

The emotional lining of an organization

Most of our lifetime we are living in and dealing with organizations. It is not our most favorite structure of being, but we are just so used to it that we hardly ever reflect organization and our mental state to have the same derivation. Many of the emotional phenomena within organizations are due to structural prerequisites and the way people are linked together by this structure. In this paper I would like to focus on the emotional challenges due to the structural architecture of an organization. Although we are talking a lot about networking these days, there still exists a basic pattern for organizations. Basically the main structural foundation of organizations is hierarchy, no matter how strict or how liberal it is laid out, how lean or how steep it is designed. In the following sketches I'd like to show some of the emotional moments and sentiments that occur because of the structural pattern of organizations. Acting and reacting emotionally in organizational contexts is not necessarily an individual personality trait. Emotional reactions of individuals can also be seen as answers to systemic patterns that induce irritations to the individual. Emotions, deriving from individual personality patterns, though also important when dealing with mental states, are not the main issue in this article.

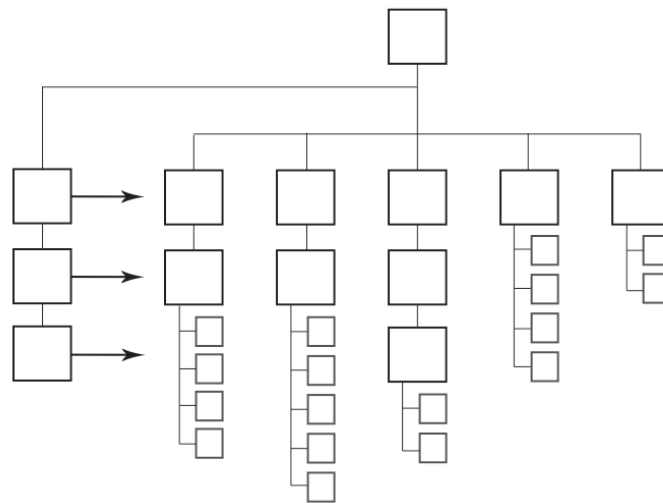
The first subsystems that come to mind when following the hierarchical pattern are individuals. Each one of them is assigned with a special task, thus, taking over one particular part of the whole. For the individual employee it is not necessary to deal with or to know about the motives or the strategic policies of the organization. E.g., designing, producing and selling a car it is not done by a group of people in unison¹. Rather, they are subdivided into sections like engineering, sales, controlling – just to mention a few according to our example chosen. Each section hires specialists like engineers and sales people who, in turn, cannot be

¹ Lately a new approach in redesigning organizations has come to attention: the open source innovation processes. One of the projects is called Open - Source - Cars *Oscar* where in the end, every participant should be able to produce his or her car.

(Honsig, 2006, In: Blutner, D. & von Lüde, R.: Akteurskompetenz und Entscheidungslogiken in Prozessen von Open Source Innovation. In: Wetzels, R., Aderhold, J., Rückert-John, J. (Hrsg.): Die Organisation in unruhigen Zeiten. Heidelberg 2009).

exchanged against each other via job rotation. Their individual expertise has to be coordinated on a higher hierarchical level, where all information necessary to produce a car is gathered and decisions can be made. When looking at organizations from this perspective, it becomes apparent that the underlying pattern is the division of labor. One way to capture the division of labor is to draw an organizational chart, illustrating how people are connected by the organizational structure and displaying who supervises whom and is supervised by whom.

ORGANIZATION SEEN AS INTERLOCKED INDIVIDUALS



Individuals are linked together through subjugation. The system divides between superiors and subjugates. Sectors originate as a consequence of the division of labor. The nature of construction is “either - or” and thus follows the principles of logic. Membership is unambiguous. Management implies and stands for: subjugation, control, subsumption, dependency.

When giving a lecture on organization, I usually start with a simple exercise and collect freely spoken associations to the terms “group” and “organization”. The result is always the same and insofar predictable: The terms expressed for “group” are emotionally connoted in a rather positive way. For example participants associate community, warmth, discussion, participation, affiliation, belonging, membership. Only after a while, they also find terms that stand for pressure, conformance claims, suppression on individual interests and others. Thus, groups are primarily experienced as welcoming and comfortable.

