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Organizational Development and Its Implications for Adult Basic Education Programs

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Marcia Drew Hohn

An organization is an entity where groups of people, connected through common purpose, come together to achieve particular ends (Morgan, 1997a). In the case of adult basic education (ABE), a typical organization would be a local program where teachers, counselors, directors, coordinators, and administrative and other staff come together to provide learning services for particular groups of adult students. Or it might consist of the people who work in a state or federal agency that oversees policy, funding, and support for local programs. Organizations do not exist independently of the people who populate them. In fact, all aspects of organizations ultimately flow from the individual thoughts and actions of members of the organization and their interaction with one another (Morgan, 1997b; Pfeiffer & Ballew, 1991). Understanding organizations therefore is about understanding the behavior of the groups and individuals within them. Organizational development and change are about seeing, understanding, and structuring processes; facilitating relationships; and leading groups and individuals within the organization to learn, grow, and work creatively together in achieving a common purpose and goals.

Organizational development is not an area that has received much attention in ABE. Historically, ABE has been a marginalized field with fragmented and inadequate resources. However, resources and recognition for the field are rising. Funding is rising at the federal level and in many states, and with these funding increases come different requirements and expectations. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 places ABE squarely within the context of workforce development. This may be an opportunity to play a more meaningful role in the workforce development system, or it might be a barrier. The National Reporting System (NRS) has narrowed measures of assessment to three core indicators of performance accountability. As Bingman, Ebert, and

Bell (2000) point out, the purpose of ABE as defined in WIA and the NRS is much narrower than the goals of many adult learners. This poses a serious dilemma for programs that serve adult learners.

Organizational development is a tool that can be used to help those in the field of ABE deal with the calls for change inherent to these challenges and others. It can be used to develop a clearer articulation of the values and principles that guide this work, a better understanding of the nature of interactions within and between organizations, more effective communications, both internal and external, and a more informed commitment to learning and growth as individual organizations and as a larger field of work. The goal of this chapter is to help to facilitate that commitment.

THE EVOLUTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the first half of the twentieth century, organization theory was dominated by classicists who viewed organizations as rational systems and valued efficient operations above all. They promoted the idea that management is a process of planning, organization, command, coordination, and control and that the design of an organization should be like that of a machine. This concept spawned the modern bureaucracy (Morgan, 1997a).

Morgan points out that bureaucracies are an ideal form when we think of organizations as machines: "We arrive at the kind of organization represented in the familiar organization chart: a pattern of precisely defined jobs organized in a hierarchical manner through precisely defined lines of command or communication" (1997a, p. 18). Although they are frequently vilified as mindless, rigid, and dehumanizing and sometimes appear to be instruments of oppression, bureaucracies remain a highly prevalent organizational form. Many of the organizations we interact with every day are bureaucracies: the school our children attend, the Department of Education where we attend a meeting, the bank where we cash a check, the insurance company where we take out a new policy. Bureaucracies have remained a popular organizational form because they are an efficient approach to routine tasks. They have also persisted because they "offer managers the promise of tight control over people and their activities" (Morgan, 1997a, p. 31; Morgan 1997b). Moreover, they are representative of the Western analytical worldview deeply ingrained in people by means of societal institutions and educational systems (Capra, 1982; Morgan, 1997a; Wheatley, 1992; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

The mechanistic perspective that characterizes the bureaucracy also underlies the theory of scientific management developed by Frederick

Taylor in the early 1900s. Taylor was an engineer who worked in a time in which industrial mass production was posing enormous problems in the workplace. The huge disparity between rewards for owners and workers generated conflict and hostility. Waste, injuries, and costly mistakes were commonplace. Taylor championed the idea that the work of human beings could be measured in the same way that the output of a machine can be measured, the objective being to design that work in the most efficient configuration possible. His principles include a belief that managers should do all the thinking about the planning and design of the work and, guided by scientific methods, should determine the most efficient work methods. They should also select and train the best person for the work design and then monitor performance. Taylor's work was associated with time and motion studies, which even then were seen as cold, calculating, and unconcerned with workers' needs and humanness; it has earned him scorn in much contemporary writing on management theory (Weisbord, 1987).

