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

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## Distinguishing between Organisation and Institution

This paper introduces a way of thinking about organisation which has been developed by The Grubb Institute as a significant tool for leadership and management in institutions, and for consultants in working with their organisational clients. It focuses on 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\*.

I would like to begin by distinguishing between organisation and institution. These words are often used interchangeably in everyday speech, but in the interest of scientific study they are frequently used to identify different ways of understanding people's collective activity in pursuit of a defined purpose.

**Institution** is an entity constituted to carry out a specific function, whether official, unofficial, formal, or informal, *eg* family, business, church, government, voluntary agencies, army.

**Organisation** is the way the institution is structured and developed in order to deploy human and material resources to carry out its purposes.

Sometimes the structure is set up on presuppositions which may not lead to the achievement of the primary task of the institution.

For example, I had a client, a Methodist minister in the United States, who was sent to a developing, up-market housing area to establish a new church. Together with a small group of residents they agreed that their aim was to grow a church. Two years on they had a very large congregation and an extensive programme of church activities. When he presented his situation to me he indicated that he was concerned that they had lost their way. After several sessions an hypothesis emerged to suggest why this had happened. Though they had applied the label '**church**' to their institution, at an unconscious level their institution-in-the-mind was about being a **business**. The local lay people, who were themselves highly successful in their business

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\* This paper is developed from an earlier paper by Hutton, Bazalgette and Reed (1997) on "Organisation-in-the-Mind"<sup>1</sup> See also Hutton (1997)<sup>2</sup>

and professional careers, were more familiar with a business culture and automatically applied it to their new institution, the church. Together with the minister they developed an organisation-in-the-mind along the lines of running a business, a venture in which they succeeded. Somehow in the process the meaning of church was lost. That had led him to consult the Grubb Institute. It was not just a matter of different values or integrity, it was a matter of outcomes. His idea of the church/business institution was focused on the need to grow in importance, strength of numbers, popularity and sense of achievement, but with no specific spiritual outcomes. He needed first to define an outcome for the church and then to question his assumptions, beliefs, feelings, and knowledge about how the church functioned. This shock gave him some insights into himself, enough to define the outcome desired in terms of the church serving God and the Kingdom of God. Until he was able to grasp this insight and own it with his lay colleagues, it would be useless to go and change the structures, to deconstruct their organisation-in-the-mind.

This example led the Institute to formulate definitions about these mental constructs. When people start to examine what they mean by institution or organisation, they are trying to identify what they have 'in-the-mind' about them. The temptation is always to reify them as existing 'out there', but the reality is that they are constructs, so are held only in the mind. We can thus speak of 'organisation-in-the-mind' and 'institution-in-the-mind'. [see also W. Carr 1999]<sup>3</sup>.

**Organisation-in-the-mind** is a conscious or pre-conscious construct, focused around emotional experience of tasks, roles, purposes, rituals, accountability, competence, failure, success. It calls for **management**.

**Institution-in-the-mind** is an unconscious construct, focused around the emotional experience of ideals, values, hopes, beliefs, dreams, symbols, birth, life, death. It requires **leadership**.

We can say that organisation-in-the-mind can be understood as a metaphor of the body, and institution-in-the-mind as a metaphor of the spirit. Together they constitute a whole. A way of illustrating this would be to take the example of the nuclear family. 'Nuclear' describes the organisation-in-the-mind, and 'family' the institution-in-the-mind.

With organisation-in-the-mind the elements are able to be described and measured, as organisation is necessarily experienced in a specific context. An example of this in the United Kingdom could be a prison, described as an establishment for young offenders, aged 16-19, taking so many convicted young men and women from all over the country. The context is the courts which, by sentencing the accused, send them to prison under specified conditions.

With institution-in-the-mind the elements are more difficult to describe because they relate to unstated beliefs, emotions and values. What a prison is in reality reflects the current values of the society and those appointed to administer justice, elements which cannot be quantified<sup>4</sup>. This leads to debates about its purpose and how to cope with criminal behaviour because of confusion about the unconscious institution-in-the-mind.

To take another example, that of the church. Organisation-in-the-mind would describe church in terms of types of people - ministers, priests, lay people, buildings, liturgy, finance, polity *etc* which has a purpose which may or may not be defined. Institution-in-the-mind would conceive church as people with something to do with the idea of God, *eg* the People of God, the Body of Christ. What it is for is a matter for belief which will vary over time and place.

