Why Do Meetings Start Late?

A workshop exercise to introduce systems thinking

Everyone can identify with meetings that start late. To introduce formal systems thinking we often ask a group the question, "why do meetings start late," and map their responses on flip chart paper using "word and arrow" diagrams. As their thinking progresses, we show how the diagram evolves to include more and more complexity and feedback loops. At some point we might shift to using software to represent the emerging model.

"Why Do Meetings Start Late?" illustrates this progression from a series of hand-drawn flip charts to a series of more formal diagrams (made in Microsoft Excel using the Draw Toolbar). It is intended to show the *development* of a system diagram, not a *finished* model.

It is intended to show the group that it's OK (indeed, necessary) to start out small, make changes, rethink the elements, rearrange the appearance, and so on. (Also, that at some point it might be valuable to shift using some computer software and projector rather than flip chart and marker.)

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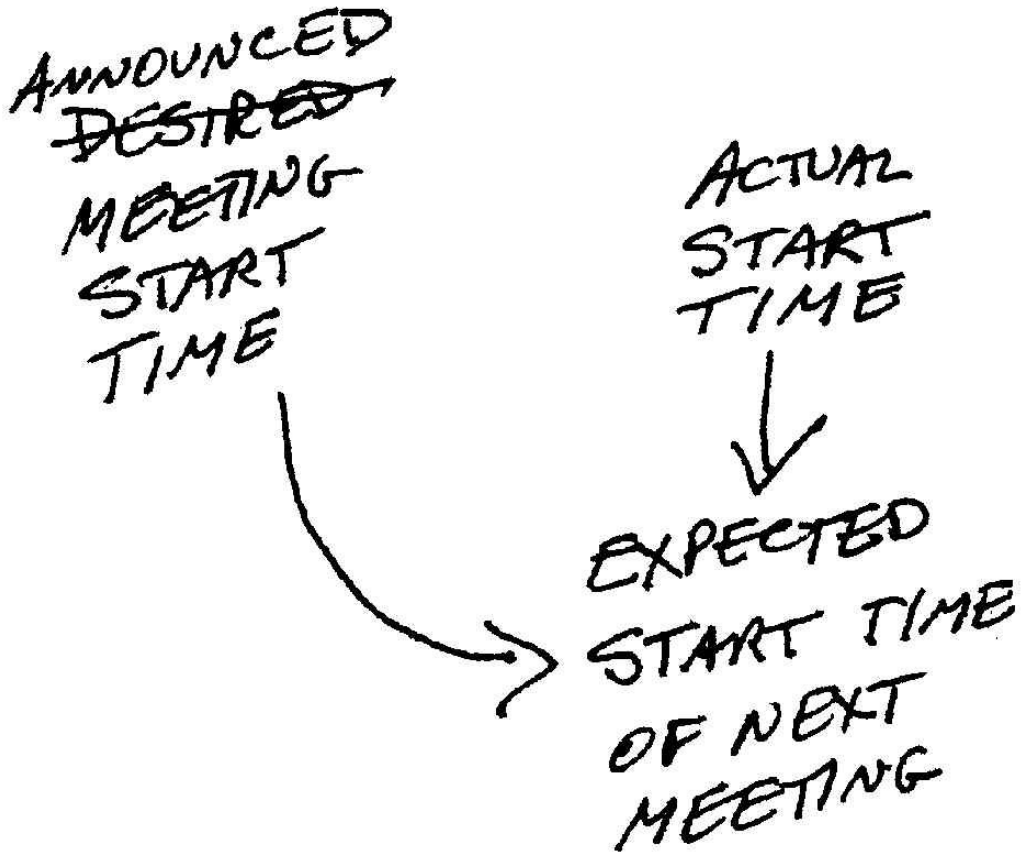
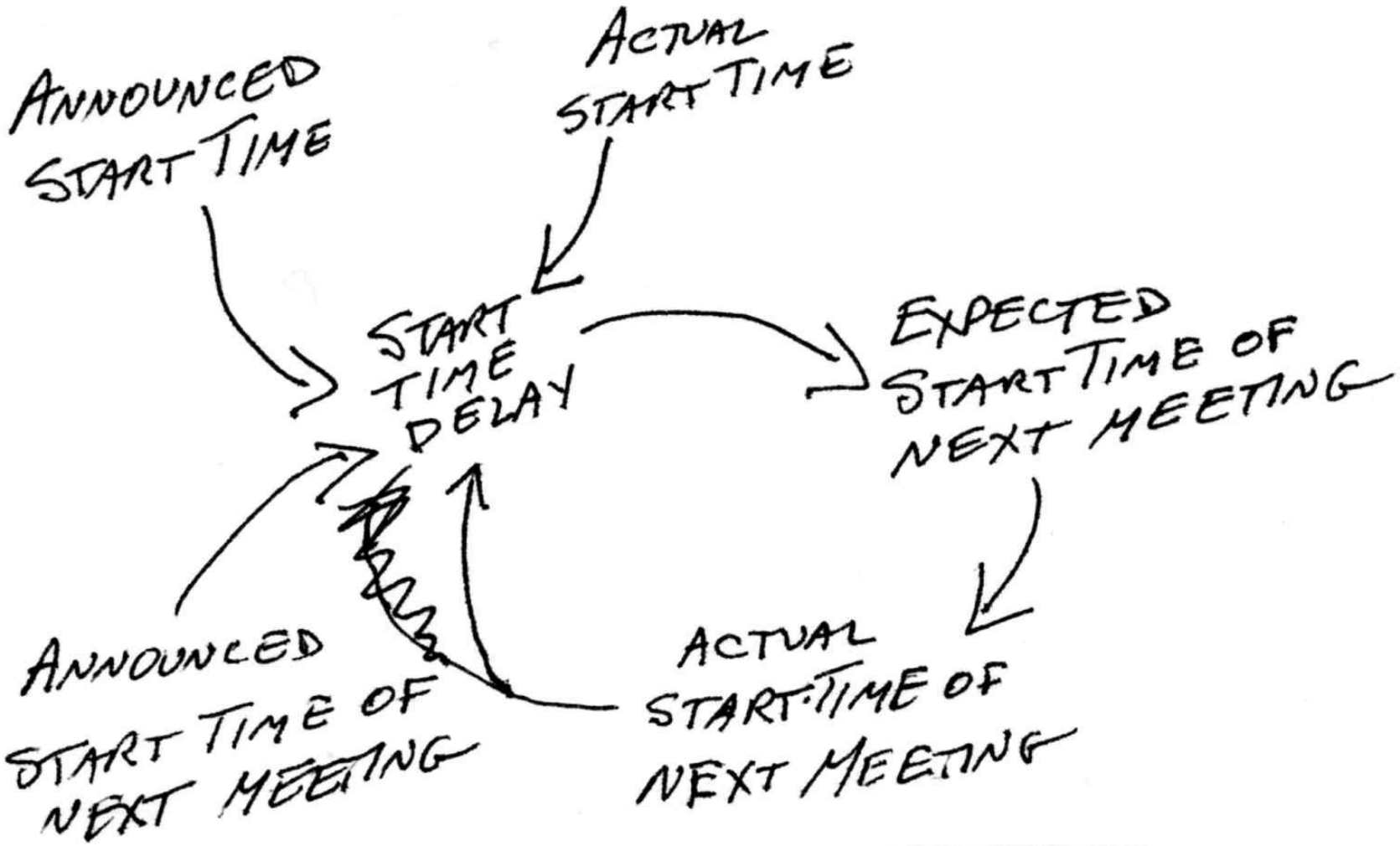