In spite of being maligned and criticized, Taylor has had an enormous impact on organization theory. His principles of scientific management provided the framework for work design throughout the century. Fast food restaurants, in which the work is broken down into carefully controlled parts networked to function like a machine, are the epitome of Taylorism. Similar methods have found their way into innumerable organizations trying to streamline their operations, including hospitals, retail outlets, and factories (Morgan, 1997a; Senge, 1990; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994).

Once in place, the limits of the mechanistic perspective, scientific management, and bureaucracies rapidly became apparent. Bureaucracies, in particular, were criticized for their dehumanizing effects on the people who worked in them, for stifling creativity, inhibiting personal growth, and causing people to be fearful and untrusting of management. Critics contended that by assuming people need to be watched, controlled, and held accountable for every minute of their time at work or would otherwise "screw up or screw off," bureaucracies miss out on a large part of the ability, talent, and potential brainpower of their workers.

Promoting a different perspective, Douglas McGregor articulated a powerfully positive view of human nature in his 1960 book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*. In presenting his "theory Y," McGregor (1960/1985) put forth a set of assumptions that Malcolm Knowles (1989) himself attributed as part of the underpinnings of his principles of adult learning. Theory Y assumes that (1) physical and mental effort is as natural as play, (2) the individual will exercise self-direction and self-control in the service of objectives, (3) the individual, under the right conditions, will learn not only to accept responsibility but to seek it, and (4) the capacity

for imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in problem solving is widely distributed in the population (Hohn, 1998a).

McGregor was strongly influenced by psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of a hierarchy of needs, which is based on the idea that after safety and security needs are met, individuals require more intangible rewards—status, recognition, and responsibility (Maslow, 1954). Another important influence on McGregor was Kurt Lewin (1951), who promoted the idea of "learning by doing" as key to helping people find meaning in work—the original "action research" that is frequently employed in ABE. Lewin's work also joined scientific thinking with democratic values and, as Weisbord (1987) points out, gave birth to the concept of participatory management, in which those directly involved in a work issue or problem participate in its analysis and resolution. McGregor wove ideas from Maslow, Lewin, and others into his own to produce a new concept of management, one that embraced the capacity of the human spirit to transform and the idea that each of us has individual perceptions about how the world works.

Weisbord (1987) believes that McGregor's greatest contribution to organization theory is the idea that because social change starts from deep within the individual, individuals need to be freed to make choices and work together to develop solutions to problems. In the work setting, these ideas and concepts translate into such activities as self-directed work teams, managers as coaches and mentors, and shared leadership. These ideas and concepts were also in sync with those emerging in education in the late 1960s and the 1970s: Freire's participatory education, Highlander's participatory research, and Knowles's principles of adult learning. The work of all three promotes the view that (1) the people most affected by a problem or work issue need to be involved in solving that problem in a manner that respects their needs, intelligence, and dignity; (2) the problem must be approached from the perspective of "we and us," not "I and them"; and (3) change evolves in the context of the local environment and its values (Hohn, 1998a). These are ideas that underlie the contemporary Total Quality Management (TQM) movement and much of current thinking about learning organizations as places where all the members of an organization are encouraged to learn together to solve problems and think creatively about achieving the organization's purpose and goals.

During the 1970s and into the 1980s, the practice of organizational development shifted away from a focus on the individual and a process-oriented philosophy to a focus on the organization itself (Bolman & Deal, 1997). This new focus, developed through the work of Trist and Emery (from the 1950s into the 1970s), led to the view of organizations as systems of integrated processes framed within particular paradigms

and initiated the intensive engagement with what is now called systems thinking (Morgan, 1997a).

SYSTEMS THINKING

Systems theory is a way of thinking about how the world operates-about the assumptions, beliefs, values, and symbols that characterize it. It is about the paradigm, the worldview, the vision of reality that helps a society maintain order. Deeply ingrained assumptions about how the world works shape the habits of our hearts and minds and our organizations in a continuous process of reinforcement. When worldviews are stable and held uniformly, they tend to be unseen and unquestioned. But when worldviews are in flux or challenged by different ways of thinking, controversy and turmoil ensue. At this time in history we seem to be caught between two ways of thinking: analytical thinking and synthetical, or systems, thinking (Capra, 1982; Hohn, 1998b; Morgan, 1997a, 1997b).

