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THE ORGANIZATION LABORATORY – AN EXPERIMENTAL SETTING FOR LEARNING PROCESS SKILLS AND MINDSETS

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"By simple common sense I don't believe in God, in none." (Sir Charles Chaplin)

As change becomes an abiding reality in most organizations today, individuals in organizations are both objects on which change is imposed and subjects co-developing change on different levels and with different possibilities to have an impact on larger results. Senior and middle managers are expected to initiate, promote and implement change processes, but many times they also become objects of the changes they themselves initiated. Advanced managers therefore need profound knowledge of organizational dynamics of which they are a part and specific knowledge of how groups and organizations operate as social systems. But today these kinds of capabilities are not required only of those filling management positions; organizations are increasingly relying on "distributed leadership" (Bolden 2007) – a term designating management and leadership which are not restricted to designated managers. A great deal of knowledge about organizational dynamics can be acquired when a learning process based on practical experience in social interaction is applied instead of or in addition to a more traditional "leadership-classroom" approach. As such, performance-based learning – when combined with reflective analysis and theory - allows the integration of "head, heart, body and soul" and thus provides a powerful tool for executive learning (Mirvis 2008). In our paper we describe "Organization Training" as a special kind of laboratory, that is, as a learning setting which differs considerably from prevailing methods of management education.

Organization Training – the concept:

"Organization Training" (OT) (previously: "Organization Laboratory" (OLab)) as we practice it was developed at the Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt[1] as an application of the principles of experimental learning as performed in T-group settings to the wider system of an organization. The underlying learning model is based on

[1] Pioneered in the context of the European Institute of Transnational Studies (EIT) in the 1970s by Traugott Lindner and Trygve Johnstad, it has been further developed by Ewald E Krainz and colleagues at the University of Klagenfurt in the last 30 years (see Krainz 1998, 2005, 2006).

Lewin's innovative educational concept of action learning and laboratory method (e.g. Kleiner 2008, Lewin 1947; Bradford et al.1964). In the 1960s Kurt Lewin and his disciples experimented with sensitivity training, inventing the concept of the laboratory method. For a longer period of time his laboratory concept was applied only to intra-group processes (social processes within groups) focusing on learning and behavioral change through feedback mechanisms, greater awareness of social perceptions and improvement of skills for social interaction. "Research into its programs has been a part of the training laboratory from the beginning, and at least some of this research has found its way back into changes in laboratory methods and designs." (Bradford et al, Preface S. viii) Since then the laboratory method has been further developed, introducing different aims and application contexts as well as designs, one of them the so-called training group (T-group). However, the laboratory method remained within the area of small group research.

It was in Europe in the early 1970s that the setting of the T-group was transformed into organization training, (later also called the Organization Laboratory) and the concept of group dynamics found a home in large group applications. The first of these "labs" in the German-speaking countries was organized in Bad Tainach (1970) and was led by Traugott Lindner, Don Nylen and their colleagues. "This first organization training resulted in experiences with the relationship between large group plenums, official and informal subgroups, the necessity and opportunity to clarify one's own purposes and their realization within the framework of group constellations." (Rechien 2001, p. 53) The laboratory methods developed by the Americans were transferred to organizations, in an adapted form but in principle open to the process. Thus the concept of laboratory learning was adapted to the processes which are played out between groups and therefore reach an organizational dimension (Krainz 1991, 2006, 2010). The laboratory concept was modified, since learning goals different to those in T-groups were formulated.

The didactic of the laboratory method (training and learning) has been maintained to the present day, because the methodology can be used to work with every type of social process; what is essential is the focus on interactional dynamics in and between social formations. "The founders of the first laboratory saw the group as the link between the individual person and the larger social structure. They saw the

group, therefore, as a medium for serving two sets of interrelated functions: the re-education of the individual toward greater integrity, greater understanding of himself and of the social conditions in his life, greater behavioral effectiveness in planning and achieving changes both in himself and in his social environment; and the facilitation of changes in the larger social structures upon which individual lives depend." (Bradford et al. 1964, p. 5) This didactic principle is still valid today, also for organization training.

