

THE RELATIONSHIP CYCLE IN ORGANIZATIONS

The Relationship Cycle is a tool with the following purposes:

- To assess conflict causes and dynamics
- To understand the function of structures and processes that facilitate an organization's adaptation to new external forces
- To understand the function of structures and processes that allow the organization to make use of new ideas and visions, problems and pain, which are carried by participants in the organization
- To create in an organization a "common language," a set of concepts, skills and norms, that allows participants more effectively to negotiate their life together.

All relationships in organizations can be seen as going through five stages. These stages seem to hold true between organization and employee, association and member, a manager and staff person, priest and parishioner, and so on. The same stages are present in forming a new team or creating a new organization.

Stage 1: Create and Negotiate Relationships

Beginning and changing relationships in the organization always involve the exchange of information about what is hoped for and expected in the relationship. The potential employee and employer are each seeking and providing information in the process of searching for and offering a new position. The sharing of what is wanted and hoped for continues until they achieve, or fail to achieve, a mutual acceptance. This initial acceptance is simply "enough for now," enough to move forward together.

In this stage all the possibly useful information that might be shared is not shared. The parties involved do not know all that might be relevant information to some future issue. There is also frequently information that is hidden or suppressed as each focuses on making a favorable impression on the other. Finally, there is never enough time to say and explore all that we might.

Stage 2: Agreement

Agreement(s) emerge out of Stage One's work. They may be informal understandings or written contracts. The depth of commitment will depend on the nature of the relationship. The longer term, more complex and central the relationship, the stronger the commitment needed for the relationship to function effectively.

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Stage 3: Stability

Frequently the result of an initial agreement is a "honeymoon" period. People give each other the assumption of good intentions. Judgments are postponed. The people involved don't really know each other or the task very well. Previously unspoken or unheard, and new hopes and expectations, will come out. Some of these will rub against what had been understood. The person you thought you had hired isn't what you are seeing now. She is more or less skilled, committed, or civil or assertive, than you thought. This will show itself in Stage Four.

While the relationship is in a state of relative stability or equilibrium, there is more likely to be a sense of satisfaction between participants and the energy available for the work. This capacity to focus on the work to be done, combined with training, a motivating climate and adequate resources, usually results in increasing levels of productivity.

Stage 4: "The Rub"

Eventually, all relationships experience forces that unsettle their equilibrium. The forces may come from sources external to the organization (e.g., national or regional social and economic trends), or may rise from new hopes or concerns among participants. Relationships are put under pressure by such forces and must address the new situation that follows in order to maintain stability. Failure to come to terms with these forces will cause a "festering" situation that takes those involved into a "Blow Out," a high level of conflict.

Stage 5: Process of Planned Change and Negotiation

This stage happens because the organization operates on the assumption that experiencing "rubs" will be a frequent, inevitable and useful occurrence. With that understanding, the organization can establish structures, processes, a climate, and resources that enable it to hear and engage the "rubs." The need is to create and maintain ways of gathering and interpreting information, planning and responding appropriately to the diagnosis we make, and continuing to evaluate the outcome of the action taken. The organization needs ways of doing this in relation to external social and wider organizational forces and shifts from within the organization. A high school faculty I was working with began to refer to these processes as "green lines" (because I had drawn that line with a green marker).

This approach to managing organizational change can keep the system in touch with itself and its environment, create a "demand system" for continuous improvement, help negotiate differences, and prevent the development of high conflict levels.

In the organization:

1. Establish structures and processes that help receive new information.

- Strategic management processes for listening to the organization's environment and making needed changes in response to the information.
- Processes for gathering "rubs", prioritizing and taking action. Ways of channeling the "rubs" into a productive process.
- Ways of "testing" issues that are raised by few people -- testing the extent to which others in the system share the issue.
- Establishing action-research projects as a way of engaging a "rub" by clarifying hypotheses and testing out approaches in a manner that allows the organization to learn from its experience.

2. Train, coach and provide support structures to build people's awareness and assertiveness. The type of structures and processes described above may make it easier for people to be more aware and assertive while accepting responsibility for their views.

3. All this is facilitated by a climate of high trust. Organizational leaders need to take a stance that is open to new information, clear about essential system boundaries, and protects the core structures and processes to enable information flow.

High Conflict Levels: The Other Possible Cycle

Another cycle is likely to occur if the organization has an inadequate "process of planned change and negotiation," or if the process fails in a particular situation. "Rubs" may move in several directions:

1. The person or group manages it themselves. They decide it really is not worth the trouble of having the organization address it or that it is something that is best handled in a manner that doesn't involve the organization.
2. The "rub" is brought into the organization's "process of planned change and negotiation."
3. The "rub" continues to be of concern to the person or group. There is likely to be frustration, anxiety and a festering of the "rub." It may be that the organization is unable or unwilling to effectively engage the concern, or it may be that those with the concern are caught up in their own cynicism, sense of victimization, and passivity.

If the third direction is the path being taken, the drama may continue to build in the people and the system until there is a "**Blow Out.**" That may take several shapes:

1. It may take the form of a public, very intense battle.
2. It might express itself in a series of smaller eruptions that end up having the same effect as #1

3. It might be internalized in a leader and show itself in health problems or inappropriate behavior, i.e., there is a "blow in," the person takes the festering into themselves.

It is important for organizational leaders to assess the situation:

- Does the "Blow Out" involve the whole system, critical subsystems, or influential people?
- Are there issues involving the organization's mission, vision, and core values?
- Is this an attempt to sabotage the organization's strategic direction?
- Is this an expression of "cynic, victim or bystander" behavior coming from people with a pattern of such behavior?

Once the conflict cycle is underway there are **four options**:

1. Termination of the Relationship -- The person quits the job or is fired, resigns from the association, asks to be transferred to another parish church, etc.

2. Withdrawal -- Those involved reduce their participation, cut their financial contribution, increase their passive behavior, etc.

3. "Go Back" -- The case may be made that "if only we could return to the earlier agreement, all would be well again." This may be expressed in legalistic terms or as a form of sentimentality. In any case there is never a way to really "go back"; people have changed. The "Blow Out" has taken place.

4. Acceptance of New Realities -- The key that allows people to return to the process of creating and negotiating their relationships in the organization is that the new realities must be accepted. Accepted, not necessarily liked or approved of. The work that follows such acceptance will mean using many of the same processes and methods that fit Stage Five.

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