This is rather different when looking at the terms expressed for organizations. They are emotionally connoted in a rather negative way. At first, participants come up with associations such as hierarchy, rules and regulations, authority, pressure red tape and order. Again after some time, there also appear terms of more positive connotation such as security,

safety and reliability. Hence, organizations are primarily experienced as abstract, inhuman, structured and not at all cozy and welcoming.

It is amazing how naturally we deal with organizations, given the evidence that we don't really appreciate them emotionally. This might lead to the assumption that these rather predictable results, as discovered by many retries of the exercise with different people, are due to probably more than the aforementioned "being just used to organizations".

To explain this phenomenon we have to understand "groups". It's characteristics, the principles of it's structure and it's historical background. When we talk about groups, we act on the assumption of a limited number of people. Whenever face to face communication between the group members - we call it direct communication - is no longer possible, groups disaggregate. Group members build subgroups until the direct communication pattern is restored.²

Considering the age of structures in the history of humanity, groups are by far the eldest social figure. Mankind used to live in group formations for about 3.5 to 4 million years. For our prehistoric ancestors, the group was the only way to survive in the rather untamed surroundings of tribal cultures. Individuality meant not to belong to a tribe and clearly was a deadly fate. It simply did not exist as a form of living. As a result, many of our behavioral patterns and affectations we owe to our prehistoric past.

Another reason for our sympathy for groups may be found in the way we have been raised. Most people grow up in families. The family group is our first social experience. Especially in the beginning, during the first three to six years, the learning pattern is not a rationalized one. We grow up learning through emotions that we experience within the family, the exercise, the practice, the routine, its relatedness and connectedness. We are molded to groups and group affections.

Organizations cannot reproduce the emotional connectedness of family structures, nor can organizations reproduce the emotional security of tribal structures. Organization is furthermore not constructed to provide direct communication for all the members involved. Organizations outnumber by far the limits of group members, if we define group as a network of direct communication patterns. Organizations therefore have to deal with the permanent challenge of organizational imperatives and group needs.

² This definition of groups including only the number of people intertwined in direct communication follows the European tradition of group dynamics. There are other controversial views that define groups as a mass of people without referring to a limited number.

Considering the mentioned perspectives, what are the challenges of organizations for the individuals involved?

Organizational challenges:

1. Indirect communication

Taking a look at the different communication structures and patterns of groups and organizations, we will get another reference as to why we rather dislike organizations at first glance. In a group setting, grown up human beings can only communicate directly with others up to a number of 15 – beyond that number, the group is likely to disintegrate into smaller sub-groups. This is already a theoretical quantity meaning that the probability that 15 people will communicate with each other directly is about 50%. In other words, 15 is an inappropriate number of people when face-to-face communication is required. According to our experiences with group communication, the maximum number is actually 12. As mentioned above, whenever there are more people involved in communication, the group splits up into subsystems. Assumed that subgroups discuss the same topic, results will have to be coordinated. In case of a decision making process, communication will be coordinated via subgroups sending representatives to a newly found board. Within this board of representatives, interests of the involved subgroups will be considered and taken into account for final decisions.

This can be seen as the beginning, the initiation, of organization. An organization can therefore be seen as a communication system, where direct communication between participants is no longer possible. Communication has to be organized and conducted by representatives. For the remaining individuals – the ones that are not delegated to the newly found board – it implies that decisions are made on behalf of their concerns. They do not take part in the decision making process, although they are affected by the decision made by others, the representatives. In organizations decisions about the fate of individuals are made without the participation of the same individuals. Eventually, the decision-making process takes place without the aggrieved parties. People become dependent.

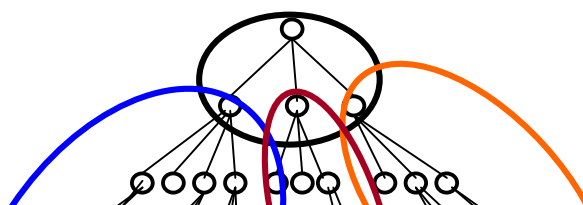
The members of the newly found board build a new group. They too will experience connectedness after a while. In case of disagreement on the subjects to decide, they might agree on a compromise or even decide consensually. Each party gives in a little and accepts

parts of the others' positions. When back in their original groups, representatives announce the achieved results and are immediately confronted with the group's disappointment after figuring out that their original interest has not been achieved by a 100% by their representatives. Summarizing we can state that whenever a systems consists of more than 12 to 15 members, direct communication is no longer possible. Communication has to be organized by representatives. The more numerous the organization, the more indirect the communication becomes.

