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Organisational Hierarchies and Organisational Triangles

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Abstract

This paper provides a current literature review on boundaries and introduces a new categorization framework for practitioners. This framework comprises of three areas of focus: person, people, place. This new boundary conceptualisation offers TA practitioners a contemporary model from which to consider how boundaries impact on their work as professionals with clients dealing with boundary and relationship issues.

Keywords

organisational structure, organisational hierarchy, organisational triangles, organisational culture, organisational transactional analysis

Note: I thank the group who attended Julie Hay's webinar with me in February 2024 for their contributions to my thinking: they were Faye Karsikko, Igor Ostapenko, Natali Voronina, Sergio Caballero, Olga Vyatkina and Vesna Nencheva.

Introduction

In this article I give a brief summary of what we have in TA to describe organisational hierarchy. I then propose a further development of Hay's (2012) organisational triangle model. In the corporate world, it is a very common phenomenon that there is a declared message and then you have a different reality of things. I represent the original model as a declared level and add another level called followed level, which is in practice and that is more deterministic, similar to the way we do for ego states in terms of behavioural (functional) and internal (structural). Following the figures of this phenomena, I will illustrate through examples how I have encountered them in organisational development practice. Then some ideas are given how to analyse the organisations with the model and how can it be used as a developmental approach.

At one of my workplaces, as an employee, I was invited to a 'welcome day' as a participant, which was an on-boarding day where we could hear about the history of the company from different heads of departments and management. They talked about the corporate values and introduced what they do. Shockingly, I was invited to this event after having worked for the company for six months, so I already had a lot of experience how things were going. I was surprised that, although there were similarities, during the welcome day I felt like I was listening about a different company and found that what was being said here as 'inspiration' was largely the opposite of what was happening in practice. This story illustrates the phenomenon that I will analyse in this article.

The re-consideration of the original organisation triangles model by Hay (2012) described in this article was motivated by an intuition supported by my real life experiences as an organisation consultant. During a webinar with the author, when I first met the triangles model, I had an intuition that something else was going on sometimes in organisations. When I reflected on my earlier projects as an organisational consultant, I developed Hay's model further and then presented it during one of Julie Hay's webinars to an international group. I have thanked the participants above who allowed me to present my ideas and this group reinforced them with further examples from their own practice.

The Development of Organisational Hierarchy Models Before TA

The origins of the earliest organisation charts go back all the way to the 19th century. In 1854, Daniel McCallum, a Scottish-born railroad engineer who was the general manager of the New York and Erie Railroad, designed an intricate tree to illustrate the complex nature of the railway system (Rosenthal, 2013). He gave a very graphic and beautiful representation, which was more a work of art than a practical organisational representation.

In 1917 a more functional structure of an organigram was designed by Computing-Tabulating-Record Company (CTR Co.) (today working under IBM) who designed their own chart. It has highly symmetrical, pyramidal form (shown in Chappe & Lawson Jaramillo, 2020). This kind of organigram has become an established tool for structuring organisations and has helped managers, employees and investors to navigate the structure of organisations for many years in so many other organisations as well.

The TA Contribution to Organisational Hierarchy Models

In the TA literature, Berne (1963) first describes organisational structures in his book *The Structure and Dynamics of Organizations and Groups*. Here he presented several types of organisational diagrams, or as he called them, authority diagrams. His diagrams are typically based on psychiatric institutions and show the structure of treatment groups, which is understandable, since as a psychiatrist he worked in health care. However, some are based on a séance he joined because he was looking for a group situation free of the connotations of psychotherapeutic groups, but where he could experience the archaic aspect of the members' personalities. Also, his experiences during his military service also provided inspiration for the thoughts on structures of organizations; during World War II he joined the United States Army Medical Corps and served as a psychiatrist; he subsequently served as a consultant to the Surgeon General of the US Army; and in 1951 he accepted a position of Adjunct and Attending Psychiatrist at the Veterans Administration and Mental Hygiene Clinic in San Francisco.

In his 1963 book, Berne presents similar formal organisational structures to those used by CTR Co. It is based on the formal hierarchy and includes the locations of the addresses of the offices (Figure 1).

