Facilitating Change in Organizations: Toward a Framework of Organization Development for Person-Centered Practitioners

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It is very common, in our experience, for people who are trained and skilled in individual and group psychotherapy and counseling to be invited to extend their helping role to working with teams and organizations. This occurs for therapists of all conceptual orientations. In such situations therapists are challenged to extend their knowledge base and their skills to working with more complex systems than an individual or small group. Our aim in this article is to contribute a framework of intervening in organizations for person-centered practitioners, so that they can remain congruent with the theory, values and practice of the person-centered approach.

In a context where other therapeutic orientations have been applied to organizational intervention - psychodynamic (Hirschhorn, 1988; Kets de Fries & Associates, 1991; Neumann, Kellner & Dawson-Shepherd, 1997), Gestalt Therapy (Nevis, 1987), behavior modification (Luthans & Kreitner, 1975) - it is now appropriate, timely and valuable to articulate in further detail the application of the person-centered approach to the art of helping organizations manage change. Can the principles of the person-centered approach be applied to organizational intervention? What paradigms are there for person-centered practitioners who wish to work in task-focused systems and at the same time remain consistent with the theory and practice of the person-centered way of being? In answering these questions, we will present a framework of organizational behavior considered from four perspectives or levels and subsequently we will discuss ways in which person-centered practitioners might intervene at each of these discrete levels. Such a use of levels is not unknown in the person-centered approach (Barrett-Lennard, 1998), and our application accords with the growing understanding of organizations as complex systems.

FOUR LEVELS OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Rashford and Coghlan (1994), describe four levels of participation in organizations: individual, face-to-face team, inter-departmental group and organizational. From the point of view of the individual vis a vis participation in the organization, these levels would be viewed as degrees of complexity. On the other hand, from the point of view of any organization's management and their concern for the commitment of individuals, these levels would be viewed as degrees of involvement. Accordingly, each organizational level may be viewed from the perspective of the individual or of management.
From the point of view of the individual, the least complex aspect of participation is the bonding relationship which the individual has with the organization. This involves a utilization of membership and participation in the organization in order to meet personal life goals (the individual level). A more complex reality exists in establishing effective working relationships in a face-to-face team, while also maintaining personal integrity (the team level). An even more complex involvement exists in terms of the inter-departmental group or divisional type of interface where teams must be coordinated in order to achieve complex tasks and maintain a balance of power among competing political interest groups (the interdepartmental group level). Finally, the most complex, from the point of view of the individual, is the relationship of the total organization to its external environment in which other organizations are individual competitors, competing for scarce resources to produce similar products or services. The key task for any organization is its ability to adapt to environmental forces driving for change (organizational level).

From management's perspective, the core issue is one of involvement. The most basic form of involvement is to get a person committed to the goals, values and culture of the organization. The second level of involvement is to establish good, working face-to-face relationships in functional teams. The third level of involvement is the inter-departmental group or divisional level in which complex information and data systems are used to extend the knowledge and to coordinate the functions of the total working group, made up of multiple face-to-face teams. Finally, the most complex of all is the unified effort of all participants in an organization towards the goal of making that organization profitable, growth-oriented and functional in its external environment.

Interlevel Dynamics

While the four levels act as a framework for observation and facilitation (what the organizational theorists call "levels of analysis"), there is an essential additional dimension, that is a dynamic and inter-dependent relationship between each level. For instance, an action taken on the organizational level can alter the distribution of resources in the interdepartmental group, which can then interfere with a team's functioning and subsequently lead to individuals questioning their commitment to the organization. So a triggering event on the organizational level (a significant event in the organization's external market requiring subsequent change and adaptation) will have consequences which must be dealt with on the interdepartmental group, team and individual levels. Smooth working relationships on the team level depend on individuals' and management's needs being adequately met on the individual level. Similarly, the interdepartmental group level depends on the individual and team levels. The organizational level depends on all three. For any organizational change to be effective a readjustment of all four levels may be required.

