Organisation - in - the - Mind

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Organisation - in - the - Mind

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This paper introduces a way of thinking about organisation which is a significant tool for leadership and management in institutions, and for consultants in working with their organisational clients. It focuses on the organisation as it is being experienced by the manager, and looks at how his or her internal picture is related to external events and assumptions.

There are two key factors which every manager has to consider in taking up a managerial role. The first is to do with the organisation that is 'intended', *ie* what is the planned aim and structure of this enterprise. The other is to do with the organisation that is actually happening, which will inevitably differ from the intentions, since it involves human beings who bring a variety of responses to the situation derived from their own ways of seeing the world - from previous companies in which they have worked, from past history within the organisation, from the vantage point of their particular discipline or skill, and so on.

Organisations are people behaving: the question is **how** they behave. Managers have to address this continually, both with regard to their own behaviour in the way they take up their roles, and with how they lead and motivate others to behave in ways which achieve the aim of their institution or department.

In the Grubb Institute we have developed Organisational Role Analysis (ORA) as a way of working with managers which enables them to stand back and explore their on going experience of their organisation and their own roles, through working with the concept of 'organisation-in-the-mind'. It enables managers to discover the realities of their working situation, and thus to make choices and take action. Their reasons for approaching the Institute can be varied. It may be because:

- *They are running into difficulties with their management teams, or with colleagues*
- *They have recently taken up a new role and are seeking to make the most of the new opportunities*
- *Rapid expansion of the business calls for new structures and they are hesitant to make the changes without being clear about the implications for the present ways of working*
- *There is conflict between well established staff and newly appointed managers, or between professional values and business objectives*
- *Constant reorganisation due to external forces is leading to inefficiency and de-motivating staff*
- *The working culture of the organisation needs to change to meet new demands and to improve quality performance*

'Organisation-in-the-Mind'

'Organisation-in-the-mind' is what the individual perceives in his or her head of how activities and relations are organised, structured and connected internally. It is a model internal to oneself, part of one's inner world, relying upon the inner experiences of my interactions, relations and the activities I engage in, which give rise to images, emotions, values and responses in me, which may consequently be influencing my own management and leadership, positively or adversely. (Both here and elsewhere in this paper, the terms "I" and "me" are used in an illustrative way to refer to the individual's inner world.) 'Organisation-in-the-mind' helps me to look beyond the normative assessments of organisational issues and activity, to become alert to my inner experiences and give richer meaning to what is happening to me and around me.

'Organisation-in-the-mind' is about what is happening inside my own head - it is *my* reality - and has to be distinguished from any other reality 'out there'. It is the idea of the organisation which, through experiencing and imagining, forms in my inner psychic space and which then influences how I interact with my environment.

In applying this concept to those in management and leadership roles, we, the consultants, are making four assumptions:

1. Managers/leaders habitually and naturally construct organisational models within themselves which can only be tested by reflecting on and analysing their experience.

2. The more effective and experienced such a leader/ manager is, the more the process of conscious imagining takes place; he or she can only function as a manager if they have such a model, whether they consciously make use of it or not.

3. The model the individual holds in their mind can be brought into view as they become sensitive to their own reactions, feelings and experiences, and reflect on these - which puts them in touch with the 'organisation' that is actually happening in their experience. (Very often this is best understood metaphorically. In The Grubb Institute we make considerable use of mental pictures in our work with clients, inviting them to draw the organisation as they see it, with themselves in it).

4. 'Organisation', in the sense of understanding the pattern which is linking different activities and relations in an institution to achieve desired results, does not exist outside the mind at all - it is not a **thing** out there - it is a set of experiences held **in the mind**.

The following simple diagram shows two people in the same organisation, interacting with each other.

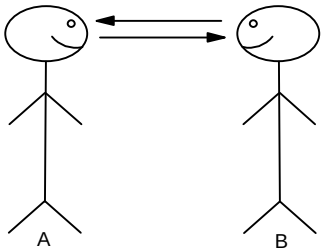

Figure 1

Why is it that A thinks he is communicating with B, when B evidently hears something different and then acts on what he thinks he hears? The two people have a reason for relating and communicating, which is the common system they are operating in, and they both want to communicate with each other. One reason is that A is making the assumption that the 'picture' of organisation he carries in his own head is the same as B's, and vice versa. When he speaks to B he is thinking 'square' but B thinks 'triangle'.

