Interactions and Interventions in Organizations

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For Olive, Catriona, and Alasdair

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Editorial Foreword to the Series

Over the last decade, there has been an enormous growth of interest in the social and psychological aspects of institutional and organizational life. This has been reflected in a substantial upsurge in research and training in the field of organizational behaviour particularly in Institutes of Higher Education and Research throughout the Western World. Attention in this development has focused on the interrelationship between the individual, the variety of groups to which he belongs and the organizational environment within which he and his group operate.

The purpose of this series is to examine the social and psychological processes of these interrelationships, that is the nexus of individual/personal development, group processes and organizational behaviour and change. Within this context, a wide range of topics will be covered. These will include: the individual, his role and the organization; multiple roles and role conflict; the impact of group processes on personal and organizational development; strategies for 'humanizing' the organizational environment to meet individual and group needs; and the influence of technical and economic factors on organizational life.

The series will attempt to draw together the main schools of organizational behaviour including, for example, the American behavioural science tradition as reflected by Harvard, UCLA and National Training Laboratories, and the British socio-technical and open systems approaches of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. It is hoped that this will add significantly to understanding the distinctive characteristics of the various approaches and also provide a link between them through which individual, group and organizational behaviour can be seen in fuller perspective.

CARY COOPER
ERIC MILLER

Preface

I've been an organization tinker for about twenty years. I tinker for, and with, many types of organization: schools, prisons, universities, hospitals, armies, voluntary agencies, companies large and small, public and private. For the last ten years or so I've been fully employed tinkering. I even have an organization of my own which is exclusively devoted to tinkering with other organizations. The practice is habit-forming but quite legal; it's even encouraged. For me it started innocently enough, tinkering with groups of actors improvising plays, being amazed by what they developed and speculating about how it was that they accommodated, and were accommodated by, each other in the process of interaction. From such groups I moved into training groups and, almost imperceptibly, became addicted to tinkering with large-scale organizations.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1951) defines a tinker (among other things) as: 'a mender (especially itinerant), a rough-and-ready worker, a botcher, one who patches in an amateurish and clumsy fashion by way of repair or alteration'.

Organization tinkers patch, alter, and repair organizations in a rough-and-ready fashion. The practice has a long and honourable history as Petronius Arbiter (210 B.C.) indicates:

> 'We trained hard but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be re-organized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by re-organizing: and a wonderful method it can be for creating an illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralisation!'

Frederick 'Speedy' Taylor attempted to give tinkering scientific status in the early years of this century, since when it has become a growth industry. Organizations are virtually beseiged by tinkers of one tribe or another: 'organization-and-methods' men, 'management-by-objective' men, 'organization-development' men. The tinker analogy is particularly appropriate to this latter group; it certainly applies to the work that I do and, judging by association and the literature, it applies with equal pertinence to the work of many of my colleagues.

Organization development consultants, like tinkers, may be thought of as somewhat romantic figures—slightly disreputable and plausible enough rogues existing on the fringes of respectable society, but epitomizing at the same time a kind of alternative, more bohemian, society. It is a stance which excites both envy and hostility in about equal measures.

Those of us who have been subjected to the 'it's-alright-for-you, you-don't-have-to-work-in-the-real-world' routine cannot doubt the envy our position generates. Equally there can be little doubt about the hostility that organization development creates among both managers and academics, the latter tending to be somewhat vituperative in their comments. Perrow (1972), for example, is heavily sarcastic in his views upon T-groups as a form of development:

'We should, then, bless T-Groups because they do for managers what pot, flower power, psychedelic experiences, encounter groups and hard-rock music do for the far-out younger generation. The search for spontaneity and authenticity should be never-ending, and if it must occur in the guise of better productivity in organizations, let it! The retrainees will return refreshed to the world of hierarchies, conflict, stupidity and brilliance, but the hierarchies are not likely to fade away.'

However, some of the hostility is not misplaced. Organization development men, like tinkers, are *sometimes* (please note the emphasis) plausible rogues. Some of them may be regarded as peddlers, hucksters, and quacks as well as tinkers. They are the tellers of tales, the weavers of spells. Using the language of democracy, of participation, of people and productivity, consensus and decision, they parley themselves into the hearts and minds of stern, upright businessmen. Much of the literature is couched in terms of sales pitches all too often replete with unsubstantiated claims for this or that nostrum, this or that form of development. Small wonder that the academic finds the field somewhat difficult to consider as a substantive body of knowledge!