ANNOUNCED
~~DESIRED~~
MEETING
START
TIME
ACTUAL
START
TIME
EXPECTED
START TIME
OF NEXT
MEETING


ANNOUNCED START TIME
ACTUAL START TIME
START TIME DELAY
EXPECTED START TIME OF NEXT MEETING
ACTUAL START TIME OF NEXT MEETING
ANNOUNCED START TIME OF NEXT MEETING

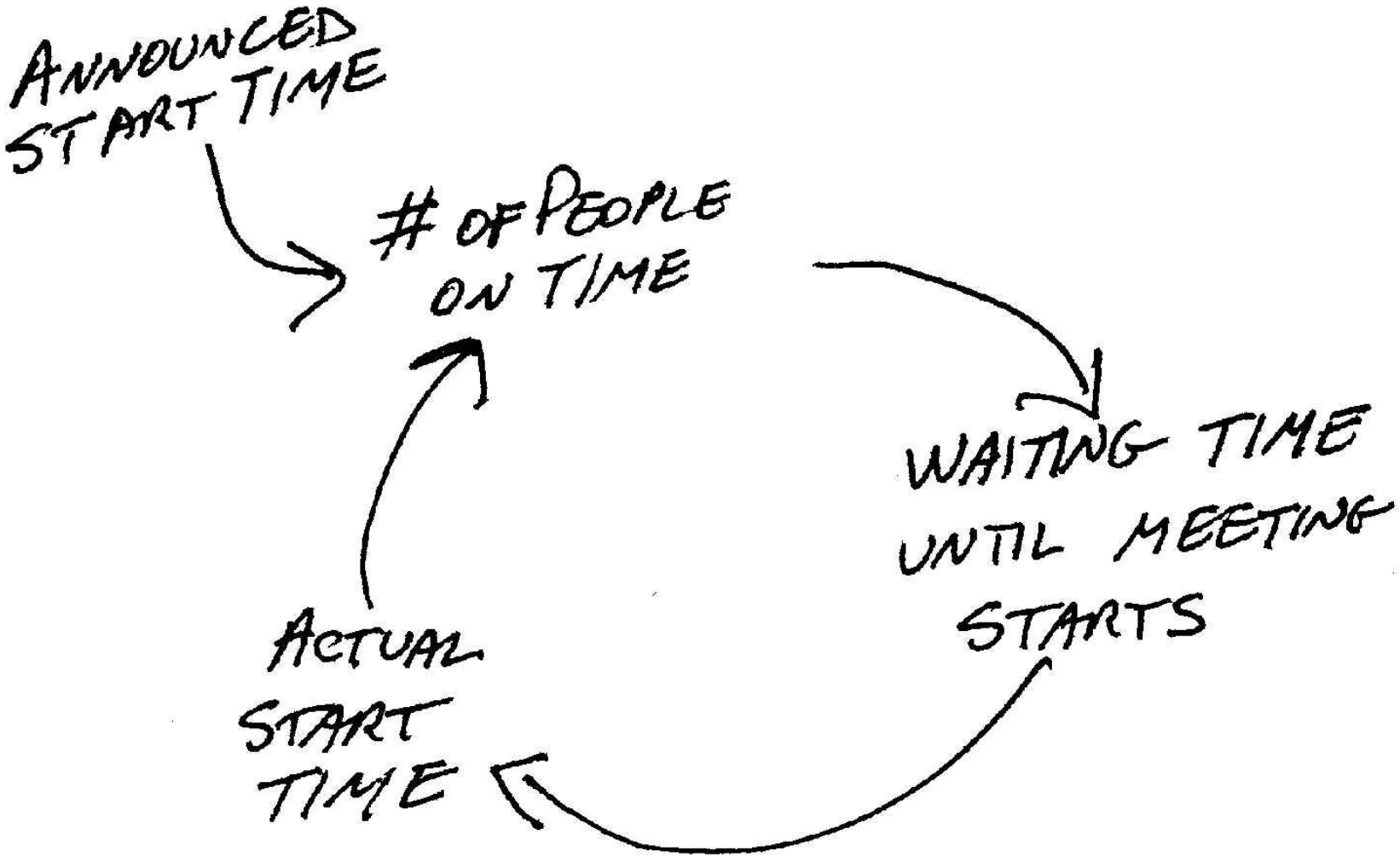
INTERVENTIONS:

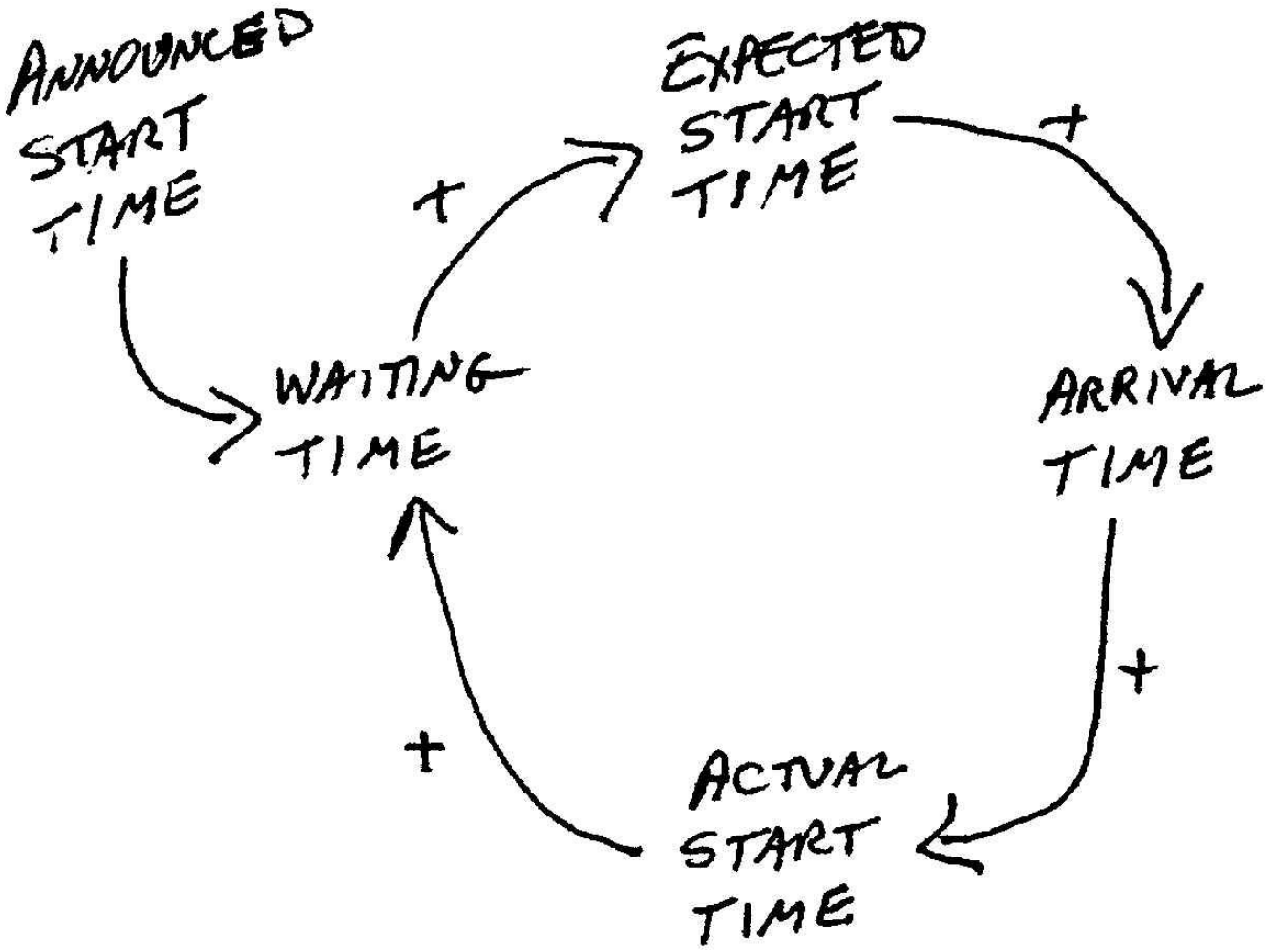
- EXHORTATION TO START THE NEXT MEETING ON TIME
- ACTUALLY STARTING ON TIME REGARDLESS OF WHO IS THERE