Shapiro and Carr<sup>5</sup> describe these concepts in a similar way:

“...all institutions exist in the mind, and it is in the interaction with these in-the-mind entities that we live. Of course, all organisations also consist of certain real factors, such as other people, profits, buildings, resources and products. But the meaning of these factors derives from the context established by the institution-in-the-mind. These mental images are not static: they are the product of dynamic interchanges, chiefly projections and transference.”

Organisations start with someone who has an idea which requires certain kinds of activity for that idea to be carried out. He \* forms an organisation-in-the-mind as an expression of some wish to set up an institution, *eg* a company for designing computer programmes, with certain values, hopes, beliefs in mind. He tries to communicate those beliefs and thoughts to others to make a structure to embody the purpose and aim of this idea. In this process there are a number of stages:

- First, the person with the idea and vision may have a very unformed idea of institution-in-the-mind and there may be discrepancies between his initial concept and how he describes that to others, and what he believes and hopes for as a result. So there is **one aspect of uncertainty**.
- Secondly, as he works with other people to set up the institution with its organisation, those others may find difficulty in interpreting the ideas, emotions and values of the original plan in practice. Their attempt to embody the aim and achieve its intentions **can also lead to uncertainties**.
- Thirdly, there is the unknown of whether they can employ competent skilled people who are able to manage the resources available to achieve the aim in a constantly shifting and dynamic context. This again is **a matter for uncertainty**.

The task therefore of the management of the organisation is to achieve a dynamic balance between these uncertainties and make the best use of the resources. The actual results of this process may be discrepant with the original intentions and lead to problems which confuse management and staff.

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\* Throughout the paper 'he' is used to mean he or she.  
An example of this is that of an ex-army officer who was driven by his love and concern for old people. He wanted to find a way of enabling them to live out their lives in familiar environments as

much like their own homes as possible. He set up a scheme using a row of existing houses within a neighbourhood. This activity was so successful that he came under considerable pressure from well-wishers to grow and to become a national organisation to reproduce such places all over the country. An executive was brought in to develop and run this growing organisation since the founder acknowledged that he was not a manager but a visionary leader. However after a year or so there was a major split between the national directors and the founder because the latter felt his original aim of the institution of caring for old people was not being carried out. He became aware that his institution-in-the-mind was quite different from his fellow directors.

They could not see that there needed to be a problem, although they were fully aware that relations were breaking down between them and the founder and the situation was becoming unworkable. They felt the founder was unreasonable and unrealistic. The founder, feeling deeply the values of his institution-in-the-mind was unable to argue his point in organisational terms because outwardly they were in agreement. The 'dynamic balance' I referred to earlier was not achievable. The founder left the original charity, and went off to found another housing scheme which exists to this day as a small separate entity alongside the highly successful national housing association.

## Understanding differences

Why do such things happen in organisational life? Let me offer you a very simple diagram\* of two people working in the same organisation. “A” and “B” are trying to agree an action to be taken by “B”. They do agree, but afterwards “B” goes and does something completely different. Has this experience ever happened to you?

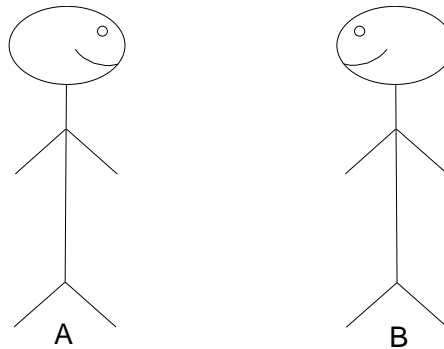


Figure 1

The problem is about each of them having a different picture of the (same) organisation- in-the-mind. “A” attributes certain values to what he says and what he hears from “B”. “B” does likewise and they then agree on the wording of the action, believing they know what the other intends. But “A” interprets everything in terms of a ‘square’ organisation-in-the-mind, and “B” interprets the same words and actions in terms of a ‘triangular’ organisation-in-the-mind.

