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Organizational Problem-Handling:  
A Pathological Process?

Some Observations and Suggestions

by

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It is an oft-heard phrase uttered by those who live in contemporary organizations, both those charged with directing and those charged with carrying out directives, that "this organization has a life of its own, independent of the people in it, and there are certain things that can be and certain things that can not be done." Witness the view held by many both inside and outside the Federal Government, that the system is inefficient, unmanageable, and unchangeable. Recently, in a conversation with a high-ranking official in a major federal government agency, the officer responsible for the office of organization and management of the agency stated, "We have good people working here. They are highly competent, very motivated and committed, and I can't understand why we can't seem to get anything significant done." Explanations offered for the lack of progress were politics, legislation, civil service regulations, lack of money, etc. Many people in the agency agree with these explanations, but the alarming thing is that many others in the agency, in response to a request to explain why the agency is not performing better, respond with, "nobody really knows or can explain it. That's just how the organization works."

As organizations and social systems grow, develop, multiply and evolve, if the consequence is people learn that those social systems become more and more unmanageable -- that organizations take on a life of their own -- then the notion of organization as a viable mechanism for effectively solving societal problems comes into question.

It is not the intent of this essay to suggest that contemporary organizational forms have become obsolete, nor is it our view that there is little that can be done to change the current trends in beliefs held by many about organizations becoming uncontrollable. Quite the opposite; we wish to recognize that such beliefs





do exist, to share some of our observations and thinking concerning the organizational dynamics which result in such beliefs, and to suggest guidelines for those who live in, must transact business with, and guide the direction of organizations for coping with those dynamics in such a way that they might maintain, and if necessary regain, confidence in the ability of people to influence, manage, and change the behavior of organizations.

Social systems and organizations have tended in the past, and likely will continue in the future, to be characterized by hierarchies with clear lines of command and control. It might also be observed that generally those systems have been viewed as made up of two major human components: those who design, decide and control the organizational processes, and those who carry out the organizational work. The result of this, we propose, is that both groups are trapped in a one-up and one-down relationship and as a consequence, organizational effectiveness inevitably goes down.

To better understand the consequences of this relationship, let us briefly examine the roles of the manager and the subordinate typically found in formal organizations. Let us first concentrate on the role of the manager. What is expected of the manager? Managers are responsible for the operation of a productive unit. In essence, what that boils down to is that the manager must ensure a minimum outcome. How then does the manager accomplish that? First of all, the manager must determine what is an acceptable minimum level. Then he or she must "design" procedures for how things should be done, so that little is left to chance. Finally, the manager has to "control" how things are actually being done. The manager's role and the expectations around that role are often defined in very mechanistic ways. Rationality and detachment are assumed to be the keys to success.



Let us now shift the focus to the subordinate roles of the organization and ask again the question: what is the subordinate supposed to do? The subordinate has to perform minimally in a particular job that was invented for him. He is generally responsible for producing a predefined product in a controllable or accountable way. Recently, efforts have been made to "add" new dimensions to the subordinate's life. Participative management, management by objectives, job redesign and job enlargement, just to mention a few, are among the new approaches and techniques that have been created in an effort to provide organizational members with a more humane work existence. Finally, to further complicate this already complex organizational setting, it should be recognized that with the exception of those at the very top and bottom levels of the hierarchy all organizational members to some degree simultaneously assume both the manager and subordinate roles.

As we proposed earlier, both groups increasingly may be trapped in an alienating work environment and worst of all they may not have an understanding of what can be done to change the situation. It is our view that one of the main reasons for this "dead-lock" situation is the manner in which each of the groups tend to define the problems of the organization. The very way in which they select and interpret the facts available to them dictates the kind of problems that will be identified and the kind of solutions that will be generated.

Below we present a four-phase evolutionary process through which many organizations are observed to follow. It is a sequence in which the nature of problem definition and problem solution are the critical defining characteristics. It should be noted that those phases are not universal in the sense that every organization must experience them. Rather, they are phases characterized by certain "problems" or dynamics and unless certain remedial action is undertaken, the organization will "evolve" into another more complex problem phase.



The start of the four organizational "problem" phases have as a common characteristic the realization on the part of the formal organizational leadership that the organizational "work" is less than satisfactory and something must be done to change the situation. What differentiates the phases is the focus taken on what is the evidence of the problem and what needs to be changed. The specific nature of the problems and the chronological sequence in which they occur is as follows:

#### PHASE I:

The problem is identified as the work, here perceived and identified as organizational performance or outcome, is less than satisfactory and something must be done to improve performance. As a consequence of this definition, the concentration or focus of the problem is a generalized blame directed at those responsible for performance, namely subordinates. They will tend to be seen and referred to as low or poor performers. On the other hand, the subordinates themselves may experience generalized guilt and failure. At this stage, if the conditions allow, there will be almost complete confirmation of the need for guidance and control of the subordinate group by the "manager" group.