The American description of the fundamental scientific methodology is also still valid today: "Such notions about the creation of learning situations and their management are drawn both from the canons of scientific method and from the philosophy of science. The form they take in the laboratory may be thought of as action research. Action research is an application of scientific methodology in the clarification and solution of practical problems." (Bradford et al. 1964, p. 33) Here learning is strongly connected to the idea of participation: "It is important to emphasize that democratic methodology is seen here as closely akin to scientific methodology. Both depend ultimately upon consensual validation of results achieved. Both build safeguards against 'false' consensus into their ways of operating. Both are experimental in approach. Both are committed to incorporating a maximum induction from relevant individual experiences and from alternative models of interpretation into learning results sought. Both insist on public processes of validation." (Bradford et al. 1964, p. 35)

The laboratory method is an innovative instrument for forming and steering large social organizations—an instrument which is intended to realize the connection between learning and research. Certain theoretical concepts of organization and development play an important role in the analysis of organizational dynamics which is necessary to this realization. "As already suggested, 'system theory' also plays an important part in the designing of laboratory learning. It is through analyzing the encounters, conflicts, and confusions between systems at many levels of human organization that motivation to learn about human behavior and, hopefully, actual learning, in a context of use and application, are accomplished." (Bradford et al., p. 31)

This expanding methodology was applied to a newly developing social science discipline—group dynamics, which can be classified as an applied social science in the tradition of social constructivist social theory but is also committed to a sociological network concept. The Aristotelian paradigm of "holism"[2] (Aristotle 2007, p. 217 f) and Lewin's field theory (Lewin 1963) are its fundamental paradigms; supplemented with theoretical elements from psychology, pedagogy, social anthropology, sociology, system theory and philosophy, the laboratory method and laboratory learning found further scientific bases; this occurred in Europe as well, beginning in the 1970s. Social learning, process oriented research, collective self-determination and participation are its essential principles. "In action research and group dynamics the people who are the subjects of the research are viewed as experts in their own social reality and the special task of action research is to support them in the exploration of these social realities, right from the outset, with the goal of changing this reality." (K□nig 2004, p. 15).

Drawing on the American laboratory concept, organization training (OT) (previously OLab) is a learning setting whose goals are directed toward social learning within a framework of organizational dynamics. "The OLab provides a learning arrangement in which organizations both are established and can reflect on their processes. It has less to do with dynamics within clear sub-groups, and also not primarily with so-called large group processes, but rather with dynamics between groups, with the creation of cooperation on a scale larger than the single group and the possibilities or difficulties of steering larger social associations." (Krainz 2006, p. 28, see also Krainz 2005)

The learning goals of OT are varied. First come the experience and understanding of organizational dynamics as a special form of social dynamics; second, social competence in dealing with steering organizational dynamics is further developed; and third, understanding of the difficulties of the "process of organization" (decision making with collective effects) is deepened. The content as well as the process of OLabs include dealing with hierarchies and the necessary establishment of hierarchies, on the one hand being led by one's individual needs (and their frustrations), on the other hand, the wish to be integrated, to participate in creating and determining (and their frustrations), the resulting analysis of questions of power

[2] Holism: "The whole is greater than (more than only) the sum of its parts."

in general, and the possibility of exercising concrete influence on decisions in the organizations which are formed in the OLab in particular. The focus is on problems of mutual decision making, representation, delegation control and the resulting collective and partially collective atmospheres which are created by the organization's culture and subcultures…Under normal conditions it is not easy to approach these emotional streams; in the OLab, using self-designed methods and instruments, it is possible to follow up the changing relationship between social structures which develop and emerge unnoticed and consciously applied organizational actions, above all, however, the system decisions, that is, those meta-decisions, which affect the decision making mode." (Krainz 2006, p. 28) (ibidem)

Application at the University of Klagenfurt:

At the University of Klagenfurt OT has been offered since 1970 (Krainz 2006, 2010; Rechtien, 2001) to students, to attendees of postgraduate courses in organizational change, conflict management and mediation, and to consultants and managers from outside the university context. The number of participants usually lies between forty and one hundred; there are normally between three and eight staff members. The idea is based on the laboratory concept: to learn about organization while performing the process of organizing. With an organization created in the laboratory, it is possible to experience, observe, shape and reflect upon the most important phenomena of the complex social system which organizations are. In contrast to the "T-Group", which analyzes the process in the group, organization training (OT) focuses on processes at the organizational level, integrating roles of individuals and teams within organizations and inter-group relations.

