Organizational Relationship Optimization

Theory and Practice

By Dona Witten

Those of us who engage in OD efforts soon become aware that the methods that we employ successfully at one organization may be totally ineffective at another. If we are wise, we intuitively adjust our approaches based on what we observe in each new setting; if we are not, then we spend a great deal of time discussing organizational resistance. I propose that there is a way to accurately determine in advance which of our OD methods will be most successful for an organization and which should be left in our toolbox for another occasion.

Introduction

Organizational Relationship Optimization (ORO), as I call my approach, is premised on the belief that the same emotional processes that decades of research have identified as determining how young children form deep bonds to their parents are also at play in group, organizational, and social relationships. Furthermore, these processes, described originally in individualistic terms, can and should be reframed from a social constructionist perspective to describe the attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors—indeed, the cultures—of organizations.

Attachment theory is the bedrock of developmental psychology. It is based on the work of British pediatrician John Bowlby (1982, 1988) and American psychologist Virginia Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Based on their observations of children in stressful situations such as the World War II London blitz, they concluded that young children develop psychological working models of their environment comprised of core beliefs about their own self-worth and core beliefs about the worth of those who are primarily responsible for caring for them. These working models have a profound and largely unconscious effect on how relationships are formed.

More recently, theorists and researchers have determined that attachment styles also influence how adults form romantic relationships. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), for example, developed a model of adult romantic relationship patterns based on working models of self and others. Other social scientists have further extended the adult model to explorations of friendship processes and to the interchanges between the individual and the group (Marmorosh & Markin, 2007). Still others have examined how the individual attachment patterns of leaders impact the culture and productivity of their organizations (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007).

What happens, however, if rather than viewing relationships solely as individual-to-individual or individual-to-group relationship patterns, we move beyond this perspective to a social constructionist one? Social constructionism is the view that we and the world we live in are constructed out of our co-created relationships. There is nothing but co-created relationship. What we perceive as individual—such as our own personality—is actually the ever-evolving construction of the environment in which we participate as co-creators.
When we adopt this perspective we expand our focus to move beyond the experience of the individual to include a focus on relationship patterns as psychosocial relationship patterns that permeate cultures and social strata. From this perspective, individuals are embedded in these psychosocial patterns, experiencing them as culture, “isms”, organizational mythologies, and simply “how we do things around here”.

I propose, building on the work of these earlier theorists, my own doctoral research, and perhaps most definitively, my observations of a large variety of organizations, that organizations develop cultural/relational coping mechanisms arising out of the predominant relationship patterns manifested in the attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors of their founding mothers and fathers and later transformational leaders, the dominant sociopolitical climate at the time of their inception, and as a response to the traumas that the organization experiences as it moves from entrepreneurial infancy to maturity.

These organizational relationship patterns are self-perpetuating. Once an organization establishes itself, it self-selects for members or employees who have compatible relationship styles. Those with incompatible styles find themselves unconsciously adopting the patterns of the organization, becoming isolates, or ultimately leaving the group. As the cultural mythology develops, the relationship patterns become increasingly engrained in the organization.

Where their [Bartholomew and Horowitz] model pertains to romantic relationships, the most significant relationships when observing organizations are those related to power, authority, and decision-making. Additionally, ORO recognizes and emphasizes the complexities of intra- and inter-group relationships. ORO further takes a social constructionist perspective which places the locus of the “internal working model” not within the individual but rather within the social context.

Further, although an organization will have an over-arching relationship pattern, as organizational complexity increases, clusters of attachment-related coping styles can manifest along functional lines as multiple and overlapping relationship patterns.

The ORO Model

To describe these relationship patterns I have adopted a variation on the adult attachment model of Bartholomew and Horowitz. Where their model pertains to romantic relationships, the most significant relationships when observing organizations are those related to power, authority, and decision-making. Additionally, ORO recognizes and emphasizes the complexities of intra- and inter-group relationships. ORO further takes a social constructionist perspective which places the locus of the “internal working model” not within the individual but rather within the social context.

