A Family Systems Approach to Management and Administration

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There is an old parable about the grasshopper who decided to consult the owl, chief administrator of the animal kingdom, about a personal problem. It seems the grasshopper suffered severe pains from the savage winter weather. After a number of these painful winters, he appealed to the wise old owl for advice.

After listening patiently to the grasshopper's tale of woe, the owl prescribed a simple solution. "Simply turn yourself into a cricket and hibernate for the winter." The grasshopper hopped with joy thanking the owl profusely for the wise advice. Later however, when he discovered that this important knowledge could not be put into action, the grasshopper returned to the owl and asked him how he could perform this metamorphosis. The owl replied rather curtly, "Look, I gave you the principle, it's up to you to work out the details."

Until I was introduced to Family Systems Theory, I felt a bit like the grasshopper. Although I had a great deal of theoretical knowledge about administrative and management systems, working out the details often proved a stumbling block. Most management theory is descriptive and predictive rather than *prescriptive theory*. In contrast, Family System Theory is prescriptive in that it specifies goal-content as the aim for activity, and it prescribes activity to realize the goal-content.

Emphasizing goal as a theoretical entity has these advantages: we dare to become articulate about the explicit features of what we want to produce, and secondly, we see goals as giving explicit practical direction rather than merely emotional tone.[1]

So, I will try to accomplish what the grasshopper could not; I'll relate some of the relevant management systems theories, to Family Systems theory. Then I will give examples of ways in which family systems theory prescribes the action necessary to work out the details of management and administration.

At the simplest level, organizations have something in common with families, *i.e.* they start with individuals who take collective action, and form an organization so that they will improve their ability to cope with the internal and external environment. In this way the organization and the family become a device of mediating between the individual and his wider environment.

Several years ago, two professors at Harvard Business School, Paul Lawrence and Jay Lorsch, conducted an empirical study of ten organizations in three different environments.[2] They found that in order to be effective in a particular set of circumstances, an organization needs to assess environmental demands on the organization in terms of the degree of differentiation, the pattern and degree of integration, the integrative mechanisms and the conflict resolving behaviors. In sum, one needs to understand what happens at both the organization and environment, and group-to- group interfaces. (Sounds like Family Systems Theory, doesn't it?)

According to the researchers, individual contributors are grouped into organizational units

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rather than an undifferentiated mass. Each unit develops different characteristics depending upon its part of the environment. But each unit is shown as having an integrated relationship to other units.[3] The achieving of differentiation and integration was found to depend upon the organization *members capacity* to *manage conflict.*

As individuals with different points of view attempt to attain unity of effort, conflicts inevitably arise. How well the organization will succeed in achieving integration, therefore, depends to a great extent upon how the individuals resolve their conflicts.

Lawrence and Lorsch found that effective organizations confront internal conflicts rather than smoothing them over or exercising raw power or influence to force one party to accept a solution.[4] In organizations dealing effectively with conflict, they found that the individuals primarily involved in achieving integration, whether superiors or coordinators, need to have influence based largely upon their perceived knowledge and competence. They are followed not just because of their formal positional influence but because they are seen as knowledgeable about the issues to be resolved.

It follows then that conflict is often an outgrowth of or precursor to change, and it can be and often is quite healthy, for it may revitalize an otherwise stagnant system. If Marx taught us anything it was that conflict is often necessary and beneficial, for it constantly provokes the social system into self-examination and change. (How like the development of family members!) Of course, there is always the danger that conflict may tear the organization apart. Schelling,[5] an expert on the strategy of conflict, states that it is sometimes difficult to determine the fine line that separates a revitalizing reformation from a self-destructive revolt. According to Schelling, all-out conflict, the do-or-die type strife in which annihilation of the enemy is the goal, is not a realistic interpretation of most social conflict. He also suggests that pure cooperation is also rarely found in human relations since each man is usually looking for his own interests. According to Schelling, a realistic interpretation of conflict must be in the middle ground for it includes elements of both conflict and cooperation, a relation that he calls *strategic conflict.*

This leads to the interface with family systems theory. Strategies for intervention in conflictual situations are the stuff of family theory. We recognize that change is inevitable in a family, and reactions to real or perceived change reverberate in conflict that may be expressed overtly, or conflict that is kept under cover and translated into anxiety, which in turn is projected or shifted through the s ystem. According to Bowen, emotional reactiveness in a family or other group that lives or works together goes from one member to another in a chain reaction pattern.[6]

Bowen conceives the emotional system in man as the intuitive parts of ourselves that operate automatically. It is important to recognize that the emotional system operates in all administrative and work systems. It is a component in the togetherness forces that keep people together. The togetherness forces strive for closeness, love, support, acceptance and agreement. The Intellectual System, in contrast, is a function of the individuality forces in man. Individuality forces form the drive to be autonomous, productive and defined by self rather than the group.