In analytical thinking, the world is seen as a machine in which the underlying assumption is that phenomena can best be understood by being reduced to their individual parts, with each part then being examined. As Ackoff (1981) explains, this approach involves taking things apart and studying the behavior of each part separately, then aggregating the explanation of the parts into an explanation of the whole. The assumption is that if each part functions as efficiently as possible, the system will operate optimally. The scientific method and objectivity are promoted, and the values of participants and the context of immediate environments are seen as irrelevant. Thinking focuses on straight-line cause and effect and on dichotomies of either-or. Analytical thinking underlies the classical management theory of rational planning, command, and control processes; it informs Taylor's work in scientific management, which breaks down work into smaller and smaller parts to be studied for optimal efficiency; and it leads to bureaucratic organizations with a top-down hierarchical structure and distinct departments, functions, and roles.

Synthetical thinking, now better known as systems thinking, emphasizes cohesion. According to Capra, contemporary systems thinking "looks at the world in terms of interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena, and in this framework an integrated whole whose properties cannot be reduced to those of its parts is called a system" (1982, p. 43). In this view, the system as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and the behavior of the system can be understood only in terms of its role and function within its containing whole (Ackoff, 1981). Localness, harmony, cooperation, and a sense of mutual dependence among system parts are promoted. Each individual part is considered in relation to all of

the other parts, and respect for the values and thinking of individuals and groups involved is inherent in the system. Systems thinking underlies most contemporary approaches to management and leadership, one of which promotes the idea of "the learning organization," popularized by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* (1990).

THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION: SYSTEMS THINKING IN ACTION

Senge's concept of the learning organization encompasses a broad range of approaches to developing the capacity of organizations to learn for continuous improvement. But the heart and soul of the learning organization is systems thinking. Senge believes that organizations need to stop focusing on pieces of the system and to understand the organization as a whole, with a deep appreciation of the interrelatedness of the various parts. A system is seen as a perceived whole whose elements hang together, affect one another, and operate toward a common purpose. Examples of systems are the human body, families, factories, chemical reactions, communities, teams, and all workplaces. In the workplace, the pattern of the relationships shared by key components of a system-work flow, the cultural system (composed of the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the employees), the quality of products or services, decision-making processes, and so on—need to be examined to discover how changes in any one of the components might affect the others and how small changes in components might leverage big changes in the system. Because teams and collaborative thinking are vital to the examination of these interrelationships, systems thinking by necessity assumes that everyone in the organization is engaged in this process (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1994).

As an example, consider the perennial problem of retention in ABE programs from a systems perspective. The common wisdom about why so many ABE students leave programs prematurely is that they have too many problems in their lives to stick with learning. But what if the starting point were different? What if the assumption was that the cause of the retention problem lay not with the student but with the system, with the way that program processes do or do not interrelate? A systems approach to solving the problem would engage in putting together teams made up of people from throughout the organization to look at the way program processes interrelate: intake and assessment, attendance policies, support services, opportunities for student leadership, curriculum and instruction, and so on. Data about how these various components work together and affect one another would then be generated and analyzed. This would likely lead to changes in the various components, linking and aligning them so that the optimum environment for students' successful completion of educational programs is

established.

An ABE program in Tennessee initiated a process of systems thinking in 1997. The Knox County Adult Literacy Program used the Malcolm Baldrige educational criteria for performance excellence as its change process framework (these criteria apply TQM concepts that are based in systems thinking). The staff considered their program to be a strong one, but they wanted to establish a process through which they could continuously improve it. Teams of staff, students, board members, and volunteers were put together, and these teams identified vital areas for improvement. Data on these areas were generated through examination of records, interviews, and other information-gathering tools and then analyzed through the lenses of interrelatedness (how each worked or did not work with one another) and customer satisfaction (students' opinions).