Synergistic relationship patterns

ORO was formally developed out of my doctoral research of a high-functioning social group with a sustained long-term relationship pattern characterized by exceptionally high levels of group cohesion and extremely low levels of conflict. Concurrent with my doctoral work, however, I was also
testing the model against the numerous organizational OD experiences in which I was involved. The outcome of these two channels of investigation is the list of characteristics of synergistic organizational relationship patterns shown in Table 1.

What would these types of organization look like? One historical example has always peaked my interest. The Lockheed Martin Skunk Works® (2006) of the 1940s and 1950s are examples of high-performing organizations with synergistic relationship styles. The Lockheed Martin Web page (2006) describes how engineer Kelly Johnson formed a high-performing team to design and build a jet fighter in response to German jet threats. The keys to success included an informal organizational style, small teams, simple processes, high levels of trust, and high levels of involvement—all characteristics of synergistic organizations.

The other three relationship patterns, which collectively are categorized as non-synergistic, describe a very different picture. In synergistically related organizations the energy of the group is focused outward on the mission and objectives of the organization. In non-synergistically related groups the organizational output is focused on managing the anxiety associated with participation in unsatisfactory organizational processes. The types of anxiety-reducing structures will vary depending on the type of non-synergistic relationship pattern. Table 2 provides a summarized comparison of the four relationships patterns.

The Characteristics of Isolationist Organizations

Isolationist organizations are the most common within North America and particularly within the U.S. I base this belief both upon my own observations of U.S. businesses and government organizations and on the research of pioneer social scientists such as Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler and Tipton (1985). Prophetically, they observed that our American cultural obsession with rugged individualism and self-sufficiency while contributing to our economic success may now be working against our long-term success as related persons and as a society. As they observed, “…if the entire social world is made up of individuals, each endowed with the right to be free of others’ demands, it becomes hard to forge bonds of attachment to, or cooperation with, other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one’s freedom” (1985, p. 23).

Isolationist organizations are characterized by their siloed structures with individuals and groups avoiding each other because they consider their own self worth to far exceed that of other group members and/or other groups. Contact is considered bothersome and is experienced as a drain on energy rather than as energizing as it is in synergistically related groups. Anxiety reactions such as those described by Bowen (2004)—observational blindness, triangulating, and cutoff—are triggered when individuals and groups are required to cooperate with each other as a result of external pressures placed on the group to perform at a higher level of collaborative effectiveness.

The most vivid example of an isolationist organizations that comes to mind involved a government agency that was...
attempting to integrate numerous siloed technologies and organizational structures into a common process for the purpose of connecting the dots. The organization had, and still has, a long-standing history of isolationist behavior characterized by endless poorly attended but obsessively polite meetings where the key decision-makers were absent, highly avoidant peer-to-peer relationships between decision-makers, and an atmosphere of extreme caution and distrust.

A Systems Integrator (SI) with a team of over 400 people won a contract to ‘transform’ the organization through a technology integration. My role in the Program Office allowed me to observe and test my theories but unfortunately to do little to circumvent the ensuing ‘disaster’. A key premise of the ORO model is that individuals and groups entering into a well-established culture are highly likely, unless explicitly trained otherwise, to unconsciously adopt the relational patterns of the organizations they become engaged in. This is indeed what happened to the SI. The team increasingly adopted the anxiety-reducing behaviors described by Bowen as they increasingly took on the isolationist culture of the government organization. First, the SI management team unwittingly colluded with the isolationist patterns between the key government managers by engaging in triangling. Individual government managers avoided meeting together and instead used the contractors as ‘go-betweens’ in their decision-making. Triangling continued down through the lower management structures. This resulted in an inability to get agreement for any key integration decisions. The SI management team, experiencing increasing anxiety about their own dilemma cut themselves off from the rest of the integration team to engage in ‘high-level planning’. Twenty or so of the SI managers isolated themselves for two weeks behind closed doors while the remaining 380 members sat and waited—at a cost of almost $1M per month. This cycle repeated itself several times over the next two years as planning

