modern organizations

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Our society is an organizational society.[1] We are born in organizations, educated by organizations, and most of us spend much of our lives working for organizations. We spend much of our leisure time paying, playing, and praying in organizations. Most of us will die in an organization, and when the time comes for burial, the largest organization of all—the state—must grant official permission.

In contrast to earlier societies, modern society has placed a high moral value on rationality, effectiveness, and efficiency. Modern civilization depends largely on organizations as the most rational and efficient form of social grouping known. By coordinating a large number of human actions, the organization creates a powerful social tool. It combines its personnel with its resources, weaving together leaders, experts, workers, machines, and raw materials. At the same time it continually evaluates how well it is performing and tries to adjust itself accordingly in order to achieve its goals. As we shall see, all this allows organizations to serve the various needs of society and its citizens more efficiently than smaller and more natural human groupings, such as families, friendship groups, and communities.

Organizations are not a modern invention. The Pharaohs used organizations to build the pyramids. The emperors of China used organizations a thousand years ago to construct great irrigation systems. And the first Popes created a universal church to serve a world religion. Modern society, how-

[1] Robert Presthus, *The Organizational Society* (New York: Knopf, 1962).

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ever, has more organizations, these fulfilling a greater variety of societal and personal needs, involving a greater proportion of its citizens, and affecting a larger segment of their lives. In fact, modern society has so many organizations that a whole set of second-order organizations is needed to organize and supervise organizations. In the United States, such regulatory commissions as the Security and Exchange Commission and the National Labor Relations Board are examples.

Finally we can also say that the modern organization is generally more efficient than the ancient or medieval species. Changes in the nature of society have made the social environment more congenial to organizations, and the art of planning, coordinating, and controlling has developed with the study of administration.

This increase in the scope and rationality of organizations has not come without social and human cost. Many people who work for organizations are deeply frustrated and alienated from their work. The organization, instead of being society's obedient servant, sometimes becomes its master. Modern society—far from being a *Gemeinschaft* town meeting—often seems closer to a battleground where organizational giants clash. But it is widely agreed that the undesirable side effects do not outweigh the considerable benefits of organizations. Although few people would agree to return to a more traditional society where human groupings were small, intimate, and inefficient, constant efforts are being made to reduce the frustrating and distorting side effects of these huge social instruments of modern society, while maintaining, even enhancing, their efficacy.

At this point we must confront a major misunderstanding. *Not* all that enhances rationality reduces happiness, and *not* all that increases happiness reduces efficiency. Human resources are among the major means used by the organization to achieve its goals. Generally the less the organization alienates its personnel, the more efficient it is. Satisfied workers usually work harder and better than frustrated ones. Within limits, happiness heightens efficiency in organizations and, conversely, without efficient organizations much of our happiness is unthinkable. Without well-run organizations our standard of living, our level of culture, and our democratic life could not be maintained. Thus, to a degree, *organizational rationality and human happiness go hand in hand.* But a point is reached in every organization where happiness and efficiency cease to support each other. Not all work can be well-paid or gratifying, and not all regulations and orders can be made acceptable. Here we face a true dilemma.

The problem of modern organizations is thus how to construct human groupings that are as rational as possible, and at the same time produce a minimum of undesirable side effects and a maximum of satisfaction. We find both a record of progress and setbacks in the search for the best combination of these human values. As we shall see, this record is marked by conflicting opinions among various experts and "schools" as how best to coordinate human efforts in the service of organizational goals.

Organizations Defined

Organizations are social units (or human groupings) deliberately constructed and reconstructed to seek specific goals.[2] Corporations, armies, schools, hospitals, churches, and prisons are included; tribes, classes, ethnic groups, friendship groups, and families are excluded. Organizations are characterized by: (1) divisions of labor, power, and communication responsibilities, divisions which are not random or traditionally patterned, but deliberately planned to enhance the realization of specific goals; (2) the presence of one or more power centers which control the concerted efforts of the organization and direct them toward its goals; these power centers also must review continuously the organization's performance and re-pattern its structure, where necessary, to increase its efficiency; (3) substitution of personnel, i.e., unsatisfactory persons can be removed and others assigned their tasks. The organization can also recombine its personnel through transfer and promotion.

Other social units are marked by some degree of conscious planning (e.g., the family budget), by the existence of power centers (e.g., tribal chiefs), and by replaceable membership (e.g., through divorce), but the extent to which these other social units are consciously planned, deliberately structured and restructured, with a membership which is routinely changed, is much less than in the case of those social units we are calling *organizations*. Hence organizations are much more in control of their nature and destiny than any other social grouping.