#### PHASE II:

The problem is identified as the work, here seen and identified as the organizational processes or technologies, is less than satisfactory and something has to be done in order to improve those processes. At this stage a shift in focus away from the subordinates occurs. They are no longer blamed, but on the other hand they are also no longer important. Technologies are viewed in this stage as having an independent life and, rationalization of procedures is the key preoccupation.



Subordinates are important to the extent that they do not disrupt a "good and logical" way of doing things. At this point the subordinates begin to sense their relative unimportance to the system and the indifference with which they are treated. Being previously viewed as failures and now as appendices to the process, the subordinates begin to develop feelings of insecurity and humiliation.

### PHASE III:

The problem is identified as the work, here seen and identified as the control of the organizational processes, is less than desirable and something has to be done to improve control. Since everything has been carefully pre-planned, the managers ask why then don't things work as planned? The assumed answer is generally that adequate methods of control and more effective monitoring of work activities are needed. Subordinates are again important to the organization but now, because they have "proved" to be untrustworthy. On the part of the subordinate, his understanding of the situation is that after having his job redesigned, after having suffered possible humiliation and insult to his pride, now he has to be constantly monitored. Humiliation, insecurity and indifference are joined by aversion, mistrust and generalized anger. Managers distrust subordinates and vice-versa, the product and the process loses importance as a creation to either group, perceptions tend to be blurred and distorted, and confusion is wide-spread.

### PHASE IV:

The problem can no longer be identified with any specificity. The situation is perceived as chaotic. As a consequence of the previous three phases, the characteristic of this stage is that nobody can really pinpoint a particular problem source or a particular line of action which might reduce discomfort.





Sometimes the whole cycle will repeat itself, since in Phase IV, it is often a natural occurrence to scapegoat someone and temporarily, Phase I is reinitiated. As the cycles repeat themselves, frustration and a general culture of alienation become established. There is no way out . . .

As the sequence of these phases evidences, there is a shifting of the definition of the problem from performance, to process, to control mechanisms to lack of definition. Paralleling this development, there is an evolution in management beliefs about human nature from basically incompetent, to unimportant, to untrustworthy, to confusion. As far as subordinates are concerned, the feelings and responses go from guilt and humiliation, to indifference and aversion to the organization, the product, and the process, and finally, to confusion.

To illustrate what we are talking about, consider the following invented history in which we attempt to depict the evolution of one social organization -- through these problem phases. The story attempts to highlight the phases and their attendant problems, the choices made of problem-solving mechanisms, and the consequences of those choices.



## The Dilemma of Planning: A Prehistorical Approach

NOTE: This is an invented history. Any resemblance to reality is mere coincidence.

A long, long time ago when rocks were rocks and not bauxite, or coal, or iron ore; and food was meat, and not a supermarket product; and when habitation was a refuge from the wilderness and not a sweet home, there were two men:<sup>1</sup> Abel and Cain.

One day Abel met Cain in the middle of the jungle. Neither of them had ever seen the other, but all of a sudden there they were facing each other. Each looked frightened; both were surprised. Suddenly, nobody knows exactly why, they attacked each other and a tremendous battle ensued.

After a while, the battle stopped. Both were hurt and tired and neither could beat the other entirely. Nobody knows exactly why, but from that moment on, the region was divided into two parts; one to the east of the battle place and the other to the west of the same battle place. Abel remained always in the west and Cain always in the east.

One day something very special happened. Abel was fighting with a beast, and after several hours, was at the point of being done in by the beast. Suddenly, Cain, nobody knows exactly why, who was just arriving at the frontier, crossed to the west and jumped on the beast. Then, together, Abel and Cain managed to kill the beast.

When the beast was dead, the men stared at each other. Then suddenly Cain moved towards the beast and started to pull it towards the east.

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<sup>1</sup> At that time, no consciousness existed about what a woman is, or even if one existed at all, so that no liberation movement was necessary and histories could be developed using only males.



Abel furiously stood up and began to pull the beast towards the west. The men were so strong and so evenly matched that the beast was divided in the middle: half to Abel and half to Cain.

Some time passed after that, and one day Abel saw Cain preparing to attack another beast. Nobody knows exactly why, but Abel crossed the frontier and attacked the beast. Then Cain joined Abel in fighting the beast.

After a while the beast was dead, but the most interesting part of this event was that neither of the men tried to pull the beast away. Rather, they just installed themselves around the dead animal and started to eat it.