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORGANIZATION RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS</th>
<th>Valuation of own organizational unit and of others</th>
<th>Intra-organizational relationship values, attitudes, behaviors</th>
<th>Inter-organizational relationship values, attitudes, behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SYNERGISTIC</td>
<td>Positive sense of own organizational unit; positive sense of others as enhancements to one’s own experiences</td>
<td>High levels of intra-organizational cooperation, good team dynamics; high levels of creativity and productivity</td>
<td>High levels of collaborative relationship, partnering, innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISOLATIONIST</td>
<td>Positive sense of own organizational unit; negative sense of others</td>
<td>Isolation and distancing based on distrust; avoidance of relationships with conflict potentials; siloed function based on avoidance, conflict expressed as fortress building and aversion to risk taking</td>
<td>Xenophobic; market dominance and control oriented; ignores market changes and trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRASPING/GREEDY</td>
<td>Negative sense of own organizational unit; positive or desirous sense of others</td>
<td>High levels of anxious conflict; absorption in relationship observations; poor boundary maintenance; paranoia; energy focused inward</td>
<td>Paranoid relationships; predatory sense of place in market; being the first to exploit and dominate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEARFUL/LOATHING</td>
<td>Negative sense of own organizational unit; negative sense of others</td>
<td>Depressed or dependent attitudes and behaviors; abuse and violence</td>
<td>Dying industry</td>
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Table 2: ORO Model of Intra- and Inter-organizational Relationship Patterns
and re-planning occurred but no deliverables were completed. Throughout all of this the management team remained completely unaware of what was happening around them. That is, until the government organization reduced the work force of the integration team to 150 with no apparent reason given.

The Characteristics of Grasping and Greedy Organizations

Grasping and greedy relational patterns are premised on devaluing of one’s own self working model and hyper-valuing of the model of others. ORO identifies two behavioral styles associated with this pattern. Differences in behavioral patterns are determined by the strategy adopted in the relationship. Dependent strategies are characterized by helplessness and attention-seeking behavior aimed at acquiring what the other has by grasping for attention and accolade. Alternately, acquisitional strategies are characterized by competitiveness and over-involved behavior aimed at acquiring what the other has by taking it.

Grasping and greedy organizations are characterized by continual emotional crisis and most especially process churn. Churn is the result of decisions being made over and over again, each time with a different set of power brokers, each with competing senses of ownership. Duplicative efforts and excessive overtime accompanied by missed deadlines are hallmarks of grasping and greedy organizations.

Family owned businesses and non-profits are the breeding grounds for these types of patterns primarily because relationship patterns already in place in the family environment are replicated into the business environment. Especially where there is a strong paternal figure who has built the business ‘from nothing’ there is a tendency for the next generation to remain in the shadow of their paternal leader convinced that they will never achieve even a portion of the success of their parent.

In my distant past, one of my first employment experiences was with a family owned commercial chemical company. The father and the three sons who ran the company kept everything and everyone in perpetual turmoil as they competed with each other for power and position. It was not until I left that I recognized how the destructive dynamics that I was embedded in was modifying my own behavior.

Organizations forced into conjoined situations where exit from the relationship is not an option are at high risk of developing fearful and loathing relationship patterns. These situations include outsourcing, acquisitions, and military occupations of countries. In these cases the reorganized components devalue themselves for being forced into the relationship and devalue the occupier for its ineffectiveness in improving their newly formed relationships.

The Characteristics of Fearful and Loathing Organizations

Fearful and loathing organizational relational patterns consist of the conjoining of negative valuation of the self working model and an equal devaluing of the model of the other. Organizations with fearful relationship patterns are likely to demonstrate defensive strategies that are both dependent and abusive. Bullying and other intimidation techniques are likely to be combined with passivity and subjugation.