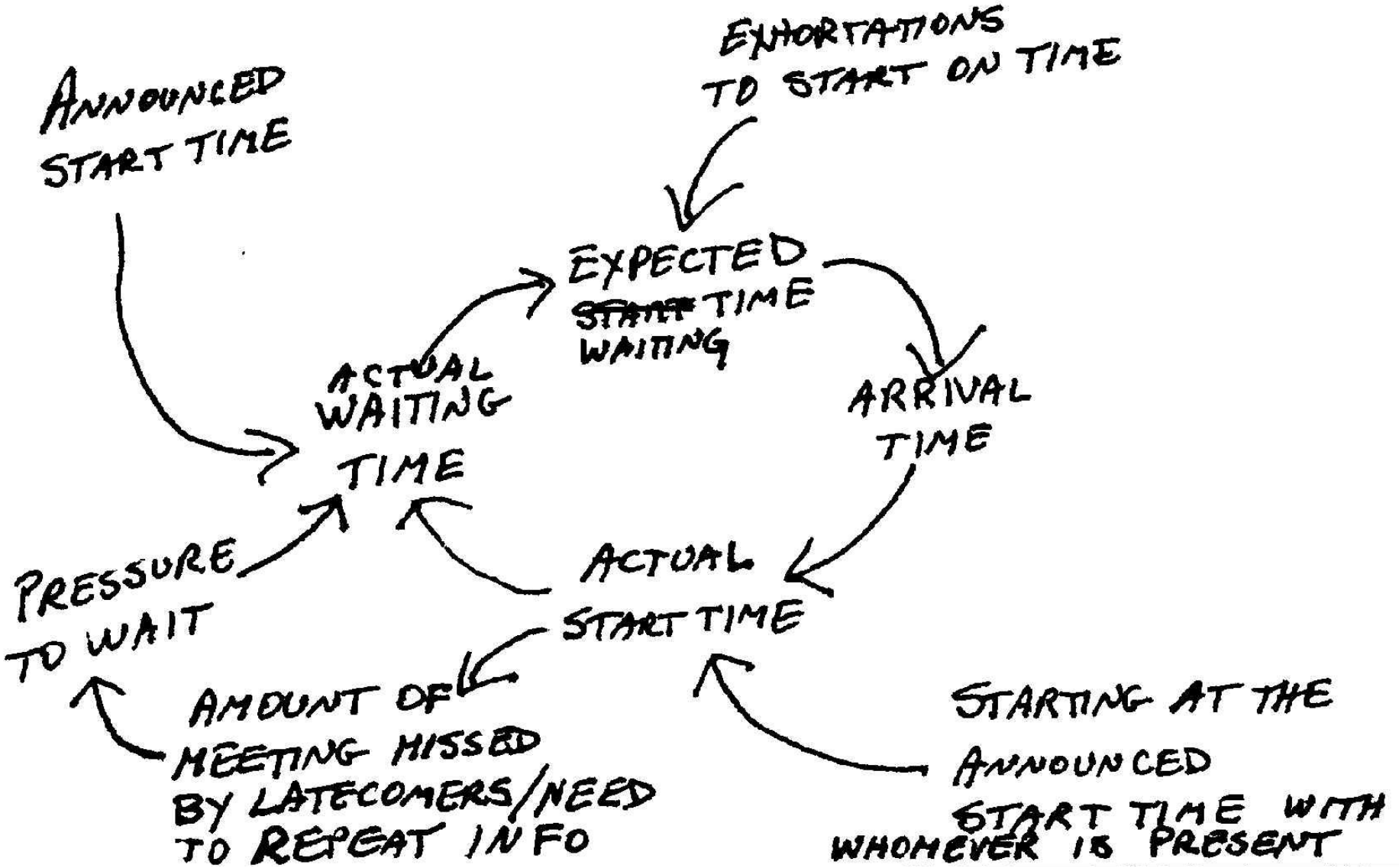
MEASURES:

- NO. OF PEOPLE WHO COME ON TIME
- NO. OF PEOPLE WHO COME LATE
- NO. OF PERSON-MINUTES SPENT WAITING

NOTE: IT'S OK IF EVERYONE COMES LATE BUT AT THE SAME TIME!


