

Discussion paper

How working with organisations might be different from working with teams and individuals ...

Two cases, questions and reflections

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This paper is published as a discussion paper. The editors think that some points contained in the paper raise interesting questions and issues. The paper is interesting and worthy of publication as the start of a discussion about the contents and conclusions. We therefore actively seek comment, discussion and debate about this paper. Responses will be published in the next issue of *InterAction*.

Introduction

Trainers and coaches are mainly working with individuals or groups, where their focus is often, not always, on individual learning. Organisational developers are mainly working with organisations (and individuals or groups), where their focus is often, not always, on organisational change. Since this might make a difference, we want to introduce two cases and reflect briefly on which differences there might be if we focus solely on people versus on people plus additionally on organisations.

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It is possible to regard organisations as groups of people, and indeed in our everyday understanding we consider and encounter them as such. We have had the experience in our OD consulting practice, however, that it can be very useful and often felt as a relief for our customers to accept organisations as “something different”, for example as an entity which is in part independent of the people who are working in it.

We assume that everyone dealing with organisations (managers, staff members, consultants, service providers, different stakeholders, etc.) develops an individual understanding of which context variables they consider particularly relevant for the functioning and development of organisations. Some regard the customer aspect as most relevant, others focus on communication structures, others focus on financial or legal aspects, etc. These individual understandings of the functioning and development of organisations can be called “individual organisational theories”.

We believe that it can be helpful for SF consultants working with organisations to share their thoughts about their individual organisational theories. Moreover, we believe that it can be helpful to enrich the discussion on our understanding of organisations with elements and concepts from the organisational theory of Niklas Luhmann, who is one of the most influential thinkers on social systems, which we have experienced as useful in our own work with organisations.

We would like to further encourage the debate about the understanding of organisations in the SF world with this contribution. By the approach taken in writing this article we would like to continue the “inductive tradition” of looking at “what works” in our consulting practice and maybe then looking for useful theories to broaden the perspective.

One main difference between the “everyday” understanding of organisations and Luhmann’s understanding (see Luhmann 2000) can be described as follows: In our everyday understanding of organisations, employees are seen as part of the organisation. Luhmann and other writers belonging to the new systemic school of thinking on organisations consider

people as one of the organisation's most important environments. This means that people are relevant for the organisation not only as specific individuals, but also as representatives of their functional roles. The consequence of this description is that individuals are exchangeable. The organisation will usually survive if someone quits; their functional role will be filled by someone else. This gives us one important advantage in a situation of conflict or change: it allows us to differentiate between the roles people fill in organisations and their individual behaviour.

According to Luhmann, many organisational structures are more contingent on their relating social subsystem (universities – science, companies – economy, courts – legal system, etc.) than on the people who are currently working there. From these subsystems certain constructs arise, such as the constructs we will describe in our cases, “structures” and “processes”, as well as “decision premises”. We wish to show that using our understanding of Luhmann's concept of organisations offers us the opportunity to ask additional questions that go beyond “Person A interacts with Person B”.

According to systemic organisational theory, organisations can be regarded as more than organised interaction (Simon, 2007). Instead, organisations can be described as autopoietic systems, meaning self-organising, “emergent” systems which create certain patterns (or we could also say, to use management terminology, “structures and processes”) that are meant to safeguard their survival. These patterns often continue to exist even if the players who originally created them have already left the organisation. In systemic “OD speak” we talk about “decision-premises”. This means that if people enter an organisation some time after its foundation, many decisions have already been taken for them, such as what are the products or services of the organisation, who are the clients, what laws and regulations apply, who are the people whose decisions have an impact on their daily work life, etc. By entering the organisation and signing a work-contract they implicitly accept these givens, or “decision premises”.

When we encounter “constructs” about the structures, processes and decision premises in the minds of the people we are working with in organisations, we can deal with them in different ways: by pointing out to staff members that they are not as completely at their mercy as they believe they are and by helping them to focus on the power of their own input and interaction. In our experience this is the classic most powerful SF area of strength and we use it wherever we can.

However, we sometimes also find that using the not so traditional SF approach of focusing on such constructs as a means of introducing a common goal can be useful. It can, for example, provide a relief from blaming individuals for patterns that are sometimes beyond their control. As SF practitioners we believe in using “what works”, adapting to the context of organisations, and using whatever we find in it as resources. We hope to give some examples of this in our two case studies.

Case 1: The hospital (Christine’s case)

Background:

The chairman of a hospital group asked me if I could help him with problems in one hospital. Executives came to him and told him that the senior consultant’s behaviour was unacceptable and that they were having lots of problems with him. Consequently, the chairman had several meetings with the senior consultant and with the executives but the situation still deteriorated. Meanwhile, the conflict escalated and there were also many conflicts between the different professional groups. He feared that the hospital could collapse, since an increasing number of employees were resigning. In the last meeting with the executives he had offered them a facilitated workshop with the head physician and asked me to facilitate this “mediation” workshop (that is what he called it).