The fearful and loathing relational pattern is unlikely to occur in voluntary organizations. Organizations forced into conjoined situations where exit from the relationship is not an option are at high risk of developing fearful and loathing relationship patterns. These situations include outsourcing, acquisitions, and military occupations of countries. In these cases the reorganized components devalue themselves for being forced into the relationship and devalue the occupier for its ineffectiveness in improving their newly formed relationships. A particularly painful example comes to mind related to an outsourcing project for a national utility company for which I was engaged. An IT firm that I was contracting with at the time won a massive contract to not only implement a new technology platform but also to take over operations of the entire administrative office environment—over 500 people in all. One of the first tasks that occurs during outsourcing is a resource triage. This euphemism refers to the process of determined who from the organization to fire, who to hire into the outsourcing company, and who to keep on board for a year or so as the transition occurs. Anyone who has gone through this process knows how incredibly traumatic it can be for the organization. Those who remain—either still in the organization or now in the new outsourcing organization—experience among other things survivor guilt. Fundamentally, their sense of self-worth—their self working model—is severely eroded.

If the outsourcing organization is not sensitive to this environment, then trouble will ensue. And if the outsourcing organization mismanages its first few months, as indeed occurred at the utility company, then the organization and its outsourcing partner together will quickly spiral into a fearful and loathing relational pattern. In the case of the project in which I was involved, the outsourcing company quickly brought in a team of over 500 people without first setting up any of their organizational infrastructure such as communications, organizational roles and responsibilities, or any of the other components of high-functioning program management. (My own role as part of the communications team was not brought in until over a year after the team was in place.) Additionally, the team that
was brought in knew nothing about the utility company operations. It did not take long for the individuals still remaining in the organization and the new outsourced organization to descend into a pattern of mutual loathing and disrespect. The individuals who were part of the outsourcing organization lost their self-confidence and, together, both organizations began acting out of their mutual loss of self valuation and valuation of others.

Flow describes the expression of the relationship fields from a social constructionist perspective. Flow in isolationist organizations will be expressed in stagnation and dead spots intermittent with small eddies and pools. In grasping and greedy organizations flow will be expressed with churn and rapids intermixing with stagnation and dead spots. In fearful and loathing organizations, flow will be chaotic and patternless.

The results were violent. The utility company personnel alternated between complete apathy and disengagement and outbursts of demands and accusations. The outsourcing organization replicated the pattern. Perhaps most upsetting was the abusive behavior of managers towards their supervisees. It was not uncommon for shouting to occur, for work schedules to be extended many hours and into the weekends, for deliverables to be arbitrarily rejected or equally arbitrarily accepted without review. Everyone was miserable yet everyone seemed unable to halt their destructive behaviors. Everyone was totally embedded in the relational patterns.

These examples can seem quite depressing and it might be easy to extrapolate from them that once organizations develop non-synergistic patterns that there is no hope for them. This is not the case. It is important to maintain a social constructionist perspective. A social constructionist position requires us to view all organizations as malleable. They are constructs and as constructs they can be changed.

**ORO Solutions: Inquiry and Optimization**

It is unlikely that an OD consultant will be brought into a synergistic organization. Indeed, we should expect that we will be working with organizations predominantly exhibiting one of the three non-synergistic relationship patterns. When the OD work is on an organizational rather than a group level, additionally we should expect to observe more than one relationship pattern swirling within a predominant cultural relationship pattern.

It is my belief that the success of the OD engagement depends on correctly determining the organizational relationship patterns and then applying appropriate optimization techniques based on the determination. Failure to correctly assess and apply optimizing measures can actually result in inadvertent increase in the anxiety of the organization which can in turn decrease abilities to internalize new organizational models.

Inquiry consists of identifying the organizational relationship styles of the organization and how these styles are affecting the organization’s ability to achieve its goals. The results of the inquiry will determine the types of optimizing measures that will be deployed as well as provide, if necessary, a phased model for deployment.