These are similar to organisation charts before TA. What was different from the organisational diagrams already in use was the way he incorporated psychology into the diagrams. He did this by including, in addition to the formal organisational hierarchy, the cultural and historical aspects of the organisation's structure (Figure 2). By doing this we could start to think about how these affect the operation of organisations even though some of the people included in the chart are not actually working there still, having left the company or even died.

In her book Hay (2024a) introduced something similar to Berne called the location diagram, but instead of the locations she put positions under the names (Figure 3). Hay mentions that this figure shows the typical top-down version of an organisational chart, but increasingly, organisations may present their charts differently and this is how she elaborated her new ideas to represent them and called them organisational triangles (Hay, 2012).

The Organisational Triangles

Hay (2012) shows the same structure as in Figure 3 but formed it as a triangle and called it 'top-down organisation' (Figure 4). Then she introduced the notion that organisations in 2012 (and we can see nowadays too) were starting to turn the chart up the other way, so that instead of a top-down image they have a 'bottom-up' picture. The meaning of this is that the company emphasises the importance of the customer-facing staff, who would no longer be metaphorically 'at the bottom'.

It is here we can also see the concept of servant leadership 1977 (Greenleaf, 1977/2002), which seems to describe something very similar. Servant leadership was formulated as early 1977 but it was only a quiet revolution at the time; research continued through Spears (2010) developing the characteristics of this type of leadership. In the 10 years that followed, this leadership topic was an important part of organisational training and culture changes. I completed servant leadership projects for some international organisations based in Hungary during those years. For example in a big IT company the strategic goal of the Board was to recruit such leaders to the organisation and to train existing leaders. Thus, one of the aspects of the assessment centre used in the selection of new managers was whether their leadership style reflected the servant leadership approach. There was also a training course for existing managers that included familiarising them with the servant leadership approach as a preferred leadership style.

Hay describes a third option where the same organisational chart is put on its side to give the appearance that everyone is equal. At one end there is the customer facing staff; essential if the company is to continue to make sales. At the other end are the senior leaders - also essential for managing the company and to raise finance, lobby the government, and all the other strategic tasks that are so important to long term business survival. In the middle are the middle managers, who serve as the communications bridge between senior management and customer-facing staff. This role is essential for business operations and staff leadership because there are usually too many employees for each to speak directly with a top manager. Hay wrote "the organisation reaches the level version when people have recognised that all jobs are equally important.

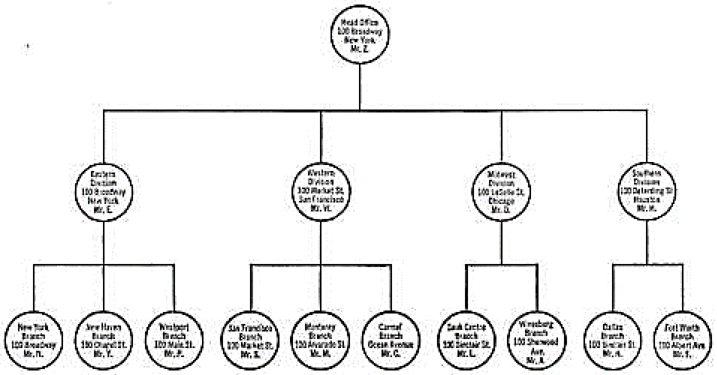

Figure 1: A Business Organisation – Location Diagram (Berne, 1963, p.3)