The didactic application of this learning setting is as follows: The OT starts with an open process. The basic assumption is that a leadership vacuum fosters the competence of self-monitoring and "self-leading". Having received only a very few defined prescriptions, the participants start the process of organizing primarily based on their own assumptions and "ways of doing things" rather than on tasks or working structures defined by the staff. The staff interventions are similar to those in the T-group setting, but they provide ideas about organizations and the principles of organizing according to the issues which emerge: organizations need to observe

themselves, to develop decision making structures and to create roles for management and experts. Through OT they are transformed into specific interventions for developing the skills of organizing and decision making.

As a result of the leadership vacuum and orientation the audience is confronted with at the beginning, first patterns of organizing begin to emerge, usually either around some kind of decision making procedure or leadership (group) structures. First insights arise, suggesting that the plenary could be subdivided into smaller groups, but how and who should coordinate the whole? This is how the learning process starts. In each case there is from the very beginning a social (learning) process, which can take widely different forms—in the early years it was observed that groups were formed very early in the process; in recent years it has more often been the case that group formation does not happen automatically—rather, other forms of "networking" occur, which, however, are usually due to very individualistic motives and can actually worsen the problem of decision making in the organization which is being built. In whatever ways social reality is formed and social structures are built here, the goal is to explore these while creating them.

Throughout the entire process the staff has the function of supporting this self-exploration and advancing it with appropriate instruments; depending on the phase of the process and the occasion, different interventions will be made. In consideration of the learning goal of making the organization itself the object of the learning, there are various forms of intervention. One such form is the Group Organization Sociogram (GOS) (Arnold 2004). This method is based both theoretically and technically on the concepts of Moreno (1954), but has been further developed at the University of Klagenfurt[3] for use with large populations. The GOS is capable of "sociometrically representing coherent groups, interconnections among groups and internal group structures as they exist at the moment of observation." (Arnold 2008, p. 1) Simply

[3] The computer-supported, data-processed Group Organization Sociogram is based on a theory of probability which can be used with large populations without losing the aspect of the relational. Thus personal networks within the (large) group system can be mapped; in so doing the degree of coherence within the individual groups can also be represented. In other words, informal groups within the entire population and subgroups within the groups can be shown. Overlapping groups, on their part, can only be observed through membership of multiple cohesions, that is, not in networks. On the other hand, they bring about the integration of groups into a (group) organization or (group) network.

expressed, with this special sociometric method, informal groupings are made visible and their participants receive prompt feedback. The Inter-Group Sociogram, which makes it possible for groups to observe and describe themselves and others, is also an instrument for strengthening the group members' perceptions of one another and improving their ability to act. This stimulates their social perceptions of formal and informal structure formation, self-monitoring and self-reflection on the highly complex system.

Staff interventions can be divided into context interventions (creation and development of designs and structural framework requirements for decision making processes) and process interventions (direct forms of intervention in the respective organizational dynamics processes). Both forms of intervention focus on the special themes, problem situations and solution strategies which emerge during the process of organizing. Special attention is paid, for example, to the "syntax of the group associations": "Group associations, like groups, are constructed of elements and a syntax which together form their basis." (Claessens 1977, p.59) But in contrast to T-groups, OT generates a special type of complexity because its group processes and organizational dynamics processes overlap and influence each other. "The syntax of the group association interferes with the syntax of the group continually and unavoidably." (Claessens 1977, p. 61) In other words, the various intrinsic logics of the system's groups and organizations must continually be balanced and attuned to each other.