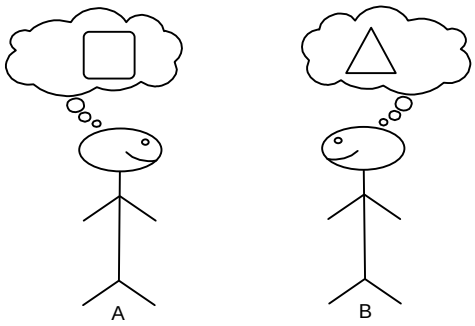

Figure 2

A's picture is made up of an amalgam of ideas and experiences which are unique to him and which form and shape themselves in a particular pattern in A's head. He has his inner experience of the activities, relations, planned intentions, dynamics, culture etc. which form the pattern of activities we call 'organisation' and which for him are 'square' shaped.

B's inner experience of the same environment is unique to him because it is filtered through his way of seeing but is 'triangle' shaped and experienced differently.

We are seeing **two** kinds of difference here:

- *The differences in **A's and B's minds***
- *The difference between the picture of **'organisation-in-the-mind'** and the **institution as it is intended to be** by those who planned it.*

In some ideas of organisational theory it is assumed that the intended organisation *is* the way things are, but the squares and triangles model refutes this.

Why these two ways of seeing?

We need to explore more precisely why there is a difference between A's and B's pictures of the same institution. Why do A and B organise their experiences so differently that 'organisation-in-the-mind' is a square for one and a triangle for the other?

Here we draw first on the work of Melanie Klein[1](1963) to help our understanding.

As I work in an institution - I introject (take into myself) aspects of what is happening to me from people and events to form internal **objects** and **part objects.** These are symbols of my external world which are what I use to think about my surroundings. These are real to me, but are not the same as the 'real' people and things in my environment. Some of these objects will give me pleasure, others pain and discomfort; some I will keep in front of me consciously, others I will try and forget, suppress into unconsciousness. However, even if I suppress them they are still objects in my inner world and affect my behaviour.

As I face the fears and anxieties of engaging with the real world I respond to these internal objects - I feel, I think, I act as prompted by them. I modify these internal objects which I draw upon (wholly or partly), or suppress (wholly or partly) into my unconscious. In order to know how to act, to make decisions and to work with others as a leader/ manager, I try to make sense of everything which I am conscious of inside me - all my thoughts, feelings, ideas and 'hard data' available to me. This process includes my aims, plans and intentions, instructions from others, regulations, responses to changes in the context, my memories of earlier work environments and roles I have taken, and so on. Exactly the same process is going on in those around me with whom I work.

What the squares and triangles model illustrates is that, as human beings interacting with others in our environment, we monitor and control, for a variety of reasons, what we take account of in ourselves, and in others. We are then taken by surprise when we come up against some blotted out features which are active and powerful, because they have been internalised unconsciously. We find ourselves suddenly angry, guilty, pleased or excited and may not always know why. We also trigger unexpected reactions in others, which may be constructive or destructive.

It may be that we have suppressed them so much that they are not immediately accessible to us. Christopher Bollas, in his book, *The Shadow of the Object*[2], has this wonderful expression of the 'unthought known' to refer to those things which inside us we 'know' are affecting us but we have not yet brought to consciousness. These are things that are obvious when brought to our attention but until they are surfaced, we have not given thought to them. (This is of course often very clear in group settings where no-one refers to the obvious, *eg* the significance of an empty chair in a group).

Why do we suppress these experiences in so much of our organisational life? Because as a person-in-role I have my own needs and desires, fears and anxieties into which come the experiences from my workplace. I 'monitor' consciously and unconsciously what I will allow myself to 'know' and perceive, for the sake of the organisation, for my own survival's sake, or for ambition's sake, or for other reasons.