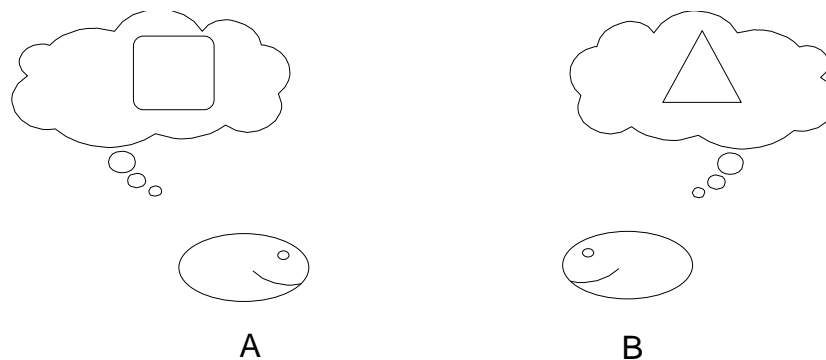


Figure 2

The difference between them can be attributed to the way they have each experienced their work and the lack of communication skills which could have alerted them to the different images which each had, characterised by ‘square’ and ‘triangle’ in-the-mind. There is the further possibility that because they worked with different values and beliefs and had different emotions, they had different institutions-in-the-mind. Since this was unconscious they were unable to grasp how different they were.

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\* Bruce Reed conceived this model in the course of developing Organisational Role Analysis. see p8

In the example of the Housing Association, this latter explanation seems the most probable and this would explain why the founder's action appeared idiosyncratic and irrational to the national director.

We are seeing two kinds of difference here:

- The difference in "A's" and "B's" minds with regard to organisation-in-the-mind based on structure and experience, as shown in the diagrams.
- The difference between organisation-in-the-mind at a conscious level of experience, and institution-in-the-mind which is influencing the encounter at an unconscious level.

In our Grubb Institute courses we sometimes invite members to work at these levels by drawing a picture which describes how they see and experience their business, company, school *etc*, at that point in time. They are invited to think of an imaginative image or metaphor, to avoid using words and to include themselves in the picture. We suggest they consider their work relationships, events, purposes, groups, clients *etc* and their feelings, and to try to encapsulate these in the drawing. When the resultant pictures are discussed in the group, it often shows some things to the artist which he or she was not aware of, nevertheless it is a basically purposive and conscious level activity. Sometimes however a comment by another member on the picture reveals a deeper level of insight into the unconscious institution-in-the-mind. This uncovers hopes, beliefs, values which may affect the meaning of the image chosen, the way it has been expressed, what is included, and what is omitted.

However there can be another reason for this difference. We are looking at the emotional experience either of the artist in the picture, or of "A" and "B" in their interaction at work. As a manager or leader I may assert that I want to be realistic, but I need to have the insight to understand that I engage in unconscious processes in order to cope with the stress of the realities of my work. The more I understand about my own inner world, the more I am likely to be able to deal with the realities constructively, because I will recognise that this is a natural human process and conveys important information to me, not just about myself and my own behaviour but about the state of the organisation and its dynamics.

Melanie Klein<sup>6</sup> suggests that as I, as a person, 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 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 forget, repress unconsciously. However, even if I repress 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; as I feel, think, act I am prompted by them. I modify these internal objects which I draw upon (wholly or partly), or repress (wholly or partly) in 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 square and triangle 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. Christopher Bollas, in his book, *The Shadow of the Object*<sup>7</sup>, has this wonderful term, the 'unthought known', to refer to those things which are affecting me from my inner world but I have not yet brought to consciousness.

Why do we repress these experiences in so much of our organisational life? Because as a person-in-role in my institution 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 my own survival, or for the sake of the institution, or for the sake of my own ambition.

Nevertheless, as Larry Hirschhorn suggests, the organisation that is happening is not just out there - it is **in** me. He calls it the 'workplace within'<sup>8</sup>.

If I am a good manager, I want to relate effectively with the institution of which I am a part. So I become caught up in what Winnicott describes as '**transitional phenomena**'<sup>9</sup>. In a formal sense, these phenomena may include defining aims, organising groups, making business 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 as 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**' becomes **the transitional object** which I need to contain both my irrational thoughts and unformulated ideas as well as my rational ones.

The transitional object is itself paradoxical in that 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. It contains aspects of irrationality because of its paradoxical nature and because of my inner contradictory feelings and anxieties.

What I have been saying is about emotional experience and it would be easy to think of it as the property of the individual manager or client. My former colleague, David Armstrong<sup>10</sup>, suggests that emotional experience is very rarely located within a purely individual space.