2. The incompatibility of visions

Due to the afore mentioned division of labor as being one of the most prominent pattern of organizations, tasks are simultaneously coped with in different sections of the organization. These tasks have to be coordinated on higher levels. What exactly do the ones on higher levels do? They exchange information, give explanations when necessary, defend their scheme and try to convince the other section partners of their particular strategy. Each party has brought in results, strategies and points of view, all according to their specific way of how to cope with the task. Engineers for example would always vision the most perfect technological resolution, whereas sales and marketing people would always refer to the most obvious customers' needs. Rarely do outcomes of such interpretations match. Ultimately, what has to be done on such coordinative levels is to negotiate and to cope with unavoidable conflicts that go along with negotiations.

ORGANIZATION SEEN AS INTERLOCKED SECTIONS



Each section has its own internal thinking (e.g. the logic of engineering contradicts the logic of sales). Sections are linked together either by top management or by organizational substructures like project management. The nature of construction is “as well as” following the principles of dialectics. Membership is functional. Management means interface management and negotiation.

3. The overlapping time structure – temporal coincides

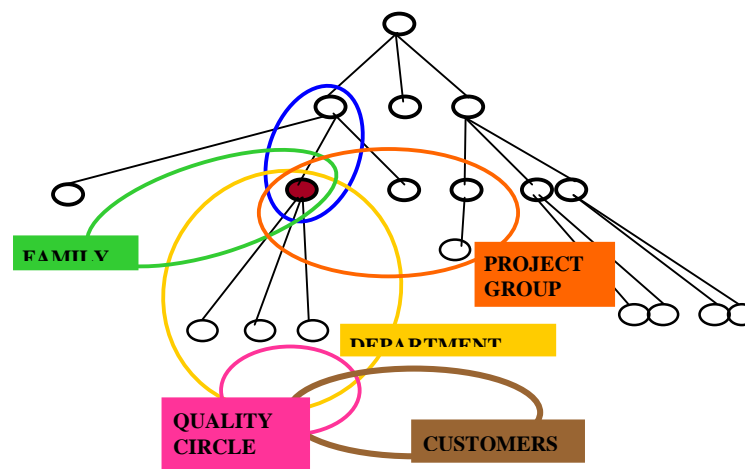
While different parts of the task are coordinated on higher levels of hierarchy, the workflow proceeds in diverse sections, getting ready to be coordinated. Hence, coordination and workflow do not happen chronologically but synchronously. This simultaneous action causes a certain density of time, which increases the more complex the structure of the organization becomes. People, especially the ones in coordinative functions, experience a continuous lack and an unavoidable acceleration of time – not caused by inefficient time management but rather by the temporal coincides. They have a feeling of reacting to things rather than to be able to anticipate actions.

4. Multiple membership

In the process of increasing complexity of the organizational structure, the individuals involved have to cope with the inconveniency of becoming members in different substructures of the organization. They are members within their original department and they may be members of different project groups, quality circles or other short-term units. If they are in a superior position, they are not only members of the team they are chairing, but also members of the group of superiors. The emotional challenge is the one of loyalty. Each group a person is involved in demands a 100% loyalty and affiliation. Being a member of different groups stresses the loyalty and affiliation of all memberships. One of the common reactions is

to “withdraw inwardly”. People find themselves reduced to their individuality, more and more getting the feeling, that they can only depend on themselves, having lost the exclusive membership of one group – a condition that is uncomfortable due to our primary need of affiliation combined with the betrayal of the group’s loyalty. On the other hand, the condition is also a comfortable one in terms of the mind-expanding feeling of autonomy and independence even if this makes one feel lonely.

