Introduction to Systems Thinking

Lesson 4.2: A BOT for The Case of Recycling Trouble

Overview

Read the first part of "The Case of Recycling Trouble" to consider how to represent its interconnections and patterns visually in a BOT diagram.

The Case of Recycling Trouble, Part 1

The management of a small active senior community in Arizona, Resort del Sol, agreed to its residents' request to begin a recycling program. Residents were unhappy that so many recyclable items were being thrown away in the regular trash collection.

The manager contracted with We Take It, a local company, to collect the residents' plastics, glass, aluminum, and cardboard each week in special bins provided by We Take It. The bins were set up at six locations throughout the community in attractive wooden frames.

In the first week, We Take It collected the materials and reported that each bin was about one-third full. In the second week, more people had used the bins, and We Take It reported that they were all about half-full. By the sixth week, it seemed that everyone at Resort del Sol was recycling enthusiastically. In fact, We Take It reported a problem to the community's management office: The bins were overflowing, creating an unsightly and unhealthy mess. Residents also came to the manager to complain that the recycling bins were unattractive and could potentially undermine Resort del Sol's sterling reputation as a great place to live.

Management took action right away. It canceled the contract with We Take It and had the recycling bins removed. Then a new, large recycling station was installed at the far back of the property, near the back gate, for plastic and cardboard only.

Two months later, the manager reported to the residents' board that the program was a failure. "Not very many people appear to be using the recycling station now," the manager said. "We only have to have the city come out for collection every three weeks or so, and even then, the station is usually only about two-thirds full, far short of what was being collected by We Take It."

"That's because the station is so inconveniently located," one board member observed. "I think everyone has just gone back to putting recyclables in the regular trash again."

BOT Diagram for The Case of Recycling Troubles

How might you represent this situation in a BOT diagram? Here are some things to consider:

- The main problem is that residents are putting recyclable items into the regular trash.

- The first fix that was instituted was contracting with We Take It, which solved the main problem but then created a new problem, overflowing unattractive collection bins.

- The second fix was to reverse the first and implement a new solution, the single collection station, overseen by the community's manager.

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