Among several surprising and disturbing revelations, the systems analysis revealed that enrollment and assessment policies, teacher training, curriculum and instruction, and student leadership opportunities were not well linked and aligned; rather, they were riddled with gaps that created confusion, misunderstandings, inconsistency in program practices, and uncertainty among students and staff. For example, the analysis revealed that teachers were not incorporating training ideas and materials from in-service programs into their classrooms. To address this problem, the focus of training shifted from putting on a workshop to involving teachers in curriculum development and bringing together teachers who worked in different parts of the program. The increased exchange of ideas and information among teachers led to the development of significantly more positive attitudes toward the program and the incorporation of new ideas and methods into classrooms (Cody, Ford, & Hayward, 1998).

The program began an attempt to link and align internal operations, organization leadership, systems (such as data management), and processes (such as intake and assessment), as well as sound literacy practices in a long process that has been a reeducation for everyone. Program staff find their world to be more complex because they understand how the parts of the program are interrelated. They have discovered the need to be open to change and to solicit and receive feedback in a way that honors and values the perspectives of all those involved. And they have come to realize that there are no quick fixes; the best way to bring about program improvement is by means of an ongoing commitment to do so on the part of students, staff, board members, and volunteers (Cody, Ford, & Hayward, 1998; Mincey & Bingman, 2000).

The members of Knox County Adult Literacy Program were able to engage effectively with systems thinking, although not without a struggle. Systems thinking represents a dramatically different way of thinking about organizational issues. It requires a reexamination of assumptions about how things work and a kind of skill and patience in executing change that some organizations do not have.

PARADIGMS, MIND-SETS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: THE EXPERIENCE WITH TQM

An example of how difficult it can be to implement organizational change when it challenges traditional ways of thinking and operating is the experience of educational institutions in their attempt to adopt TQM concepts in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The theory of TQM was articulated primarily by W. Edwards Deming (Hohn, 1996), who worked with the Japanese on corporate approaches to management in the post-World War II era. Deming promoted the idea of training everyone in an organization to become engaged in process improvement and quality management up-front rather than relying on postproduction inspection. These methods produced spectacular improvements in the quality of Japanese products, the Toyota line of cars being a notable example.

Most American businesses became engaged with the idea of TQM because they saw the competitive environment as a wolf at the door. The options were to change or cease to exist. Educational institutions were more likely inspired to engage with TQM because of its transformational potential and the idea of continuous improvement; often a particular individual or group within the institution was excited about TQM and rallied to its cause (Seymour & Collett, 1991). Here was a management approach that seemed relevant and workable for educational institutions. It made sense to many educators to form teams to examine the organizational processes, develop and analyze concrete data generated by TQM methods and tools, and then empower employees to make decisions based on the analysis that would foster continuous improvement of the institution. The emphasis on customer satisfaction was seen as a way to recast conversations on improvement of the system so that the focus would be customer (student) needs and interests rather than a quagmire of personal (faculty) opinions. Many educators were probably drawn to TQM because it embraced democratic principles, recognizing the dignity and worth of all individuals and seeking to include voices across traditional boundaries.

TQM promoted employee participation and power sharing throughout an organization, and it introduced new ways of thinking about relationships within organizations. Therein lay the problem. A critical assessment of

the TQM experience at some twenty-two institutions of higher education indicated that the shift in mind-set that implementation of TQM required significantly stymied its adoption by many institutions (Hohn, 1996; Seymour, 1993; Seymour & Collett 1991). The assessment showed how difficult it is to break free of deeply ingrained analytical ways of thinking that constitute the operating paradigm of educational organizations.

In the institutions studied, the experience with TQM yielded some significantly positive results. Chief among the benefits was the fact that employees acquired a voice in the decision-making process. Teamwork brought employees together, often for the first time; they engaged in networking and developed a greater appreciation for the complexity of the organization. This led to changes in the organization's psychological climate: improved morale, reduced grievances, and less use of sick time. Processes and procedures were streamlined, and problem prevention strategies reduced the need to correct errors. One college claimed to have reduced its overall purchasing, warehousing, and delivery of equipment errors by 78 percent. Another college worked to improve its graduation rate, reaching nearly 80 percent matriculation rate over three years (Seymour & Collett, 1991).