There are many synonyms for the term, *organization*. One, *bureaucracy*, has two disadvantages. First, *bureaucracy* often carries a negative connotation for the layman, while *organization* is a neutral term. Second, *bureaucracy* implies for those familiar with Weber's work (see Chapter 5) that the unit is organized according to the principles he specified. But many organizations, including many modern ones, are not bureaucratic in this technical sense. Hospitals, for instance, do not have one center of decision-making, whereas bureaucracies do, by definition. *Formal organization* refers to one set of characteristics of organizations. We discuss this aspect below; here it suffices to say that this term does not refer to an organization as an entity, but only to a part of it. *Institution* is sometimes used to refer to certain types of organizations, either quite respectable ones as in "GM is an institution," or quite unrespectable ones, as in "He is in an institution." Sometimes institution refers to a quite different phenomenon—namely, to a normative principle that culturally defines behavior such as marriage or property. Because of these two conflicting usages, this term has probably caused more confusion than *formal organization* and *bureaucracy* together. All three might well be avoided in favor of the simple term, *organization*.

Since many social groupings have some degree of patterning and some control structure—e.g., in contrast to a mob—*social organization* has been

2 Talcott Parsons, *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960), p. 17. Some minimal amount of such construction and reconstruction will be found in all social units, but it is much higher in organizations.

used to characterize these phenomena. But in recent years *social structure* has been increasingly employed to describe these characteristics of social units. Thus we can safely reserve the term *organizations* to refer to planned units, deliberately structured for the purpose of attaining specific goals, and do without social organizations altogether.

The Plan of the Book

The plan of this book follows our definition of organizations as social units that pursue specific goals which they are structured to serve, obviously under some social circumstances. Therefore the book has three foci: organizational goals; organizational structure; and organizations and their social environment. Considerably more space is devoted to organizational structure than to the other topics, for two reasons: First, more research has been conducted and more writings are available on organizational structure than on organizational goals (Chapter 2) and environment. Second, the major schools of organizational analysis have fixed their interests on structural aspects of the organization, and thus, we may best evaluate these different approaches in the context of organizational structure.

The approach to organizational structure used here can be viewed as a synthesis of two schools—the *formal*, Scientific Management school and the *informal*, Human Relations school, whose major contributions are analyzed in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively. The emerging synthesis—the Structuralist approach—combines the formal and informal perspectives as well as other aspects of organizational analysis (Chapter 4). There follows in Chapter 5 a presentation of Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, which represents the work of an early Structuralist, and which is of great importance in itself. The rest of the volume applies the Structuralist approach to the study of organizational structure from a comparative perspective (Chapters 6–8), to an examination of the relations of organizations to their clients (Chapter 9), and to the larger environment (Chapter 10).

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two

The goals of organizations serve many functions. They provide orientation by depicting a future state of affairs which the organization strives to realize. Thus they set down guide lines for organizational activity. Goals also constitute a source of legitimacy which justifies the activities of an organization and, indeed, its very existence. Moreover goals serve as standards by which members of an organization and outsiders can assess the success of the organization—i.e., its effectiveness and efficiency. Goals also serve in a similar fashion as measuring rods for the student of organizations who tries to determine how well the organization is doing.

Organizations are social units which pursue specific goals; their very *raison d'etre* is the service of these goals. But once formed, organizations acquire their own needs, these sometimes becoming the masters of the organization. This happens, for example, when a fund-raising organization spends more money on staff, buildings, and publicity than on the charity itself, for which funds are raised. In such instances, organizations reduce the service to their initial goals in order to satisfy their acquired needs, rather than adjust the service of their acquired needs to that of their goals. Sometimes organizations go so far as to abandon their initial goals and pursue new ones more suited to the organization's needs. This is what we mean when we say that the organizational goal becomes the servant of the organization rather than its master. In this chapter we consider the questions: What are organizational goals? Under what conditions can they be met? When do the organizational needs become masters, subverting the

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initial goals? How are organizational effectiveness and efficiency defined, and what organizational problem does their very measurement raise? The chapter closes with a discussion of the danger of using goals as the prime tool for studying and evaluating an organization, and a suggested alternative.

The Nature
of Organizational Goals

An organizational goal is a desired state of affairs which the organization attempts to realize. The organization may or may not be able to bring about this desired image of the future. But if the goal is reached, it ceases to be a guiding image for the organization and is assimilated to the organization or its environment. For example, the establishing of a Jewish state was the goal of the Zionist movement. In 1948, when this goal became a reality, it ceased to be a desired goal. In this sense a goal never exists; it is a state which we seek, not one we have. Such future states of affairs, though images, have a very real sociological force that affects contemporary actions and reactions.