Often conflict emerges when the individuality forces in a staff or faculty group interplay with the forces for togetherness. Perhaps one member of the group makes an "I Statement" which is seen as threatening to the togetherness forces in the group. Conflict may ensue. Or the conflict may be dealt with on a covert level. The presence of conflict may be denied or smoothed over, since members of a group respond to conflict in patterned ways which were shaped in families of origin.

Family Systems Theory states that individuals become pursuers and distancers around certain issues. Therefore, pursuers may emerge and try to resolve the conflict. Other members of the group may distance from the conflict and deal with it on an emotional or physical level.

Have you ever gone to a meeting feeling terrific, and left with a headache? When that happens I look into my own insides and recognize that somehow I am assuming an overresponsible position for the dynamics of the group. My responsibility is to state my position, listen to other positions, and then monitor my insides if the anxiety goes up. One can often take reactivity in conflictual group situations back to one's functioning in the extended family under conditions of overt or covert conflict.

Some members of the group attempt to smooth over and say: "Well, basically we all agree." Other people become involved, while some members leave the room when anxiety starts to shift throughout the system. Still other

members of the group deal with emotional reactivity by getting angry thereby moving from their discomfort, while others project the discomfort out by complaining about clients, students, administration, etc. Family Systems Theory states that the greater the degree of anxiety in a group the greater the tendency for even the most reasonable person to resort to blaming others for his problems.

In some groups the newest or most vulnerable member of the organization becomes a conduit for the release of increased tension. It is interesting to watch the various roles members of the group assume when tension is high. For example, there are occasionally group members who make seductive comments, or antagonizing statements, and predictably members of the group respond angrily towards the person who assumes this deviant position. As family system theory states, under increased stress, individuals revert to their most predictable style of functioning which is often similar or completely opposite to the way they function in their family of origin.

One can watch emotional reactiveness in a group that works together pass from one person to another in a chain reaction pattern. Each person becomes a center through which impulses move in rapid succession. Each group member, programmed from birth to serve a certain set of functions, "senses" what is expected or required of him from the way the system around him functions. At this point alliances for helping one another, refusing to help, or hurting the other emerge. The key for an administrator is to keep as calm as possible—try not to get caught in the emotional reactivity.

One can observe tension mounting when the forces for togetherness conflict with the forces for individuality. For example, I taught at one university where, although there was an extremely strong push for individuality, the togertherness forces (containing the need for approval, emotional closeness and agreement) focused around a particular theoretical approach which was developed by the chief administrator of that program. Individuality was strongly encouraged until it touched the conceptual framework. Over time faculty left that institution and developed new programs. However, an issue of loyalty was raised before they left and if the departing faculty got caught in the emotional reactivity and neglected to take firm "I positions" about their departure, some tension ensued.

In fact, one group of faculty left the university with angry feelings. Afterwards, they developed a new program using an entirely different conceptual framework from the one they had once firmly accepted. One wonders if there was some reactivity in the decision to totally discard the previous framework. Interestingly, after a number of years many of the faculty have left the second institution, and there is a great deal of turmoil and conflict in that department.

I believe that the group did not adequately deal with the conflict between individuality and togetherness in their previous work siutation, and it has continued to influence their functioning as a group. What will happen over time is that teachers will triangle into students, faculty will triangle into administration, faculty members or staff will become dysfunctional, etc., etc. From what I hear, some of this fallout has occurred, just as it does in a family that has trouble resolving conflicts.

When I decided to leave the aforementioned university, I took a firm "I position" about my departure and worked at not getting caught in the emotional reactivity that often surrounded someone's departure. As a result, I left on good terms with the administration and the other members for the department. Being influenced by the togetherness and the individuality forces at the previous institution, I hired a faculty who agreed to accept the conceptual framework, although a number of them had received their graduate education at institutions which espoused a more eclectic conceptual approach.

Since we assume that all groups go through certain phases in their development and redevelopment as members are added or substracted, our faculty group was no exception. After an initial period of togetherness, the individuality forces began to exert influence, and conflicts emerged around, interestingly enough, the conceptual framework. Those receiving doctoral education at one university were in conflict with those receiving graduate education at another. Eventually, the group went through phases from togetherness to tolerance and finally acceptance of individuality.

The conflict that emerged after that generally reflected individual "I positions" with the group rather than "taking sides" on issues. However, each time a large number of faculty were added or faculty left, one could observe the increased emotionality and the shifting within the group.

