

Gareth Morgan's Organisational Metaphors

PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANISATIONS

Our interpretations of organisations are always based on some sort of theory to explain reality (Morgan). Many ideas about organisations and management are based on a small number of taken for granted beliefs and assumptions.

Organisations are complex and can be understood in terms of several perspectives. People who are inflexible only see organisations in terms of one of these metaphors, but people who are open and flexible and suspend judgement are able to recognise several perspectives, which open up several rather than only a single possibility for dealing with organisations and their problems. We live in a world that is increasingly complex and deal with complexity by ignoring it.

Morgan identifies nine organisational perspectives.

1. The *machine view* which dominates modern management thinking and which is typical of bureaucracies.
2. The *organismic view* which emphasises growth, adaptation and environmental relations.
3. Organisations as *information processors* that can learn (brain metaphor).
4. Organisations as *cultures* based on values, norms, beliefs, rituals and so on.
5. In *political organisations* interests, conflict and power issues predominate.
6. Some organisations are *psychic prisons* in which people are trapped by their mindsets.
7. Organisations can *adapt and change*, and
8. Some organisations are *instruments of domination* with the emphasis on exploitation and imposing your will on others.

MACHINE ORGANISATIONS

Machines and machine thinking dominates the modern world. People are expected to operate like clockwork by working to certain procedures, rest according to certain rules and repeat that in a mechanical way. Organisations are machines in which people are parts.

Machine organisations are tools to achieve the ends of those who own them. Organisations have to adapt to the technology they use and after the Industrial revolution people lost their work autonomy to become specialists in controlling machines.

Machine organisations are modelled on the military from which it borrowed ranks and uniforms, standardised regulations, task specialisation, standardised equipment, systematic training, and command language. Bureaucracies produce routine administration in the same way as machines in factories.

Machine managers are taught that you can plan for and control organisations and divide organisations in functional departments with precisely defined jobs. Commands are given from the top and travel throughout the organisation in a precisely defined way to have a precisely defined effect. The thrust of classical management theory is that organisations are rational and can be optimised to become as efficient as possible.

Machine organisations work well if the task is simple, the environment stable, the task is repetitive, if precision is required, and if humans behave like machines. On the flipside, machine organisations adapt poorly to change, it fosters bureaucracy, it can have unanticipated unwanted consequences, and it is dehumanising.

ORGANISMIC ORGANISATIONS

These organisations are perceived to work like living organisms. Consequently, they are concerned with survival. Employees have complex needs that must be satisfied for them to function well. The Hawthorne studies identified social needs in the workplace and brought the motivation to work to the fore. The emphasis shifted towards making work more meaningful and getting people more involved in their jobs.

Since organisations are open to the environment, they should be organised to fit their task environments, rather than according to a boilerplate. Such organisations are better able to respond to change in the environment. This lead to models such as adhocracies, project orientated companies, matrix organisations, and so on.

Some researchers emphasise the importance of the environment as a force in organisational survival. According to the population ecology view, some organisations depend on resources to survive for which they have to compete with other organisations. Since there is normally a shortage of resources, only the fittest survive and the environment determines who will succeed or fail. It is therefore important to understand how groups of organisations or industries adapt and survive rather than individual organisations, since whole industries may fail when the environment changes.

The strengths of the organismic view is its emphasis on relations between organisations and the environment, which suggests that open systems must be understood at a process level. Secondly, its focus is on survival, which is a process as opposed to goals which are endpoints. Organismic organisations have more design choices, they are more innovative, and they focus on interorganisational relations. Its limitations are that it is too mechanistic and therefore struggles with social phenomena on which it relies, most organisations do not function well because their elements do not cooperate, and the metaphor can easily become an ideology.

THE SELF-ORGANISING ORGANISATIONS

When things change, it is important that people should be able to question whether what they do is appropriate in a rational way, like a brain, which is the best known information processor. Organisations cannot function without processing information, communicating, and making decisions.