ANNOUNCED START TIME
OF PEOPLE ON TIME
WAITING TIME UNTIL MEETING STARTS
ACTUAL START TIME


ANNOUNCED START TIME
EXPECTED START TIME
ARRIVAL TIME
ACTUAL START TIME
WAITING TIME
+
+
+
+

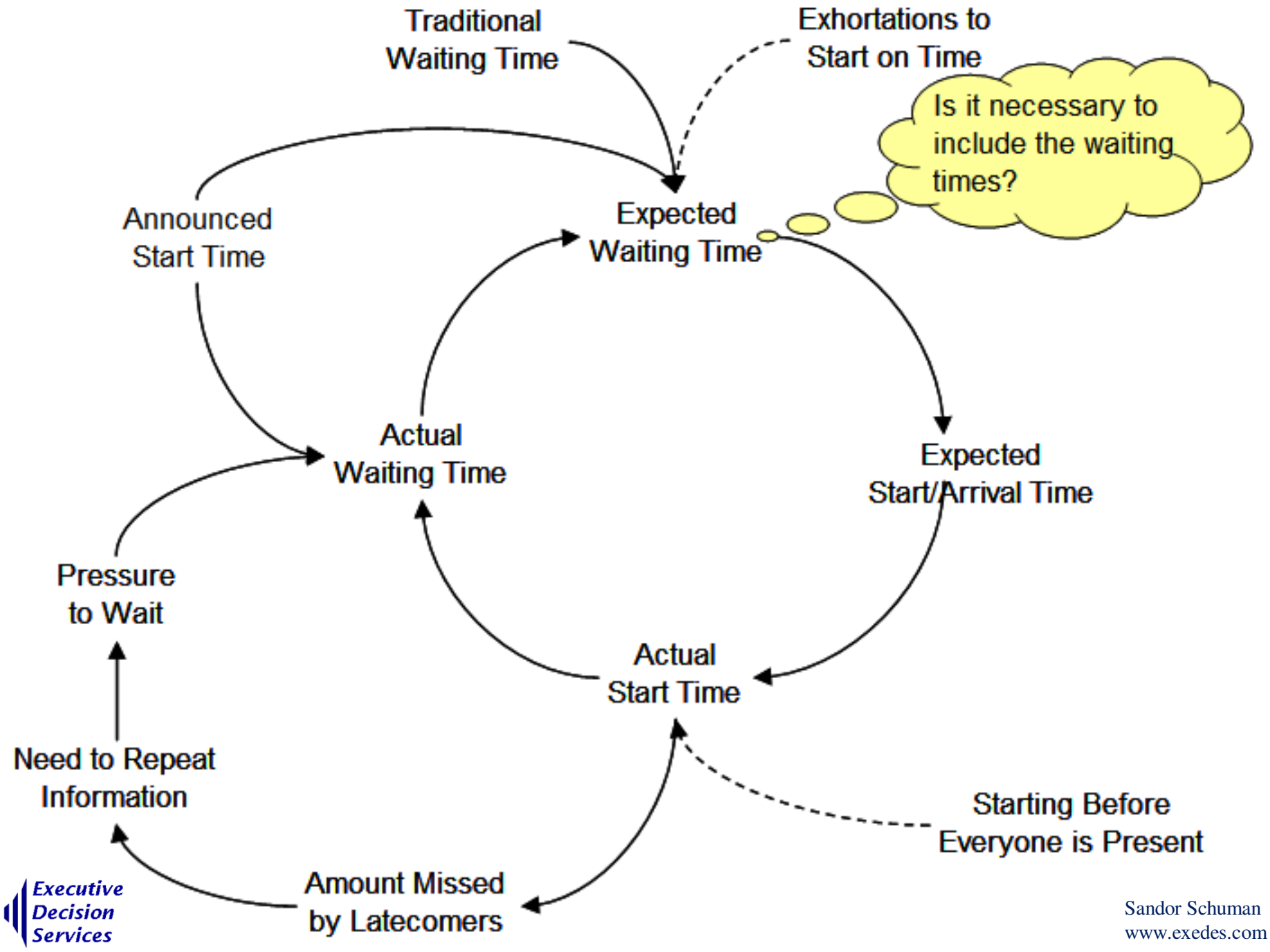

ANNOUNCED START TIME
EXHORTATIONS TO START ON TIME
EXPECTED ~~START~~ TIME WAITING
ACTUAL WAITING TIME
ARRIVAL TIME
PRESSURE TO WAIT
ACTUAL START TIME
AMOUNT OF MEETING MISSED BY LATECOMERS/NEED TO REPEAT INFO
STARTING AT THE ANNOUNCED START TIME WITH WHOMEVER IS PRESENT

ADDITIONAL MEASURES:

- NO. OF PERSON-MINUTES MISSED (LATECOMERS)
- NO. OF PERSON-MINUTES SPENT REPEATING/REVIEWING INFORMATION TO BRING LATE COMERS UP TO SPEED.

NOTE: IS THE OBJECTIVE TO "START AT THE ANNOUNCED TIME" OR TO HAVE EVERYONE ARRIVE AT THE SAME TIME AND THEN START IMMEDIATELY?

Excel version


Traditional
Waiting Time
Exhortations to
Start on Time
Is it necessary to
include the waiting
times?
Announced
Start Time
Expected
Waiting Time
Actual
Waiting Time
Expected
Start/Arrival Time
Pressure
to Wait
Actual
Start Time
Need to Repeat
Information
Starting Before
Everyone is Present
Amount Missed
by Latecomers
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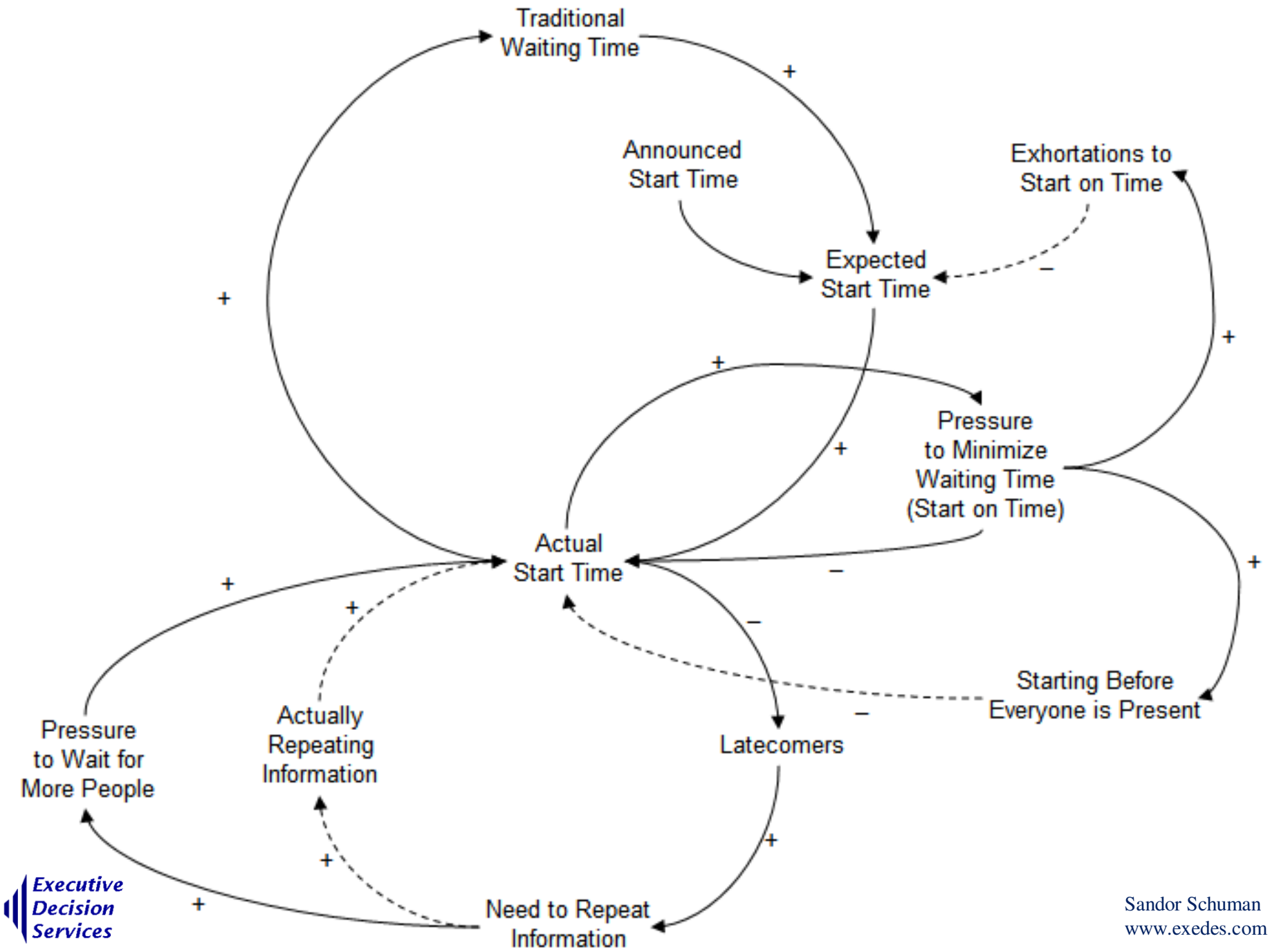