Two weeks before the event, I phoned the chairman to prepare the workshop and he told me that he had decided to

terminate the contract of the head physician and wanted to negotiate this with him. Three days before the workshop the termination was communicated to the executives. The decision was to run the workshop with the executives, ten people who are all leading different professional groups within the hospital.

The first workshop

I started the three-hour workshop with the question “What would be the best outcome of this workshop for you? What would make it useful for you?” The answers showed a range from “Could be a start of a process, but I doubt it,” to “Let’s start doing something else instead of fighting all the time”. The main goal, which I asked about too, was to improve teamwork. A scaling exercise (concrete signs of good teamwork, where are the executive team now, what is happening already in the desired direction, what would be different at $x+1$, possible signs and individual/group tasks) was, according to the participants, very successful. They expressed the feeling of “That’s a new start”. Also the doubtful ones were optimistic: “If we can do something like today, it’s a good sign”. They asked for a follow-up workshop three months later.

The second workshop I

The follow-up workshop was postponed for four weeks while a new senior consultant, who was going to participate in the workshop, took up his new post. The opening questions “Experiences? What’s better? Topics for today?” showed that, according to the participants, teamwork was better, “but just for the group of executives”. Lots of conflicts remained. Almost every participant underlined that now, with the new senior consultant, the problems within the hospital would diminish, since he was interested in good teamwork, etc. Still, the main topic they wanted to talk about was improvement of teamwork and what every single professional group could do to improve.

Now, here's a small exercise: Please take some minutes to think about what your next questions in this workshop would be. Please write your questions down.

Questions focusing on people could be:

What is different, when teamwork between different professional groups is better?

How will you notice that e.g., doctors and nurses have started to work better together?

How do the employees recognise that the executives are working better together?

What will you do differently yourself? What differences would others notice, watching you?

These questions could encourage people to think about individual learning tasks, of behavioural change etc. and thus, would be useful to support this.

From an "organisational perspective" talking about people and individual learning could be doing "more of the same" (Watzlawick et al, 1974). The communication in this hospital is already focused mainly on individuals. What did the old head consultant do? What will the new head consultant do? What are the doctors doing? What are the social workers talking about? What is the chair of the hospital doing in the workshop? So, talking again about individuals could be described as doing more of the same – which had not proved too helpful in the past.

From the organisational "point of view", doing something different could be talking about other decision premises like processes, communication and responsibility structures, rules, expectations, etc. Decision premises are described as decisions that serve as a basis for decisions in the daily life of an organisation (Simon 1997). An example: The boss is asked when decisions are worth more than £10,000.00. The employee then will usually just check how much the decision is worth, and not, for example, who would be the best

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decision-maker in this special case. Thus, decision premises can be changed, but are not usually questioned. By this, they support uncertainty reduction (March and Olson, 1976) and reduce the scope of an employee. People are described as decision premises, too: Some decisions are possible with Mr. Smith and not with Mrs. Miller. Every new employee gets flowers with Mr. Smith, but not with Mrs. Miller. So, with Mr. Smith being the boss, the question is who is buying the flowers. With Mrs. Miller being the boss, flowers are probably not in question, so other things will be discussed since they have been seen to be more important.

The second workshop II

Continuing the case report: After asking if I'm allowed to offer the group a hypothesis (being an outsider with no clue about their daily work), I asked them whether they talked a lot about people and rarely about processes, communicational and responsibility structures, rules or expectations. Immediately, they acknowledged that they did. The short discussion after this resulted in a new topic for the workshop: after collecting their goals relating to the hospital's communicational and responsibility structures, they decided to work on one goal, a better preparation within the hospital of a so-called "core meeting", an inter-professional planning of the therapy for the patients. Up until then it had been unclear who was responsible for what, who should provide which information, if information given by a professional group was the opinion of the one who was talking in the meeting or if it was something the professional group agreed on, the process of coordination within the groups was unclear etc. Questions concerning what was already working, and what resources were there, revealed the work of two women, who had already talked about this topic concerning their own professional groups and had started to make a concept for the whole group about two years ago. The workshop ended up with a project planning with responsibilities and timetable for the development of a new process that was aimed at the preparation of this meeting, based on the earlier work of the two women.

A follow-up workshop was arranged to evaluate how the project went and if the new process (with cleared responsibility and communication structures) had been successfully implemented.