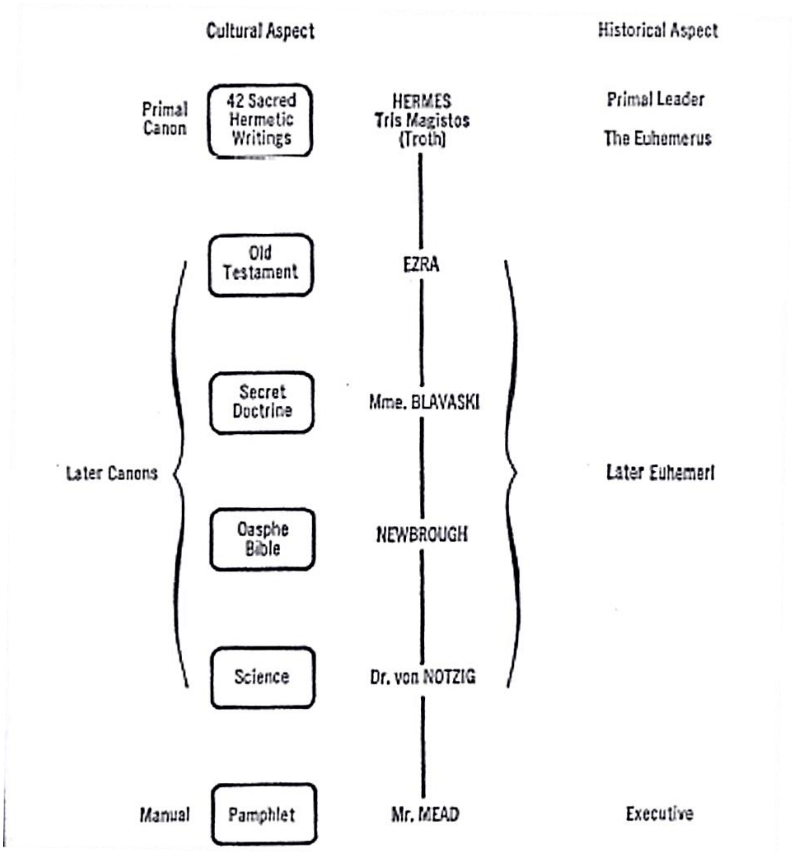

Figure 2: An Authority Diagram – Cultural and Historical Aspects (Berne, 1963, p.35)

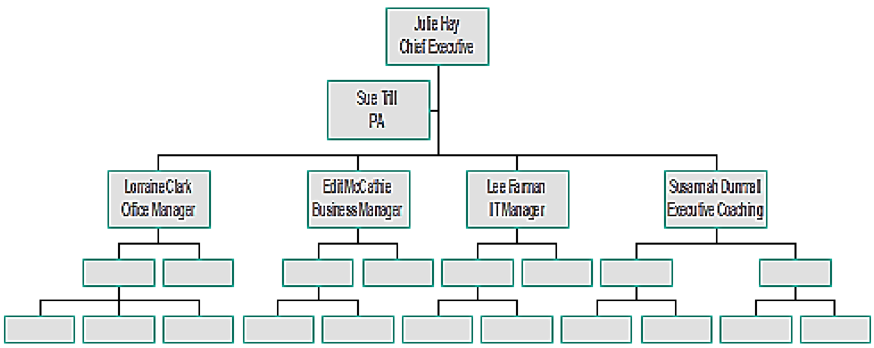

Figure 3: Typical Organisation Chart (Hay, 2024a, p.53)

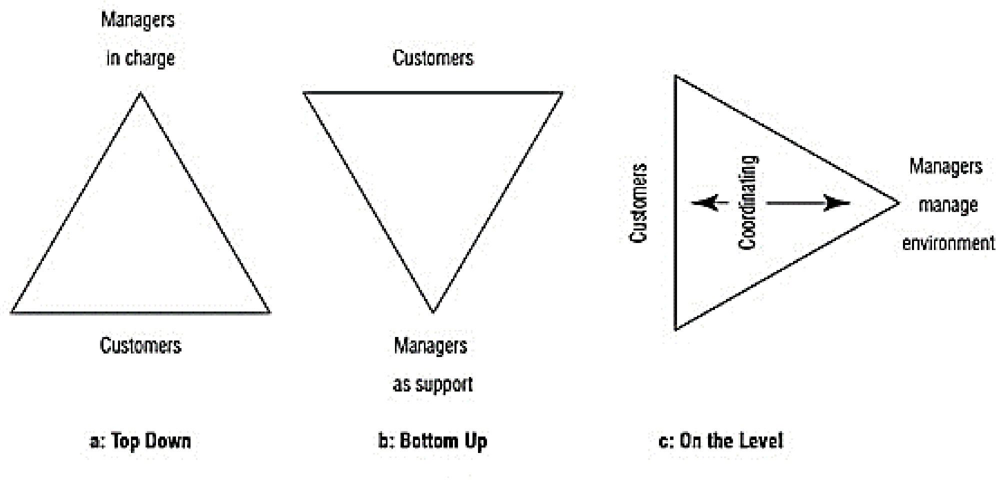

Figure 4: Organisational Triangles (Hay, 2012, p.58)