The key tasks of each level provide a framework or cognitive map by which the manager, trainer and external consultant can unravel the multiple complex issues which occur in organizations. It enables the manager and consultant perceive what is happening in an organization, understand how this is happening and respond appropriately. The tasks at and between each level have a particular edge in a situation of organizational change. Organizational change typically means individuals have to change what they do or how they do it. The change affects the work of teams. It has to be negotiated across the
THE PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH AND THE TASKS
OF EACH ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

The central hypothesis of the person-centered approach can be stated briefly. It is that individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding, and for altering their self concept, attitudes and self-directed behavior, and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided (Rogers, 1951). The conditions which constitute this climate and are perceived by the person are: empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard and congruence. These conditions are consistent with the philosophy and values espoused in the process consultation approach to organization development (Coghlan & McIlduff, 1995; Schein, 1987, 1988, 1999). We will now outline the processes implicit in the tasks at each of the four organizational levels and illustrate the manner in which person-centered practitioners might work in that regard.

The Individual Level

Individuals within the organization have life-tasks, needs and wishes which extend far beyond their participation in any given work setting. Each individual human organism struggles to find unique and personalized satisfactions in this regard. Management's perspective at the same point, however, is that individuals somehow belong to the organization in an appropriate psychological contract. When the tasks at this level are reasonably and adequately met, individuals can allow the organization and its goals be a source of personal goal motivation. Individuals will still retain their own individuality while "belonging" to the organization. In contrast, the awareness and utilization of motivational techniques are the basic functions of management towards each individual in the organization in the hope that these techniques will enhance growth and effectiveness. Therefore, management's ideal goal is to create a matching process in which people are able and encouraged to become involved, and find that the work situation develops them as human beings while the organization benefits from such an involvement (Schein, 1978). Individuals do not always relate to management's goal in this regard, and prefer to define their relationship to the organization in political and adversarial terms with the core issue at stake being power and control. Where such a situation exists, consultants are clearly required to respond to this reality.

There is an inevitable tension in this matching process. Individuals attempt to be themselves, bringing unique aspects of themselves to the organization, and at the same time, adapting to organizational norms. One common difficulty here is that differing views and theories-in-use as to how people are motivated, produce contradictory approaches and undermine the growth process (McGregor, 1960; Schein, 1980). The critical need is for
managers to reflect on how different people might be motivated in diverse and changing situations. The more ownership and awareness that individuals have of their lives, the more capable they are of contributing their unique aspects which are so necessary for organizations to change and develop.

Organizational change typically means that individual employees have to change too. Individuals may be required to change what they do or how they do it. It may be required of them to change their attitudes towards their work or some particular aspect of it. A consequence of this may be that an individual's sense of bonding to the changed or changing organization may be altered, either positively or negatively. An organizational change if not well managed, may result in individuals feeling demotivated and alienated and exhibiting defensive behavior. Person-centered practitioners may work with individuals' negative perception of the change, so that individuals may recognize the substantive issues at stake and their own feelings in their regards in order than they may choose their own response, rather than reacting to how the change in being managed (Coghlan, 1993a).

The change process may also suggest that it is useful for the consultant to work at facilitating individuals to identify and evaluate the dynamics of the life-cycle, the work-cycle and the family-cycle and place them in juxtaposition so that they can locate their career issues in the context of their lives. Individuals can be facilitated to take ownership of their lives and career and adopt positive coping responses to the tasks facing them. Furthermore, work with these individuals aims towards empowering them to suggest, initiate and promote change in the organization and reduce undesired stressful side effects. At the same time, work with managers enables them to reflect on and restructure managerial assumptions and behavior towards their subordinates and colleagues. Consultants in this situation are facilitating the individual employee and the manager to become more aware of their separate and mutual needs as persons within the organization as well as the needs of the organization. As organizational change involves individual and personal change, attention to the individual in the context of the wider systemic change is critical for the success of the change process.