However romantic, whatever tools he may carry in his knapsack, whatever his sales pitch the tinker is fundamentally a botcher, a patcher, and, in the pejorative sense of the word, an amateur. His approach is that of trial-and-error, suck-it-and-see. His tools are simple, his techniques crude and clumsy, his familiarity and understanding of his raw material relatively slight. To tinker with something is not to know what it is you are doing. By contrast, the master of his trade, the craftsman, far from patching, repairing, and altering in an amateurish or clumsy fashion is a professional, a confident, competent master of his tools, his techniques, and his materials. He *knows* what he is about, albeit intuitively; he *understands* how the parts fit together; he has a deep familiarity with his raw material and can be relied upon to utilize it in producing, time after time, finely wrought artefacts. The very notion of craftsmanship connotes excellence, properly finished work, skill and dexterity, aptness, fitness, and appropriateness; talent and resourcefulness, mastery and accomplishment; artistry, proficiency, and flair. It implies a consummate blend of knowledge and skill.

Few organization development consultants are craftsmen. Most of us are tinkers exhibiting some degree of skill but little artistry. Our practice runs well ahead of our understanding, so much so that when something 'works' we are often at a loss to know why. An all-too-familiar conference theme is: 'What is organization development? The more I do it, the less I understand it.' For the most part the activities we undertake in organizations consist of a number of techniques which have but a tenuous relationship with any systematic ideas

about individuals, groups, organizations, or change. Our daily practice is surrounded by a cloud of unknowing, a mist of ignorance which, in our trade, can only be dispelled by appropriate theory and research.

Given this situation, some would prefer to remain tinkers. There is, as I have noted earlier in this preface, a strong streak of romanticism running through most organization development, often finding expression in aggressive, anti-intellectual, anti-science postures. The extreme adherents of such positions, however, deny the validity of thought, assert the primacy of feelings over reason, and consider that expression is far more important than understanding. They are sceptical and hostile towards words and numbers, theory and research.

Judging by the literature, such views are less in evidence now than they were a few years ago. For the majority of writers, theorists and practitioners alike, there is concern about the cloud of unknowing and the apparently aimless prosecution of techniques. Kurt Lewin's statement that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' now finds widespread approval and there is a growing recognition of the utility of models in the process of intervening. In the early days of organization development (less than fifteen years ago!) it could have been argued that theory outweighed practice, that the ideas of Kurt Lewin had but infrequently been put into practice. Today the balance is decisively the other way; the practice heavily outweighs the appropriate ideas. Given this state of affairs, where do we go from here?

In my view the problem is not that there is a shortage of ideas or a dearth of research. It is that the existing theoretical fragments and empirical generalizations are either not appropriate or not sufficiently integrated to provide a useful handle for the practitioners. Books and journals are full of ideas and research deriving from the so-called 'systems' perspective ('open', 'contingent', or whatever). Less in evidence but still significant are notions drawn from the humanistic perspective. The former tends to stress variables such as technology and the environment; the latter places emphasis upon the individual and his desires for self-actualization. In my estimation both approaches neglect that which ought to be the central concern of practitioners in organization development—interaction. We know precious little about the process of forming relationships and probably substantially less about the process of changing relationships within organizations. What is needed is more emphasis upon theory and research which is concerned with the fundamental process of social interaction, the central (and, all too often, taken-for-granted) feature of all social life within organizations or elsewhere. As Goldschmidt (1972) stresses: 'Social interaction is the very stuff of human life. The individuals of all societies move through life in terms of a continuous series of social interactions.'

This book provides such an emphasis. The reader will find little or no discussion of concepts such as task, technology, integration, differentiation, equifinality, systems, environment; what mention there is of these notions is couched in somewhat critical, occasionally downright hostile, language. The emphasis throughout is unashamedly upon persons, upon the interpretations they place upon the circumstances in which they find themselves, and upon the

performances they construct in the light of their interpretations.

In Part I of the book I consider the need for an emphasis upon social interaction, give the background to my ideas, and present the framework which informs the rest of the book.

In Part II the application of the framework to organization is explored and in Part III the implications of the ideas for the practice of organizational analysis and development are considered.