The third workshop

The next workshop three months later showed that, according to the participants, it had been a great success. The executives were very satisfied with the inter-professional planning and remarked that this had positive effects on a lot of other issues as well. They were keen on working on another goal. At the end of a very energetic workshop, I asked them what was different about their teamwork now. An executive who was rather sceptical at the first workshop was the first to answer. She said that she was tremendously surprised at the good process: "Though we didn't talk about conflicts, there were fewer conflicts, since there are fewer possibilities". Another participant put it this way: "Our therapy planning meeting is completely different because there's a new common understanding: the decisions concerning the therapy planning are expected to be shared ones. So even new people adopt this. If something doesn't work we still ask sometimes what should this nurse or that social worker do differently. But the main thing is the change in our common understanding of how to organise the work."

In this instance it was helpful for the people concerned to de-focus from the potential "mal-functioning" and "functioning" of individuals and instead focus on a joint goal on a more abstract level. At this level the commonly accepted constructs of "structures and processes" were used and supported the staff members to create their "dream version" of their functioning.

Sometimes it is not possible for individual employees to directly influence the organisation. Thus, even if a staff member personally does not like something or would do something differently, people often do what (they think) is expected within the organisation. But these expectations will

possibly be easier to change, or will at least become easier to live with, if people enter into a communication process about them within the organisation. Communication about decision premises that narrow the possible decisions of a certain job are definitely vital when people must live with a “malfunctioning” organisation. The following case will reflect on that.

Case 2: The bank (Susanne’s case)

Background

A department in a large and traditional bank in Vienna contacted me with a request for conflict facilitation and coaching for the team members.

The situation was described to me as follows: There were numerous conflicts in the “Internal Postal Services” team, consisting of 14 members with very diverse backgrounds regarding education, work experience, age, nationality, and level of health. Some of these conflicts had escalated past the team leader to the department head, his deputy, and some team-members were even threatening to take them to the HR-department and the staff council. The department head even feared there might be a case of bullying. The team was responsible for all postal services in the bank and were poised to kick-off an important project, “Electronic Mail Delivery,” in 6 months. This was in danger if the team was in such disarray.

One condition of the contract was that I was to conduct confidential conversations with the team members to ascertain whether some of those conflicts could be considered bullying. The bank was open about any follow up after that, but believed that probably a number of conflict mediations would be necessary between the individuals. The department head felt it was impossible to bring the team together in a workshop with the current state of conflict.

Interviews

In my conversation with all team-members, including the team head, I basically asked four questions:

- Please describe the current situation to me from your perspective (with a few scaling questions)
- What would be different if it were better for you all?
- What can you do to make it better?
- What can I do to help all of you to make it better?

On a scale of 1–10 most interviewees scored the current situation between 2 and 3. They differentiated between “climate” and “processes”, with processes getting slightly higher scores. The conversations usually started with personal conflict stories, pointing the finger at various individuals in the team who got on their nerves or were “misbehaving”. Gradually they began to describe quite clearly what better would mean in terms of communication and interaction with each other and what they wanted and needed to do to get there (such as be more polite and explicit, talk directly if there is a problem, not behind the others’ backs, brainstorm together how it would be best for everyone rather than dictate solutions, etc.). They also indicated what the managers could do to help improve the situation. In the course of two weeks, during which I kept coming back to conduct more conversations, the mood already seemed to have changed.

What confused me, however, was the fact that nobody could clearly describe to me how they worked together. They all seemed to be a little confused about that themselves. Some conflicts that were described to me seemed to be sparked off by this confusion about who should be doing and deciding what.

When I read through and reflected on the stories that people had told me, I realised that many of the conflicts were sparked off by interface issues. It seemed to me that the staff were completely unaware of the fact that when they passed a

parcel or a pile of envelopes over to a colleague, they were actually using the services of their colleagues, who were actually in another task group. I felt there needed to be more clarity about where the interfaces were and some rules agreed on how they wanted to work through them.

Another issue that showed up was the fact that these fourteen team-members had five different types of work-contracts, all based on different task descriptions, stipulating what they were allowed to do and forbidden from doing. The work-contracts entailed different wage-bands, conditions, collective agreements with the work-council, and different retirement ages.

I gave both the managers and the team a summary of what the team had told me, and we discussed what should be done next.

Now, please think again: What questions come into your mind? What would you have suggested? What would have been your next step?

Since the team-members had all answered the question: “What can you do to make it better?” by saying: “We must all sit together and discuss our work”, the path was clear for a team-workshop.

From the conversations, three areas emerged as yielding potential for improvement: work processes and interfaces, interaction within the team, and some structural changes. As a format I suggested two afternoon team-coaching sessions of three and a half hours each.

First workshop: Processes and Interfaces

This was the subject of the first team-coaching, where the team members outlined the ideal work processes and defined the specifics of the different task groups. When it came to defining small steps towards these ideal work processes, the extremely delicate subject of the differences in work

contracts could be openly addressed for the first time in front of everyone. The older team members explained that they felt restricted by the job categories in their work-contracts. The younger team members expressed their frustration at the fact that the more senior team members had better pay and conditions, but “worked less”. Ultimately all agreed, that since they could not change the bank’s complicated job categories, they would have to “jump over their shadow” and work towards their “ideal work processes” regardless. This meant basically respect the contracts in some of their “hard” legal requirements, but not take them too literally in the every day working processes.