But whose image of the future does the organization pursue? That of top executives? The board of directors or trustees? The majority of the members? Actually none of these. The organizational goal is that future state of affairs which the organization as a collectivity is trying to bring about. It is in part affected by the goals of the top executives, those of the board of directors, and those of the rank and file. It is determined sometimes in a peaceful consultation, sometimes in a power play among the various organizational divisions, plants, cabals, ranks, and "personalities."

How then does one determine what is the goal of an organization? In part the participants may act as informants. We may interview executives and employees of various departments to establish what they see as the organization's goals. In interviewing them, we must carefully distinguish their personal goals from the goals of the collectivity. An executive's goal might be to gain a larger stock option; that of the finance department, to balance the budget; the employees', to gain a raise. Still all might view the organizational goal as making a profit. Profit-making might be selected because they believe that it is the way for them to fulfill their personal or departmental goals, or because they believe in principle that a private enterprise should make profit. In either case their goals should not be confused with the organizational ones. The participants should be specifically asked what they see as the organizational goal, as distinct from their own or from those which they think the organization *ought* to pursue. We may also get relevant information by studying minutes of the board meetings and by examining other documents of the organization. We can also analyze the division of labor of the organization, its flow of work, and its allocation of resources as reflected in its budget to determine the actual organization's orientation to a future state of affairs.

Especially revealing are those situations in which the distribution of manpower and material resources clearly suggests a direction of effort different from that expressed by the informants. For instance, if the administrator of a mental hospital informs us that his hospital is in the business

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of curing people, and we find that there are but 4 doctors (only one of whom has had psychiatric training) serving 5,000 patients, that the hospital aides have no more training or interest in therapy than prison guards, that 90 per cent of the patients—many of them suffering from senility which is generally considered incurable—have spent 10 years or more in the hospital, then we might infer that the hospital's goal is to keep the level of public disturbance down or to care for the aged, but not to cure or rehabilitate.

There are at least two reasons why the head of an organization might maintain that the organization is seeking certain goals which in fact differ from the ones it actually pursues. In some instances the head may be unaware of the discrepancy; the true situation is hidden from him. The heads of some university departments, for instance, have only very inaccurate information on what happens to most of their "product," the graduates. Thus a department head and his staff might believe that the department is devoted to training future Nobel Prize winners in physics, while in practice it operates mainly to provide the electronics industry with fairly capable applied researchers. More commonly, organizational leaders quite consciously express goals which differ from those actually pursued because such masking will serve the goals the organization actually pursues. Thus an organization whose real goal is to make a profit might benefit if it can pass as an educational, non-profit organization. And an organization whose goal is to overthrow the legitimate government of a country is likely to benefit if it can pass as a legitimate political party.

The researcher will define as the *real goals* of the organization those future states toward which a majority of the organization's means and the major organizational commitments of the participants are directed, and which, in cases of conflict with goals which are *stated* but command few resources, have clear priority. Sometimes establishing intimate contact with key participants allows the researcher to determine how aware informants are of any discrepancy between real and stated goals. Generally, however, it is unwise to depend entirely on interviews for information on an organization's real goals. An examination of the allocation of resources and direction of efforts is often a necessary complementary research method for obtaining satisfactory results.

The distinction between real and stated goals should not be confused with the important difference between intended and unintended consequences widely used in sociology. Goals are always intended; the difference is between stated intentions and real ones. Unintended consequences are strictly unplanned, unexpected results of action oriented toward some goal.

How Goals Are Set

Virtually all organizations have a formal, explicitly recognized, sometimes legally specified organ for setting the initial goals and for their amendment. In some organizations goals are set formally by a vote of the stockholders; in others, by a vote of the members (e.g., in some labor unions); in still others, by a small number of trustees; and in a few by an individual who owns and runs the organization

In practice, goals are often set in a complicated power play involving

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various individuals and groups within and without the organization, and by reference to values which govern behavior in general and the specific behavior of the relevant individuals and groups in a particular society.

The following example, drawn from a well-known novel, illustrates the process by which goals may be set in an organization. In a furniture factory the young, idealistic head of the production department favors producing furniture of solid quality; the older head of the finance department is more interested in increasing profit by manufacturing furniture of lower quality. In part their differences reflect a power struggle between the two for the presidency of the corporation. Note that both find it necessary to appeal to general values—profit and quality—in their fight. Moreover the young production man is so committed to the reputation of the firm and the quality value that he would sooner make no profit than sacrifice this goal. The formal resolution of this conflict comes in the board of directors' meeting —although the main power struggle and maneuvering have ended.