All of a sudden no more frontier existed and both men felt that something was changed in their lives: they were not alone anymore. From then on, the men stayed together and (nobody knows exactly how) other similar "species" joined them. They discovered that these new species smelled differently. Also, when they touched one another a strange sensation was felt. As time passed, some strange things started to happen: small "species" began to appear from the middle of some of the old ones.

Cain and Abel were the strongest among all the "species" that joined them and everybody followed them without question. As the group grew in numbers they decided that they should find a place to stay and to be the residence when they wanted to rest after hunting. In order to protect the residence the group was divided into those who stayed and those who went hunting.

Cain formed one group and Abel the other. When one group was tired, the other went hunting, and vice-versa. This situation persisted even after Cain and Abel were dead. One group went hunting while the other would rest. Everybody hunted and everybody rested.



One day while resting, one of the species noticed that the trees and flowers were born from the earth and grew up. He also learned that some trees could be eaten. When he told everyone of his discovery, they were all delighted with the idea of eating flowers and trees. They soon also learned that they could force things to grow. From this point on, everyone who did not go hunting would force things to be born from the earth and grow. Now, all of the species participated in killing beasts and also in forcing things to grow while they rested from the hunt.

As time passed, there were some of the species, nobody knows exactly why, who preferred hunting to forcing things to grow. Fortunately or unfortunately, there were others who felt just the opposite: they preferred to stay at home rather than run after beasts. More species from Cain's original group wanted to stay at home, while more species from Abel's original group wanted to hunt. So Cain's group was converted into farmers and Abel's group into hunters. At that point, part of the species specialized in killing beasts and the others specialized in forcing things to grow.

This situation persisted for a long time, even after the leaders of the new groups, respectively Cain's grandson and Abel's grandson, were dead. Cain's descendants were always farmers and Abel's were always hunters.

The hunters started to use a particular type of clothing, more practical for the sort of thing that they were specializing in, whereas the farmers started to use clothing that was more appropriate for working in the fields. Not only the clothes became representative of and unique to each group, but also their mannerisms, the way in which they related to each other and even the shape of their bodies.

Some time passed and, again, something very special occurred. Not enough trees and flowers grew and Cain's group began to look very sad. Curiously,





the hunters had an excellent season killing beasts. The entire group was very dissatisfied because they had very few flowers but a large surplus of meat.

Everybody was extremely upset. Some hunters started to say<sup>2</sup> that they, the hunters, were being exploited by the farmers, as it was not fair for one group to be giving its best while the other was lazy and did not contribute anything. Some hunters even said that they knew this was going to happen, because farmers were not the kind of people to fight hard since they preferred to stay at home.

The situation was becoming extremely bad, so the leaders of the group, who happened to be Cain's grandson's grandson (Cain V) and Abel's grandson's grandson (Abel V), decided to get together to see what could be done. As soon as they got together, nobody knows exactly why, but they started to blame each other and then they got into a fight.

Abel V was much stronger than Cain V and also much better skilled in fighting; and in a few minutes he dominated Cain V completely. Then he said that he could not see any benefit from all the fighting and proposed to discuss the issue with Cain V more rationally.<sup>3</sup> Cain V, humiliated, shamed, and submissive, accepted Abel V's proposal and both sat down to negotiate. After apologizing for his demonstration of irrationality and pointing out that despite the differences that everybody was a member of the group, Abel said that in his opinion there was a need for stronger coordination of action within the group. Cain V stated that he felt the same way and that although the farmers were having a hard time that season, with some help from the hunters they could face the situation. Abel V reminded him that the problem was not that simple: it would not be easy to get the hunters to perform the task of forcing things to grow. Further, Abel stated

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<sup>2</sup> Nobody knows exactly how, but they developed a way to communicate with each other by using oral sounds.

<sup>3</sup> To be rational at that time was somewhat the same as being a hunter.



that even if they could find more flexible hunters, the fact that they would have to stay at home to plant would signify a drop in the rate of beasts killed per season.

The power of those arguments astonished Cain V. He asked himself how he could have been so stupid not to have recognized the complexity of the issues. A feeling of ignorance and failure came over him: he was as inept in arguing as he was in fighting. Abel V then said that what they really needed was to have someone to better organize what had to be done, to figure out how it should be done, to think about how to solve the problem of the actual shortage of flowers and trees, and to make certain that those things would never again happen.

Cain V recognized that this was a very good idea and, in fact, he had someone in mind to take on the task. Since all the trouble had been caused by the farmers and the farmers were the ones who knew best how to make flowers grow again, Cain V reasoned a farmer should take the responsibility. But Abel V did not see it the same way, and he argued with Cain V: "If we take one farmer away from his work to do this job, it will mean one less of the species working as a farmer, and this will create more problems to make flowers grow. Now, if we take one hunter, no great difference will be noted, because the season that we are having is so good and the amount of accumulated beasts that we have killed is sufficient to last for a long time, so there is no reason for fear.

