HUMAN SYSTEMS CONSULTANT:
USING FAMILY THERAPY IN ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and demonstrates the application of family systems therapy to the workplace. Practical applications of family systems therapy are reviewed, including consultation with organizations, counseling troubled employees, and working with family-owned and -operated businesses. Basic similarities and differences between organizations and families are discussed. Examples of specific concepts and techniques that have been shown to be effective in organizations are presented. These include assessment, triangulation, homeostasis, differentiation, coalitions, and boundaries. A background in family systems therapy, as well as a general understanding of organizational dynamics, is shown to be valuable for consultants working with organizations.

As corporate and political organizations face greater and more complex challenges, organizational consultants must develop new and better approaches to help them through these changing times. A common complaint regarding the techniques of some consultants is the lack of an adequate theory to explain and predict organizational behavior. This paper looks at the application of family systems theory to organizations. Family systems theory is just beginning to be used by business consultants and there are aspects of the theory which lend themselves to greater use in helping organizations develop, accept change, and understand their internal conflicts.

What can a family therapist do for a commercial enterprise? There are several possibilities: those trained in family systems theory can provide consultation to organizations, counsel employees experiencing problems in their personal or work lives, and they can work with family-owned businesses. “The family therapist utilizing a system approach has a reservoir of knowledge and skills that is greatly needed and can add immeasurably to the effectiveness of business organizations” (Borwick, 1986, p. 440). In addition, family therapy offers a theoretical approach for organizational development (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1980).

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FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORIES

Family systems theory is different from other psychological theories in that the family is seen as containing subsystems, such as the marital pair, the offspring, the parent-child relationships, as well as the biological and intrapsychic systems of the individuals. "Any approach, therefore, in which the therapist sees pathology residing in the system or interactions can be called family therapy" (Foley, 1986, p. 4).

Ackerman (1966) views the family in terms of members' roles and how the roles are intertwined. Virginia Satir (1967), a communication theorist, looked at the feeling level of families and their rules. According to Satir, dysfunctional rules produce dysfunctional families. In Bowen's (1978) family systems approach, the identified patient is a symptom of the system and can be understood only by his or her relationship to the system; thus a change in one part of the system affects the rest of the system. Jay Haley (1971) was interested in power and its effect on family systems. Minuchin (1974) has put forth structural family therapy, which defines the family by its coalitions and splits, and examines family communication. This theory examines the ongoing patterns of interaction, determines how symptoms are maintained in the system, and then restructures the system so that it no longer needs the symptom in order to function.

All of these theories have applicability for organizations. What is especially appealing about these theories is that the systemic perspective places emphasis on a belief in change. It is an optimistic viewpoint that believes in the potential for health in an individual or a system. However, it is important to note that there are differences between its application to families and organizations. Family therapy can succeed only to the extent that it helps advance organizational goals (Merkel & Carpenter, 1987).

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AND ORGANIZATIONS

On the surface, one would never confuse an organization with a family. An organization is an entity which is established to produce goods or services. A family is a group of individuals who are related by blood or marriage. They do not usually produce goods and services, and except for marriage and adoption, they are not "established." However, upon closer examination, one can see that there are many parallels, and that both systems are comprised of people. Don Jackson (1968) describes families as interacting communication networks in which every member influences the nature of the entire system and in turn
is influenced by it. The same is true for organizations in that every member of an organization has an effect on the organization and in turn is affected by it.

A consultant, trained in family systems theory, can provide valuable insight into troubled organizations by creating systemic ways of thinking about relationships and problems, and helping to identify dysfunctional relationships. "People are people, and their bonds and binds, whether in a work system or a personal family system, materialize and dissolve in response to identical processes" (Friedman, 1986, p. 421). More importantly, family therapy taps the family's responsible decision-making and builds upon its healthy resources and competencies. This is the same goal that business consultants strive for in organizations—to enable the organization to use its own resources to help itself.

Viewing families and organizations as similar is not a new idea. In an interview in 1971, Jay Haley said, "A family is a special kind of system because it has a history, i.e., a past and a future. We cannot, therefore, restrict a family to blood relatives... We may yet have to consider any group with an ongoing relationship a family" (Foley, 1986, p. 90).

Change often must take place to enable optimal functioning, and occurs within a structural and functional context. Sobel (1982) has stated that "optimal functioning in an organization is based upon the same principles as optimal functioning in a family" (p. 21). A systems approach provides a means for understanding the context of behavior change, whether it be in a family or company.

This is not to say that family systems therapy is the cure-all for organizational problems, but the techniques and theory have some applicability. In addition, a family systems advocate would probably have to modify some techniques for the business setting. Consultants must develop ways of working that respect the different traditions, tasks, and perspectives associated with organizations. Family therapy and consultation are different in their epistemologies, theories of knowledge, social organizations, economic rewards, assigned tasks, and technologies. It is in the degree to which they overlap in their concern with solving human problems that they have collaborative aspects (Block, 1986).