In this context, person-centered practitioners have the appropriate therapeutic skills in facilitating individuals to identify and evaluate the dynamics of the life-cycle, the work-cycle and the family-cycle, and place them in juxtaposition so that they can locate their career issues in the context of their lives (Schein, 1978). Through the person-centered nature of the process, individuals can be facilitated to take ownership of their lives and career, and adopt positive coping responses to the tasks facing them. At the same time, work with managers enables them to reflect on and restructure managerial assumptions and behavior towards their subordinates and colleagues (Coghlan, 1993a). Person-centered practitioners in this situation are not acting as diagnosticians. Other conceptual and therapeutic orientations have no theoretical problem with directly diagnosing what they see the problem to be. The task of person-centered practitioners is to facilitate the individual worker and the manager to become more aware of their separate and mutual needs as persons within the organization as well as the needs of the organization. It can be clearly a life affirming and personally validating process for both parties.
The Team Level

From the individual's perspective, entry into work activity involves interfacing with other persons in clearly defined units. Face-to-face teams are typically formal groups and defined in terms of:

1. face-to-face interaction,
2. common objectives,
3. psychological awareness of other members, and
4. self-definition as a team with member-non member boundaries clearly defined.

The team level is a more complex level than the individual because of the increased number of participants and interactions. Teams are parts of a wider system in organizations and some of the dysfunctional issues that arise within the team may originate beyond the team in its technological and political interface with other teams. Problems, which arise between teams, are considered at the interdepartmental group level.

From the managerial perspective, any individual’s task within the face-to-face team is to contribute to the collective ventures of the team. Management requires the team to be efficient and cooperative in its output toward the overall organizational task. Effective team functioning requires the team to be successful in accomplishing its tasks and skilled in learning from its experience in building and maintaining working relationships.

It is critical for face-to-face teams to develop the appropriate skills of self-reflection and correcting their own dysfunctions. Such skills typically constitute the definition of successful teams. Team-level dysfunctions occur when assumptions, attitudes, and behavior of team members towards one another and the team’s effort frustrate the team’s performance. The discovery of negative information generally is not valued in many organizations, as people then tend to attack rather than constructively confront one another. Behaviors such as blame, withheld information, inappropriate team leader style, misplaced competition, sexism and racism, and lack of trust can negatively influence the team members’ capacity to work well together and also inhibit team development. Furthermore, within any given team the interaction skills of task achievement and maintenance function may not be equally developed.

One important aspect of any practitioner’s work at this team level is to enable the team to build its team skills. Team building is the title given to a wide range of activities which are aimed at improving a work team’s effectiveness. There are four primary purposes of team building: (1) setting goals/priorities, (2) analyzing the manner in which work is allocated, (3) exploring the team’s process and (4) exploring interpersonal relationships between team members (Coghlan, 1993b). In our experience, when working at team building, it is important to work on these four purposes in this sequential order. Interpersonal problems between team members can result from a lack of clarity about team goals, procedures, responsibilities or roles. Similarly, procedural problems can result from a vagueness about responsibilities, roles and goals. Alternatively, problems about roles and responsibilities can arise because of a lack of clarity about team goals and priorities.
How does a team leader, manager, consultant or facilitator know what to attend to when attempting to intervene in a team in order to improve the situation? When using the team framework the most useful starting point is consideration of the task in which the team is engaged. Any task consideration comprises three components: content, process and structure (Schein, 1987). The task content comprises the team's mission, goals and achievement of those goals in measurable terms. Consultants can facilitate the team in its inquiry into the source of these goals, their clarity, the team's ownership of them, the tasks required to achieve them and the planning that needs to be done. Task process refers to how work is allocated to achieve these goals—who decides and how? How the work is to be done and by whom? How progress is reviewed? How dysfunctions are named and corrected? Task structures include the standard operating procedures, whereby the team goes about its work. It is important to be aware that informal procedures are powerful forces in organizations. Given the philosophy of person-centered practice, where the focus is very much on the subjective, personal meanings, understandings and feelings, person-centered practitioners are ideally positioned to honor members' experiences as their legitimate, perceived reality.