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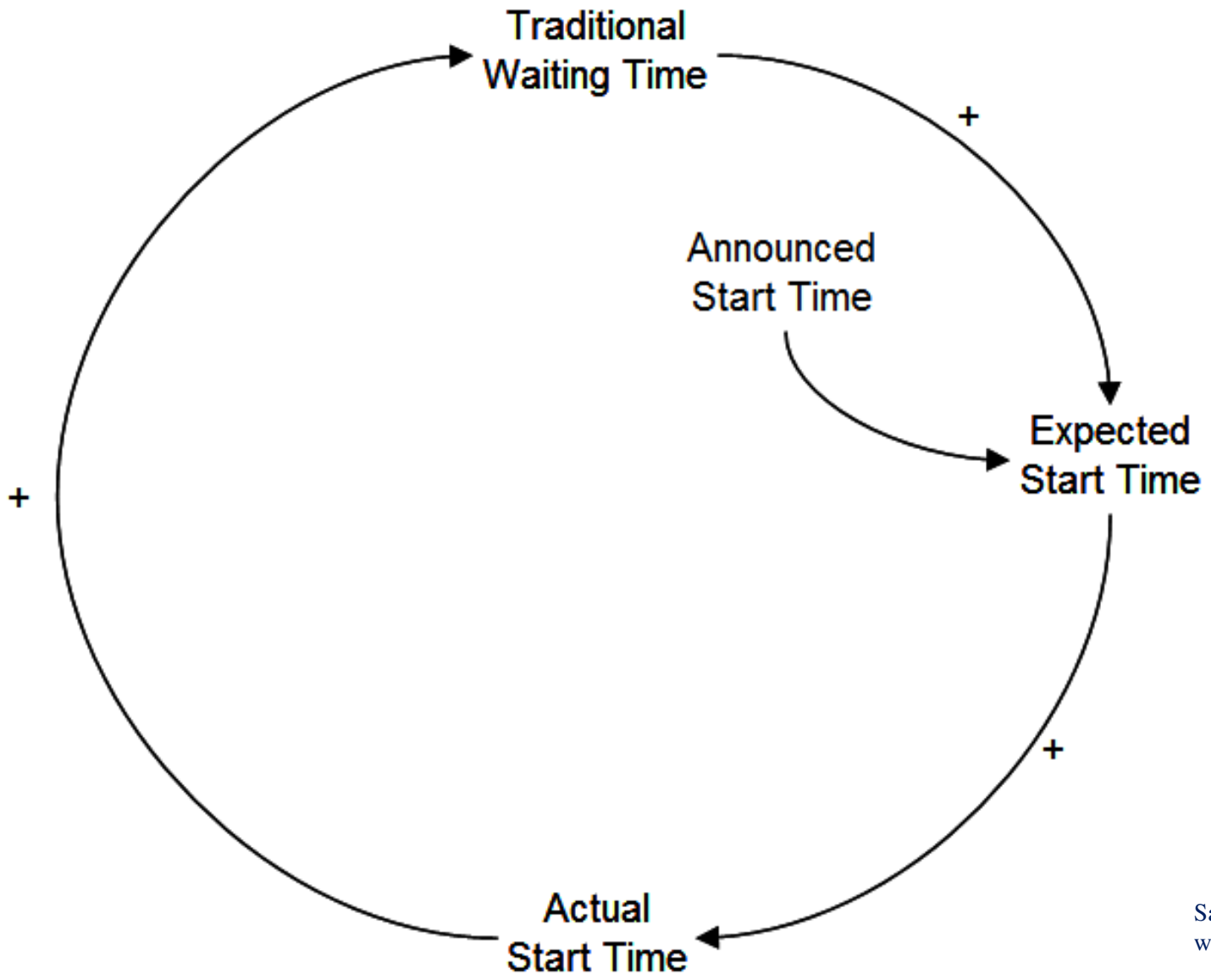
Late Start Cycle



