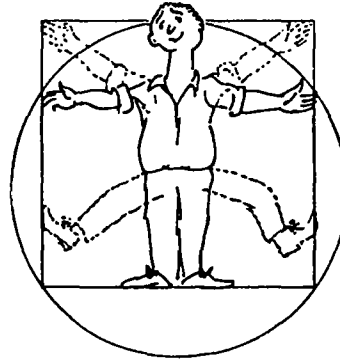


STRUCTURAL SYMMETRY IN ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FITTING THE SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND WHOLE

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The phrase Organizational Development (OD) has been in recurrent use in the last 25 year or so. It refers to a planned process of bringing change in the culture of the organization both at the system and subsystems levels, subsuming structural changes (Argyris 1964). It is a wholistic approach to restore the dynamism of collective human effort. It is an approach at symmetrization of decisions of various members of the organization which when left unreviewed for long contribute to organizational dissymmetry (Lorsch & Lawrence 1970).

The process of symmetrization is to get the change moving with a dynamic balance in the structure rather than getting it right (in terms of static symmetry), and then reviewing and adjusting the structures and policies as a result of experience (Newman 1973, Balachandran 1987). To describe it in a simpler way, for organizational development, symmetry is perceived and discerned in terms of a dynamic integration among the structural parts of the organization (Kanter 1985).

Symmetry through Organizational Design :

Productive human work requires various resources. The co-ordination of these resources for achieving a purpose is essentially a process of putting order in randomness often expressed as reduction of uncertainty (Brown 1960). This coordination gives the organization a structure.

The function of such a structure is to hold the resources together, put form, consistency, and stability amongst the parts for all of them to be comprehended as a whole. The structure then becomes the regulating mechanism interrelating behaviour of people with each other, with the

environment and with organization's objectives (Mintzberg 1983, Melcher 1976). In fact any feature that does the work of delineating, regulating or integrating the relationships among various resources has structural implications for the organizations (Newman 1973).

Many theorists opine that resource integration is a function of organizational design (Argyris 1964, Lorach & Lawrence 1970). Part of this opinion considers design only as one OD approach which aims at keeping the systems consistent with the needs of the organization, the emphasis being put on the grouping of activities; issues of level and spans distribution of power including centralization versus decentralizations and interdepartmental relationships etc. Others would include organizational goals and organization's relations with environment as well in the design. (Maheshwari 1977).

Organizational Reality & Structural Symmetry :

One of the major difficulties with the organizational structure is the discernment of the form of the structure or what most people would like to visualize as organizational reality. Ignoring the relationships with other resources, most of the time organizational structure is conceived in terms of hierarchy among roles and positions.

Until Elton Mayo (The Human Relations School) came along, structure was perceived essentially in mechanical terms, the symmetry confined to tasks and people. The organization was perceived as a dyad, most reflected in the use of such dyadic terms as employer-employee, line-staff, supervisor-subordinate, and product-function. Other attempts at discerning the structural reality visualized four types of structures; manifest, extant, assumed, requisite (Brown 1960).

The complexity of the structural reality is aggravated by perceived role relationships which in one hierarchical level are conjectured to be at least 6. It is further made complex by the potentiality of the relationships which increase at an exponential rate with increase in the number of members in the organization (Koontz & O'Donnel 1968). Then there are the expectations, preferences, career needs, and political needs of every member with which he relates himself with others (Burns 1969). In other words, perceiving one organizational reality in terms of symmetrical structure is fraught with a lot of assumptions, presumptions and subjectivity (Westerland & Sojostrand 1979).

Asymmetrization : A Constant Factor

Most organizational behaviourists therefore view the structure simply as 'situational' and process'. Activities relevant to the objectives and resources to be used, define the situational structure, and the decision process involved in carrying out those activities define the process structure (Newman 1973).

Decision making, exercise of discretion or making judgment and choice is necessary for coping with uncertain situations. It is also a major area of satisfaction, growth and power for the individual (Jaques 1971). The structural consequences of all decision making cannot always be predicted. Decision making therefore is a factor of constant asymmetrization of structure - a process essential to the dynamics of organization.

Many OD theorists and consultants would specifically add the intuitive and emotional behaviour of people to the process structure, often adding to the complexity of the situational structure as well (Zoll 1974, Argyris 1964). For example, individuals are constantly comparing themselves with others to assess the extent of asymmetry (in wages, status etc. Patchen 1961) between themselves and others.

In fact, any symmetrical configuration that stabilizes creates a perception of power (vested interest) in some, and feelings of powerlessness in others. This starts the cycle of powerless trying to make themselves more powerful, and the powerful trying to conserve or increase their power in order to defend their vested power - a process leading to periods of dissymmetry in the structure.

Many have therefore viewed OD as a process of power equalization, (Galbraith 1983, Mintzberg 1983), an approach shifting from organizational design to individual sensitization (Roger 1969, Argyris 1978).

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