According to Simon, organisations cannot be perfectly rational because they never have access to all information, they can therefore only consider a few alternatives when making decisions, and they are unable to accurately predict outcomes. Organisations therefore settle for a bounded rationality of based on sufficient decisions guided by rules of thumb and a limited search and limited information. These limits of rationality are institutional and make decision making more manageable. Jobs and functional departments create structures of interpretation and decision making, which simplifies the ability of managers to make decisions.

The question is whether organisations, like a brain, can learn? Cybernetics studies the exchange of information, communication, and control, which allows machines to maintain a steady state through feedback and self-regulation. Movement beyond a specified limit triggers movement towards the opposite direction to maintain a course towards a desired goal. An analogy is that of a sailboat on its way to a harbour. In order to do that, a system must be able to detect aspects in the environment, compare that to rules guiding behaviour, detect deviations from the rules, and take action to correct the deficit. More complex systems are able to correct mistakes in the rules guiding them, and the ability to question the activities of a system is the basis of learning (see for example (Argyris and Schön)).

In practice, so-called double-loop learning is not that easy for the following reasons. Bureaucratic structures discourage people from thinking for themselves, people protect themselves against making mistakes in organisations where employees are held accountable for their actions and rewards success and punish failure, and there is often a gap between what people say and do. Organisational learning requires accepting mistakes and uncertainty as inevitable in complex environments, it requires the ability to consider different viewpoints to issues and problems, and action based on inquiry rather than traditionally imposed goals or targets. A key issue is questioning prevailing beliefs and assumptions and a shift towards choosing limits or constraints rather than just ends.

Morgan speculates that the key to the brain's abilities is its connectivity, which means that different functions are performed by the same structures, and functions can evolve depending on changing circumstances. In the same way, organisations should therefore seek to self-organise and build in redundancy that allows that just like the brain. Redundancy can be created by adding specialised parts to the system, or by adding functions to the parts, in other words multitasking or multi-skilling. The former is mechanistic and the latter allows for flexibility and the ability to self-organise.

Ross Ashby suggested that the diversity of a self-regulating system must be the same as the complexity of its environment so that it can respond appropriately to its environment. This can be achieved by multifunctional people or multifunctional teams that have the ability to adapt and learn. It requires facilitative enabling management that specifies direction but not the specifics for getting there. The more you specify or predesign, the less flexible the system becomes. On the other end of the spectrum, without any direction at all, self-organisation takes too long.

The strengths of the brain metaphor are its contribution to learning and self-organisation, a shift away from goal directed planning, and a shift away from bounded rationality. But it also has two major weaknesses, namely the conflict between learning and self-organisation and power and control, and secondly, the resistance of beliefs and assumptions, or mind maps, to change.

ORGANISATIONS AS CULTURES

In industrial countries we now live in a society made up of organisations that influence our lives, each with their own peculiar beliefs, rules, and rituals. According to Emile Durkheim, in organisational societies traditional patterns of social order disintegrate and lead to fragmented beliefs based on the occupational structure of the society.

As I showed earlier, Hofstede's research showed significant national differences in the concept of work and how work is organised. Culture therefore shapes organisations, and organisations are

mini-societies with their own different subcultures within national cultures with frequently subcultures within subcultures.

In short: organisations are socially constructed realities.

The strengths of the cultural model of organisation is that it draws attention to the symbolic aspects and subjective meaning of organisations, to the shared mental programs that create this meaning, it helps to interpret the nature and significance of relations between the organisation and its environment, and it helps in understanding organisational change. However, a cultural model can also lead to ideological control in the wrong hands and getting a complete picture of an existing culture is not easy.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Edgar Schein takes a somewhat different view of organisational culture that has implications for Hofstede's research (Schein). According to him there are three dimensions to organisational culture namely artefacts, which are similar to Hofstede's cultural practices, espoused values, and beliefs, or Hofstede's mental programs.

Artefacts are the visible structures and processes of an organisation and include language, technology, products, dress code, ways to address people, rituals, ceremonies, and so on. They are easy to see but are only meaningful relative to the values and assumptions of the organisation.