A typical problem which regularly arises here in connection with the dilemma of delegation is linked to the necessity of creating authoritative communication and organizational ability to act, especially the ability to make decisions. These problems together with the necessity of "internal self-image and the group association's external presentation" require, according to Claessens (1977, p. 61) a specific qualification in the various forms of growth in effective membership and roles. When a representative or delegate of a group meets with another representative group[4], a second order group is formed with its own syntax; this requires that its members play a triple role: first as members of their dispatching group, second as representatives, agents or speakers of their dispatching group and thus the group itself, and third as

[4] In practice a representative group can have various designations: decision making board, delegate panel, executive committee, steering group, etc.

members of the group of representatives of groups, i.e. group members on a higher level. (Claessens 1977, p. 62) This complex set of roles is usually a very demanding learning experience for the participants and is often accompanied by the experience of frustration and the dissolution of old behavior patterns.

Our practical experience (from observations, reflection papers, feedback from participants, etc.) shows that this phenomenon of the dilemma of delegation occurs repeatedly in various shapes. Sooner or later the participants' insights mature, and they realize that social structures are necessary for decision making. This forces them to master various conflicts which are linked to the different and occasionally contradictory demands of the roles they must play. In the best case, by so doing they also learn to differentiate among the various cooperation and decision making strategies required by groups and organizations. In small groups or working groups consensus can be reached relatively easily; in contrast, in the second order group coalitions and the building of majorities are of great importance. Decision making and the development of the structures necessary to do so are also challenges which are mastered in various ways by the participants, not always successfully. It happens frequently that at the end of an OT there is something resembling a structure, but the participants will not find it satisfactory if they have not managed to set up a decision making mode appropriate for the entire organization. The analysis of and reflection on the processes which have led to that point are nonetheless equally educational as those in a "successful" OT. It is interesting to note that most participants can deal well with the processes in small groups but have difficulty separating themselves from those small groups and involving themselves with the organizational dynamics. In general, however, it can be said that the ability to act and make decisions in organizations develops differently in each individual, depending on his or her degree of readiness to become involved in the processes.

It is still true today that very many participants find it difficult to open themselves to this style of learning processes. Even Bion noticed resistance within himself to making himself the object of reflection and learning from his own experiences (in the group). "All this and much more like it is in the end nothing more than a hatred of a development process…Behind that stands the hatred of the fact that one has to learn from the experience at all, and failure to respect the value of such learning." (Bion

1971, p. 65) In their interventions the staff must always bear in mind how to deal with such resistance. If the resistance becomes too strong it can hinder the learning; if it remains hidden and unspoken the result can be the same, because this can negatively affect the creation of a climate of trust. Resistance, however, is also useful, because evidently it serves as sufficient cause for the participants to become active, opening themselves to the events through exploration and learning.

In our continual examination of the didactic fundamentals, one question must repeatedly be answered anew: How can the participants confront the organization with their problems in such as way that they first perceive them and then try to solve them? "Two questions will be uppermost: How can problems be adapted to the laboratory? and How can the laboratory be adapted to the problems? Persons often find it difficult to adapt problems to the laboratory because they retain 'real world' variables that are salient but irrelevant, because they are unwilling to alter the values of variables, and because they misunderstand the purpose of experimentation and the process of generalizing data. Relevant to the question of adapting the laboratory to the problem, persons often underestimate the versatility of the laboratory." (Weick 1965, p. 194) We can confirm the finding that participants often underestimate the learning possibilities of an OT. It can also be observed that learning through experience is often easier when one either does it repeatedly or acquires a conceptual tool with the help of literature and theoretical processing.

