'Cell-Net'

Evolving Structures for Professional Networking in the 1990s

These notes were originally circulated to members of "The Leading Edge", a London-based network of professionals concerned with the field of organisation development. The issues raised are related to peer-network development in a wide variety of fields.

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The mutual management of a supportive network of peer professionals poses peculiar difficulties. We have moved beyond the autocratic pyramid structures of the '60s and '70s and seem to be feeling our way, in common with other organisations, toward a structure of inter-dependency and shared responsibility. We are having to discover the ground rules as we go, making our own mistakes and learning from them. One of the things I value most about belonging to the Leading Edge is this sense of attempting to pioneer professional structures appropriate for the 1990s. In theory at least the corporate skills of members of the Leading Edge ought to represent the most creative matrix for this kind of development, provided we can overcome the destructiveness of professional competition, or the autism of mutual de-skilling and abdication of responsibility.

My contribution is motivated by the sense that the Leading Edge net is not working effectively, but is simply stumbling from one crisis to the next with fairly high levels of member frustration, dependency, counter-dependency and the search for various scapegoats to carry the negative feelings associated with our current experience.

1. Purpose

The reason for the existence of the Leading Edge is not at all clear and we are experiencing some difficulty in raising the issue. The old Organisation Development Network collapsed some 2 or 3 years ago. Was that because its task was completed and there was no further need for any relationship between organisation development consultants? Or was it because the structures were ineffective and needed to be changed for the better? Does the Leading Edge exist because certain members of the ODN couldn't tolerate its decease and therefore have to perpetuate some kind of rump as a defence against coping with loss? Or is there a distinctive purpose in the existence of the Leading Edge alongside other networks like the Association of Teachers of Management, the Group Relations Training Association, the British Association of Counselling, Counselling at Work, etc? Is there a professional grouping of Organisation Development Consultants, Change Agents, Trainers, Teachers and Researchers, with an organisational and institutional focus distinct from, although complementary to and slightly overlapping with, these other professional groupings? If so, does that specific group require some structure of organisation to further and foster its personal support and its professional development?

We need a clear consensus around the purpose of TLE if we are to avoid falling into the trap of being simply a neurotic perpetuation of a rump, or a dependent culture in a traditional

organisation which exists because it exists, because it exists, and does things this way because we did it this way last year, and that is the way the core members think it should happen, or simply becoming a sentient group of a few friends who like to meet each other, or who need the security of knowing that somewhere somebody cares about them. I take it that in a classical, or pyramid, structured authority-based organisation questions about purpose are seen as challenges to authority. In a traditional organisation questions about purpose are seen as taboo because it might change the tradition. But in a systemic, or functional, organisation there is a continuous need to clarify, evolve and build consensus around the fundamental purpose of the organisation. In this latter case there is always the possibility that the purpose is fulfilled and the organisation no longer needed, or that the purpose is changing and the organisation therefore evolving appropriately.

2. Membership Criteria

The desire to have open and accepting boundaries and to say anyone is welcome to join is ultimately self-destructive. In the absence of a clear purpose of the organisation and of a membership joined by commitment and consensus to that purpose, and in the absence of criteria for clarifying appropriateness of membership or otherwise, all distinctions are eventually lost between the members and non-members. The skin, or boundary, of the organisation loses all functional reality and eventually degrades simply to the boundary of a sentient group.

Clearly the Leading Edge is in revolt against some kind of professional criteria of selection imposed by the organisation. On the other hand, clarification of appropriate membership means that those approaching the organisation can make their own autonomous and responsible decisions as to whether they fit, professionally, within this kind of sector, not simply do they like the people around and can they find a way of worming their way into the relationship net.

Clarified criteria for appropriate membership flow naturally from a clarified purpose for the organisation's existence.

3. Needs and Tasks

If there is insufficient consensus around the purpose of the organisation, if membership is so disparate that each individual's purpose and need is so distinct and individualistic, with very little overlap with other members, then any attempt to develop a programme of activities, in either content or process, is reduced to the sterility of a multiply polarised struggle group.

In my experience so far, all attempts to identify needs, tasks and ideas have been individualised, regurgitated in lengthy randomised listings, from which we have picked almost with a pin some particular task or idea that could be tackled next. It might be useful to structure the identified needs and tasks into various subsets, something like the following:

A. Individual Needs

Particular persons may be facing particular stress points which could be familial or professional and need the supportive, facilitating relationship with one or two others to work through the material and their reactions in depth. Perhaps it is this area that leads to the consistent demand for co- consultancy. The problem is that co-consultancy with comparative strangers is very difficult and there are no structures in which deep relationships and team-building and trust development can take place.

B. Group Needs

A 'network' whose only activity is a monthly meeting, attended by anything from 3 to 40 people, convened in different venues with different times and days of the week, whose membership is liable to change almost completely from one month to the next, and whose dynamic format fails to inter-relate members even when they are present - in other words there is a meeting without meeting - can in no sense of the term be called a 'network'. Functions of team building, group development, interpersonal relationship fostering, the incorporation of new members within the net, the forging of new relationships - all these needs are comparatively unmet at the moment. If a net is a lot of holes tied together with pieces of string, then I suggest we need to pay attention to string theory and get knotted a little more effectively!

