THE PSYCHOANALYTIC IMPLICATIONS OF OPEN SPACE EVENTS

I would like to begin this paper with a disclaimer. For several years I was a member of the Consulting to Institutions Seminar at the Tavistock Clinic. During those years I also was first a member and then a trainee at several group relations events including two Leicester Conferences. I believe that I learned more about consulting in those few years than I ever had before. I would like to express my gratitude to members of the seminar for their patience with me and for the experiences at Leicester.

Throughout this time I was also thinking about the nature of organizations and I was becoming increasingly uneasy about what I felt was an unwarranted assumption by members of the seminar and to some extent in the design of Leicester. Both seemed to assume that well-functioning organizations had to be hierarchically structured. My declarations about how organizations were changing had little effect, and I could muster no convincing arguments for my view. My recent experience of running a series of conferences that modeled non-hierarchical organizations has finally given me a basis for a bit of an argument. This paper then is an attempt to surface the assumptions of my colleagues in the seminar, an attempt to describe a counter-instance to them and a request for further study of the nature of psychodynamic forces in such organizations.

It is common among members of the Tavistock Seminar and others interested in the psychoanalytic study of organizations to assume that organizations are hierarchical. They identify obstacles that impede hierarchical organizations from working well, and often try to find ways to make them work better. They tend to ignore the possibility of other organizing principles.

Once their hierarchical nature is assumed it is believed that well-functioning organizations must have clear lines of formal authority. This may be related to the view that a well-functioning

organization must be capable of containing the anxiety of those who work in it. It may be that some of this containment is derived from the role played by father/mother in a well-functioning family. Thus it may be assumed that a stable (familial) hierarchy can be a model for relatively robust human organizations.

Another argument from Eliot Jaques is less directly psychoanalytic but seems to have been widely adopted among psychoanalytic thinkers, and some members of my seminar. It is the notion that there are differences between workers at different levels or tiers of an organization. A well-functioning organization would locate people appropriately in a hierarchical structure, with those with the widest and longest span of understanding and vision at the top and others, depending on their capacities, at lower levels. The assumption of one's own authority means to some extent that one understands one's appropriate place in an organization - both as a leader and a follower. A good summary of these views of well-functioning organizations occurs in Anton Obholzer's recent paper "Authority, Power and Leadership."

> Effective leadership requires not only an authoritative state of mind to monitor the functioning of the organization against the bench-mark of the primary task. A leader also needs the power to initiate and implement changes as required by a change in social or institutional circumstances, or even, in the light of these factors, to change the primary task of the organization. As part of this process, a system of accountability needs to exist, as does a mechanism for the delegation of authority, an in-house network that allows for the flow of both authority and feedback. By such means, it becomes possible to delegate aspects of the primary task to individuals or teams within the structure, and to call them to account for the nature of their functioning in relation to the overall task of the organization.[1]

The result of these views has been that organizations that are lateral and collaborative rather than hierarchical and directive are often thought to be anomalous and to have a tendency to be dysfunctional. A good example of this view appears in "Conflict and Collaboration" by Vega Zagier Roberts.

Working well together - whether between individuals or across groups and organizations - is generally considered a good thing and, as such, to be pursued without question. Yet before effective systems for working together can be set up or adequately managed, there are basic questions which need to be asked. The first is whether there is a task which requires collaboration. If so who needs to work with whom in order to carry out this task? And finally, what authority will they need to have, and how (and by whom) are they to be managed? Without adequate attention to these questions, there is every likelihood either of too much togetherness or too little. Too much can give rise to numerous large meetings which feel pointless but take up a lot of time; or to the pursuit of `cohesiveness' at the expense of individual initiative and the on-task exercise of specific competencies. Too little can result in insufficient co-ordination of related activities, and chronic strife. On the other hand, well-managed intergroup relations, including relations among sub-groups within a single team, can do much to improve both morale and effectiveness in the human services.[2]

In contrast to these views there has been a great deal of discussion in recent years about organizations that are becoming less hierarchical, flatter, more collaborative. Many recent descriptions of "learning organizations", "knowledge workers", "collaborative partnerships", suggest that traditional organizations are changing and that new ones are beginning to emerge.