The idea of 'organisation-in-the-mind' alerts us to the fact that there is data here which has to be accessed if we are to take up roles effectively and enable others to do so too. The organisation that is happening is not just out there - it is in me. I have the **'workplace within'**, to use Larry Hirschhorn's description.[3] If I take its existence seriously, and study 'organisation-in-the-mind' within me, I can begin to understand why some things which *are* happening in the organisation **are** happening. Links and connections can be made which help me to see the organisation as a whole with myself in it, and which lead me to consider choices about my own behaviour-in-role, and also what I expect of others. The same can be true in my work with a client, if I am a consultant.

Working with the concept of 'Organisation-in-the-Mind'

This is where the world of psycho-analytic thought helps us, and we refer again to Melanie Klein, and also to D.W. Winnicott.

Transitional Phenomena

If I am a good manager, I recognise I want to relate effectively with that outside world of which I am a part. So I become caught up in what Winnicott describes as **'transitional phenomena'.** [4] In a formal sense, these phenomena may include defining aims, organising groups, making plans, having discussions - and from these plans and encounters I formulate my actions and behaviour toward the actual situations of my work as I perceive them in reality. In fantasy I may have dreams and visions which impinge on me and affect my decisions and behaviour.

But these things may not harness my real feelings, anxieties, fears and aspirations. The drive from my inner world may be unable to engage effectively with the real situation 'out there'.

In Winnicott's terms I need to discover a **transitional object** which can carry my inner feelings, thoughts, imaginings etc, to surface my internal objects and bridge the gap between my inner world and the world outside me, in which I have to act. Just as a teddy bear enables a child to handle his anxieties about discovering his own separate identity from the reality which is his mother, this transitional object is for me, an adult manager, something that enables me to cope with the stresses and uncertainties of making decisions, taking risks and being accountable for what I do. 'Organisation-in-the-mind' is for me the transitional object which I need to contain both my irrational thoughts and ideas as well as my rational ones.

The transitional object is itself paradoxical in that it is both **created** by me (it emerges from my own internal imaginings about the pattern I give to the components of 'organisation-in-the- mind') and **discovered** by me (the pattern presents itself to me as if it were independent of me), often in unexpected, surprising ways and places. Thus the transitional object is essentially a **possession** both created and discovered by its owner. The transitional object therefore contains aspects of irrationality because of its paradoxical nature and because of my inner contradictory feelings and anxieties.

Hirschhorn makes the important point that in the process of management training, *"...technique can function as a transitional object* , which helps adult learners make the transition from feelings of

incompetence to feelings of competence...", and "...the working alliance between trainer and learner can create *a transitional relationship*".[5]

Alongside the idea of the transitional object, I want to refer back to the ideas of Melanie Klein, who describes how, when our anxieties about the dissonance between the things we love and rely on and those we fear and hate becomes too great and unmanageable, we split them into good and bad objects. We then project these splits into the realities of our environment. She calls this inner emotional state that of being in the "paranoid/schizoid" position. In this state we see our surroundings in polarised terms, *eg* idealised some and despised others. However, in everyday life working as managers on tasks, we have to face the reality of a continuous, changing flow of interacting events, and it is predictable that this polarisation begins to crumble. We begin to realise that the world is not black and white, but that we have made it so. From this position follows the search for a way of resolving the dilemma of how to handle the **real** relation between the split-off bits of ourselves, splits which exist initially inside ourselves but we project and reify them in our context.

During the process of resolving, the person looks for something which will 'hold' the situation while sorting out the complexities and moving forward. If the holding is successful, it enables him or her to understand the splitting which has taken place and to recognise the anxieties which lay behind it: to "own" the bad, unrealistically negative split-off parts and re-introject them with the good, unrealistically positive parts, and thus come to a realistic understanding of the situation in which decisions are made and actions taken which are based on reality. Klein considers that the energy to be creative and decisive, derives from the person seeking to make reparation for what has been done to others through the processes of splitting and projection. She calls this the "*depressive position*", the position from which one recognises that the **good and bad** belong together, and are in reality parts of **me.** In recognising that position for oneself as a manager, I find that I do not need to get caught up in the dynamics of blame and punishment but I can work realistically with my colleagues and staff to find a way forward, working through the negatives and positives which are facts of life.