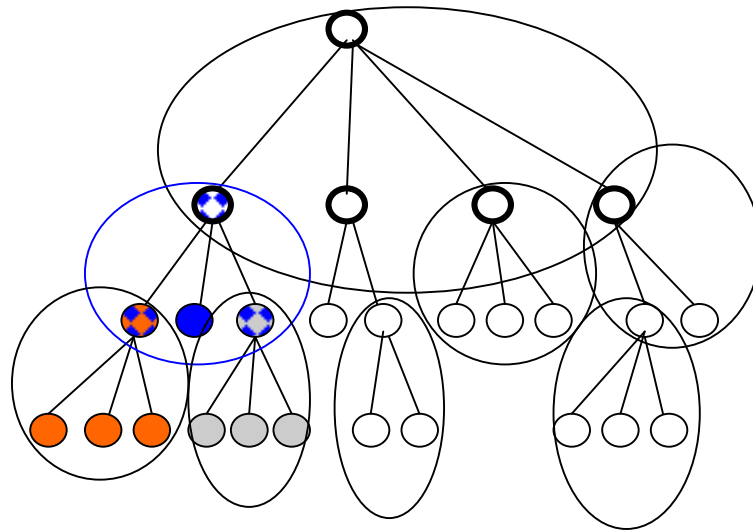
ORGANIZATION SEEN AS OVERLAPPING SYSTEMS



The organization is seen from one specific person’s perspective. Perspectives develop into different directions: up, down, sideways, close, distanced. The organization appears as a system of colliding interests within one individual due to multiple membership. Individuals are members of different sub-systems. They are either representatives of groups of interest or mediators amongst groups of interest. The nature of construction is conflict oriented, following the pattern of logic when hierarchy oriented as well as the pattern of dialectics when interface oriented. Membership is experienced as highly ambiguous. Management means to balance needs and interests, negotiate and deal with interface contradictions and conflicts.

When discussing multiple memberships, I would like to draw on the aforementioned situation of supervisors. They are responsible for their employees and their capabilities as well as for the organizational demand to fulfill their tasks according to the organizational standards and needs. Whenever superiors negotiate tasks within their group of organizational leaders, they betray the loyalty of the team they represent. When they announce the newly agreed requirements of the organization to their employees, their affiliation weakens. Sometimes the reaction of the team is even hostile; at least they are suspicious of how little their supervisor had considered their special interests. The relationship between supervisors and team members will always be accompanied with a certain amount of mistrust.

ORGANIZATION SEEN AS OVERLAPPING GROUPS



Groups are linked through superiors. For the superiors this means at least a dual membership. They belong to their teams as well as to the group of superiors of the same hierarchical level. The nature of construction is ambiguous. Management means to balance the needs of the employees and the demands of the organization.

As mentioned before, group affiliation is one of the basic needs of mankind. Losing the group membership in our prehistoric past meant death. Even in medieval times, being outlawed after a trial was the cruelest of death penalties. Thus, we can assume that the emotional lining of group affiliation is a very strong one. Organizations violate these feelings by structural demands. When having to face aspects such as losing the group's trust, who would ever volunteer to be a representative? They have to be granted certain privileges. Organizations guarantee those "betrayers" protection and support via hierarchical structures – a superior hierarchical position – that provides them with the necessary authority and of course honor their commitment with higher remuneration.

5. The trouble with hierarchy

Assuming that hierarchy is still the main structure of organizational architecture, there are some consequences that have to be considered. First, hierarchy follows the principles of logic thinking. A point of view is either right or wrong. Probably there are a lot of tasks within an organization that can be decided logically, given that there is a right solution to the task. Thus, the logic of hierarchy creates subjugation. Lower levels subjugate under higher levels of hierarchy. Higher levels dictate and control lower levels assuming that the higher levels know the right answers. Information therefore has to be monopolized on the top level. Otherwise, they would not be able to decide in categories of “right” or “wrong”. This implies that lower levels will never have all the information necessary to decide beyond their capabilities. What happens, if a problem occurs, where there is no logical right or wrong answer? A problem, where all contradicting positions might be right? Hierarchy can only decide in the “either - or “ mode. Organizations on the other hand, as I have outlined before, have to deal with quite a number of conflicts caused by a collision of interests where the principles of logics cannot be applied. Solutions have to be found by negotiation. The parties involved cannot subjugate each other. They will have to compromise or even find consensual resolutions. Organizations have to provide communication settings, where negotiation processes can take place. Members of this process are equal before the task, even if their hierarchical level might be different.