If we retain the assumption that unconscious forces at work in large organizations serve to contain the anxiety of their members, how would such organizations work? Can non-hierarchical organizations be well-functioning? Or would they be dysfunctional, almost by definition ? If we further accept the familial basis for containment, how can a collaborative lateral organization succeed?

At the Tavistock Clinic and to some extent at the TIHR, the Leicester conference has been a laboratory for looking at Authority, Leadership and Organization. Many of the views that are held in the Tavistock community have been elaborated as a result of the experience of this famous and long running group conference. There are two large events that are of particular interest. The Inter-group event is designed to allow individuals to study "relations between groups as they happen and in particular the problems of exercising authority on behalf of others."

The Institutional Event "enables the study of the relatedness between ..(all component groups at the conference).. as an organization. Staff are present as management and consultants (are) available." These descriptions have hardly changed since 1987, when I received my first copy of the brochure.[3]

The conference as a temporary institution is an excellent learning experience for its members. And the events in it are meant to model other institutions that are less temporary.

> Depending on the nature of the design and the focus of the event, individuals ...
> have the opportunity to study the nature of intra-group processes in groups of
> different sizes, and to participate in intergroup activities to learn about intergroup
> processes. In all these events, members can take up a variety of roles and thus
> learn about the processes of giving and taking authority, working with tasks and
> roles and bidding for and exercising leadership, and so on.[4]

Over the last year, I have had the experience of planning and facilitating several large group events that run in a non-hierarchical way. The technique was developed by Harrison Owen who describes the method in great detail in his book *Open Space Technology*.

My thesis is that Open Space conferences can harness large-group forces in a non-hierarchical way. They allow people to organize themselves, and provide an infrastructure for business that needs doing. Participants control what happens and work at issues they consider important. These events then can serve as models for well-functioning non-hierarchical organizations which have few of the characteristics required by my colleagues in the seminar.

It may then follow that at least some of the obstacles to working well may be due to the hierarchical nature of some organizations rather than to more general facts about the nature of groups or organizations. It may also be necessary to begin to explore the conditions that are necessary for flatter and less hierarchical organizations. Finally it will be interesting to consider

some of the psychodynamic forces that occur in them.

The Design of Open Space Conferences

People are invited to come voluntarily to these events to work on a theme they believe to be important. The main meeting room is a large open space in which chairs are arranged in a circle. A facilitator restates the theme and invites individuals to convene meetings on issues that they feel strongly about, and for which they are prepared to take some responsibility. The convenors come forward, write their topics on large cards and read them out to the large-group. They then post the topic, along with a time and location of the meeting on a bulletin wall. When all the topics are posted, everyone comes to the wall to sign up for the meetings of their choice.

All changes are negotiated at the wall which becomes a kind of market place for event activities. For example, when many people sign up for a meeting it can move to a larger space, or the convenor can schedule a follow-up meeting to make sure that everyone is heard, or someone else can convene a second meeting at the same time.

Once meetings begin people come and go voluntarily. If they feel strongly about an issue they can work on it. They might even feel strongly enough to work alone if no one else appears. If they have stopped learning or have nothing to contribute they are encouraged to move on. The conference allows everyone to hear the concerns and hopes of others, and to contribute their own.

Large group meetings may be held once or twice each day to review work already done and to allow new topics to be announced. If the event lasts for several days, the convenor is responsible

for recording the attendance, the major elements of the discussion, and the recommendations of the group. Some computers are made available for this. The printed reports are posted on the bulletin wall for comment, and issued to all participants as a conference report at the conclusion of the conference.

Open Space has been used in many venues. It seems most appropriate where there are serious shared challenges to be met by people with different backgrounds and interests. In Colorado groups with opposing environmental views decided how to proceed with major new road expenditure. In Calgary a religious organization agonized over the main strands of its five year strategy.

I have recently organized three Open Space events. The first was a conference in Toronto for 130 doctors, nurses, survivors of cancer, patients and their families, and government and voluntary agencies to create regional cancer networks. A second event in Gloucester marked the closure of a large Victorian psychiatric hospital and brought together more than 140 doctors, psychologists, nurses and other professionals as well as service users, carers, purchasers, executive and non-executive board members, representatives of community groups and others to consider how to improve mental health services. A third brought together over 500 people from six Toronto Hospitals and their surrounding communities to consider how an integrated hospital network could bring them closer together.