Espoused values are the ways an organisation justify what it does. When any group forms or is faced with a new task or challenge, it accepts some person or subgroup's proposed solutions based on assumptions about what works and what is right or wrong. Once the group observes that the plan works, the perception is mentally transformed into a shared belief and then becomes a shared assumption. Only solutions that continue to work in reliably solving a group's problems and that can be socially validated are transformed into assumptions. Social validation means that certain values are confirmed by shared experience, which in turn means how comfortable and free of anxiety members are when they adhere to the new rules.

Beliefs and ethical rules copied from other people remain conscious as espoused values and are used as a guide for dealing with important situations and when initiating new members in an organisation on how to behave. Espoused values are therefore useful for coping with uncertainty and events that cannot be controlled. They refer to what people *say* they do, as opposed to what they may *actually* do in a given situation. Hofstede's research reports on national espoused values, which may not necessarily always be what many people in different national cultures do in practice.

Assumptions are the unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings that serve as the ultimate source of values and action. When a solution to a problem often works, what was a theory in the beginning becomes a reality to people. We never confront or discuss our assumptions which make them extremely difficult to change. To change we have to relearn things about reality which is difficult because asking questions about assumptions destabilises our mental and interpersonal worlds which causes anxiety. To avoid anxiety people want to see that things fit their existing assumptions to the point that they will distort or deny what is really happening. Leaders are the custodians of culture and therefore have an important role to play when change becomes necessary.

To Schein therefore, organisational culture is the product of a complex group learning process that binds together a pattern of behaviours and provides structural stability to groups at a deeper level through shared basic assumptions. The search for patterns and integration comes from the human need for stability, consistency and meaning. Hence the function of culture is to provide stability to human group interaction by maintaining expected behaviour.

One can understand the substance and dynamics of group culture by distinguishing between how a group adapts to the outside world and how it integrates its internal processes in order to remain able to adapt. Adaptation basically describes a coping cycle that any system must maintain relative to its environment, with the following essential elements.

1. Every group must have a shared concept of its ultimate survival problem, from which it develops a basic sense of what its core mission, primary task, or reason for existence is. If people disagree about goals subcultures may develop or the group may break up. Assumptions about identity and purpose are central to organisational culture.
2. To achieve their goals, people must agree about how to go about to achieve the group's mission.
3. People must also agree about how to allocate tasks and roles, how the organisation should be structured, people rewarded, tasks controlled, and how information and authority will be shared. In other words, a group's skills, technology and knowledge become part of its culture. Cultural assumptions about means and goals involve internal status issues related to the allocation of territory, property, roles and privileges, which increases the complexity of the group and become issues to be addressed if change is necessary. If there is consensus on means, it supports regular behaviour and many visible artefacts of culture, which, once they are in place become a source of stability and difficult to change.
4. There must be consensus about how an organisation measures the outcomes of its activities.
5. People must decide how the group will take corrective action if they discover that they vary from their stated goals. Corrective strategies reveal assumptions about mission and identity and are also related to assumptions about a groups' internal functioning.
6. The process of becoming a group is not automatic. Every group must learn how to become a group by developing a common language, reaching consensus on boundary issues of in versus out-group, developing rules to define relationships, developing assumptions about reward and punishment to constrain individual behaviour, and finding explanations for unpredictable events.

Organisations on the whole are unitary or pluralistic in Flood and Jackson's terms, which is why they are able to function the way they do. The situation is somewhat different in bureaucracies.

POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

In democracies people are free in principle to have their own opinions, make their own decisions, and to be treated as equals. In organisations in democratic countries employees have none of these rights. The only freedom they have is the option to quit and move on. A country may therefore be democratic, but its organisations are not.

The concepts of authority, power and superior-subordinate relationships dominate management and organisations therefore are structured according to political principles. The original meaning of politics is based on the view that when people have divergent opinions they should have the ability to reconcile them through consultation and negotiation.

