanie powtarzających się wzorców problemów, unikanie doraźnych rozwiązań oraz projektowanie trwałych interwencji. Archetypy są wartościowe zarówno dla organizacji, jak i dla pracowników – wspierają procesy decyzyjne, poprawiają efektywność zespołów i ułatwiają codzienną pracę, zmniejszając ryzyko powtarzania się problemów w przyszłości. Integracja archetypów z metodykami rozwiązywania problemów może przynieść znaczące korzyści operacyjne i strategiczne.

Słowa kluczowe: myślenie systemowe, zarządzanie organizacją, archetypy systemowe