All the events resulted in reports that were used to move the process of change forward. They events showed how large-group forces can result in collaborative and productive work. They also may allow us to further examine assumptions about the nature of human organizations and the forces at play in them. I will describe in greater detail the context and results of the last of these conferences.

The Westcare Project

Major hospital restructuring is occurring in Toronto as in many other cities. A consortium of six general hospitals in West Toronto had been working together for a number of years to find economies in their operations. The restructuring brought them together to attempt to plan for an integrated hospital network for their area of Toronto that would allow them to decide their own futures. The boards of the six hospitals decided to commit $100,000 each to the development of a strategic plan that would elaborate and help them implement this vision. They engaged a firm of consultants to consider the detail of the plan and commissioned me to facilitate an Open Space conference to bring together representatives of the six hospitals to begin the process of lateral communication and to identify issues that needed to be addressed in the strategic plan.

At several meetings the objectives, invitation procedure and the theme for the conference were developed by a steering committee composed of the Chief Executives of the 6 hospitals, members of their boards and medical representatives. The theme is presented as Figure 1

Figure 1: Conference Theme

As a result of the pressures on the health care system, the six Westcare hospitals have agreed to plan for an integrated hospital network for West Toronto.

- What should it look like?
- How do we get there?
- How do we ensure that we improve the quality of care?

The Westcare Open Space Conference was planned for January 20 and 21, 1995. Each hospital was allowed 75 invitations to the conference. Hospitals were encouraged to make participation voluntary and to invite the broadest spectrum of participants. These wee asked to invite a

predetermined mixture of doctors, nurses, allied health workers, board members, administrators and patients. Since the conference took place on Friday and Saturday staff participants were not paid for one of the two days of the event. Doctors, who work on a fee-for-service basis, gave up one day of income to come. The consortium office invited other participants who represented the local community, the provincial government and members of the restructuring committee. There were different procedures used at the hospitals. Some invited everyone who wished to come to request an invitation and assigned spaces, leaving the rest as back up. Others sent out over 100 invitations expecting a 25% refusal rate. In the end 550 people agreed to come to the conference. Some shared their invitations with others.

The logistics of preparing for over 500 people meant that the conference venue had to be a major hotel with a ballroom that could seat 1,000. The hotel provided 20 meeting rooms, three lunch areas, and refreshments over the two days. A computer facility with 10 secretaries, and 25 computers allowed all the reports to be prepared and posted on the freshly painted bulletin wall. It was decided to prepare a diskette version of the conference for duplication and distribution to everyone as they left on Saturday afternoon.

Most of the participants arrived at the conference with a concern that the conference might not work. The fear was that no one would come forward to declare a topic. After the introductory remarks there was a very these moment of silence before someone came forward with the first topic. Immediately a large number of topics were generated and a schedule for the conference began to emerge on the bulletin wall. Once all the topics were posted the market place began as participants signed up for meetings.

One of the first meetings was called by a nurse who felt that nurses had been unfairly left off the steering committee despite the fact that they constituted the largest single constituency in the

hospitals. Their meeting was attended by doctors, nurses, nard members and administrators. A doctor found this meeting particularly illuminating because he had never before been to a nurses meeting. A chief executive was very pleased that the nurses wanted to be so involved in the process. A board member was surprised at the strength of feeling in the room. Most participants found themselves in a meeting with a different and more lateral composition than they had ever previously experienced.

On the morning of the second day there was a meeting which gave everyone who wanted to speak a chance to describe how the conference was going. A cordless microphone was passed through the circle of chairs and the large group of 500 was able to review its progress in one hour. A group of five hundred worked to task and time. There were some who found the conference unpleasant and felt that it was a ploy by the senior staff to have their agenda approved. But most participants found the meetings interesting and felt that they were having a chance to speak and be heard, often for the first time. A second evaluation meeting was held at the end of the day and the conference concluded wit ha series of recommendations. The diskette version of the reports was distributed as everyone left the ballroom.

An evaluation form for the conference was completed by more than 250 participants. The overwhelming response was positive. A quick overview of the results is in Figure 2
A study of the comments suggests that most were positive about the conference itself as an event. but some participants had reservations about the outcomes.