Being hired by an organization requires a systems orientation that goes beyond the family, although the principles are the same. In an article entitled "The Road from Family Therapy to Systems Consultation," Wynne, Weber, and McDaniel (1986) assert that family therapists, because of their systems perspective, can bring special skills to consultation in multiple contexts. They feel that it is time to become
aware of the many opportunities for consultation by family therapists and other systems-oriented health-care professionals. “These new systems models do not have the neatness or completeness of the classical concepts of organization, but they are a closer approximation of what researchers find when they actually study groups” (Schein, 1980, p. 187).

**Similarities to the Business Context**

Organizations and families share several fundamental similarities that make the family systems model particularly applicable to business settings:

1. Individuals spend most of their time and energy in organizations to earn their livelihood.
2. Organizations provide a maternal setting in the form of supervisors, managers, or employers who may be benevolent and caring of their employees.
3. Historically, as in many families, the frequency of encounters with males in the hierarchy increases as one goes up the administrative ladder. There are relatively clear sex role distinctions within organizations, not only by type of work but also by position (although this is changing in both organizations and families).
4. Businesses are comprised of various subsystems that serve to facilitate some functional tasks and to hamper others. As in families, businesses contain both overt and covert subsystems. The overt subsystems may include management, different departments, and channels of formal communication, whereas the covert subsystems may include managers who differ in their treatment of employees, departments differing in prestige, varying financial allocations, and an employee grapevine. As in families, covert subsystems and alliances are at the root of organizational distress, and their identification is a prerequisite for effective intervention.
5. Organizations, like families, have well-articulated belief systems, metaphors, and values that strongly influence staff functioning. In addition, there are internal myths which have parallels within the family system.
6. Repercussions of negative, stressful interactions at the administrative (or parental) level will be felt at the lower levels of the hierarchy. A battle between two department managers can lead to acting out or tension in the employees in their respective departments. Similarly, when parents argue or family stress is increased, the disturbance is often manifested in the children.
7. There is no identifiable “patient”; rather, problems are rooted in the system rather than individual pathology.
Thus, businesses are similar to families in that they both have levels of cohesion and rigidity or flexibility of role structure; they both allocate power; they both have overt and covert subsystems; and both have a pervasive set of belief systems (Fisher, 1986).

Family therapy, as compared to individual therapies, is becoming shorter and more problem centered. This is what most businesses want; they usually are not interested in long-term consultation.

**Differences Between Business and Family Contexts**

There are a number of differences between families and organizations that should be acknowledged. Borwick (1986), in applying a form of family therapy to a business, found several distinct differences. The first had to do with permanence; families are permanent relationships while businesses are temporary. A member of an organization can be replaced, a family member cannot.

He also found that the tasks are different. Families are usually not organized around specific tasks, except for day-to-day chores, whereas organizations are built around very specific functions and tasks. Related to this is a difference in roles: in a family one is taken up by the role, whereas in a business a role is taken up by the individual. Family members cannot walk away from an uncomfortable role, as can be done in a business; thus, becoming “stuck” in a role is a much greater possibility in the family.

When treating families, the interventions are usually on a very personal level, while in business they are on a role and system level. If a consultant intervenes on a personal level in a business situation, the individual can become very threatened. This is related to the issue of permanence; if sister changes her behavior, she will always be sister. If a manager changes his or her behavior, he or she may be out of a job, since business roles are temporary.

In family therapy, differentiation of family members is usually one of the main goals. In an organization, the goal is usually integration of managers and employees into the system. On another level, businesses can easily be restructured, whereas one cannot as easily restructure a family. CEOs may come and go, but a father is always the father.

Another goal of family therapy is to improve family relationships. In a business, the goal is generally to improve organizational functioning, which may or may not require improved relationships.

Last, in treating a family, the therapist usually deals with two to twelve individuals. In an organization, the number may be from two to two thousand or more. Thus, it is very important for the business
consultant to have the resources to deal effectively with the number of people involved.

**USING SYSTEMS THEORY IN ORGANIZATIONS**

The use of family systems theory in treatment involves the application of feedback, shifting the balance within the family, teaching members to relate in different ways, and helping to change rules, communication patterns, and value systems. The therapist does not set the new standards or values; the outcome is the responsibility of the family. Likewise, in an organization, a consultant would examine the same processes and help members decide what to change and help implement that change. The decision to change, however, resides with the members of the organization.

**Assessment**

When a consultant is hired, the first step is generally one of assessment. A systems assessment approach that incorporates the family system model with organizations is borrowed here from Evan Imber-Black (1986). In this model, the consultant must differentiate between intrasystem and intersystem issues. Intrasystem issues pertain to what happens within the organization—who is defining the problem, and for whom is it a problem. These issues give the consultant information regarding alliances, splits, myths, and staff expectations. Also included in intrasystem assessment is the examination of system beliefs and labels. This includes company goals, policies, and procedures. A third area of intrasystem assessment concerns the organization’s focus of blame. Questions here may include: (1) Why is this happening? and (2) What do you think needs to change for this to be solved?