The study of face-to-face interaction is not the province of any one discipline and the ideas presented in these pages are drawn from philosophers, sociologists, linguists, anthropologists, writers, dramatists, politicians, and psychologists. The resultant text is not a work of cognitive psychology, nor a primer in theory development or research methodology. It represents a drawing together of a number of ideas from different fields and a preliminary consideration of them from the point of view of myself in my activities as an organization development tinker who would wish to become a craftsman. My departure point has been Sapir's (1968) statement that society 'is being reanimated or creatively affirmed from day to day by particular acts of a communicative nature which obtain among individuals participating in it'. En route I have taken on board ideas from a host of others, Simmel (1950), Mead (1964), Blumer (1969), Burke (1962), Duncan (1968), McCall and Simmons (1966), Goffman (1959) to name but a few. I have not reached my destination, a thorough and integrated understanding of the processes of interaction and intervention, but I take consolation from the words of Robert Louis Stevenson: 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour.'

My labour has been made bearable, even enjoyable, by a number of people: my friends and colleagues, Colin Eden, Stephen Fineman, John Mason, Adrian McLean, David Sims, and particularly Peter Reason who read and commented upon the draft at various stages but who should not be held responsible for its faults, by Cary Cooper who, as editor of the series, has encouraged me throughout, by graduate students who have not suffered my ramblings in silence, and by managers who wittingly and unwittingly have been the partners in my explorations.

To say that Pat Meadows prepared the manuscript cannot do justice to the effort she had expended on my behalf; she has worked through draft after draft with unfailing equanimity and considerable speed and accuracy for which I wish to record my gratitude.

The final acknowledgement must be to my family and friends who have provided me with the space, support, and energy to bring this project to fruition. My thanks to you all.

IAIN MANGHAM

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PART I

Interactions

'Vladimir: It's the start that's difficult.
Estragon: You can start from anything.
Vladimir: Yes, but you have to decide.
Estragon: True.' (Beckett, 1956)

Chapter 1

Shouts, Assertions, and Disputations

In this chapter I will develop the argument that I briefly sketched in the introduction to this book: that the prevailing modes of explanation and the dominant modes of research in the literature and practice of organization development are derived largely from two sources, systems theory and humanism, and that such emphases are not appropriate to the development of the understanding of the practice of changing relations within organizations. I shall further put the case that the most fruitful approach is one deriving from the interactionist perspective.

Since time, space, tolerance, and energy are limited, some of what follows is neither logically set out nor closely argued. Some, indeed, is expressed in the form of a shout, a loud uproar in support of a particular position, or an exultation of a point rather than a detailed explication of it. Some, more restrained and with more obvious backing, has the character of assertion, and the rest is cast in the more recognizably academic form of almost mediaeval debate and argument which may be termed 'disputation'. I will begin with a series of assertions, but the reader is warned that for the most part the chapter will be punctuated with a mixture of sundry shouts and disputations.

A further word of caution is in order before we proceed. The terms '*systems*', '*humanism*', and '*interactionism*' are shapeless words. Like many such terms in social science there is little or no agreement as to their characteristics and some would even dispute the claim to a distinctive name for the ideas I am seeking to characterize. Still others, while accepting the need for distinctive names, will disagree strongly with my attempt to designate the features of the approaches. This, no doubt, will particularly be the case in my presentation and discussion of systems theory. In anticipation of such disputes and by way of defence, I must state unequivocally that my purpose is not to present a comprehensive or even fair review of systems theory or humanism (given that it were possible), but rather to highlight their problems in order to contrast them with my preferred alternative framework—social interactionism.

Systems Theory

I will begin, however, in the manner in which I do not intend to go on by attempting to be fair in outlining the characteristics of systems theory by

reference to what I take to be an impeccable source, Buckley (1968), where the perspective is outlined as:

'A whole which functions as a whole by virtue of the interdependence of its parts is called a *system*, and the method which aims at discovering how this is brought about in the widest variety of systems has been called general systems theory. General systems theory seeks to classify systems by the way their components are *organized* (interrelated) and to derive "laws" or typical patterns of behaviour, for the different classes of systems singled out by the taxonomy.'