“Psycho-analysis for example is not the investigation of the emotional experience of the individual alone: it is the investigation of the emotional experience of the pair, of what passes between two people... similarly in group work... In institutions, it is the institution as a whole that contains the emotional experience, within what I referred to earlier as a ‘bounded space’.”

To explore this experience requires more than a psycho-analytic perspective, therefore, it requires a **systemic** perspective. In system terms, the emotional experience of the individual is the shared experience of everybody in the system. What he experiences at this moment in time is experienced on behalf of the system and tells him things about the state of the system. The emotional experience is important information helping him to understand the realities of both organisation- in-the-mind and institution-in-the-mind. [see also D Armstrong 1991]<sup>11</sup>.

## Organisational Role Analysis

The origin of the concepts relating to organisation-in-the-mind arose from the Grubb Institute’s work in group relations conferences. The development of this framework came from a distinctive initiative from my colleague, Bruce Reed, in inventing in 1973 the experiential model he called ‘Organisational Role Analysis’.

The distinctive aspect was to enable clients (usually executives, managers and professionals) to explore the range of their experiences - personal, group and institutional - in a one-to-one setting, as an alternative to attending a group relations working conference. The model itself arose as the outcome of an experiential working conference.

Instead of exploring a conference-generated experience, the client was invited to explore his experience in his place of work - his ‘working experience’. Based on the assumption of organisation-in-the-mind, the consultant hypothesized that the client ‘brought’ his entire company for study through his own experience. The Organisational Role Analysis model, (ORA for short), consisted of alternating between sessions with a consultant, held off-site, where the consultant would engage with the experience of the client as he wished to express it, and a period of two to three weeks before the following session for the client to engage with the actual life of the organisation. Thus he could test out any working hypotheses developed in the ORA sessions and



take note of his own behaviour, *eg* under stressful conditions. Each session was open-ended and the client decided in the here-and-now of the session the working experience he wished to discuss.

The desired outcome of the ORA is that the client will learn how to make his optimum contribution to his institution through discovering how to manage himself in his role in the 'real' dynamic situation he is working in. An important aspect in this is the capacity to distinguish between the exercise of power and the taking of authority<sup>12\*</sup>.

After working on several ORA projects with different clients, Reed decided on the design of eight sessions of two hours duration. Each ORA extends over three to four months, which provides a sufficiently long period for clients to learn to manage themselves and to take authority in their working roles.

### The Role of the ORA consultant

In the Grubb Institute we believe this role requires skilled and trained organisational analysts. We have only used staff who have had experience in staff roles in group relations conferences and with considerable understanding of the associated psycho-dynamic and behavioural concepts. The Institute has developed an ORA consultant training programme which involves being an ORA client, observing an ORA, taking one under supervision, and participating in group relations conferences and seminars on the conceptual framework and theoretical tools.

### Key Concepts

Since the ORA model was first devised in 1973, several concepts have become critically significant in examining working experience, and have been defined in terms which we use differently from other behavioural scientists.

Four of these concepts and how they mutually interact are illustrated in the following Venn diagram conceived by Reed.

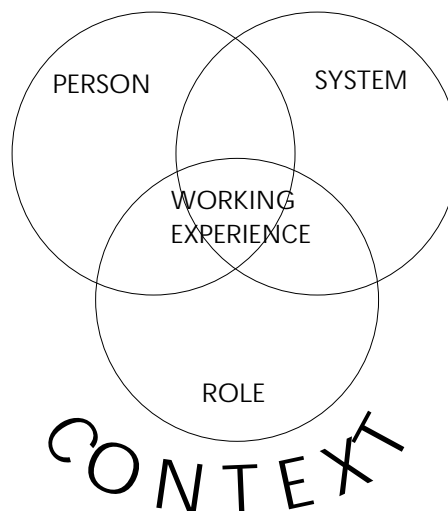


Figure 3

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\* Reed, "Organisational Transformation", p12

**Working Experience** describes the feelings, thoughts, desires and reactions of a person who is engaging with a system by taking a role. This is differentiated from 'personal experience' where the person cannot find the role by which to manage their work - their contribution to the system. Reflection upon current working experience is a way of monitoring a person's understanding of themselves, the system and its purpose, and the way the role is being made and taken.