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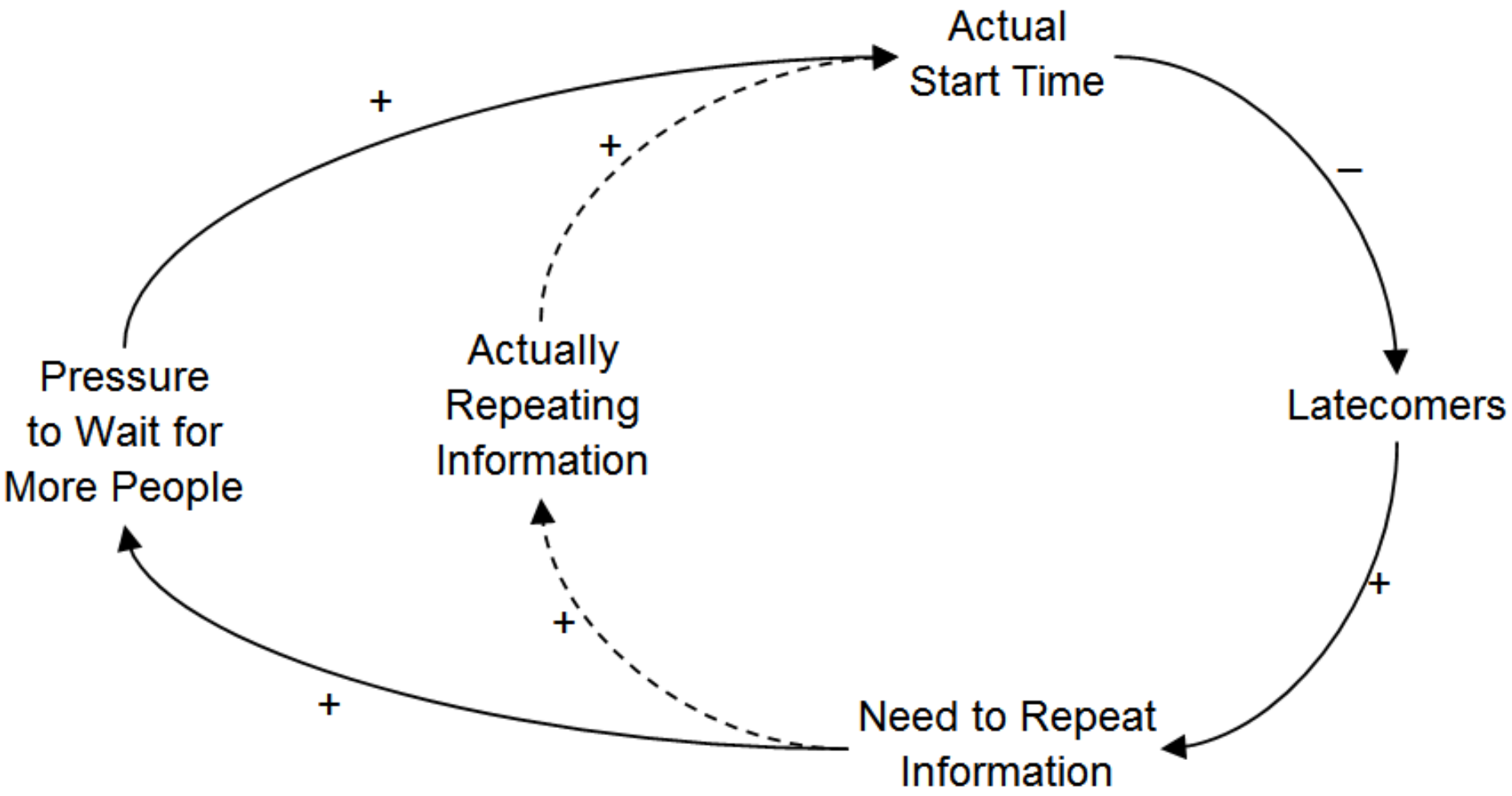
Pressure to Wait



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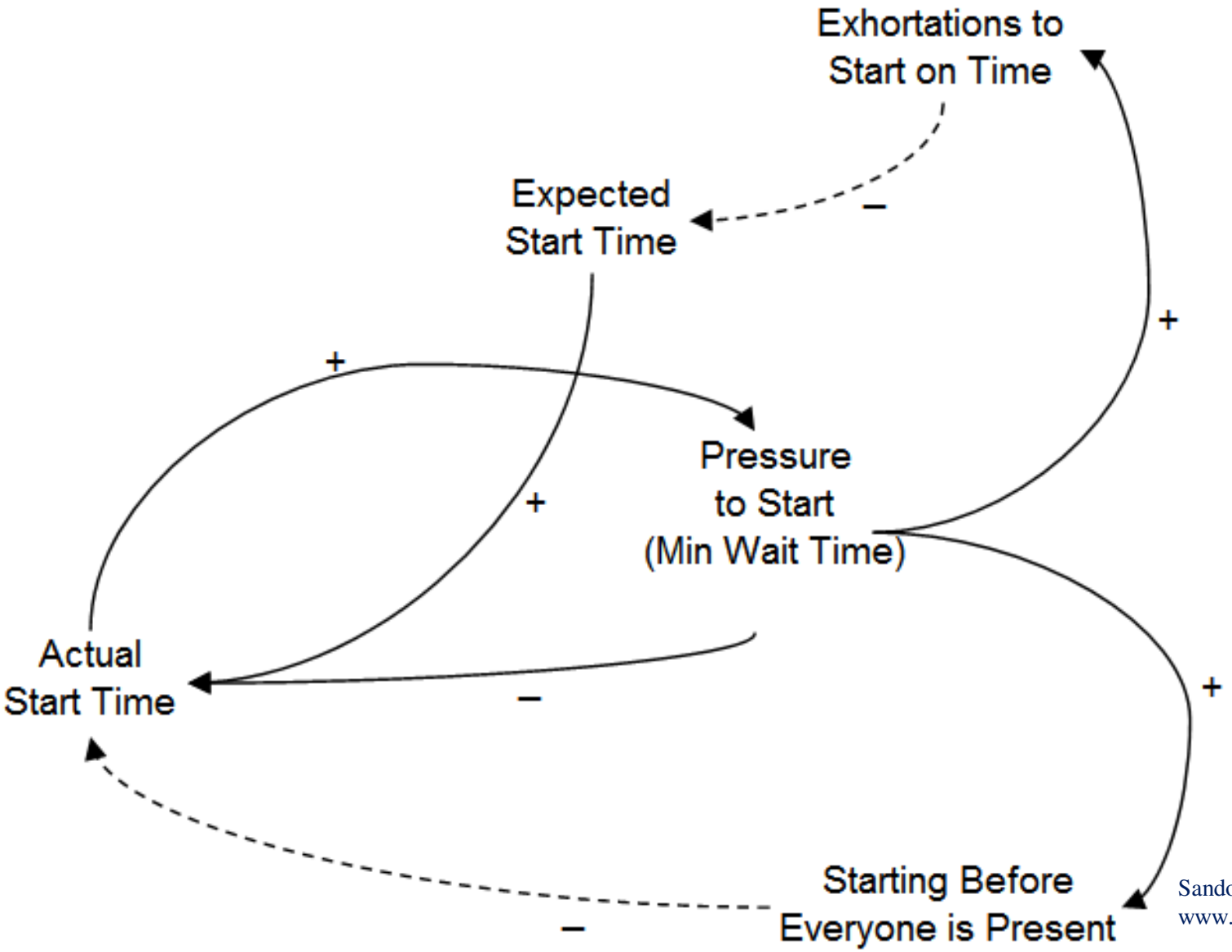
Pressure to Start