There can be no doubt that in the hands of people such as von Bertalanffy (1962), Buckley (1967), Ashby (1956), Allport (1960), and many others, general systems theory has been and continues to be a powerful tool for the analysis and understanding of behaviour at both micro and macro levels. In the hands of other less sophisticated behavioural scientists, however, the approach is in danger of trivializing the study of man, reducing the individual's status to that of being a 'product' of the forces which impinge upon him, or, still worse, to that of being a cog or a component in the giant machine called society.

The systems perspective, particularly in its deterministic emphasis, has passed directly into the literature of organizational analysis and development. It is the prevailing paradigm of many of those who speculate about organization and organization change. As Greenfield (1973) notes:

'Traditions dealing with organization as mechanisms or organisms usually find favour over those which, reflecting Weberian views, see organizations as complex patterns of choice made by individuals in pursuit of ends that are meaningful to them.'

Miles (1975) is reasonably representative of the prevailing tradition: for him organizations are entities which

'. . . inseparably intertwine people and processes into what is currently referred to as a "socio-technical" system. People in organizations operate the technology, they run the process. But they, in turn, as part of the process, have much of their behaviour *determined* by the system they operate.' (Italics not in the original)

For Miles and, I would argue, for many others, systems theory is more concerned with factors, variables, and things rather than with individuals: 'The scholar is concerned with how these variables—goals, technology, and structure—relate to each other and how they serve, individually or jointly, as determinants of managerial behaviour and organizational performance.' He is, of course, sophisticated enough to acknowledge that such variables must be 'ultimately linked' with 'human variables' for complete explanation, but he considers it convenient to make use of these 'dimensions which are characteristics of organization as such, and not of the people within them'.

The ultimate linkage, acknowledged by Miles, is not simply a matter of crude constraint. True, Durkheim, whose ghost haunts many a naive systems theorist, argued that society controlled the individual by imposing constraints upon him

through custom, law, and practice, reinforcing these constraints with punishment whenever appropriate. Parsons (1937), however, notes that in his later work Durkheim began to see that social rules do not 'merely regulate "externally" . . . they enter directly into the constitution of the actors' ends themselves'. This constraint or restraint becomes 'internal, psychological and self-imposed as well' (Wrong, 1961). The individual becomes part of the system responding unconsciously to the interplay of forces which surround him:

'Central to the natural system is the concept of homeostasis, or self-stabilization, which spontaneously, or naturally, governs the necessary relationships between parts and activities and thereby keeps the system viable in the face of disturbances stemming from the environment.' (Thompson, 1967)

Strauss (1976) notes with approval that organization development is becoming 'the systems approach it claims to be', notably in the moves towards organizational rather than 'attitudinal or small group variables'. He particularly approves of diagnoses and interventions in terms of organizational climate, technostructural, formal, and informal systems, and he sees the development of approaches based upon notions such as differentiation and integration, contingency theory, and 'the almost painfully structurally oriented' work of the Tavistock Institute as the salvation of organization development.

Strauss is decidedly not alone in his aspiration for the field. French and Bell (1973) see the concept of 'system' as 'a major assumption in organization development efforts' denoting 'the interdependency of components and an identifiable wholeness or Gestalt'. Margulies and Raia (1972) claim that 'Organizational Development is essentially a systems approach to the total set of functional and interpersonal role relationships in organizations'. For them, 'Planned organizational change, by its very nature, must consider the potential impact on *all* elements of the system when one of its elements or subsystems is changed'. Schmuck and Miles (1971) rely heavily on the systems concept in their work with schools, while Lippit (1971) is inclined 'to work upon the organization as a system or totality', and so is Kuriloff (1972), Schein (1965), Bennis *et al.* (1969), Beckhard (1969), Argyris (1971), Blake and Mouton (1969), and Lawrence and Lorsch (1969). The perspective reaches its apogee in the work of Alderfer (1976), who utilizes 'boundary permeability and relationship mutuality, two concepts from open systems theory, to explain steady and changing states of individuals, groups and organizations'.

Not only are explanations and understandings to be offered in systems terms; for many the whole basis of organization development itself may be conceived of in terms of the individual *versus* the organization. The facticity of organizations is taken for granted; it is assumed to be non-problematic. In a very similar posture to that adopted by Marxists (Nord, 1974), a number of writers and practitioners appear to see the individual as alienated by his organizations and/or his society and to see their own roles as 'helping people destroy' these organizations (Pages, 1974), or at least to 'come to terms' with them if organizations themselves cannot be redesigned to actualize values and reward