

## **TKC CASE STUDY: THE DOWNSIDE OF BEING ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE**

### **The Situation**

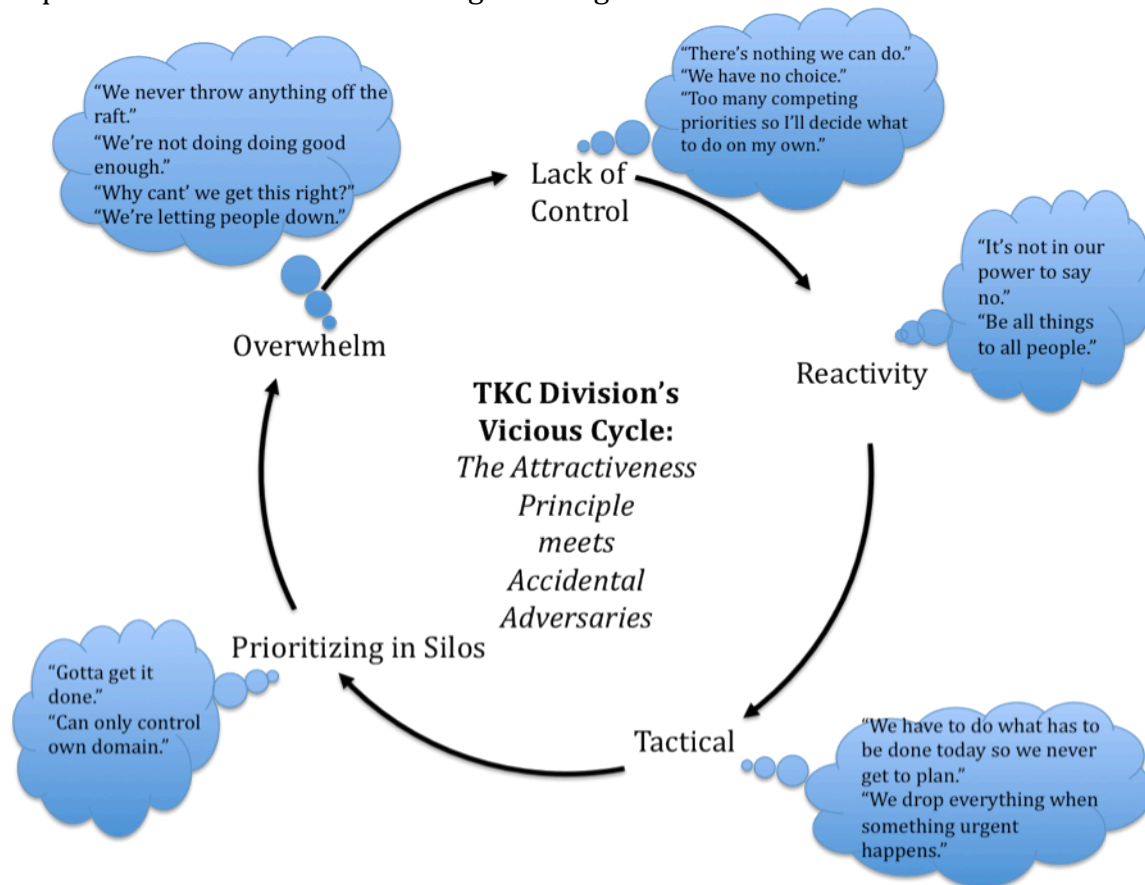
The leadership team of TKC, a division of a large company, was struggling. They felt besieged by expectations to produce at impossible levels, yet often had to reprioritize their workload to squeeze in additional last minute demands from organizational leaders who were more senior. Division leaders, while attempting to buffer their people from the demands, did not feel able to give clear guidance about what to prioritize. Members of the leadership team, while trying to keep focused on the whole division, found themselves resorting to setting priorities and making decisions in the areas they directly oversaw as a way to get *something* done—essentially working in silos and at cross-purposes to the work of the overall division.

People were frustrated, morale was low, and there was a strong belief that things were out of their control.

### **The Intervention**

- The work began with a series of attempts to help the team develop a purpose, goals, and criteria for workload prioritization. This turned out to basically be a dead end, especially the criteria for prioritization. Hours were spent by the team, with and without an outside facilitator, to reach a set of shared criteria about what work to prioritize.
- Attempts to apply the criteria failed every time a new demand was made by higher ups.
- Finally, the team focused on identifying the key dynamics that were affecting their ability to impact this untenable situation and, in particular the stories they were telling themselves about why things were the way they were. Also called “mental models,” those beliefs—previously unconscious and unarticulated—were exerting a powerful influence on the team’s capacity to make change.
- The team also identified the dynamics they experienced as a combination of two systems archetypes. Archetypes are “classic stories” or “universal patterns that are understood by all people.”
- One of these archetypes was “The Attractiveness Principle” which basically means trying to be all things to all people, having expectations that could not be met, and an inability to set and maintain priorities. This was the main dynamic occurring in this division.
- The other, a likely result of the Attractiveness Principle, was “Accidental Adversaries” in which parties who ought to be working together are undermining each others’ success. In this case, individual decisions to prioritize and act in silos was undermining the success of the whole division.
- Once the dynamics that characterized the current situation were identified and agreed upon by the team, they then decided on the mental models and strategies that would have the highest leverage in getting them to their desired state.

The following diagram visually depicts the dynamic as the team saw it. The clouds in blue are “thought bubbles” describing the team’s mental models. The tables following are the shift in mental models and the action plan that was developed to implement each of the two new high leverage mental models.



### A Shift in Mental Models

FROM	TO
"There's nothing we can do about it."	"There <i>is</i> something we can do about it." We need to be proactive with our stakeholders."
"Too many competing priorities so I'll decide what to do on my own."	"We need to work as a team, we need to clarify priorities as a team."
"It's not in our power to say no." "Be all things to all people."	"We have something unique to offer and we stick to it."
"Gotta get it done." "Can only control own domain."	"We have to work together."

### Action Plan

MENTAL MODEL	STRATEGY
"We have to work together."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Reward people who work collaboratively</li> <li>•Clarify direction, values and standards for the TKC division, communicate and model</li> <li>•Use existing mechanisms for regular report-outs on progress.</li> </ul>
"Proactivity with stakeholders."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Develop a marketing plan for internal stakeholders that communicates the unique value of the TKC division and how it collaborates best with other divisions.</li> <li>•Assign marketing and relationship development with internal stakeholders as a critical TKC division leader responsibility.</li> </ul>