Many organisations are ruled by autocratic managers with a lot of power who make all decisions. In such organisations the rule is to do things my way, as opposed to bureaucracies where the rule is to do it according to the rules, or true democratic organisations, where the rule is how should we do it? Politics is most evident in power plays, conflict and interpersonal intrigues, and is mostly invisible.

In human systems, people have different interests, which may come into conflict with that of the organisation or other people in the organisation. They become political if people begin to share interests or form coalitions to advance their interests.

Conflict occurs when there are opposing interests and is probably always present in most organisations. Conflict can occur between people, groups, and coalitions and it may be inherent in the way the organisation is structured. It is fostered by beliefs, mental programming, stereotyping, competition for scarce resources, or in organisations that encourage competition between employees.

The way that conflicts of interest are resolved is through the power to determine who gets what, when and how. It is the ability to get people to do things they would not normally want to do. Morgan extends the sources of power from the four identified earlier to fifteen.

1. *Formal power* is when people accept the right of another to rule and to have power which means that they have a duty to obey them. This form of legitimacy leads to social stability. Traditionally charisma, tradition or rule of law is associated with this form of power with formal authority associated with position typically of the bureaucratic type.
2. The *control of resources* depends on resources being scarce or limited access to them. A common form of this type is the control of the financial resources of an organisation.
3. *Using organisational structures, rules and regulations* which is how the struggle for political control expresses itself. The ability to use rules to your own advantage is an important source of organisational power.
4. *Control of decision making*. One of the most effective ways to get a decision is by default, in other words by controlling the agenda and assumptions about a problem situation. One can also influence the issues and as stated before, decisions are shaped by group interaction.
5. *Control of knowledge and information* by controlling who gets what information.
6. *Control of boundaries*. Groups and departments often try to control key skills and resources, which influences in-group/out-group decisions.
7. *Control of technology*. Organisations often become dependent on some form of core technology, which influences interdependence and power relations. People are able to manipulate control over technology to their advantage.
8. *Coping with uncertainty* means the ability to foresee change and make provision for that ahead of time.
9. *Alliances and networks* include contacts, sponsors, coalitions and informal networks, which give individuals advance information. Organisational politics therefore uses culture alliances and networks to influence others with a stake in the sphere within which they are operating. In order to be successful one has to incorporate friends and pacify potential enemies by trading favours now for favours in the future. More often than not, these networks and alliances are informal and invisible.
10. *Control of counter-organisations* such as for example trade unions. Opposing forces can enter into an alliance to form a power bloc and in this case governments for example use trade unions to indirectly control business monopolies.

11. You *manage meaning* when you can convince others to live the reality you would like to pursue. Charismatic leaders seem to be able to influence how people perceive reality and therefore act, in other words, they are able to change people's mind maps towards what they want.
12. *Managing gender*. In many organisations it matters a lot whether you are a male or female and the male stereotype may dominate concepts of organisation.
13. There is a difference between surface manifestations and the deep *structure* of power, which suggests that power is linked to the social environment and how it works.
14. The *power you have* can be used to get more power.
15. Power is *ambiguous* because it is difficult to describe precisely what power is and one cannot be sure whether power is an interpersonal phenomenon or arising from deep structural factors.

The political view of organisation shows that politics is inevitable in organisations and all organisational activity is based on self-interest. It explodes the myth that organisations are rational, it helps to find ways to overcome the limitations of the notion that organisations are integrated systems, and it gets us to recognise socio-political implications of different organisations and their roles in society. The danger of this view is that it can increase the politicisation of organisations.

PSYCHIC PRISONS

Organisations are consciously and subconsciously created and sustained and people become imprisoned by mind maps to which these processes give rise. Socially constructed realities take on an existence and power of their own that control those who created them.

People in everyday life are trapped by their incomplete and flawed understanding of reality. They are able to free themselves from that, but many prefer to remain in the dark. People in organisations become trapped by success, by organisational slack, and by group processes that lead to groupthink.