The roots of this area of Klein's thinking lie in infancy[6] and early family experiences. But few managers will be willing or in a position to regress to dependence in a classical psycho analytic process. Amongst other things, the necessary pace of their life will not normally accommodate such a lengthy process. What a manager needs in order to function in role is to get in touch with the processes of splitting and projection as features of organisational rather than familial behaviour. Where in a classic analytic setting the family provides the "organisational" frame for exploration, for a manager in role it is the company, the hospital, the school, or the agency; hence the manager's need to get in touch with his or her own 'organisation-in-the-mind' of the actual institution.

Taking this as the background then, we come back to how working with clients on their 'organisation-in-the-mind' has released them to find and take their roles in new ways.

Organisational Role Analysis

A core process in the Institute's work is what we call Organisational Role Analysis (ORA). This is a one-to-one method of reflective consultation for senior executives which consists of a series of two-hour sessions between a client and a consultant held at regular intervals, preferably away from their workplace.

In Winnicott's terms the ORA session provides the occasion for transitional phenomena to be engaged with. The work is to explore the internal objects that have been patterned by the client to form his or her 'organisation-in-the-mind'. This is then examined against the external phenomena in the workplace through a process of hypothesis building and testing. The hypotheses are formulated in an open ended way to bridge the gap for the client between his or her ideas and feelings and the experiences of their institution. Following Hirschhorn, the **transitional object** is the 'organisation-in-the-mind' which is surfaced with the client through the ORA process, while the **transitional relationship** is that established between the consultant and the client.

Because the material surfaced in the ORA process is powerful and potentially volatile, it is necessary that the structure which contains the work is resilient and strong. In Klein's terms, the 'holding' is done in the management of the working relation between the client and the consultant. The fixed time, the secure boundaries, meeting in the same room with the same furniture arrangement, together provide the facilitating environment of the ORA. This enables the client to relax and to allow those inner, symbolic representations of the organisation to come to the surface. The holding is done in such a way that the client is willing to regress to dependence on the consultant, to let go of their own wish to manage the situation or suppress their 'organisation-in-the-mind' phenomena, to allow their feelings, anxieties, thoughts and ideas about their institution and its workings to emerge and to be looked at. When this clarification of what is inside them happens, the client can begin to test the external realities of their situation, and work at how they can be addressed - taking note of the real state of the institution or department, the processes by which it sustains itself in its context, and considering all those involved. The client can then move to a position where they can truly take up their role as a manager.

Our experience as ORA consultants is that, in a session with a client, the culture the client induces around them, the way they relate to the consultant (the transformer), the kinds of incident that are recounted - all provide evidence which enables 'organisation-in-the-mind' to become manifest to both. That enables the client and consultant together to devise ways of testing what is going on in the external world of the institution and why the client experiences their role in the system in the way they do.

Case Study

A client could not understand why, when he and his colleagues on their own initiative presented their department's Business Plan to the Board, just as everyone else in the organisation had done, the Board members refused to discuss it, dismissing it almost out of hand. He felt that, despite not having been asked to submit such a Plan like all the other departments, they had behaved in a fashion that showed managerial responsibility and for which they expected praise. Instead they were subjected to what felt like an attack on the work of their department such as they had never experienced before in the previous ten years.