After a long period of silence in which he was trying to digest Abel V's words, Cain V asked, "But how would a hunter be able to solve a farmer's problem?" Abel V responded, "Of course this is a serious problem, but I hope that if we chose the right person he will be able to help you after interacting more closely with your group. He will have time just to learn and think about your problem."



From that point on, the group was composed of some people that killed beasts, some people that forced things to grow and one man that just thought about problems: Abel VI.

Nobody knows exactly why, but the hunters kept on killing lots of beasts and the farmers could not make as many flowers and trees grow as was needed. The hunters were terribly upset, saying that they were doing their best in hunting and had even tried to help the farmers by giving them a thinker. They concluded that the farmers were still lazy.

The farmers, especially Cain V, were feeling guilty. They thought that they were giving their best and even had additional help - who was not familiar with planting, it was true, but was an addition nevertheless - and the results were even worse than the last season.

Abel V called his son and asked him what the problem was, why things were not getting better. Abel VI said that he was having a hard time understanding what the farmers were doing, but his initial observations were leading him to the conclusion that they were doing everything wrong.<sup>4</sup>

This new information made Abel VI very anxious and he immediately called the eldest hunters together for an urgent meeting. At the beginning of the meeting, he said that this intolerable situation could not continue. He went on to say that it was not fair to have the hunters do everything right and the farmers do everything wrong, as everybody would see by the report that his son was going to give. Then, feeling very proud of his son, he introduced Abel VI to the participants of the meeting.

All the old hunters were shocked by the report, but on the other hand, they empathized with the farmers' problems and ignorance. One of the old hunters even said: "how can they live with such a situation?"

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To do things wrongly at that time meant that things were not done in a hunter's way.



Abel VI then postulated: "What we need is to form a group, rather than just one person, to study the problems of our community and especially to decide how we should handle the type of problem that the farmers have. We hunters are strong and responsible; we are in a very good position because we have killed lots of beasts; we can be proud of our sons because they have proved themselves to be good hunters. Therefore, I propose that as a gesture of generosity and compassion, we designate some of our sons to take on the noble task of studying and helping."

From this moment on, the group was divided into farmers, hunters and thinkers (who were the sons of the hunters). The hunters' sons had to have a place to develop their studies without being disturbed by the farmers, so the resting place was divided into two zones: north and south. The thinkers always stayed in the north zone.

Time passed and the thinkers thought a great deal. They actually discovered ways of making the farmers more productive.<sup>5</sup> Those ways were classified into "thoughts on production technology" and "thoughts on production processes." The farmers were astonished by the results that the ideas achieved, the majority of which they did not even understand, but they felt that the ideas worked. Of course, they also felt they were being forced to change and this created some discomfort, but that was the price that had to be paid. The hunters were proud and asked: "If our sons are able to make those farmers productive, what can't we expect for the future?" The answer to that question did not delay in appearing.

The thinkers, in the north, had a tremendous idea; if they were able to make farmers productive in planting and growing things, they certainly would be able to make hunting more productive. They concluded that if they could use far-

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<sup>5</sup> To be productive, at that time, meant to do more things for hunters in a way that hunters would like.





mers to do the hunting and more hunters to do the thinking, there would be a tremendous savings.<sup>6</sup> The farmers loved the idea because they felt that the hunters were giving them an opportunity to learn how to kill beasts: in fact, not only how to kill beasts, but how to kill them in a productive way.

This situation persisted even after Abel VI died and, by the time his grandson Abel VIII was the leader of the thinkers, they came up with general theories on doing. The theories described techniques on doing and how to organize the doing process. They also defined a doer and identified the characteristics of a good doer. The group at that time was composed of thinkers and doers; the former would study and guide the others; the latter would work. The former originated from those who in the far past had accumulated killed beasts, the rest were descendents of those who had discovered that things grew from the earth. Everything was going smoothly.

However, the day came, nobody knows exactly why, when dissatisfaction among doers and guilt among thinkers started to show. Claims could be heard that it was not fair to have only thinkers thinking while doers were doing. So, as a consequence, some good doers<sup>7</sup> were admitted to the thinking places. These doers were then introduced to the conceptual world of the thinkers, their thoughts and their behavior. They, in fact, proved to be so good that they distinguished themselves among the thinkers (they were called the "nouveaux thinkers").

Some time later, nobody knows exactly why, the doers started to be less and less productive and, no matter what the thinkers tried to do, things got worse and worse.

In order to cope with this problem, many thoughts were created such as the one on sociability among doers. This thought was about the possibility of the doers getting together to meet other needs besides productivity increases.

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<sup>6</sup> As a consequence of the meaning of productivity, savings, at that time, meant increased benefits to the hunters.