Figure 2: Brief Summary of Evaluation Results

"Many good ideas were expressed."
Over 90% of all interest groups agreed.

"I feel more knowledgable."

Over 80% of all groups except doctors agreed.

"Opportunity to express my views."
100% of doctors and over 90% of others agreed.

Summary of Results

There were 132 meetings held over the two days on a wide variety of topics. The conference report was over 250 pages long. It was analyzed by the management consultants to identify the major issues for further work and to cluster the meetings into eight groups. The eight clusters were

---

Figure 3: Topics and Participation

Westcare Vision	14 meetings	550 participants
Clinical Programs	18 meetings	380 participants
Functional Groups	9 meetings	160 participants
The Leadership Model	16 meetings	460 participants
Stakeholder Communications	12 meetings	375 participants
Community Linkages	22 meetings	610 participants
Human Resource Issues	17 meetings	280 participants
Quality of Care	24 meetings	680 participants

All the stakeholder groups were represented in discussions of all the issues and all six hospitals were similarly represented in all of them. A further analysis led to the creation of twelve intensive task forces to develop directions for the clinical programs and functional areas of the six hospitals. These groups are currently in process and will complete their work by the end of March. By the time of this conference the strategic plan should have been completed, approved by the six boards and submitted to the hospital restructuring committee. The results of all this effort should be apparent by the time this talk is delivered. I look forward to reporting them to you.

Lessons

It would seem that Open Space Conferences may be a model for how non-hierarchical organizations function. If we look at some of the standard components of organizations as viewed by members of the Tavistock Seminar we find several interesting features.

1.   **Primary Task**

It is clear that an Open Space Conference must have a very clear, widely understood theme. This theme must be of sufficient concern to participants so that they are prepared to come voluntarily. When the task is not acceptable, then either few people will attend, or they will question the theme itself.

2.   **Authority, Leadership, Power and Voluntary Participation in Meetings**

In open space formal authority is structural rather than assigned. Authority and leadership are assumed by individuals who have both a passion for an issue and are prepared to take responsibility for convening a meeting on it. The only power convenors have is to declare their topic and run the meeting. If their topic is of wide interest many will attend, but only as long as they feel that they can learn from the others there or can contribute to the discussion. The voluntary nature of participation means that there is a lateral granting of leadership and authority and that there is no need for followership.

3.   **Organization and Management of Task**

Let me remind you of Vega Roberts remarks. Once a task is defined then before the work is actually done the following questions must be answered:
>   ...who needs to work with whom in order to carry out this task?
>   And finally, what authority will they need to have, and how (and
>   by whom) are they to be managed?[2]

But in Open Space there is no possibility of someone in authority deciding who will best contribute to a meeting. Since meeting participation is open and voluntary, everyone with a strong interest in a topic may attend. The convenor does not select participants for his/her topic. The success of the meeting is not dependent on who is chosen by the convenor, but on the voluntary presence and contribution of the members. By and large only those who have a genuine interest in a topic attend. Although there are disagreements and debates at these meetings, there is a tendency to move towards consensus. At times this will happen because several successive meetings are called on a topic where there are strong disputes. Similarly the chance of excessive long and empty meetings is averted. Once the meetings become less than useful everyone begins to leave.

Conclusions

My hypothesis is that many of the unconscious feelings of rivalry, exclusion and envy in organizations come not from the basic characteristics of human organizations but from their hierarchical design. The questions that remain are about the nature of the unconscious feelings in non-hierarchical organizations. I recommend further study of such organizations and the psychodynamic forces that shape them.

Sholom Glouberman
March 22, 1995

Notes

1. Obholzer, Anton; "Authority, power and leadership: contributions from group relations training"; in <u>The unconscious at work: Individual and organizational stress in the human services</u>; edited by Obholzer, A; and Roberts, VZ; Routledge; London, 1994. pp 39-47. p.47

2. Roberts, Vega Zagier; "Conflict and collaboration: managing intergroup relations"; in <u>The unconscious at work: Individual and organizational stress in the human services</u>; edited by Obholzer, A; and Roberts, VZ;Routledge; London, 1994. pp 187-196. p.196.

3. <u>Authority Leadership & Organisation</u>; brochure for the 1995 Leicester Conference.

4. Obholzer p.46.