The complementary area for attention by the consultant or team leader is the relational area. The relational area of a team also comprises content, process and structure. The relational content focuses on the team members' working roles by which team members can gain insight into their own personal styles as part of a team, obtain an overall view of the balance of roles in a team and develop ways of complementing strengths and minimizing possible defects any imbalance of roles may have on the team. Relational process refers to how the team members communicate with one another, exercise power and influence, manage conflict, solve problems and make decisions (Schein, 1988). Relational structure points to the cultural patterns which a team develops. These are the hidden assumptions around recurrent interpersonal roles—how some individuals have high or low status, how some are blamed more than others, how women are treated. These are some examples of how teams can be unaware of the effects of their own behavior.

The change agenda in an organization typically effects the work of teams. Teams may be set new goals and targets. They may have to work differently. The process of organizational change typically involves the change agenda being assessed and responded to by the permanent working teams in the organization's structure, and by the involvement of temporary committees whose aims are to solve problems, create policy or generate commitment (Coghlan, 1994). Team level processes may occur in the permanent teams, which are the basis of the structures of most organizations. In this context the long-term relationships among the members and the patterns of interaction which have become taken for granted and have become largely unnoticed are a significant area of focus and intervention for the consultant.

It is particularly important for person-centered practitioners, when working as facilitators with teams, that a crucial starting point is to begin at the task content area. This is because a permanent working team is an ongoing social system, with a history and a patterns of norms and social relationships which are not readily accessible to the outsider. As Schein (1987, 1992) points out, culture is comprised of basic assumptions which have become taken for granted, internalized to the extent that they have disappeared from consciousness. While they may be evidenced in visible structures and behaviors, it is difficult for an outsider to know
what these behaviors and structures actually mean for a particular team, group or organization. Therefore, consultants/facilitators are more effective when they are sensitive to the fact that they are outsiders, that their presence in the team may be a source of discomfort and anxiety to the persons on the team and that, however well they may have been briefed as to the issues under review, the task and relational issues of a team are complex. Accordingly, consultants' philosophy of helping needs to be such that their facilitation will meet the client's needs as the client perceives them. To this end consultants need to be empathic in two ways: towards the clients' perceptions of reality and toward the situations in which both consultants and clients now find themselves, that is to be empathetic to the situation.

In working with teams person-centered practitioners are required to skillfully blend a use of structuring and facilitative interventions. The use of structuring has traditionally been anathema to person-centered practitioners. We have argued strongly that structuring and directiveness have been confused and that the use of structuring, skillfully implemented, is in no way incompatible with the person-centered philosophy, theory and practice (Coghlan & McIllduff, 1990). Person-centered practitioners may usefully structure the format of their work or efforts in order that the team may explore those issues, which it needs to explore. Typical structuring interventions could include, conceptual inputs, experiential exercises or providing questions for the team members to consider and discuss. What is essential in structuring interventions is that consultants are not attempting to direct the team towards any particular outcome. Rather they are attempting to facilitate a process which better enables the team to achieve self-direction.

The manner in which consultants work with the process of structuring reflect their philosophical principles. Consultants may impose, propose, offer for consideration or empower the team to formulate and implement its own way of working. In their way of implementing structure consultants are operating along a directiveness-nondirectiveness continuum, that is, the manner in which structure is proposed and implemented lies along a scale which reflects varying degrees of consultant control or group control. At its heart, structuring reflects what consultants do and directiveness-nondirectiveness reflect how they do it. Person-centered practitioners will tend, of course, to operate in a less directive manner than consultants of other orientations.