The customer contact jobs are valued, but so is the role of management in dealing with outside bodies such as government departments and local authorities, shareholders and other sources of finance, the local and perhaps the international community. There is even a recognition of the worth of people in between as coordinators and bridges. People are treated as equals and there may also be partnerships with suppliers and purchasers." (Hay, 2024a, p. 54).

In this model the parties can work closely together to develop long-term sustainable, effective and customer-centric operations. Hay developed the idea of 'on-the-level' organisations by combining and building on Berne's (1963) organisational diagrams which resulted in the organisational cone (Hay, 2016) (Figure 5).

This model shows clearly that each level within an organisation is important on its own way. In addition, this model avoids the problem with Berne's group structure model, which portrays leaders as having no direct contact with the outside world, because it shows how all levels in the cone have external boundaries within different contexts.

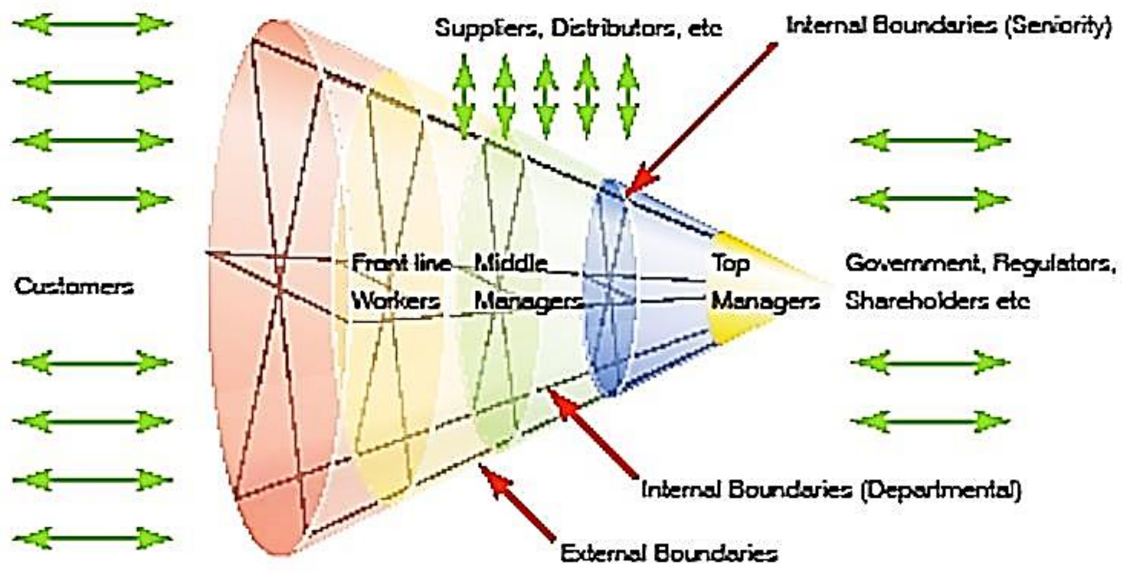

Figure 5: Hay's Organisational Cone (Hay, 2016, p.20)

We see the rise of on-the-level organisations for example in the so-called 'agile' (Chin, 2004) systems. Agile working incorporates horizontal rather than vertical linkages, with groups working in self-managing ways, and with individuals within the groups forming other groups to ensure that there is coordination between groups. The four main values of agile working are: focus on the individual and personal communication over processes and tools; focus on working software over comprehensive documentation; emphasising collaboration with the customer; and reacting to changes versus rigidly following plans. (Beck, Beedle, van Bennekum, Cockburn, Cunningham, Fowler, Grenning, Highsmith, Hunt, Jeffries, Kern, Marick, Martin, Mellor, Schwaber, Sutherland, & Thomas, 2001).