Further applications:

Organization development consultants and OD research have elaborated different concepts of laboratory learning settings within larger groups, such as simulation methods (e.g. Davies, 1993) and conference models including different settings for doing, reflecting and learning as offered with the "Leicester Conference" at the Tavistock Institute (www.tavinstitute.org); or they can be organized to learn around specific issues of organizational problems, as with the role of power and influence in "power labs" (Oshry, 1999) or the use of models of organizational change and feedback as in the "SYMA-concept" (e.g. Rieckmann & Weissengruber, 1990). The OLAB is different, because the organizational elements set as preconditions for the organization which is to be built and the learning process which occurs are rather limited compared to the above mentioned approaches.

Improving management and leadership – what can be learned in the OT?

Most importantly, the OT helps participants to alter their knowledge and mindset on process interventions: What should be discussed/decided/reflected on with whom, when and where in order to move the organization forward? These questions point to a row of individual learning goals but also to typical problem situations in organizations. Although the processes in an OT are always unique, certain basic problems occur again and again, and these can be generalized. “Generally formulated, the ability to act evidenced by an entire system and its parts is essentially dependent upon how well it confronts its potential for conflict and deals with it as much as possible through conscious reflection. In the O-Lab there is always the opportunity to look into this potential for conflict closely and to explore the functioning or non-functioning of the organization. This makes the O-Lab distinct from ‘real organizations’ in which conflicts arise but one cannot explore them due to time or work pressures.” (Krainz 2005, p. 320-321)

”The problem with ’growing’ our own organization is that it takes time. And experimenters are an impatient lot. What is needed is techniques to influence the rate at which groups develop, but these techniques are scarce.” (Weick 1965, p. 217) Today the techniques are no longer so very scarce, researchers and trainers are usually eager to point out; but one can say that the time factor plays a great role. In the early days of group dynamics many goals were formulated for the laboratory, not all of which could be reached, as experience showed. However, some of the learning opportunities designed by the Americans for laboratory learning can be partially adapted for the OT, for example: “opportunities to test congruence between goals and action, opportunities for collaboration in setting directions for change, opportunities to determine pathways to change, opportunities to assess effectiveness of new behaviour, opportunities to practice, internalize and apply new behaviour.” (Bradford et al. 1964, p. 37) An OT offers further learning opportunities, for example the opportunity to experience and reflect on complex social dynamics and to experiment with a wide repertoire of roles and the behavior patterns related to them.

As stated earlier, openness to the process is especially important for the stimulation of learning through experience, because the initial situation has a very low level of structuring (as in a T-group). Due to this social vacuum an ambiguous social situation arises and very specific learning experiences are generated. ”Essentially, a kind of social vacuum is produced. Leadership, agenda, procedures, expectations, usually pre-established by some authority, are blurred or missing. As tension produced by the vacuum mounts, members endeavor to supply the missing elements and their behaviour output also mounts.” (Bradford et al. 1964, p. 41) This vacuum causes the participants to (have to) work on and begin to develop these themes. Then they can reflect on their own assumptions and concepts about organizing and change and find blind spots in their thinking and acting, since they can immediately see what happens and receive feedback on their actions.

However, our research suggests that there are different individual patterns for organizational learning, as some participants prefer acting in groups, some like to communicate with other groups, some take over responsibility and perhaps risks as well, whereas others rather like to remain in an observing position. Each of these types of organizational behavior creates different patterns of learning. But all participants have to deal with complex organizational processes and their role within them, thus developing their “organizational competence” (Grossmann & Heintel, 2000). Through our practical experience and the hypotheses and results of our research (also: Auer-Welsbach 2005) we have identified three different levels of learning, which are related to their multiple forms of growth in effective membership and the mastery of various potentials for conflict:

1. *Group-Learning*: The relationship between the individual and the group

Our research and experience show that the group is the first “escape” for the individual, as groups provide safety, connectedness, face-to-face communication and trust building. But when it comes to making a difference in the whole organization, the group is of limited value.