If structures are offered in a manner which provide freedom for groups to accept or reject them-- indeed to propose other structures-- then groups can begin to empower themselves in initiating and implementing their own ways of achieving their purposes. Skilled facilitators are able to use structure in a manner which is appropriate to the agenda, issues and objectives of a given group. Simultaneously they move along a continuum of behavior which can be described in directive-nondirective terms. This flexibility of response and intervention is the essence of effective facilitation grounded in person-centeredness-- especially those aspects which highlight an authentic willingness to facilitate client self-determination, choice and self-generated self-insight and learning (Coghlan & McIllduff, 1990, p. 28).

The Interdepartmental Group Level

From the team's point of view, to be effective and enter the organization's life is to work within a larger system. This interdepartmental group level can be made up of any number of
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working teams which must function together to accomplish an inter-departmental group or divisional purpose. This interdepartmental group level needs to have critical information, which passes beyond the boundaries of individual teams in order to implement programs and projects at a range beyond their direct contact. In large organizations where size and distance dissolve immediate personal relationships, it is imperative that this third level functions well. From management's standpoint, the team's tasks within the overall group is to perform effectively in its own right, while at the same time have a clearly defined commitment to the group. When this third level is working effectively, the interdepartmental group is capable of obtaining information and converting it into decision processes, enabling the implementation of complex programs or operations. The task at this level is to map the flow of information and partially completed work from one team to another. Management needs are that these teams form an integrated whole.

The process of performing a complex function and making an efficient distribution of resources, such as personnel and money, is the key venture of the inter-departmental group level. It is a highly political situation in which the in-built structural conflicts of multiple interest parties need to be resolved. As a group, this diversified mass of differing functions and interests must negotiate an outcome that adequately reflects the balance of power among competing coalitions and a just distribution of resources. An essential element in interdepartmental group level dynamics centers on issues of power and how it is exercised in the allocation of resources and the accessibility of information.

From management's view the technical issues at this level require an ability to locate dysfunctions. Dysfunctions occur in the flow of transferring information and partially completed work or services from one team to another. The entire function must be viewed, understood and successfully handled in order to produce the product or service. Because of a huge number of individuals engaged in particular functions in a large organization, this process is often difficult to see. The group's process then must focus on becoming a functioning work unit to build on successes and learn from mistakes. Difficulties also arise at this level due to the lack of reflective and corrective skills. Discovery of negative information is difficult because it is often hidden in the interfaces that exist between one team and another.

The interdepartmental group is critical in an organizational change. As resources are re-allocated and technology and advanced information systems alter access to the flow of information, teams are required to communicate more effectively across functions and departments. Organizational consultants can facilitate a greater awareness of the interdependencies of the interdepartmental group's functions through a process known as internal mapping. In essence, internal mapping utilizes a process whereby individual heads of work units or team leaders are facilitated to plot the work flow through their section. By doing this, all the steps, from the beginning to the finish are plotted. The members of the interdepartmental group have a chance to jointly take ownership of all the dysfunctional areas and proceed to work in small task forces in order to remedy the dysfunctions. Severe dysfunctions on the interdepartmental group level are most often solved through the use of a consultant who can help the group understand more clearly the complex patterns of its information processes and network and how resources are allocated. It may be necessary to restructure both these areas. Internal mapping is not inconsistent with person-centered values.
Person-centered practitioners may also facilitate situations in which inter-team tensions require resolution. This can be done by providing a safe environment in which interfunctional relations can be examined and discussed in a manner which enables protagonists to actively listen to one another and come to understand experiences and perspectives of teams other than their own (Blake & Mouton, 1984). Facilitating large group meetings, where the members of the total system meet to view and take ownership of the strategic direction of the organization, is another intervention available to the person-centered practitioner (Bunker & Alban, 1997).