Nowadays it is used not only in the IT sector, where it is originally came from, but some elements have also been taken over by other sectors. I worked in an organisational consulting company with agile method where we were using an agile 'backlog' - the task management tool in agile where we put the task and the team members take on those themselves and the leader intervenes and assigns tasks only when really necessary. We were also developing e-learning contents via 'sprints', which means two-week periods of improvement in agile, followed by a retrospective meeting, which is an agile framework for meetings to reflect on how we worked together last time and identify how the team can work better in the coming period. In addition to these, we had weekly stand-up meetings, which again in agile is a short planning meeting where we look at three questions in a fixed structure: what have I done since the last meeting; what is waiting for me; and do I need any help?

Once I helped an international accounting company to import some methods from agile, where the challenge was that the manager was very overloaded and team members were less independent. It was decided by the manager to start using a backlog for task allocation, so that the employees would not have to wait for the tasks to be allocated. In addition to this, we taught the team members the agile approach (the values mentioned above) and helped them think about how they would like to implement these in their practice. As a result, the overburdened manager was relieved, which was evident from the fact that from 80 emails a day, after the development only seven a day were in his mailbox in the morning. Team members felt empowered and became more independent. So some of the elements of agile helped this organisation, particularly because of the repetitive nature of the field they are in. Having collected these repetitive tasks and put them on the backlog, they just had to think further about how to teach employees to do most of them and to be free to choose tasks from this list.

Another example for on-the-level hierarchies is holacracy (Robertson, 2016) which is very similar to agile. Although the term holacracy as opposed to agility has not really caught on in my country. Robertson defines it as "a new social technology for governing and operating an organization, defined by a set of core rules distinctly different from those of a conventionally governed organization." (p.12). Holacracy is about taking power out of the traditional organisational hierarchy and spreading it throughout the organisation according to different, well-defined roles. This way, everyone knows what they are supposed to do and does it, without a single boss checking that everyone is doing it properly. One of the most significant benefits of which is that employees have 'more power' than in companies with a traditional structure.

And the non-top-down hierarchical trend has continued with the extreme emergence of many start-ups in the last years. In the case of these, there is usually an angel investor who takes a big risk by investing in start-ups in the hope of high returns. There is also a new approach in the market, when those investors who were once successful managers themselves, in order to maximise the chances of a return on investment, often become mentors too and support the leaders with experiences and relationships, so they work closely together in those start-ups. The entrepreneur is also actively developing the product with the help of the clients/customers, so they are all working on-the-level, very closely, relying on each other very much.

Organisational Triangles: Declared and Followed Levels

In Figures 6 and 7, I distinguish between followed level and declared level when we think about the triangles, just as we do with ego states when we make a difference between internal (structural) and behavioural (functional) ego states (labels used for internal and behavioural ego states are from Hay, 2009).

- *Declared level – is* the stated, professed level that is said at various company events or on different forums and platforms to employees and customers. This is represented in the same form as Hay did in the original organisational triangles model, drawn by a solid line.
- *Followed level -* is the internal, psychological agenda that they do not speak about but actually act on it. I draw it in dotted lines in the representation, as Berne (1964) does in the representation of ulterior transactions during

psychological games and as Hay (2009) does in the representation of internal (structural) ego states, to indicate that this level is not visible, not directly observable, but has a significant impact on the dynamics of what happens. Sometimes the followed level comes to the surface unexpected and brings bad feelings as we can see in examples below.

I call it ‘clarified’ when the followed and declared levels overlap almost completely, which is not a problem in practice; hence there can be three versions that have been clarified. However, there are two typical problematic versions where the followed and declared levels diverge, which I will explain through the following example cases.