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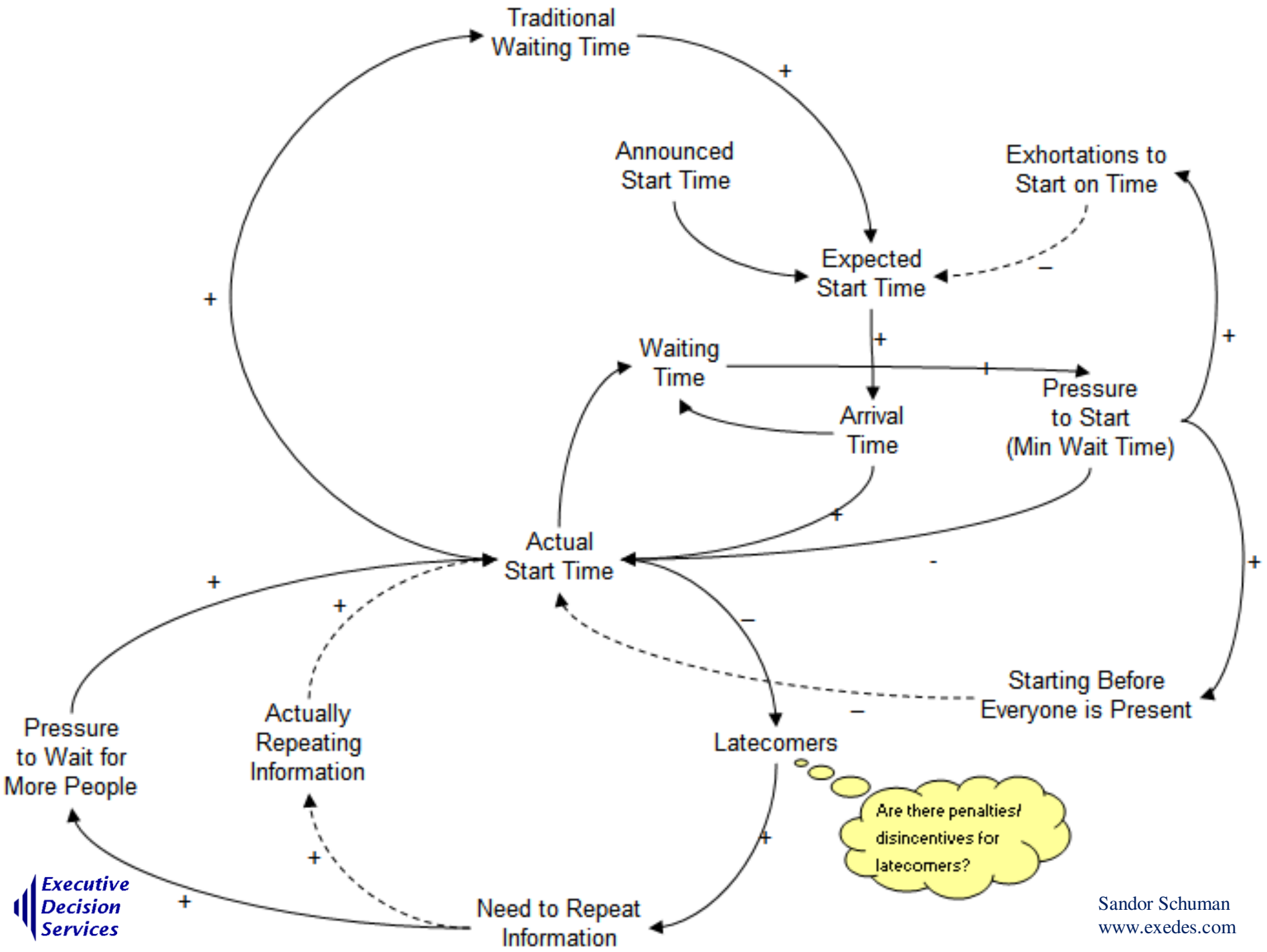
Traditional
Waiting Time
Announced
Start Time
Exhortations to
Start on Time
Expected
Start Time
Waiting
Time
Arrival
Time
Pressure
to Start
(Min Wait Time)
Actual
Start Time
Starting Before
Everyone is Present
Latecomers
Are there penalties/
disincentives for
latecomers?
Pressure
to Wait for
More People
Actually
Repeating
Information
Need to Repeat
Information
+
+
+