<sup>7</sup> To be a good doer meant to be a person with a "flexible personality."



Another thought was developed on needs scaling. This one was about how doers could have different needs than thinkers. All the thoughts served as palliatives and, although some improvements were achieved, things were still going wrong.

One day, a man with a long white beard came to the resting place, nobody knows from where, and said, "I am here to help you." His voice was so strong that everybody heard him. Some thinkers reacted to him by asking how he as an outsider could be of any help; other thinkers were worried about how it was possible for this man to appear out of nowhere and speak the same language as the group. Some doers thought that the foreigner was another thinker's invention; other doers thought that he came from the sky with super powers to solve all problems.

This man, the stranger with a lamp in his hand who had come to help, started to ask each person how the problems facing the group had begun. But by that time nobody exactly knew.



The preceding scenerio depicts in a simplistic way many of the evolutionary dynamics of our contemporary social systems. It is an invented history - we know because we invented it. The key question is, however, to what extent have we represented a reality which fits contemporary organizations. Our experience and observations suggest we have captured more reality than fantasy, unfortunate as that may be. Many of the dynamics which characterize human systems are present in our parable; interpersonal conflict growing out of fear and uncertainty, organizing for mutual benefit, differentiation and specialization, subgroup formation and identity, intergroup rivalry, stereotyping, social comparison, status differentials, development of control and coordination mechanisms, cooptation, job enlargement, and so on. Beyond highlighting the human dynamics characteristic of organizations, the social system is depicted as it moves through the four organizational problem phases discussed earlier. As was stated, the primary purpose for presenting the parable is to illustrate the dynamics and evolutionary nature of the four phase problem sequence. Let us examine the "history" more closely and analyze each of the four problem phases.

The phase 1 problem, where the problem is identified as the work (outcomes) has become less than satisfactory, occurred in the parable when "not enough trees and flowers grew." The result was a good deal of dissatisfaction shared by all, high anxiety, tension, fault-finding, and defensiveness. The solution chosen was that one of the "proven" good performers (a hunter) should study and help the poor performers (farmers) improve their performance (grow more trees and flowers). The assumptions implicit in this solution were (1) the farmers' lack of ability or motivation were the cause of the problem (low output of trees and flowers), and (2) the hunters had the capability to solve the problem. At this point, we will simply note that both assumptions were taken as "givens" and neither was questioned or tested.



Time passed and at the end of the next season, it was realized that "the results were even worse than the last season." It was the conclusion of the "thinker" that the farmers "were doing everything wrong." Here, we have an illustration of what we mean by a phase 2 problem - namely, the focal problem is now identified as the process being wrong. The solution was "to form a group, rather than just one person, to study the problems . . . [and] to decide how we should handle the type of problems that the farmers have." The implicit assumptions in this solution were the same as the previous ones plus an assumption that the farmers must be told how to do things right. The results were that the thinkers "discovered ways of making the farmers more productive" and more plants and flowers grew.

The phase 3 problem phenomenon - where the concern is to improve the control of the process - is illustrated by what grew out of the hunters' query, "If our sons are able to make these farmers productive, what can't we expect for the future?" The answer was to develop better ways of standardizing and controlling the work. The thinkers developed "general theories of doing. They detailed and refined techniques for doing and specified how to organize the doing process." Note that the assumptions underlying these actions have expanded to include: (1) doers [former farmers] lack ability or motivation to "do" things "in a productive way" without guidance; (2) thinkers [former hunters] should provide the necessary guidance; and (3) there was one correct way to "do" - the thinkers' way.

As time passed, the society evolved into a phase 4 problem situation - something was wrong, but nobody knew what to do to improve the situation. The situation was characterized by a widespread lack of understanding of the causes of the dynamics operating in the current situation. The most significant characteristic differentiating this phase from the other phases was that in each of the other phases, the leaders believed that they understood the nature of current dynamics,





whereas in phase 4, the belief was the opposite - there is no understanding - or at least no consensus of understanding existed among key leaders.

As a sample model, the phases can each be defined in terms of (1) the way in which the problem is perceived and defined by management, (2) the behavioral assumptions, often implicit, which are congruent with the way in which the problem is defined, and (3) the problem-solving mode which generally follows from the problem definition and assumptions made. Table 1 below summarizes the major features of each phase along each of the three dimensions.

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As we can see by simple investigation in Table 1, there are certain features that are shared by phases 1, 2, and 3. The first of those features is that although the focus of the problem changes in the first three phases, there is always a clear problem definition. The second shared feature is that there are an identifiable and unique set of behavioral assumptions that are held by managers on the one hand and subordinates on the other. Finally, phases 1, 2, and 3 share the characteristic that there is always a clear and "standard" solution to the problem as it is defined.