The fact was that this was the Chaplain's Department in an internationally known mental hospital and he was the joint Head of the Department. He had come to The Grubb Institute with several things he was determined to understand so that he could behave effectively as a manager of a significant part of the overall system of the hospital:

- *he was being used extensively to run "support groups" for nurses across the hospital, but these were treated with suspicion by hospital managers though they did nothing to stop the groups*
- *the behaviour of the Board and many managers towards the Department and its work was very different from how he wanted it to be treated*
- *he was deeply concerned about some of the practices that were being adopted by nurses, especially towards adolescent patients, which verged on violence at times and which was being concealed from the hospital management.*

In the early sessions of ORA, the consultant found himself being filled up with religious imagery and theological concepts. He felt that he was being used as some kind of priest, while in the material being introduced into the session the client was presenting himself as some kind of psychotherapist. By questioning aspects of how the client spent his week, the consultant elicited that the client was indeed an experienced psychotherapist who did some therapeutic work in the hospital. Not only this, it became clear that he felt considerable jealousy towards the consultant psychiatric staff "in their white coats". This, along with the incident about the Business Plan, gave a strong clue to how the client was picturing his 'organisation-in-the-mind' and his own part in it. He was apparently suppressing his clerical responsibilities, training, appointment and original vocation to the priesthood, and only felt justified in his roles as a therapist and a departmental manager.

In investigating this further it emerged that he felt ill-equipped and unsupported as a chaplain, and unable to justify his existence as a chaplain in conventional management terms in the hospital. However, he hoped that he could find an acceptable identity for himself within the non-religious structure of the hospital. Hence his suppression of the Chaplain's Department and its unique place in the hospital, under the conventional structures which seemed to him to be more acceptable. That was his 'square'; however the 'triangle' in other people's heads shaped things differently: hence his puzzlement at the treatment by the Board of his voluntary presentation of a Business Plan which might keep him in line with other managers, who appeared only to see the Chaplain's Department as something outside the conventional structures and ways of doing things.

The work that followed the uncovering of this picture of the chaplain's 'organisation-in-the-mind' was to direct attention to some of the details of his experience and to relate his Department to other parts of the hospital system[7].

One important detail was that he felt that some of his psychotherapeutic work was arid and ineffectual, with some patients showing little development or change, while others advanced by leaps and bounds. It emerged that the more successful sessions took place within the Chaplain's Office, which was clearly labelled, while his ineffectual sessions took place in other consulting rooms.

Further questions focused attention on the services taken by the chaplain. He discovered that he had in the past conducted rather conventional services paying little attention to the context of the mental hospital. By drawing upon experiences of the actual life of the hospital and the issues being faced by those patients who came to the services, a new vitality grew up. Patients now began to participate in the service in ways that were then reflected in their progress towards health. One of the most remarkable cases was of a schizophrenic patient who had hit the national headlines when he ran amok while on short-term release. He had made little advance in the normal treatment but after he began to attend the new style of services began to make striking progress which had not been evident before.

Attending to the experience of having his Business Plan rejected, it became clear that in this hospital the expectation of the Board was that the Chaplain's Department should "hold" the mystery of human life for the institution as a whole. They were not expected to justify the money spent on their work - nor were they expected to be "effective" in conventional value-for-money terms. The chaplain's problems about his own faith and its significance in the hospital had caused him to come to suppress his religious function and to deny how he and his department were being used in the overall system of the hospital. However, things were happening despite his denial, *eg* his successful work with patients in his office and the fact that patients and staff came to his uninspired services. Whatever he might have thought consciously, other members of the hospital could see things about him and his department of which he was apparently unaware.

Things came to a head when there was a rash of suicides amongst the hospital's out-patients which led to a sharp increase in the demand for the services of the Chaplain's Department. Because he had begun to see the value of what he was actually doing, he was able to apply his belief in ways which were not simply therapeutic but which handled the spiritual dimension of the presenting problems. This had important results for patients and staff in that it enabled them to handle appropriately their feelings of grief, guilt and failure about the crisis.

Rediscovering his role as chaplain in the system of the hospital, he was able to establish new relations with the nurses in the groups he was supporting. In particular he enabled them to re-assess their experience in the heated moments of being confronted with dangerous teenage behaviour. The nurses worked at developing ways of drawing their difficulties to the attention of senior hospital staff. Senior staff in turn, could then begin to draw up new programmes of treatment which stood greater chance of succeeding, as well as creating new robust support structures for the nurses on the wards.