There are many factors that enter into the struggle to determine an organization's goal or goals. Organizational departments or divisions often play a prominent role in the process. Personalities are another important determinant. When a strong leader has established himself in the key position of president or executive-director, it is frequently just as hard to unseat him, or to push through an organizational strategy to which he objects, as it is to run against the incumbent president of the United States, unless he commits a major blunder.

In addition to departments and personalities an important role is played by environmental forces. Most organizations are less autonomous than first seems to be the case. Consider a prison which will drastically reduce its security precautions if it carries out its plan to allow inmates to work in the fields, a measure deemed helpful in the shift from the goal of custody (keep them in) to that of rehabilitation (change them while they are in). The surrounding community will often object strongly, especially after an escape, to such a relaxation of security measures, and exerts considerable political pressure to prevent a change of the prison's goal from custodial to rehabilitative. If necessary, the community is willing to have the warden and staff of the prison removed. Similarly anti-trust laws, the Department of Health, labor unions, and other environmental forces set limits not only on the means an organization may use, but on the goals it may pursue.

Effectiveness, Efficiency, and the Danger of "Over-measurement"

Organizations are constructed to be the most effective and efficient social units. The actual *effectiveness* of a specific organization is determined by the degree to which it realizes its goals. The *efficiency* of an organization is measured by the amount of resources used to produce a unit of output. Output is usually closely related to, but not identical with, the organizational goals. For instance, Ford produces automobiles (its output), but its goal seems to be profit-making. The unit of output is a measurable quantity of whatever the organization may be producing, expressed in terms of automobiles, well patients, or what not. Efficiency increases as

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the costs (resources used) decrease. Both current costs and changes in capital have to be taken into account.

It is important to note that while efficiency and effectiveness tend to go hand in hand, they not always do. An efficient company might make no profits, perhaps because of a declining market, and an inefficient one may return a high profit, because of a rising market. Moreover over-concern with efficiency may limit the scope of activities of an organization, while effectiveness might require a large variety of activities.

Measuring effectiveness and efficiency raises several thorny problems. When an organization has a goal which is limited and concrete, it is comparatively easy to measure effectiveness. For instance, in the case of two organizations—one whose goal was constructing a canal linking the Red and Mediterranean Seas and the other whose goal was building a tunnel between France and Britain—it is clear that the former was effective while the latter was not. If the organizational goal is a continuous one, measurement is already more difficult. If the purpose of a corporation is to make profit, and it makes 3 per cent one year, 4 the next year, and no profit the third, how effective is it? Here one must specify a standard, such as "Profit compared to that of similar corporations in the same period," in order to measure effectiveness. Finally, when we come to organizations whose output is not material (e.g., churches), statements about effectiveness are extremely difficult to validate.

The same problem attends measuring efficiency and such related concepts as output, productivity, and costs. It is possible to determine how much it costs to make a car in one factory as against another (although even here there are some tricky problems, such as measuring amortization of the capital equipment and changes in the morale of the workers). But when it comes to comparing the efficiency of two hospitals (sometimes measured by costs per bed), or of two schools (rarely measured by serious students of organization), the concept becomes considerably more vague; one hospital or school or church is more efficient than another only if it produces the *same* product at a lower cost, and this "sameness" is a very difficult thing to establish.

Most organizations under pressure to be rational are eager to measure their efficiency. Curiously, the very effort—the desire to establish how we are doing and to find ways of improving if we are not doing as well as we ought to do—often has quite undesired effects from the point of view of the organizational goals. Frequent measuring can distort the organizational efforts because, as a rule, some aspects of its output are more measurable than the others. Frequent measuring tends to encourage over-production of highly measurable items and neglect of the less measurable ones. When a factory puts great pressure on its production people to increase their efficiency, they might well produce more items but of a lower quality. If quality control is then tightened, the production people might neglect the maintenance of their equipment to put more efforts into satisfying the increased pressure to maintain quality.

The distortion consequences of over-measuring are larger when it is impossible or impractical to quantify the more central, substantive output of an organization, and when at the same time some exterior aspects of

the product, which are superficially related to its substance, are readily measurable. High schools which measure the quality of their curricula by the number of students who pass the Regents Examinations (stressing here one component of effectiveness) find that some teachers neglect the character-development of their students to drill them for the tests. If a pastor is frequently surveyed by his superiors as to how much money he has raised for a new cathedral or how many children attend Sunday school in his parish, he soon becomes more occupied with fund-raising and class size than with the spiritual guidance of his parishioners.