What organization members, and particularly the managerial group, fail to realize when they accept the standard problem solving mode is that they are often taking actions based on untested and implicit assumptions and definitions. Those assumptions might prove to be correct and congruent with the situation, but the problem is that very seldom are those assumptions tested. Pressured to solve their day-to-day problems, managers tend to skip a fundamental rule of enterprise management, namely to gain a clear understanding and verifiability of operational assumptions.



The need to straighten out the system tends to make them avoid a more careful and well thought-out approach to problem solving in favor of merely reducing each complex problem to a combination of previously experienced ones for which they, or others, have a known set of solutions.

Subordinates, on the other hand, tend to be subdued as a result of their "perceived" relative ignorance in technical matters and often end up assuming the already-discussed complementary role in this pathological dynamics. In view of this relatively destructive sequence of organizational behavior, the critical problem to be resolved becomes determining ways in which organizational members can both effectively "solve" the problem at hand and break out of the pathological problem sequence outlined.

Our suggestion for confronting this problem rests on people in organizations gaining a clearer personal understanding of social behavior and social systems. In essence, what we advocate is that everyone become an organizational theorist and diagnostician of sorts. It is our belief that if people can better understand the dynamics of behavior in organizations, begin to identify some of the "critical choice points" in organizational life, and develop some action or intervention skills for influencing the behavioral choices made, then we feel people can begin to regain a feeling of control over their social systems.



## WHAT CAN BE DONE

The last part of the paper will concentrate on the ways by which the members of an organization can try to cope with their organizational problems. As it was stated, we believe that much can be gained just by increasing each individual's understanding about the situation that he or she is involved in.

In confronting the problem of what to do, referring back to the four-phase model, it is our view that as a result of the differences noted, a distinction must be made between the first three phases and phase four. The perception of some degree of certainty and confidence in understanding the nature of current organizational dynamics prevalent in phases 1, 2, 3 versus the lack of confidence and relative confusion characteristic of phase 4 suggest a differentiation between the two may be critical. In the former, the learning process can be approached in a relatively straightforward manner. The relative clarity of problem definition and the perceived understanding of cause and effect relationships can facilitate assumption testing and the learning process in that the ultimate goal of problem elimination is clear and explicit. In the phase 4 situation, little is clear in terms of cause and effect or in terms of agreement of appropriate action options. In the former case, more traditional approaches to learning and assumption testing can be employed whereas in the latter case, novel and radical approaches are likely needed. Let us examine some possible approaches which might be applied under phase 1, 2, 3 conditions.

It has been observed that individuals create very complete and sophisticated theories and explanations about their social situations that tend to be self-confirming. In other words, individuals create their own understanding about social facts in such a way that whatever happens their assumptions are seldom challenged. Rather, their assumptions and beliefs tend to become more powerful



in terms of explaining what goes on. To put it differently, the individual in an organization keeps receiving signals which tend to confirm his or her own assumptions and beliefs, as the reciprocity of assumptions in Table 1 shows. In a way, the individual becomes frozen into a self-perpetuating and predefined role.

The social situation can be such that individuals become stuck in unchallenged, although sometimes undesirable roles. The question then is how can these roles be changed? The answer is that first current assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs need -- to use Schein's term -- to be "unfrozen." By unfrozen, we mean that those assumptions need to be subjected to conscious and serious examination and testing -- they need to be subjected to possible challenge. In order for the unfreezing process to occur, certain conditions must be established:

1. There must be a commitment to examining and analyzing what is occurring and to understanding why.
2. There must be a commitment to seeking information which might confirm or disconfirm the validity of one's view of the situation.
3. There must be a climate of psychological safety established.

The process of exposing oneself and one's assumptions to possible disconfirmation will be likely to create some anxiety and tension, both of which can facilitate change. However, change is unlikely to occur unless there is some degree of safety established for testing one's beliefs and trying out new attitudes and behaviors (Schein, 1971).

Once conditions have been established for realistically testing prevailing assumptions, what methods exist for achieving the type of changes needed and desired? There are several methods which might be applied: value-clarification meetings, attitude surveys, organization mirroring sessions, the role analysis technique (RAT), T-groups, etc.





One final point worth noting is the role of management in choosing whether or not to undertake such an organizational learning or analysis activity. If management seriously want to promote this type of organizational self-insight building effort, they should be clear about their own motives for entering into the effort. They should avoid being either paternalistic or authoritarian when doing so; otherwise, the responses and results will almost certainly be contrary to what they had hoped to accomplish. In other words, if managers go to this "experiment" with the philosophy of "let's try this new gimmick on them and see if now we can get them to be what we expect them to be," it is better not to start, as the result is likely to be failure. The manager considering such an activity should ask himself or herself before starting whether he or she really wants to get involved in an effort which might result in getting away from "past" ways of doing things.