The group offers very specific learning opportunities: If the group functions even halfway well and a friendly climate of trust is established, then meta-communication

can result and the group can make itself the object of the reflection and steering. This requires that the membership of the group is assured and that there are proven strategies for mastering problems. Typical group themes can then become learning themes: building trust, leadership, external presentation of the group, building coalitions, forming subgroups, integration versus personal freedom, group pressure, social control, etc. The members of the group are responsible for making these themes central to their learning, i.e. widely varied themes will be dealt with here, depending on what the group considers to be important. Experience shows that in this context groups react with widely differing degrees of professionalism: There are groups, for example, which are extremely disciplined in the organization of their own time—it is important to them to deal with themselves. However, one regularly sees cases where this self-discipline is difficult; there are often complaints that the group is not "available", that it is "scattered" or even that it is falling apart—this is often a sign of continual "under-steering". When one studies these difficulties more precisely, unresolved group problems such as unsettled questions of power always come to light.

2. *Role-Learning*: The relationship between the individual and the organization

Unavoidably, some participants will deliberately leave their home groups to collaborate with other groups and with "management groups" to target collective decisions. The main learning here is that there is a basic difference between the social systems of group and organization. The participants learn about delegates and roles "between" different parts of the organization – the "dilemma of delegation": How can we master the ambiguous role of being a representative of one group (e.g. a working group) while we are at the same time a member of another (board, committee, etc.). Additionally, the importance of formal and informal roles and processes and how they relate to each other is experienced, since both are important means of creating impact. In that sense, "the organization never sleeps". The laboratory method also intensifies the dilemma of delegation because roles must often be changed very quickly. For many participants it is evidently difficult to become aware of and act out the demands of the various roles and the expected behaviors related to them. Various inclinations can be observed here: Few participants have difficulty with the role of delegate, but there are always some who seem to have

absolutely no difficulty with the idea of breaking ties with their dispatching group and adjusting to cooperation with others. Most are, at least at the beginning, irritated and disoriented because they are emotionally attached to their group and therefore often act forcefully in its interests without noticing that the dominance of a single group can paralyze an entire organization (for a comprehensive description of the specific potential for conflict, see Krainz 2005).

3. *Organizational Learning*: The relationship between groups and the rest of the organization

On this level learning is mostly at its most complex because making collective decisions is a great challenge for individuals and groups. When delegates collaborate, they are also affecting a group process, so the group dynamics interfere with the organizational dynamics. The main learning centers around developing structures and the role of hierarchy: What is the function of hierarchy, but also what are the problems related to this organizational element and how we can cope with effects created through hierarchy? How can we work across organizational boundaries (vertically and laterally)? Why is it necessary for organizations to go beyond groupthink and partial interests, and how can the decisive element of "responsibility for the whole" be implemented?

Above all, it is also important for comprehensive control that a form of communication develops which is capable of bringing inherent potential for conflict to the fore and developing strategies for its resolution. This can work when the second order group (delegate group) has developed so well that it can value the meaning of the organizational dynamics more highly than the meaning of the individual group's interests. In other words, the empowerment of the delegate group must be accepted in the group to an extent that at least its fundamental conditions of existence are not questioned. Not until that point can it be assured that the decisions of the entire organization can have sufficient effect. Experience shows that this process of empowerment does not always succeed; frequently the seminar ends before the second order group succeeds in translating its decision making power to the entire organization. Evidently the pull of the original group is so strong that insights into the organization's imperatives are subordinated to it. However, whether successful or

not, the insight and analysis of this problem advances the organizational competence; in the best case it is also possible to test this in the laboratory.

These three learning dimensions cannot be activated in any other type of learning setting, but only in an OT which is open to the processes. Our experience shows that specifying learning goals too narrowly does not lead to the desired results: on the one hand, social learning cannot be quantitatively verified; on the other hand it is more productive to focus on specific systemically contingent problem situations so that one can consequently name the learning dimensions. The development and specification of intervention techniques as well as theoretical concepts with respect to development and steering of organizations has contributed to a system which allows these learning dimensions to be dealt with effectively.

The methods and the special research and training concepts of the laboratory are not new; what is new are the real problems in our society which are connected to increasing organizational change and the necessity of steering that change. In this respect OT is an appropriate learning setting because through it organizational change and development are made explicit objects of learning.

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