The Organizational Level

The organizational level is the level whereby the organization as a unified corporate identity competes in a competitive socioeconomic environment to provide a service and be profitable. Finally, the most complex of all is the unified effort of all participants in an organization towards the goal of making that organization profitable, growth-oriented and functional in its external socioeconomic environment. Consequently, an organization needs to be capable of reflecting on its own strengths and weaknesses, as well as engaging in proactive relationships to determine and deal with the opportunities and threats from the external environment. The assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats results in an identification and selection process, which leads to the establishment of programs, services and products. These procedures aim at accomplishing the goals of the organization and adapting to external environmental demands.

Organization development consultants may need to facilitate an organization's top management in the design of the planning process itself, in the development and choice of realistic strategic options, and in the implementation of the selected options. They work with senior managers as to who should be involved in the processes of planning, developing options and implementation, how the process could work most effectively, and what additional expert external help could be utilized. They can help the organization clarify its core mission, and map the internal and external constituencies, which make demands on the organization and its strategic choices. A methodology such as open systems planning can be usefully utilized by person-centered practitioners. Open systems planning facilitate the (i) identification of key stakeholders, (ii) the analysis of the demands these stakeholders are currently making on the organization, (iii) the projected demands they will make in the future, (iv) the current responses to those demands, (v) the creation of a desired future and (vi) action planning (Beckhard & Harris, 1987). Person-centered practitioners are ideally equipped to carry out this task, as in our experience, gentle facilitation, the process of clarification, staying closely linked to clients' efforts to elucidate clearly and empathizing with resultant strong feelings yield more positive and longer lasting outcomes than directive and imposed solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

The construct of four organizational levels greatly facilitates an understanding of the dynamic inter-relationship between individuals, teams, aggregations of teams and an organization's strategic endeavors. It integrates the disciplines of individual and group psychology with those of organizational theory and management. We view this construct as being located at
the cutting edge of organization development and the management of change. It provides an essential and highly useful conceptual framework for person-centered practitioners who are invited to work in an organization development manner with individuals, teams, the interdepartmental group and the organization.

Organization development practitioners require sophisticated cognitive frameworks in order to understand the complex dynamics of an organization. As Edgar Schein reflects, “Ultimately OD should be organizational therapy and the training of the OD practitioner should include enough clinical training to ensure that he or she will understand the tensions and anxieties that accompany changes in human systems” (1990, p.25).

Given their training and work experiences, person-centered practitioners are in possession of the necessary personal and group work skills required for the helping role with teams and organizations. We would strongly recommend, however, where there are deficiencies in the following conceptual areas, they need addressing before commencing this type of work. These areas are an understanding of current organizational psychology and theory, organization development and human resource development.

It is also important to realize that the starting point for work with task focused groups is at the task content area. For many person-centered practitioners there might also need to be a reevaluation of their attitude toward structuring when it is applied to the large or small group facilitation process. Again we are strongly of the opinion that this is not incompatible with the person-centered approach.

Carl Rogers was strong in the belief that the philosophy and principles underlying client-centered psychotherapy and the person-centered approach had applications far beyond the disciplines of therapy and counseling. He did not believe or contend, however, that when we engage in efforts to help others, we must always sit down as therapists. While he did not write about or comment on organization development specifically (Segal, 1997), he was fully aware of the transferability of person-centered values and practice to this scenario. He spent a good deal of his life combating the notion that the person-centered approach was a technique, which could be used to achieve predetermined goals. For him, the person-centered approach is a "way of being", which is characterized by active empathy, facilitator genuineness and an open, warm acceptance of the other. Accordingly, consultants, when working from a person-centered perspective, are genuine in their facilitation of clients' responses to change. An authentic person-centered approach excludes any attempt to use it as an effort to manipulate people to adjust to a change they do not wish to accept. It is our hope that this article will encourage person-centered practitioners to be more informed, comfortable and hence less fearful of accepting the invitations to facilitate constructive change processes in institutions and organizations.

REFERENCES


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