Let us now turn our attention to the phase 4 situation, in which confusion and generalized anger is the widespread organizational condition. Problems cannot easily be defined, and decisions seem to be made more or less randomly. The system is perceived to work only because of its own inertia. No one really seems to be in control of what is happening and everyone is caught up in traditions, norms, and regulations. "Shake-it-up" may be a useful strategy at this point. Lack of clarity about roles and goals, lack of purposiveness of behavior and lack of commitment tend to dominate. Everything and everyone seem to be "frozen" and unchangeable. The organization seems to have a life of its own. People may in fact refer to the organization as something independent of themselves, an independent and irrational beast.

The focal concern here is no longer a matter of clarifying assumptions and attitudes of individuals in organizations, nor is it simply a matter of increasing understanding about the social situation per se.



Rather, it is time to question the very existence of the organization and to challenge the supposed supra-natural quality that the organization has achieved.

It is our view that remedial action requires that someone do something that is "abnormal," something that has never been done, something outside the boundaries of what is considered to be "appropriate" in that organization. At the basis of our thesis that a "nontraditional" approach is needed to break out of the phase 4 situation is an assumption that it is the organization's tradition and those behaviors deemed "normal" which together have caused and maintained the problem. Thus, we propose the solution lies somewhere outside of past ways of thinking and behaving.

March (1971) has suggested the beginnings of a "technology of foolishness" which outline some guidelines for new and nontraditional ways of thinking and acting. What March advocates is a temporary, yet serious, periodic legitimization of playfulness in organizations. By "playfulness" is meant a relaxation of rules, especially rules of rationality, so as to legitimize and facilitate creative, novel, and relatively unconstrained thinking and problem-solving.

It is our view that a technology of foolishness may provide the needed guidelines for organizations to break out of the phase 4 problem trap. Let us briefly examine what such an approach, using March's suggestions, might involve.

### 1. Treat Goals as Hypotheses.

As March states, "Conventional theories of decision making allow us to entertain doubts about almost everything except the thing about which we frequently have the greatest doubt -- our objectives." (1974, p. 226). Here the agenda is to challenge the unchallengeable -- our goals. This is not to say that goals should be eliminated; rather it proposes that goals be examined, evaluated, and remain



subject to evaluation. It is suggested that the value of specific goals be assessed continuously and maintained or rejected according to the information at hand at any given time.

## 2. Treat Intuition as Real.

Here the suggestion is to allow more basis of action-taking to be considered as legitimate options. In phase 4 situations where confusion and failure are prevailing conditions, traditional and rational approaches often have been exhausted and new approaches are required, intuition may prove to provide a new heuristic for achieving viable solutions. To quote March,

We do not know what intuition is, or even if it is any one thing . . . Perhaps it is an inexplicable way of consulting that part of our intelligence and knowledge of the world that is not organized in a way anticipated by standard theories of choice . . . intuition permits us to see some possible actions that are outside our present scheme for justifying behavior. (1974, p. 227).

## 3. Treat Hypocrisy as a Transition.

Put another way, one might view inconsistencies as a dynamic state moving towards consistency. As we have described the phase 4 condition, it is a period of high dissonance, of high inconsistency between what is understood and what we think, or thought, we understood. It is a time of significant and rapid change of personal beliefs and actions. As a result, such a condition may be characterized by a widespread prevalence of apparent hypocrisy or inconsistency. The suggestion is to resist, at least temporarily, the norm of condemning inconsistencies and instead, to encourage and support the change implicit in those inconsistencies. The example March uses is that, ". . . a bad man with good intentions may be a man experimenting with the possibility of becoming good. Somehow it seems more sensible to encourage the experimentation than to insult it." (1974, p. 227).



4. Treat the Memory as an Enemy.

The assumption here is that memory acts to hinder creativity and innovation.

March expresses it most succinctly:

The rules of consistency and rationality require a technology of memory. For most purposes, good memories make good choices. But the ability to forget, to overlook is also useful. If you do not know what you did yesterday or what other people in the organization are doing today, you can act within a system of reason and still do things that are foolish. (1974, p. 227).

5. Treat Experience as Theory.

Learning can be viewed as a series of conclusions based on concepts of action and consequences we have invented. Experience can be changed retrospectively. By changing our interpretative concepts now, we modify what we learned earlier . . . The usual strictures against 'self-deception' in experience need occasionally to be tempered with an awareness of the extent to which all experience is an interpretation subject to conscious revision. (1974, p. 227).