C. Professional Tasks

Provided the individual and group needs are effectively met, then the particular tasks required to be performed by this specific group of professionals in carrying out their agreed purpose can become much clearer and can be carried through with much less conflict. Some of these tasks are clearly in the area of casework problem-solving, professional field development survey, etc. and can be carried out in a variety of ways, through workshops, conferences, lectures, presentations, training sessions etc. utilising the resources of both members and invited visitors.

D. Administrative

Network facilitation requires the performance of certain specific and identifiable functions of administration, organisation and leadership, some centralised, others distributed. The rejection of traditional and autocratic modes of leadership and management appears to have left a vacuum in which any kind of leadership function is too risky to take, or if taken then becomes a focus of mutual aggression and destruction. Again, we need greater clarity in terms of what functions need performing, what facilitative skills are appropriate to network development and management and greater corporate responsibility for ensuring that these functions are carried through effectively on behalf of the network as a whole.

4. Structure

If a centralised monthly non-meeting is inappropriate for the development of a true network, then what improvements can be made? Obviously the quality of the process within the central meeting points could be radically improved, but that still leaves individuals as the membership nodes and comparatively superficial relationships as the qualitative links.

As various networks struggle with this problem, a new-shaped solution to network structure appears to be emerging in several contexts. I think the direction of development is now clear enough for us to identify the basic principles.

a) The fundamental unit of belonging is the cell, or base group, probably with 6 to 8 members meeting regularly in each other's homes, or other appropriate settings and constituted by mutual invitation of those who live close to each other, or work close to each other. In the context of these primary groups, with deep relationships built up over time, there is the possibility of co-consultancy in pairs or triads, group support and mutual problem-solving, professional and personal development to a depth which is quite impossible within the central meetings.

b) At the next level the network becomes a federation of such base groups. It is a cellular structure, a zoned 'cell-net' in which appropriate professional members can be in touch with their fellows and peers in an appropriate small group setting wherever they live or work, but can gather in particular interest or sector groups for task or content-related workshops, presentations etc. as appropriate, without demanding of the central structures the levels of intimacy and group support provided in the base cells.

Clearly the quality of the network will depend upon the quality of the interrelationships between the base groups, the shared information base, the ability of the base groups to incorporate new members and of the cell structures to evolve new nodes or to allow and absorb the effects of cellular death. The network thus takes on an organic structure, which represents in human relations terms that massive leap from protozoa to metazoa which was such a significant land-mark within biological evolution.

c) The fostering of inter-cellular relationships would be a function requiring attention at certain central gathering points, so that in addition to a lecture, presentation or workshop, it might be appropriate to develop a team building or process approach which developed multiple small groups within the event, the members of which were drawn from different base groups, so fostering the creative interchange of ideas and culture at a different level.

d) Administratively each base group could have a particular contact person, through whom the distributed information system of the network could be channelled. Certain functions of administration and management would be appropriate at each level of the network. The number of levels can, of course, grow with the complexification of the organism according to the numbers of people involved and the geographical region over which they are distributed. If stage one is the development of base groups themselves, stage two is the inter-relation of such base groups into a composite

federation, stage three could be the zoning of that federation into sectors of base groups. Stage four, which might or might not be required, would be the federating of such zonal networks across different regions, all within the context of the inter-relationship between the Leading Edge network and other complementary networks with similar structures. Overall this kind of model develops a multi-dimensional matrix of relationships, capable of high levels of stress management, and the maximising of human potential development, both individually and corporately, as well as the enhancement of professional expertise and competence across a variety of disciplines.
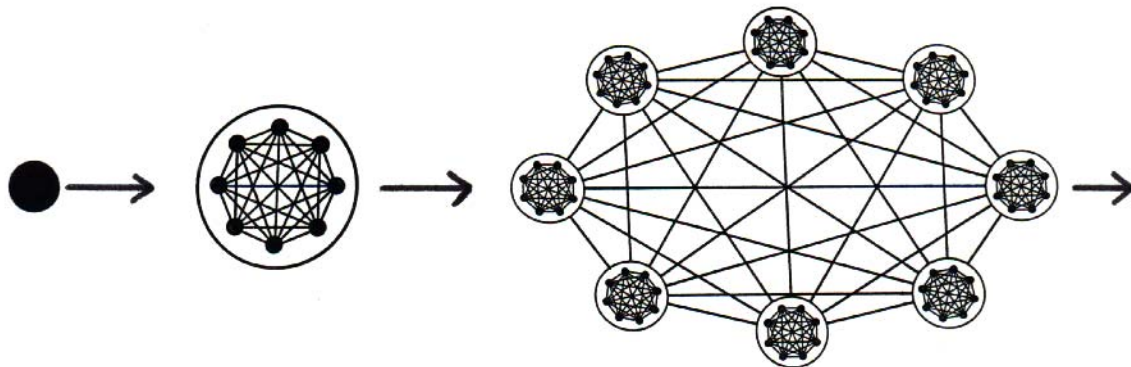
David Wasdell
7th June 1986
Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE
Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN)
(Charity Registration No: 284542)
Web-site: www.meridian.org.uk