Reflections on the case study

The case study illustrates the shift for the chaplain in his way of understanding how to take up his roles in the hospital. It was as if he had only been working with a partial picture of the hospital as a system and himself within it. By listening to the accounts the client was giving of his experience in the various interactions and relations day by day, the consultant in the ORA enabled him to see the significance of the Chaplain's Department as a sub-system within the hospital, and to discover his primary role in that department and its relation to his roles in other sub-systems of the hospital. He was able to understand the reactions he had been getting from other managers, and to appreciate their 'triangles' and his 'square'. It is interesting to reflect on the presenting negative experience of the uninvited Business Plan, and how that negative power was turned into positive results, by being explored and understood through the medium of 'organisation-in-the-mind'.

It was only by becoming alert to his own 'organisation-in-the-mind' that the chaplain could use it as a transitional object to facilitate his working relations with others. It has been our experience in the Institute that in the cases where our clients have become alert to their own internal objects, especially in the form of 'organisation-in-the-mind', they have become more effective. This is because it has freed them to interact with others in their institutions which enabled them in their turn to surface their 'organisation-in-the-mind', thus enhancing their work.

GUIDANCE FOR CONSULTANTS

The value of working with the idea of 'organisation-in-the-mind' is that it frees managers from thinking about the way things **ought** to be, so they can engage creatively with the way organisational life actually **is** in order that future plans and intentions can be more realistically planned and achieved. The case study shows the practical outcomes of working with this tool, and the usefulness of the ORA method as a way of helping clients to reflect on their experience, to analyse and learn from it, in order to bring about change. It is worth commenting on some of the factors involved in taking up the consultant's role in the ORA process. These include the following.

- *Keep alive the idea that there **is** 'organisation-in-the-mind' for the client to discover and that this is informing and influencing his or her behaviour in his or her role(s)*

  This starts with the consultant explaining the process and describing the idea of 'organisation-in-the-mind'. The client is invited to start at any point - with the presenting issue, or with a critical incident, or by describing or drawing a picture of the organisation as he sees it with himself or herself in it. The consultant listens and reflects back and in due course presents hypotheses about what is going on. This is a cyclic process throughout the ORA. The client can test the hypotheses for himself, and seek more evidence in the intervening weeks to prove or disprove the hypotheses.

- *Provide the dependable holding environment for 'organisation-in-the-mind' to be exposed as fully and richly as possible*

  Dependability is provided both physically and psychologically. The consultant tries to keep to the same room arrangements, to start and end on time, and to avoid altering dates. For the client to learn to 'see' the organisation in ***his*** *own mind, it is important that the consultant works in a way which reflects back to the client the impressions and implications he is conveying. The consultant can also be a 'memory' for the client in later sessions, when new happenings and events in the client's workplace may blot out material which needs to be recalled.*

- *Use the consultant's own experience of working within the ORA pair as a resource*

  The consultant sometimes finds that he or she is developing strong feelings about the situation, which on examination can be seen to be reflecting what is going on in the client's situation. In ORA this transference is worked with in terms of 'organisation-in-the-mind', not as evidence of individual psychology.

- *Assist the client to remember, to "notice", to make links between what is in his/her head/mind, and the external events, experiences and structures of everyday working life which have to be checked continually with the internal picture*

  The consultant models this process for the client in the early stages, until it becomes a mutual process. The consultant also makes brief notes in the session, and spends time reflecting on these afterwards in order to develop further hypotheses.

- *Make connections between apparently unrelated pieces of data by thinking systemically*

  Thinking systemically involves taking account of the whole system in which the client is involved, and recognising that there is a relatedness between all the parts and between the system and its context.

- *Remembering that working life is a dynamic, on-going process and that meeting with a client over time means never taking for granted that 'organisation-in-the-mind' has stayed the same.*

  Each new ORA session is a fresh start. The consultant cannot assume that the client is at the point where the last session finished. Many other things will have happened in-between, and the picture of 'organisation-in-the-mind' which the client brings in this week may have altered. It is important that the consultant always invites the client to start from where he or she wants to. Recapping can be dangerous because it can throw the client back, instead of allowing change to be noticed and worked with.

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