The five "suggestions" for an approach to be employed in confronting the problems characteristic of phase 4 provide a foundation for developing a strategy for "breaking out" of such an acute problem situation. As March points out, the guidelines offered "are possibly dangerous applications of powerful devices more familiar to the study of behavioral pathology than to the investigations of human organizations." (1974, p. 139). We would agree that such "devices" may hold danger as well as offer promise. Further, we submit that methodologies developed to deal with human pathologies may be the appropriate mode for the type of organizational problem situations under discussion. It is our view that such problems and situations are the manifestation of a sort of pathological organizational evolutionary trend.

The problem or challenge for organizational managements and organization development practitioners appears to lie in developing more explicit strategies





and intervention techniques which can exploit the potential of such nontraditional approaches while minimizing the danger of their utilization.

As one last point, if we accept the notion that inconsistency is a consequence of and characteristic of change and complexity, it may be the case that inconsistency or hypocrisy are becoming the norm or the steady state. As the organizational world becomes increasingly complex and dynamic, values and beliefs determined or acquired in the past may be continuously "out of synch" with behaviors required by current environmental demands. If this is the case, what organizations may require is a series of mechanisms or interventions aimed at changing currently-held attitudes toward and discomfort with inconsistency. An ability to cope with and accept inconsistency comfortably may be a critical determinant of future organizational effectiveness and survival.

To summarize briefly what we have endeavored to convey in this essay, we have attempted to conceptualize an evolutionary sequence into which some contemporary organizations appear to be "trapped." That simplistic four-phase problem sequence was described in terms of (1) how current organizational problems were defined, (2) the attitudes and beliefs characteristic both of management and subordinates, and (3) the types of "problem solutions" deemed viable at each place. A parable was presented in which we attempted to illustrate, in a playful way, the chronology, dynamics, and possible consequences of such a problem sequence. We briefly suggested guidelines for confronting the problems posed by phases 1, 2, and 3 in our model. In essence, the proposed approach was to consciously employ a more-or-less rational and traditional learning and problem-solving approach to the organizational problems. However, the phase 4 situation was significantly differentiated from the previous three phases. The approach advocated here was based on ideas from March's paper, "Technology of Foolishness" (1971).



What was suggested was an approach based on developing a methodology antithetical to "rational" or previous organizational problem-solving methodologies. Several authors recently have supported such an approach using different labels: March (1971, 1974) calls for more "playfulness" or "foolishness," Leavitt (1975) advocates "fertilizer" rather than "analytic" approaches to problems, while Mintzberg (1972<sup>6</sup>) observes many chief executives rely heavily on "right-brain" functions (intuition).

In closing, we wish to point out that we do not feel we have offered a solution to the types of organizational problems discussed. Rather, we hope we have identified a direction of inquiry and development. Terms of "playfulness," "intuition," and "technology of foolishness" are not solutions in themselves. As March notes: "There is little magic in the world, and foolishness in people and organizations is one of the many things that fail to produce miracles." (1974, p. 229). We would agree with March that such concepts hold little magic. We would alternatively suggest that such concepts indicate directions of opportunity.



PHASE	PROBLEM DEFINITION			BEHAVIORAL ASSUMPTIONS (IMPLICIT)			PROBLEM SOLVING	
	FOCUS OF ATTENTION	MANAGER'S ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THEMSELVES	SUBORDINATES	SUBORDINATES' ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THEMSELVES	MANAGERS	GENERAL	PROBABLE SOLUTIONS	
I	WORK = OUTCOME	RESPONSIBLE, COMPETENT	LAZY, INCOMPETENT	FAILURE, INCOMPETENT	POWERFUL	DEPENDENCY, SUBORDINATION	PERSONNEL SELECTION, TRAINING, REWARD SYSTEM	
II	WORK = PROCESS	KNOWLEDGEABLE, IN CONTROL, ALL-POWERFUL	"ADAPTABLE," PASSIVE, UNIMPORTANT	LACK OF IDENTITY & SELF-RESPECT	FORCEFUL & UNCARING	PERSUASION	PROCESS INNOVATION, STRUCTURAL REORGANIZATION, LAY-OUT, etc	
III	WORK = CONTROL	DISCIPLINARIAN, GUARDIAN OF MORALE	UNTRUSTWORTHY, SELFISH, UNCOMMITTED	EXPLOITED	UNTRUSTWORTHY, SELFISH, OPPRESSIVE	COERCION	M.I.S., PRODUCT CONTROL	
IV	"FUZZY"	GENERALIZED LACK OF CONFIDENCE	GENERALIZED ANGER	GENERALIZED CONFUSION & SELF-ESTRANGEMENT	GENERALIZED ANGER	STRUGGLE	RANDOM	



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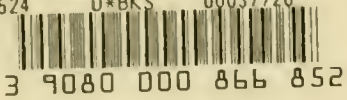
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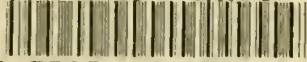
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