**Person**, as used here, relates to the client. The construct in the mind of the consultant is distinguished from that of individual. Whereas individual points to separateness, person implies connectedness and relatedness with others. The consultant is sensitive to the part objects and projections the client is experiencing which transcend group and institutional boundaries, (see Armstrong), and are continually fluctuating. They constitute the emotional life of the person which influences his values and beliefs. The client's self-knowledge, history and awareness of competencies and learned behaviours is being affected by these factors and shown in the way he is working and evaluating his performance.

**System** is the working context of the person as construed by the consultant, following Gregory Bateson's definition of a system as 'activities with a boundary'<sup>13</sup>. For the client initially, 'system' covers the constructs of organisation-in-the-mind and institution-in-the-mind in the ORA process, but on a daily basis it is where he works and has responsibility for contributing to the success of the workplace according to his position within it. I hope it is clear I am speaking here of an organic, living system, not a mechanical one. Von Bertalanffy in "*General Systems Theory*"<sup>14</sup> speaks of a living cell as a system with permeable boundaries, receiving inputs and expelling outputs into the environment.

**Role** is the critical construct of the ORA process and is a central point in its work. Its definition derives from the Tavistock tradition but has been uniquely developed by my Institute. All I can do here is to introduce its principles and to distinguish our use of role from that of others. (For further discussion of role see Reed<sup>15</sup>).

In the Venn diagram, role is seen as linking person to system. It implies that to work for the benefit of the system, the person has to function in role. When joining a system, a person is generally given a position, a job title and a task to carry out, but none of these is role in our terms. A 'Role' cannot be given to anyone by anyone\*. The person has to **discover** there is a role for him, then to **make** that role, and finally to **take** that role. Properly understood, we suggest that the induction period offered to new staff can be the opportunity provided for them to begin to find, make and take their roles.

For example a person needs to learn what the purpose of their company/institution is, to decide whether, in their new position they can work for the benefit of the system and not just for their own career. That is, they begin to discover if there is a role for them to take.

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\* Role as used here is differentiated from the behaviour expected of the person by others, *ie* assumed in their minds. The role I as a person assume we call 'psychological role'; the role which others expect of me we call 'sociological role', which becomes part of the context in my finding, making and taking the psychological role.

The ORA develops as the consultant offers hypotheses to the client based on his working experience, which begins to lead to the transformation of his behaviour as he takes his role. The person ‘makes’ the role by identifying not only **the aim of the system** but also its structures, technologies, ethics, cultures and the types of people who work there with their expectations.

The person needs to know himself and the intellectual and emotional contributions which he can offer to the system. He also needs to be knowledgeable about **the context** in which the system operates in order to take account of threats and opportunities for its well-being. As can be easily seen, at all phases of this exploration the client will continue to find, make and take his role - it is a never-ending recurring process.

Since the head of the client institution is the one on the outer **boundary**, interfacing both internally and externally with the context, we prefer to start with him as the client and then to work with other people in the organisational structure who manage subsidiary boundaries, although some will also work on the outer boundary with the head.

Central to the ORA process is the **construct of organisation-in-the-mind**, which will also be subject to new perspectives as the ORA proceeds. The more the client can become sensitive to the unconscious **construct of institution-in-the-mind**, the more he is likely to find new energy and see new possibilities for his work, personally and corporately. This will be enhanced if the client is able to think and experience the systemic dimension of his behaviour as being influenced by and influencing colleagues and others.

An illustration of the effect of ORA in practice comes from an ORA with the headteacher of a secondary school in central London. This school took pupils from socially disadvantaged homes and had a local reputation for being a ‘sink’ school for failing pupils. She drew a picture of her school which showed a marked contrast between the warm and caring environment of the lower school and the pressured and chaotic environment of the upper school, where students were achieving very poor academic results on which the school’s reputation was being based.

In the process of the ORA she saw that they had so compensated the ‘poor’ pupils in the lower school by being sorry for them as they came into the school, that when they were in the rigours of the upper school, faced with the reality of public examinations, they were not equipped for the pressures of entry into adult life.

The organisation-in-the-mind now compelled her to see that she was not coping with holding the whole system together as an educational institution. She had split the school into a ‘good’ lower school and a ‘bad’ upper school, and had organised the school to fulfil those projections. She then began to realise that her unconscious institution-in-the-mind was that she was running the school as if it were a social work agency. She had to face up to whether she could take the staff along with her to enable the school to be transformed into a place of education and learning.

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