Family Systems Theory has been indispensable as a guide for prescriptive intervention when emotional reactivity and stress level were high. Family systems concepts which I have found especially useful include the realization that each person in a work system is influenced by external family and community systems as well as by the work system. My emotional reactivity as well as theirs may vary from day to day. Therefore, the systems operating within each individual will interact with the interactions of other members of the work system. A wise administrator keeps that knowledge at the forefront of his or her mind.

The notion that a work system serves as a replacement for a family system is inappropriate. Distancing from family to work encourages administration and staff to pursue work and the work situation with the same ferocity they used when distancing from family situations. Therefore, I would prefer employing staff who are interested and involved in their job, but who have outside interests and family ties to give them a more relaxed perspective. Although a work situation is similar to a family situation, it is not a family and it creates added stresses when it is treated as a family.

As an administrator I try to make decisions that are based on principles, reality, and my belief system, although when the tension gets extremely high or the chief administrator of the institution starts pursuing me because of pressures she is experiencing, I occasionally encourage decisions based on the discomfort of the moment. However, whenever possible if the emotionality in the system goes up, I do try to focus on myself and my functioning. In short, I try to define my self as much as possible and try to give other staff members as much space as they need to develop and define their position. Wherever I react emotionally to a position, I know that it has somehow triggered me, and I try to distance a bit and find out what the trigger is all about. Therefore, the principle which states that it is functional to make "I statements" based on logic and intellectual functioning rather than emotionality is a helpful one for satisfactory administrative functioning. Focusing on the process taking place within the department rather than the content of issues is also extremely helpful. I try to ask myself and others what, when and how, rather than why.

If there is one concept that is essential for administrative survival it is the statement: "Stay out of triangles whenever possible." An administrator or manager is in a key position to be the third leg of a triangle. How well one succeeds as an administrator is directly related to how well he or she manages in staying out of key triangles within the system. As you know, success in dealing with family triangles is a back-up for success with work triangles.

When staff start coming to me worrying about other staff, complaining about them, talking about problems going on with other faculty or students, I try hard to pull back and not get emotionally reactive to either the person complaining or the one they are discussing. Often the other half of the dyad will come in at a different time and I'll get a truer reading, realizing that the conflict exists between those two individuals. My involvement would ultimately escalate tensions. Invariably, people work out their problems in one way or another. So avoiding triangles is an absolute key to success. Students complain about faculty, faculty about students, etc., etc. My position is that I will discuss the issue if it involves me, otherwise I have confidence that the two parties involved will resolve it. If further resolution is needed, I make certain both parties are present.

Recently a friend of mine took a position as dean of a college. One day she said to me: "Are your faculty too hard on students? Our students come to me all upset because the faculty are etxtremely strict with them." My reaction was: "Jane, you are getting caught." This dean was siding with students against faculty, a red flag for future problems. I encouraged her to coach the students to go back to faculty and resolve the issues on that level. Otherwise, she would have had a very unhappy faculty, and students who have not learned to resolve conflicts.

Some administrators assume an over-responsible position and protect staff from administration. This is also a dysfunctional movement. Whenever possible I share information and concerns with faculty and work hard at not getting caught between the two groups. If there is a problem, faculty will be informed.

Several years ago I was in a work situation in which the co-director was friendly, understanding, and seemed supportive of the department. Without thinking I tended to ally with her and I saw her as the supportive one, whereas the other co-director came across as distant, cold and nonsupportive. I was aware of a great deal of tension in that system with my department some-

how caught in the firing line. It wasn't until a meeting with the friendly co-director in which she started complaining about the other director that I realized what was going on. I was caught in a triangle without realizing it. Although most of my contacts were with Mary Jones, the friendly director, and it was appropriate to have a great deal of contact with her, I did not have equal signs between the two directors; moreover, I was allying with the warmer, friendlier director.

From then on my strategies included more contact with the distant administrator and I began to see that she was not such a bad sort but had to deal with many problems on a higher level of which I had not been aware. As you can predict, the warm friendly director started to pursue me as I moved towards the more distant director. However, things calmed down, and once again family theory came through.

That leads to another concept: the idea that a basic conflict may exist at the highest administrative level, but can be triangled and retriangled again and again until the conflict surfaces between two employees low in the administrative hierarchy.[8] Since conflict is inevitable and often functional, the key to administrative success is to maintain an "I position" on issues, separate out emotional process from intellectual process, and whenever possible, avoid triangles. They are the ruination of administrators, since you can be the third leg of a myriad of triangles and you are mitigating against your goal of conflict resolution.

So, if any of you are in conflictual work situations, rather than ruing its presence, recognize that you are in an emotional system, and use some of the family operating principles to keep from becoming entangled.

Real freedom depends on our ability to address underlying conflicts that produce discrepancies. For me, Family Systems Theory has been an important link in that process.

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