Making a case for preventive action

Karthik Suresh

ABSTRACT

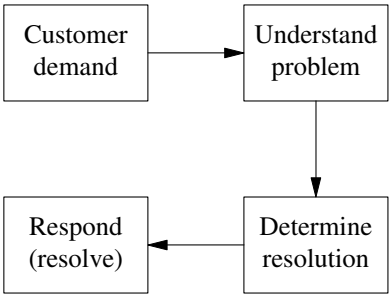
We are familiar with a break-fix archetype — where we release resources to fix things when they are broken. What about the less glamorous world of making sure they don't break in the first place — how should we think about situations and create systems and processes to help us there?

1. Introduction

It makes a lot of sense to deal with small issues before they become big ones. Ensuring your car is serviced, your house is cleaned, unnecessary possessions are culled — all these are examples of things we should do but in our increasingly busy lives we just don't seem to find the time. So, when it comes to bigger issues like reducing meat and dairy use in order to contribute towards reducing the rate of climate change where can we even start thinking about where to begin? This paper explores some of these ideas.

2. Fixing things when they break

An archetype is a pattern, something we see again and again. And example of a common archetype that you will have experienced is called 'break-fix'. This is a situation that starts when a problem occurs for a customer — something is broken and creates a customer demand, and ends when the problem is resolved — it is fixed. This is shown in Seddon (2003) using the following model.



In any situation we must learn how to measure things that matter. A lot of effort goes into measuring things that can be measured — but only a few of these actually add value to analysis. Seddon suggests asking two questions: 1. What is the purpose?; 2. How well are we achieving it from the customer's point of view?

In the case of a broken electric light, for example, the purpose is to get it fixed to a satisfactory standard as quickly as possible, so the measure we should choose is the end-to-end time from first call to permanent fix from the customer's point of view.

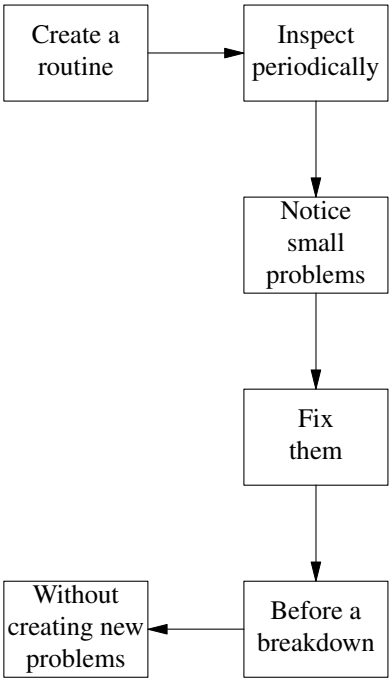
As most people will have experienced, even this simple model is incredibly hard to implement in practice. For example, we have a broken light fitting. We've lived with it for several months as it's in a room that we don't use. We have finally arranged for one quote for the job. Getting the quote took time because we had to schedule a visit when it was convenient for everyone. We haven't gone ahead with the work yet because getting quotes takes time, and you should apparently get a few so that you can be sure you're getting good value. And time, inexorably and irresistibly moves on.

There are ways to deal with break-fix situations. You can give yourself some mental peace of mind through an insurance package. You can invest in regular servicing. You can only buy products with warranties. You can be practical and proactive and fix things yourself. All these, and other options, will perform in different ways, when looked at through the lenses of whether the problem is permanently fixed or not, and how long it takes for that to happen. Sometimes we are satisfied and sometimes we are not — to the extent where we have to take legal action. Is this

an archetype we can rely on to deal with the problems of a planet at risk from climate change?

3. The prevent-break archetype

Think about what we need to do in order to make the changes required to have a meaningful reduction in our impact on the planet. A 'prevent-break' archetype, borrowed from the notion of preventive maintenance might look something like this.



Now, this is necessarily simplistic but it is also an order of magnitude more complicated to implement than a 'break-fix' archetype which, as we have already seen, is hard enough to do right.

Take a simple example. This morning, as I poured milk into my mug of tea, I wondered again whether we should be getting local deliveries of milk. We consume quite a lot of milk — something we have in common with households with small people. So, is it worth switching to a local delivery? It feels like the right thing to do but is it?

Unsurprisingly, there isn't an easy answer. People who work on such questions have to balance competing interests — from the views of big supermarkets to the income prospects for farmers, from the relative merits of glass versus plastic to how fresh the milk is and how much mixing has taken place before it reaches you, the consumer.

Then there is the question of whether you should, when making your decision, make it just on the factors that affect you or whether you should consider the impact if everyone acted the way you do. For example, should you consider what might happen if everyone switched from plastic to milk bottles, just like you? Is that unlikely to happen, making it a waste of time for you to do something that contributes very little? Or could it result in a situation where there is a huge increase in the amount of energy used to make glass — more than that previously used to make plastic? In short, where is the boundary that you should use for decision making?

Another consideration, perhaps a trap, is the one that says just stop. Stop eating so much eat, drinking so much milk. Can you see what's happening because of what you're doing. The Amazon is burning, species are going extinct and deserts are forming, all because of you and what you eat.

This is a minimalist, austere mentality and one that, I must confess, I am tempted to subscribe to. The only problem is that the history of austerity and control is not a good one. We create new solutions to problems not by avoiding them but by facing up to them. For example, we have a problem with cheap clothing and the impact that a desire to be fashionable has on the environment. Would we prefer to live in a world where clothing was expensive — as it was in the Middle Ages — when only the wealthy could afford to look good? Is it possible that the clothing industry, driven by consumer demand for sustainable products is going to come up with clothing that is affordable and low-impact or will we be saved by reducing consumption altogether? History shows us that markets deliver, that people who do things because they care about it come up with innovative ways to make a difference — not the people that stop doing anything at all.

4. Where should we start?

The problem with thinking big is that sometimes the thinking can paralyse you into inaction. Sometimes, when you notice a problem you have to take action and then see what happens. Learn through action.

For example, we started using a service to deliver and organic veg box several months ago. This has reduced the amount of packaged supermarket food we buy dramatically. We compost more of our waste and can see the reduction in the

amount of general waste we send to landfill. This reduction in general waste is what prompted us to look at plastic waste because it is now the most obvious form of waste we are creating.

5. Conclusion

This is a very short introduction to the kinds of problems we face when we avoid creating a problem. This is harder than it looks — people don't give you credit for solving problems that didn't happen. We're too fixated on heroes that solve problems and this creates a natural bias towards acting when things go wrong.

That approach may not be enough to solve the problems of today.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

Please feel free to connect on LinkedIn or read more at www.karthik-suresh.com

References

Seddon, J, *Freedom from command and control,* Vanguard Press (2003).