Alternatives to hierarchies

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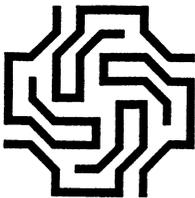
Alternatives to hierarchies

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Preface

Giving on occasions a talk on the subject of this book, one of the queries raised was, 'surely, what you mean are flat hierarchies'. This, I think, gives an indication of how difficult it can be to conceive of organizations which do not have a hierarchical structure. A rather similar response was obtained when, in the 1950's, an account was given to a manager of the British Coal Board of an autonomous composite team of more than 40 miners, who had taken over complete responsibility for a three-shift cycle, and divided the income obtained among themselves. His comment was that this could not possibly work. The new mode of work organization which had been evolved by the miners in several pits in the Durham coal fields was, at the time, well ahead of the prevailing concepts and philosophy of both management and the Trade Union. It did not help matters very much that the detailed accounts were presented in an academic and scientific form (Trist et al., 1963; Herbst, 1962). I think that we felt that all the backing of systematic research and data analysis would be needed to present the case for modes of organization, which deviated from conventional practice.

However, something was learned from this experience. When at the beginning of the 1960's the Norwegian Work Democratization Project was started, a number of demonstration sites were set up which people could look at, and which could function as centers for diffusion. There was no immediate success with this as far as Norwegian industry was concerned; however, a rapid diffusion occurred some years later in Sweden.

Action research is essentially a long term collaborative learning process of those who are involved in a process of organizational change. It was results of this type, where theoretical expectation and practical experience diverged, which in recent years have led to reflections on and a reappraisal of the socio-technical approach which was developed in the course of project work, of the strategies of organizational change which have been utilised, of the role of the expert, and of the conditions for diffusion.

In their recently revised account of the early Norwegian field sites, Emery

and Thorsrud (1977) note that what we had initially taken to be a machine theory of organization turns out to be a particular form of a general theory of bureaucracy. It would seem that it might be quite difficult to say anything very new about bureaucracies. However, utilizing the socio-technical approach makes it possible to identify the design principles of bureaucratic hierarchies in a simple form, and once this is done it becomes possible to identify the basic characteristics of a whole range of alternative non-hierarchical forms of organization. Apart from the autonomous composite group, this includes matrix and network organizations. Each of these will be appropriate for specific types of tasks and environmental conditions, and the last two appear to provide possible modes for large scale organization.

Part II looks in more detail at the perennial twin threats to society. The threat of disintegration and chaos and the attempt to impose some form of totalitarian order. The approach developed in this work is to look for and to identify in each case the basic assumptions which, if they are accepted as being true, generate a particular form of organizational logic. In the last chapter, the question of the nature and origin of the basic structures in terms of which we organise our world, leads to a basic reformulation of the foundations of logic itself.

This book is an outcome of a long term collaborative effort of a network of colleagues which began to be formed about 25 years ago. At that time Fred Emery was a senior lecturer at the Dept. of Psychology of the University of Melbourne, and the author was a student member of the research staff. About that time, Einar Thorsrud during a stay in England had become aquainted with Eric Trist and A. T. M. Wilson, the then chairman of the Tavistock Institute. During the 1950's Fred Emery and the author worked at different times with Eric Trist at the Tavistock Institute on the coal mining studies and the development of socio-technical analysis. In 1959, I spent about 6 months in a hut in the hills outside Trondheim to complete a monograph on 'Autonomous Group Functioning'. In the course of a visit to Einar Thorsrud, at that time director of the Institute for Industrial Social Research, I accepted an offer to work at the Institute, and some years later Fred Emery and Eric Trist from the Tavistock Institute collaborated with the Institute in Trondheim on the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project. About that time, an informal European group was established, which included among others Hans van Beinum and Mauk Mulder in Holland, and subsequently Louis Davis contributed on problems of socio-technical design. It is in part a review of our own organizational experience which helped in identifying some of the characteristics of a network group.

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