Phenomenon 1

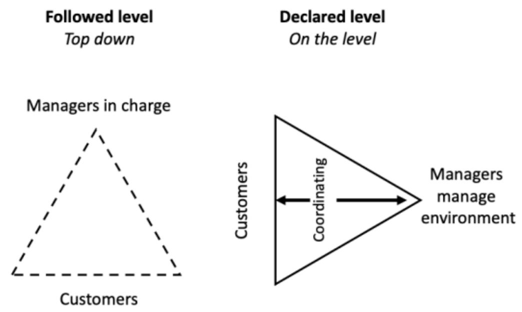

Figure 6: Phenomenon 1

We meet this when the followed level is top-down but the declared level is on-the-level (Figure 6). An example of this is when a company claims to put the customer first, but in practice actually this is not the case. A company claimed to be customer-centric in their marketing campaigns, but when we looked at the key performance indicators (KPIs), we found that they were looking at efficiency, how to maximise the results in terms of minimising the time spent with each customer. Employees tend to work to KPIs to achieve their own bonuses, rather than the company's declared mission. This leads to employees who are under too much pressure; sometimes they know consciously why, sometimes not and are only aware of the overwhelming feeling and stress they are experiencing because they cannot decide which one to follow.

Sometimes this is what happening in professional associations too, where the on-the-level triangle would be desirable. The members are on equal (and sometimes they are the ‘customers’ too) and should work closely with the leadership chosen by them. The members should make the decisions and work with the leadership who coordinate and manage the environment. The association is a form of a very democratic legal entity. We can see examples where this equality is only a pretence; not every member is asked, or members have to vote without knowledge, or voting on association decisions is only a formality without real debate and discussion. Extreme and probably not a common example, but I once attended a general meeting of an association where every issue was decided by a 100% yes vote, which is an artificial harmony.

We can think about how this also describes the dynamics of some governments where they declare their decisions are based on national consultation, but in practice they are not based on real surveys, forums or any other form of democratic consultation, but on manipulated, suggestive questions. They use methods where the outcome is highly predictable, and often declare with big marketing campaigns, like propaganda, that the results are based on ‘the overwhelmingly support’ of the citizens.

Phenomenon 2

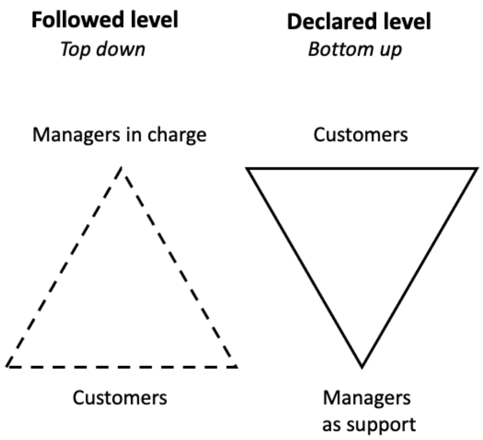

Figure 7: Phenomenon 2

We meet this when the followed level is top-down but the declared level is bottom-up (Figure 7). The situation in Figure 7 is when the people working there are more important than the customer, even though they claim on the declared level that they work for the customer. We can see this mostly in state-owned companies, such as the lottery companies. An interesting example of this for me is that the Hungarian state owned gambling company has won the ‘most attractive workplace in the service sector’ award for four years in a row, which is constantly promoted on their communication platforms and which has the ulterior message that actually it is the people who work there who are really important.

My other example for this is sometimes national railways, which all say that passengers are the most important, but sometimes in practice that is not the case. For instance, Hungarian Railways can be seen in statistics (Weiler, 2024) to be performing worse and worse in the last 4 years, although they show on their social media platforms how they improve. Another problem is that the improvements shown do not respond to the most relevant customer needs. For example, they show on social media how they renovated a bathroom in a waiting room, but the number of delays increases significantly year after year.

Another example was when I worked with a company where in every corporate event, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) declared that the customer is the most important and we always have to pay attention to what is good for them, but in practice that company did no product development based on feedback from those who did sales and met the customers most. The salespeople were not even participants in the company satisfaction survey, which covered only those in Headquarters (HR, IT, legal department, product development, etc). Another hint about this is when a company has a marketing campaign that instead of being about what the customer gets out of the product, compares itself to other companies, which sends the ulterior message that the brand is more important, not that the product is more responsive to customer needs. This phenomenon can also be seen in the cynical comments that staff make behind management's backs about how everyone knows that putting the customer's interests first is nonsense.