Examining the inputs and outputs of the organization, including relationships with vendors and customers can be revealing of the organization’s relationship patterns. A synergistic relationship pattern between an organization and its environment, especially in regards to mutual trust and respect, is imperative to the survival of an organization. Assessing the opinions that vendors and customers have of the organization can be extremely revealing of the organization’s relationship pattern.

At the next level of inquiry, the intra-organizational structures become the area of focus. Definitions of roles and responsibilities, the policies that govern work, the processes for decision making, and the reward systems that are in place are all areas of interest. Again, as with the other levels of analysis, review of the formal documentation is only the starting point. The tenor of rumors, gossip, and complaining is particularly useful to explore. The focus of the analysis should be on the folklore surrounding the events. Group conversations, both with homeogenic and heterogenic functional groups can reveal relationship patterns.

As the inquiry continues, the background noise or music of “flow” will begin to reveal itself: music, if the organization is expressing itself through synergistic relationship patterns; noise, if non-synergistic relationship patterns are in place. Flow describes the expression of the relationship fields from a social constructionist perspective. Flow in isolationist organizations will be expressed in stagnation and dead spots intermittent with small eddies and pools. In grasping and greedy organizations flow will be expressed with churn and rapids intermixing with stagnation and dead spots. In fearful and loathing organizations, flow will be chaotic and patternless.

Throughout the process the language and methods for the inquiry should focus on eliciting information reflecting the socially held awarenesses of the organization rather than the individual instantiations of that social awareness.

Optimization consists of transforming negative working models of self and/or other to positive ones. The complexity of this process cannot be underestimated. Indeed, in cases where fearful and loathing relationship patterns are deeply entrenched optimization may not be possible except on a very limited scale that segregates portions of the organization for developmental efforts. The focus of the organizational optimization should be 1) targeted at minimizing and ultimately eliminating attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors that are perpetuating and encouraging non-synergistic relationship patterns; and 2) targeted at implementing and reinforcing
behavioral and institutional conditions that will favor synergistic relationship patterns.

A mistake commonly made by OD consultants is in regards to transforming suboptimal-performing organizations into high-performing organizations. The attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors associated with high-performing organizations are the sole domain of synergistic organizations. Appending the behaviors associated with high-performance onto non-synergistically related organizations without addressing the underlying relationship patterns will yield short-term success at best. Rather, the approach should be to select a progressive path towards high performance that applies optimization processes and policies in a phased approach with each stage appropriate for the current relationship patterns.

Organizations in the process of making changes to their current ways of being require a temporary “raft” as an intermediary between the old and the new. That raft is the OD project itself. The OD project, whether as a stand-alone initiative or coupled with another initiative such as an IT project, must reflect the synergistically related patterns that are envisioned for the organization itself. Therefore, a great deal of time and care needs to be spent prior to and throughout the OD optimization ensuring that the OD efforts model the attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors desirous of the larger organization. Indeed, this process of piloting the synergistically related patterns may be the most difficult, yet most important, component of the effort. Its processes should be highly transparent and open to observation by the larger organization as a model and predictor of future results.

Whatever the interventions chosen, the OD consultant must recognize the complexity of the effort. Change will rarely be linear. Ultimately however, organizations have no choice. The nature of today’s global interconnected business and social challenges requires cooperative and collaborative efforts like never before. It is only within synergistic related organizations that responses commensurate with today’s challenges will be crafted.

References


Dona Witten, PhD, has worked as an executive management consultant for over two decades in the commercial and public sectors. She provides a range of services including large scale organizational development, process redesign, leadership and organizational coaching, and especially Organizational Relationship Optimization (ORO) assessments and interventions. She is the author of a business development book, *Enlightened Management: A Compassionate Guide to Working with People*. Her consulting and coaching practice, DJW Consultancy, LLC, is based in the Washington, DC metro area. She can be reached at DJWConsultancy@comcast.net.