Much of the process clarification provided a new angle for all those involved. Everyone was quite relieved to learn that most of their conflicts were not personal, but could be explained and sorted out through a better understanding of work interfaces. It also had the effect that several processes were overhauled and optimised, which was good preparation for the new project to come. Bringing the discussion away from the interpersonal level, which was charged with conflict, towards a more abstract level and a general goal they could all agree on was “what worked” for this group.

Second workshop: Interaction

The second workshop was two weeks later on the subject of “communication and climate”. It proved almost unnecessary, since so much had improved already. We used the team for a fun, play-acted version of their “dream future” and for setting up “rules” for when conflicts get bad. This workshop ended with a joint evening meal, which was attended by nearly everyone – something that had not happened for some time.

Finally, they agreed on introducing a communication platform for the team. Until then the team had had no official way to seriously discuss their work issues with each other or with their bosses, or to address conflicts. Their team jour-fixe was a five-minute stand-up affair with the managers passing on “work orders”.

They decided to try out the following: once a month they would meet for a somewhat longer period (20–30 minutes) in a different setting where they could sit down and all see each other. The managers agreed to ask the team members for the issues they wanted to raise. In fact, besides asking them to report their progress, I asked the team members specifically to raise problems here if there were any, a very “non-SF” move you might say. The reason for this was that previously during the extremely short information-giving gatherings they had had, the team members had always communicated that everything was fine, even if it was not. For them it was progress to start mentioning “problems” and communicating about issues they need to resolve together instead of burying them in interpersonal conflicts.

Structural changes

The situation with the team leader still remained to be sorted out. His absences and bad health were causing a bottle-neck, since he had failed to provide some basic requirements such as making the shift schedule, resulting in huge holiday overlaps and problems of coverage.

Again, to de-focus from criticism of the team leader and each other, we agreed to instead focus on the more abstract topic of an improved shift schedule. A working group was set up which produced new procedures to take account of part-time workers, planned and unplanned absences, and a better agreement for holiday times. The working group presented it to the team and it was ultimately adopted with the agreement of the HR department and the work-council.

Also, it seemed clear that the team leader needed a deputy since he was absent so often. However, team leaders are not supposed to have deputies in this bank, and also the department head did not wish to nominate a single person as informal deputy since this might have started rumours and expectations about the team leader role, which was to be open in three years’ time. Therefore, they agreed on a rotating “deputyship”: each team member agreed to take on

this role for a month in a rotation determined by the first letter of their name. We agreed what this role consisted of and what the attendant tasks, duties, and authorities were.

I had only one conflict facilitation with the two ladies who had accused each other of “bullying”, during which we discussed how they wanted their relationship to be better in the future. When I asked them a month later whether they felt they needed a follow-up, they declined.

In the situations I just described almost everyone initially pointed at individuals. In fact individual changes of behaviour could improve the situation only very little. What was needed were bigger shifts in the team’s working together, involving changing some of the previous patterns, such as shift schedules, communication and leadership structures. We doubt that the team would have solved the situation if the original request to only do conflict facilitation and coaching with the individuals had been fulfilled.

All too often individuals are asked to learn and to change so that the organisation can stay the same. But organisations must also learn and change: If structures and processes stay the same, individuals can “bend around them” for a while, but not forever. This “bending” means that individuals are absorbing the inefficiencies of routine interactions as they are decreed by the organisation or as they have emerged over time. This “bending” often comes at great cost to individual energy-levels, health and work-enjoyment.

Sometimes individual players – managers and team-members alike – can get into a rut and take the routine interactions, such as processes and structures, as a given. Sometimes they are indeed unchangeable at a certain level of authority in the company: the work contracts, for example, are governed by working law and some internal regulations, which only the board unanimously with the board of directors can undo. So in this instance team members had to learn to “bend around them”. Other processes are within the team’s own sphere of influence and can and should be changed or adapted. But even more communication about unchangeable procedures can help to improve matters.

Conclusion in brief

These two cases aimed to show an idea on how working with organisations might differ from working with teams or individuals. The solution here is constructed with the focus on the organisation. That was, from the point of view of our clients, useful in these two cases. Naturally, these solutions would also have been possible with questions that were originally aimed at individuals, but we think that this is less likely for the two cases presented here.

It might extend our focus if we keep in mind that in OD we are working with individuals AND with organisations. Additionally, it might be a good idea if we start to discuss and reflect on our concepts of organisations as SF organisational developers in the future.

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