There is no complete solution to this problem. Organizations do best to recognize that many measures are far from accurate. Attributing too much importance to some indicators of organizational success and not enough to others may lead to considerable distortion of the organizational goals and undermine the very efficiency and effectiveness the organization seeks. Using measures of several aspects of the product (e.g., quantities and quality, as well as maintenance control), and stressing those features that come closest to the organizational goal reduces the problem of measuring organizational success, although one never succeeds in eliminating it.

The distortion of goals that arises from over-measurement of some aspects of the organizations's output to the detriment of others is one of a larger category of distortions that arise in the relations of organizations to their goals. In the following sections we are concerned with several other varieties of the distortion phenomenon. Distortions due to over-measurement are comparatively mild, since the main goals of the organization remain intact, though certain aspects of these goals become over-emphasized at the expense of other sometimes more important ones. Goals-displacement is much more detrimental.

Displacement of Goals
This severe type of organizational distortion was first explored 50 years ago by the German sociologist, Robert Michels. It arises when an organization displaces its goal—that is, substitutes for its legitimate goal some other goal for which it was not created, for which resources were not allocated to it, and which it is not known to serve.

The mildest and most common form of displacement is the process by which an organization reverses the priority between its goals and means in a way that makes the means a goal and the goals a means. The most common means so displaced is the organization itself. Organizations are instruments; they are created to serve one or more specific goals. But in the process of forming them, of granting them resources, and of recruiting personnel, interest groups are formed which are frequently concerned more with preserving and building up the organization itself than in helping it to serve its initial purpose. These interest groups use the organizational goals as means to recruit funds, to obtain tax exemptions or status in the community, in short, as means to their own goals.

Michels' book, *Political Parties*, is credited with the first extensive description and analysis of this not uncommon phenomenon of goal dis-

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placement.[1] Michels studied the Socialist parties and labor unions in Europe before World War I. He pointed out that the parties and unions were formed to forward the Socialist revolution and to establish a democratic regime in authoritarian countries, such as Bismarck's Germany. In its efforts to serve these goals, the Socialist movement created party and union organizations. The organizations demanded leadership; the leaders soon developed vested interests in maintaining their positions, since loss of their organizational positions would have forced the leaders to return to manual labor, to a life of low prestige, low income, and without the psychological gratification of leadership. Michels showed that the leaders were, for these reasons, careful to establish themselves firmly in office. Through control over the means of communication of the organization and either the absorption into or "purging" from the organization of young, ambitious leaders, the established leaders strove to secure their positions. In this process, which Michels referred to as the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" (iron because it is presumably without exceptions, and oligarchy because the rule of a few is imposed), the organization's democratic goals, Michels maintains, were subverted. Furthermore, the leaders were less and less induced to take risks in their revolutionary activities for fear that they would anger the government, and so endanger the organization's existence. The party abandoned its militant activities in favor of increasing attention to development of a smoothly working organizational machine. More and more revolutionary moves were delayed to allow for "further preparations," which amounted to a large build-up of the organization, its assets, and the positions of the leaders. Thus, Michels suggested, organizations with revolutionary goals became quite conservative in their conduct.

Since Michels' statement of the Iron Law of Oligarchy this organizational tendency has been repeatedly documented. In many countries and in a variety of organizational types, even where the leadership is elected and can be changed by the membership, oligarchies prevail. Note, however, that Michels' study raises the question: Do limited-purpose organizations *need* to be democratic? Is this not a question of a misplaced concept, artificially transferred from the realm of public to that of private "government" in limited-purpose organizations? [2]

Michels and many of his followers seem not to have realized that an organization that is internally undemocratic might still serve the goal of forwarding the establishment of a democratic regime in the society in which it operates. It is even possible that an oligarchy by avoiding wasting efforts on internal strife, might direct the organizational membership more effectively in attaining democratic goals. It is however quite clear that even if there had been *no* displacement of the democratic goal in the organizations Michels studied, the goal of Socialist revolution was greatly diluted by persistent delays, and in all likelihood was eventually sacrificed in favor of preserving the organization.

Since Michels' work, goal displacement has been noted in a large

[1] Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (New York: Dover, 1959).
[2] See S. M. Lipset, M. A. Trow, and J. S. Coleman, *Union Democracy* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1956).

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