The difference between a followed and a declared level can cause problems many ways, such as when the declared level is misleading to freshly recruited employees. I have experienced working with an insurance company (Phenomenon 2) where a new employee expected that the goal was really to help customers create protection by insurance, because this was actually conveyed to him in the recruitment interview series. But as soon as he started working, he realised that this was not the case; he was pushed to make sales of products regardless of the needs of the customer. He left the company in disappointment. All this came out in the exit interview, which is an example of when the followed level comes to the surface, as it does in terms of ulterior transactions in the end of psychological games too (Berne, 1964). The similarity is also reflected in the fact that those involved in the situation leave with bad feelings too.

Contextual considerations

The basis on which a discrepancy between the level followed and the level declared is created is very much related to the context. What may be happening in the organisation may instead reflect the personal characteristics of the first person of that company. In the case with the insurance company, it was part of the context that the new CEO was working there for two years and supported customer-on-top hierarchy. The CEO before him tended to suggest the top-down on declared and followed levels. The new CEO would like to change it, but it takes some time. To manage this they have to change the culture and the processes too. Until it is sorted out, the employees will be stressed about it as we could see in the example above.

Another contextual effect is that firms which are facing staff shortages and want to attract staff, may profess something different from what they actually do with staff and customers, and this is more likely to produce Phenomenon 1.

One more contextual impact could be in those countries and organisations where the corruption and the politicisation and bureaucracy is typical. These tend to induce Phenomenon 2, especially if we check the government owned companies in some countries.

Finally, if a company is in a monopoly position or there are few competitors in the market, this is more likely to lead to the cases described in Phenomenon 2. However it can also lead to this if competition is too high, the product is not unique and the company resorts to a manipulative marketing and business strategy.

How can we analyse the differences of the two levels with the model

I suggest that in organisational development projects, when we do an analysis of the company, we cannot focus only on the stated, declared level, but must also consider the followed level, that is going on the psychological level, as we do with ego states.

To check the differences we need to analyse two factors: how and for what the people are rewarded physically. Like what positions exist in the organisations and how they contribute to the performance of the company? What are the KPIs, work processes, bonus systems? Whether surveys exist and if so, who fills in employee and customer satisfaction surveys, etc?

As well as analysing what rewards are there psychologically, we have a lot more TA to use. Like what patterns are there in the organisation in terms of Parent, Adult and Child structural ego states (Berne, 1964) and how can we see the behaviour patterns in terms of Nurturing Parent, Controlling Parent, Functional Adult, Natural Child, Adapted Child behavioural ego states (Hay, 2009). We can analyse stroking patterns in terms of conditional and unconditional positive and negative strokes (Cooper & Kahler, 1974). We can check the leadership styles where we can use Krausz's (1986) model, where based on the amount of energy used and the results obtained, she identifies four types of leadership styles: controlling, coaching, coercive, participative. Or there is Hay's (2009) leadership model (adapted from Kahler, 1979a, 1979b) along the lines of whether a person is active or passive in initiating a relationship, and prefers to work with others or alone, so a different leadership style is needed. Hay also links this to infer a person's working style and preferred types of strokes too, and defines the potential leadership styles as caring, connecting, controlling, consulting, concise. We can think about what kind of power is used and to what for, like Steiner (1981) uses the following classification: grounding, knowledge, control, communication, passion, love and transcendence; , Krausz (1986) suggests to use coercion, reward, knowledge, competence, interpersonal, support, positional; or there is Hay's (2015, 2024b) comprehensive model, which integrates the previous two (and two more non-TA authors) into: physical, pecuniary, performance, personal, psychological, positional, political.

The Clarified Level

I have already explained that by clarified, I mean that followed and declared level are in sync, whether they work top-down, bottom-up or on-the-level. It is important to note that organisations have a lot to gain by having the two levels in line. For example, there is less internal tension in management and staff because of the differences; new recruits do not drop out after starting; negotiating strategic moves is much easier because everyone knows exactly how things work; and therefore managers and staff are more satisfied. Because they are satisfied, they will be less stressed, so there will be less driver or script behaviour by employees, and therefore there will be fewer psychological games. This way they will be better able to build better relationships with their own managers and with customers too. And good relationship is one really significant source of customer satisfaction at the end.