A growing complexity enriches the organization with different aspects of a task. Knowledge is growing and so is diversity. The hierarchical reaction would be to subdivide the structure according to the different aspects of diversity. New divisions are created and implemented into the hierarchical structure. The growth of hierarchical structures becomes endless. Simultaneously manageability of the whole becomes more and more difficult for the top level management. The power of hierarchy counterstrikes, weakening the system by over-complication and complexity. It becomes more and more challenging for the top management to keep an overview of a system that is uncontrollably increasing complexity.

Several attempts to react to the situation via organizational change – lean management, project management and learning organizational experiments just to mention a few – have been tried out and applied to organizations. All attempts of implementing structural supplements are accompanied by suspicious resistance strategies on the part of the original organizational structure, the hierarchy itself.³

³ Ewald Krainz (19..) named these resistance strategies “system defense”. These system defence mechanisms are described in: Heintel,P. & Krainz,E.: Projektmanagement. Wiesbaden 1988

6. Communication patterns

In hierarchical systems, communication flows between subordinates and superiors - or, as we would say nowadays: between employees and their managers. The system does not provide any other possibilities. Thus, if a problem of some sort arises in the lowest parts of hierarchy, it is reported to the supervisor, who is reporting it to his supervisor and so on. Whenever the problem is addressed on the top level, it has either changed its informational substance or it has been undergoing a *softener program*. No employee would endanger her/his job by giving unpleasant news to her/his supervisor. They will rather try to avoid making themselves unpopular by delivering bad news.

There might also occur misunderstandings concerning the issue to be delivered. A mere technical issue might end up with a supervisor whose expertise is purely business related. So, she or he might not quite understand the technical relevance of the problem. As being in a superior position, it is difficult to admit that you haven't any idea about the technical part of the issue. In the end, you depend on your own interpretation of what exactly the problem could be. In turn, this is the information that will be delivered by one supervisor to the other. Whatever information reaches the top level of decision-making is probably not the one meant by the technician who addressed the problem in first place.

Top-level managers know about this pattern. They try to deal with the communication camouflage by creating additional organizational structures such as project management groups and quality circles while taking into account that the hierarchical logic will react with resistance strategies.

7. The diversion of person and function

Membership in groups is bound to people and the relationship between individuals within the group. For group affiliation, the personality of the individual is important. This includes emotions, characteristics, abilities, gender, age, and everything else that constitutes a personality. Furthermore, no individual in a group can be replaced by another person. Hierarchy in contrast is not interested in personal habits and traits. Hierarchy is only interested in the fact that this specific person can fulfill the task required. If this is not the case, the person will be replaced. Since functions are held by people, the organization has to deal with this incompatibility. Accepting human oddities and needs on the one hand and guaranteeing the performance demanded on the other hand.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, being part of an organization is stressing the individual needs. Individuals are reduced to functions, they have to give up group affiliation needs, they have to deal with time pressure, and they are involved in contradictions due to structural and sectional prerequisites. In the introduction of this paper, I referred to some association experiments to the terms of group and organization. The result of these experiments is always the same: groups are emotionally experienced rather positively, whereas organizations are emotionally experienced in more negative terms. After the discussion of some of the reasons for these phenomena, we might understand the emotional lining.

Nevertheless we have to consider that there is a great attraction of organization to individuals. But what characterizes the attraction to undergo all the emotional stress and harassment involved when being a member of an organization?

Actually, it is a chance for individuals to escape group affiliation pressure and to develop authenticity and a unique personality. It provides a possibility to be successful. It might even make careers possible. Even if the point cannot be stressed as much to day as it used to be in former times, organizations guarantee a certain existential security. Individuals are part of a system grand enough to challenge eternity. For many it is a privilege to identify with a powerful corporate identity. Organizations having to face economic difficulties and/or organizational change processes are disillusioning such beliefs of their employees. On the emotional scale of organization processes change management therefore always triggers suspicion first. The innovation aspect of change management can be realized only after straightening out emotional issues.