Many organisations and industries failed because they were unable to move beyond the policies that made them successful to begin with. Secondly, in order to create certainty many organisations build in margins for error, which eventually leads to institutionalised inefficiency.

The psychic prison metaphor brings a set of perspectives that enable us to explore unconscious processes that trap people, it shows that our understanding of organisation is too rational, it draws attention to ethics, power relations, and it shows up barriers to innovation and change. But it also has limitations, namely that it ignores ideologies that control and shape organisations, it places a lot of emphasis on cognitive processes whereas exploitation, domination and control are rooted in material life, it encourages speculation, and it raises the risk of mind control.

TRANSFORMATIVE ORGANISATIONS

The universe is impermanent and constantly changing. That means that to understand organisations we need to understand the basic force that generate and maintain organisations. Geoffrey Vickers calls this the regulator and in natural systems there are basins of attraction around which complex systems stabilise which fulfil the same function. Traditional approaches to organisational theory suggest that change is initiated by the organisational environment.

The advantage of this view is that it provides an insight on the nature and sources of change, which can help us to find ways of dealing effectively with change. The transformative view is criticised as too idealistic and more effective after the fact than before.

ORGANISATIONS AS INSTRUMENTS OF DOMINATION

Bakan argues that since corporations are individuals in the eyes of the law, their behaviour can be measured against that of humans, in which case corporations are socially disruptive and in terms of the criteria of the DSM *antisocial*. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders version IV, antisocial behaviour is characterised by at least 3 of the following: failure to conform to social norms, deceitfulness, failure to plan for the future, aggressiveness, a reckless disregard of the safety of self and others, consistent irresponsibility to sustain consistent work behaviour or honour financial obligations, and lack of remorse. Bakan's study shows evidence of all of these behaviours in corporations.

Corporate practices place profit before human welfare and in Third World countries people are dispossessed and working in sweatshops and factories for subsistence wages. Organisations therefore often are instruments of domination to further the self interest of elites at the expense of others. Within organisations there is also often an element of domination.

Throughout history, organisations have been associated with social domination. In most organisations asymmetrical power relations lead to the majority working in the interests of a few. People can be dominated by charisma, by custom, and by rules and laws. The ability to use any of these depends on the ability to find support and legitimation amongst those being ruled and authority is vested in how the ruled are administered. Under the charismatic model, administration is unstructured, unstable, and works through nepotism, customary administration is through officials in the employ of someone with inherited status, and legal administration is bureaucratic. Bureaucracies are therefore instruments of domination. Even democratic leaders become part of an elite interested in furthering their own interests, and will tend to hang on to power at all costs.

People are increasingly being dominated by the process of strict administration and rules through impersonal principles and the quest for efficiency. The logic of modern society is therefore domination by reason.

The Industrial Revolution changed labour from a craft into a commodity that can be bought and sold. It eliminated prior systems of production and made people dependent on the wage system. Ancient systems relied on slaves for labour and even Plato's idealised republic could not function without them, whereas modern capitalism depends on wage labour. Profit depends on efficient labour, which likely resulted in the discovery of modern management. Wage labour is followed by strict and precise organisation, close supervision, and standardised jobs and it follows that skilled and semiskilled work is replaced by cheaper unskilled workers and mechanisation. Consequently, managed gains increasing control over workers, labour costs are reduced and planning and control becomes centralised.

Organisations become politicised because jobs became stratified between skilled career type and unskilled lower paid type jobs. The former requires an investment in education and training which becomes a fixed cost whereas the latter is of low status and subject to periodic unemployment and come to see themselves as exploited.

The dominance metaphor draws attention to the rational consequences of individuals seeking to advance their own interests while ignoring values. The model shows that domination can be intrinsic to how we organise human behaviour, but the fact that domination is class based, that ruling elites tend to centralise and control their interests, and that government policies sustain and serve the interests of socially dominant groups does not mean that that is due to a conspiracy.

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