Frustration and lack of progress was enormous, however. Overt problems, such as the time needed to train staff and for teams to meet, surfaced immediately. Then more subtle problems emerged. Many revolved around issues of power. Middle managers, in particular, had a hard time letting go of decision-making authority and were fearful of losing control, thereby undermining or ignoring recommendations from employee teams. Employees were also highly sensitive to what they perceived as mixed signals from the top, indicating a lack of commitment to or understanding of TQM. There was a sense that top management did not support the work of employee teams. This led to mistrust, cynicism, and a sense of betrayal that eroded morale and lessened productivity. Issues of power and control are bound up in what one believes about the nature of power. When managers believe that power is finite, they are reluctant to give up any portion of it. This belief is inherent in analytical ways of thinking. The belief that power grows through sharing is inherent in systems thinking, with its emphasis on interrelationships and interactions.

Other challenges included the lack of underlying skills to work in teams and lead teams. Skills in listening, giving feedback, generating ideas, equalizing everyone's voice within teams, reaching consensus, and dealing with conflict all demanded team participation and facilitation skills that employees and managers simply did not have and that were often not highly valued in the organization. Facilitation skills were often seen as too "soft" or too "feminine" to get the "real work" done. The need

for additional training to develop team skills was sometimes resisted and certainly exacerbated the problem of time management.

What proved extremely difficult for the people in these educational institutions was thinking in terms of processes and their interrelationships and interactions. Not only was it an unfamiliar and therefore difficult way of thinking, but it did not produce enough tangible results to warrant the time and effort it required. The staff members were anxious about the challenge of working through that ambiguous time during which old ways of doing things are given up but there is no clarity about what will replace them. People were concerned about the ramification of change for both the organization and themselves as individuals. All of this made people resistant to change. Ultimately some institutions abandoned TQM because the overall benefits did not seem substantial or immediate enough to warrant the time, expense, and effort required to integrate it fully into the institution. Others, however, cited TQM as transforming their organizations and preparing them to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

One experience of ABE with TQM yielded similar results. In 1994, Massachusetts introduced a program and staff development process involving the application of TQM concepts. This process supports a participatory approach to organizational planning intended to link staff learning to the agenda for the program's growth and to address weaknesses in program systems. All staff are to be involved in decision making and work individually and in teams to learn about the issues identified and to carry out the work needed to address them. For some programs, the experience led to a new world of thinking, growing, and doing-although not without some difficulties-that transformed their program management and operations. For others, the process never became integrated into the organization and rapidly disappeared, usually because the process challenged the same mind-set that undermined TQM in higher education (Hohn, 1996, 1998b).

CONCLUSION

Insights into people's motivation to do good work, their need to be recognized as capable and self-directed, and the necessity of honoring the perspective of those closest to the work are becoming more common in contemporary organizations. In fact, teamwork and employee empowerment now operate in many organizations, flattening the organization into a less hierarchical arrangement that allows for swifter problem solving and directs the collective creativity and energy of employees toward achieving the organization's vision, purpose, and goals. Managers function less as controllers or dictators than as mentors, coaches, and facilitators of relationships. These concepts and ideas find

congruence with many of the principles and practices found within ABE, especially in Knowles's principles of adult learning, Freirean participatory education, and Highlander's participatory research. They promote inclusion of those closest to the work in solving problems, an approach that honors local knowledge and perspectives and urges a melding of different perspectives to reach new levels of potential. In some places, ABE already thinks in a systems way.

The continuously evolving and increasingly complex problems that ABE organizations face require a change from traditional, top-down management hierarchies. But no one should be naive about what it takes to bring about a genuine shift in thinking about how the organizations operate. The experience with TQM, the enormous difficulties organizations have had in applying the concepts of the learning organization, and the pervasive and persistent presence of bureaucracies in our everyday lives collectively show how difficult it is to shift paradigms. Embarking on such a program of change means starting down a long and difficult road. New ways of thinking and working together need to be supported through time and training at all levels, and there needs to be strong, continuous, and consistent leadership that values input from many perspectives. People need to see the benefits of changing in relationship to personally meaningful issues so the stress of uncertainty does not dominate their thinking. As the Knoxville, Tennessee, program shows, the perspective needed for a paradigm shift requires a willingness for "constant reflection, evaluation, and experimentation" to move beyond the comfort of current, "good enough" work to the risk and uncertainty in realizing their potential through continuous improvement (Bingman, Ebert, & Bell, 2000).

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