While any type of organisational structure can work, it is important to highlight that a clarified and on-the-level approach might be useful in terms of what young people will be expecting today and in the future. We can think about what we see in the labour markets around the world: younger workers are impatient, eager for a challenge and to grow and they are hungry to feel that they have an impact. Research also shows Generation Z (born between 1996-2009) are becoming more cooperative, demanding partnership in schools and workplaces (Mészáros & Lestyán, 2016). Researchers predicted in 2018 (Ruzsa, 2018) that Generation, Z will be the 'generation of self-identity expression'. Today we can see how true this has become. It means that in a decade or two, companies that can attract this identity in individuals will be the ones that succeed. In practice, this means that a successful company should not have different values at the different levels. Such workers are conscious workers who will move on, not afraid to change jobs more often. They do not expect to take orders and will much prefer to work with a manager who builds a trusting relationship with employees, giving them constant and detailed feedback on their work, rather than the traditional authoritarianism (Visontai-Szabó, 2020). Thus this generation yearns for the on-the-level hierarchy in organisations where this can be achieved. If the company do not adapt to this, they will lose the interest of the new generation.

In organisations where this need is already perceived, in the process of organisational development our task can be to help the organisations reach on-the-level hierarchy on the declared and on the followed level too. It is also important to note that it is possible to bring the clarified and the followed levels closer together, but without the illusion that this is fully feasible. Therefore, the clarified level expresses the direction of ambition towards which our interventions could be designed.

To provide another example, once in a big company the salespeople, their sales managers, and the people at HQ were working very separately from each other, as if they were two separate companies, even though 'they were one'. In the organisational development project I was involved in, what we did was to invite the sales managers and their director (who belonged to HQ), to a fireside chat. The participants were able to throw questions into a hat for the director, which we pulled out and based on that they engaged in conversation. It was a very meaningful conversation, one that I was sure the attendees had not had in years. A few weeks later, the sales staff commented on the occasion: "I was given guidance, after that the decisions at HQ were no longer unexpected, I knew what to expect, I knew how to prepare for them and I could manage my people on that basis", "It was good from a human point of view, because I was not used to the big bosses sitting down with us. I felt that my opinion was important, I was listened to, it was new, it was very good", "The commitment of the director really comes through, which strengthened me", "The corporate culture and strategy came through, and after that I could place myself in the system as a cog", "I felt like the glass wall that had been between us was starting to break down", "We want to be people and not just numbers, and this is the feeling that this conversation created". The company decided to continue these chats with even higher management to establish a dialogue between salespeople and HQ.

All this shows that, although not yet achieved, this company - with the help of this and later some other interventions - is on the way to moving towards on-the-level working, both at the followed and not only on the declared level.

A Developmental Approach

I think it is important to interpret the phenomenon experienced not as a problem, but as a current state, where the followed level reflects the current situation and the declared level reflects the vision of the company towards which they are working. This interpretation is also acceptable and supportive for our clients in organisational development projects. We can stress that they are not alone in the market with this and we can share some of the examples above with them how typical it is. We can then go on to say that competitive organisations that want to evolve, however, perceive this and once they have perceived it, they can handle it.

Thus, as TA professionals, we can help organisations to use the model to recognise what is happening to them, in order to make them conscious of what they may not have been aware of (although they probably felt it). This way we can help our clients to develop options about changes that will lead to a level of alignment between what is declared and what is being followed. This is the personal interest of the customers, the staff, as well as the interest of the company, in terms of long-term, balanced, growing operation and performance. This can lead organisations to reach the clarified level and use their full potential.

Szabolcs Lovas is an organisational consultant who has worked with more than 4,000 employees in 26 workplaces, delivering individual and group development. He uses TA as his main approach combined with other methods. He has also voluntarily translated the full set of Abstracts of this journal into Hungarian. He can be contacted on hello@lovasszabolcs.hu.

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