Intersystem issues involve systems that interact with the organization. These include the organization’s customers or clients, its competitors and suppliers, and the organization’s relationship to the larger community. By examining these aspects, the consultant learns how the organization is seen by others, how it believes it is seen by others, and how these relationships affect the organization.

According to Douglas Carl (1984), organizational behavior can be explained using a systems assessment approach to such factors as sequence, hierarchy, boundaries, roles, triangles, coalitions (both overt and covert), and life cycles issues—just as is done in families. Likewise, Reamy-Stephenson (1984) found the same assumptions regarding resistance in hospital systems as in family systems. There were issues of triangulation, boundaries, and cross-generational coalitions among hospital staff members.
Triangulation

Bowen (1978) felt that the basic component of a system is the triangle—three-person relationships wherein a third person is brought in when there is stress between the first two. The tension is shifted to the third person. A system is composed of interlocking triangles; this is true in a family, social, or work system. Interlocking triangles are important because they help us see how problems in one system or subsystem can produce symptoms in another, and how unresolved issues can leap from one triangle to the next (Friedman, 1986). In an organization, triangles can consist of any number of combinations; for example: three employees; a manager, a supervisor, and an employee; two managers and an employee; or even a triangle made up of three departments.

Triangles form whenever there is stress or an unstable relationship. They are characterized by manipulative behavior, coalitions, and splits. Detriangulation is the goal of therapy. Bowen (1978) suggested that responding to, rather than reacting against the triangle is the way to break it up.

Homeostasis

Maintaining a state of equilibrium is a dynamic process which also allows for growth in a system. The more rigid the family or system, the greater the need to maintain the status quo. In addition, the more rigid the system, the easier it is to upset its balance. As a consequence, systems devise behaviors to help maintain homeostasis.

One such behavior is scapegoating—all disturbances are blamed on one individual. Often a family will enter therapy to “fix” the scapegoat; however, in actuality the family would experience greater trauma if this were accomplished since it would upset the family's homeostasis. Businesses also may use scapegoats. These can be a person or persons or an entire department. More generally, any change can upset the status quo. A consultant can be used to help uncover the source of trouble and enable the system to regain its balance.

Differentiation, Coalitions, and Boundaries

A major goal of family therapy is differentiation. When family members are too enmeshed and lack an individual identity, they behave dysfunctionally. As noted, businesses have the goal of integration rather than differentiation. This is true except in the case of leadership. In order to run an organization, the leader must be differentiated to function optimally. Since what happens at the top affects the entire system, the leader must work to define his or her own goals, while staying in touch with the rest of the system. Otherwise, the leader will fail and the body will not follow the head.
Many leaders have the capacity to stay in touch; fewer leaders have the capacity to define themselves; fewest have the capacity to remain connected while maintaining such self-differentiation. It is the most difficult part of leading any system, work or family. Consultants who have observed this process in families are well prepared to coach its identical twin in work systems. (Friedman, 1986, p. 411)

Two other family system patterns that are relevant to organizational consulting are coalitions and boundaries. In coalitions, decision making is undermined by alliances that bypass formal authority channels. The concept of boundaries applies to appropriate separateness yet adequate interaction between components (individuals or systems). When boundaries are either too rigid or too diffuse, dysfunctional behavior can occur.

Through the use of family systems theory, greater complexity can be brought into an organization so that participants can draw upon a wider range of options for dealing effectively with each other. Its application can open up new ways of thinking for individuals and greater cooperative behavior.

**FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AND EMPLOYEE COUNSELING**

A recurring need in the workplace is to help managers cope with employees who are experiencing difficulties in their personal lives. Obviously, since problems in the home can affect work performance, the consultant can provide an important function for the organization.

The manager can confer with the consultant or refer the troubled employee to the consultant. Either way, family systems theory can be used to help employees and managers understand the interlocking triangles involved in dysfunctional behavior. Managers can then see the “big picture”—how each separate system is simply a subsystem of larger systems. There needs to be “institutional symmetry”; problems arise when the boundaries between home and work are blurred or too distinct (Lightfoot, 1978).

**FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AND THE FAMILY BUSINESS**

More than 90% of the businesses in the United States are owned or operated by families (Rosenblatt, deMik, Anderson, & Johnson, 1985). A family-run business can have the same troubles and concerns as other businesses—compounded by the emotional intensity that occurs in families.
Problems in the areas of boundaries, differentiation, triangles, individuation, sexism, and money are especially acute (Rosenblatt et al., 1985). Decision-making in a family business may have more to do with family collusion and battles than with organizational structure. In addition, it is much more difficult to fire a family member.

There has been very little research on this unique situation in spite of the fact that such a high percentage of businesses are family run. It is logical that a family systems approach would be ideal for these organizations. Treating only the family member or only the business problem would not take into account the cross-over consequences to the other sphere when a change takes place. Understanding how the change affects the entire system would help both family relationships and the functioning of the business.

CONCLUSION

There is a need for a theoretical or conceptual model that combines family systems theory and organizational theory to provide a more well-rounded approach to dealing with organizations. Most consultants can point out discrepancies between goals and achievement, but it takes specialized training to pinpoint components, relationships, processes, subgoals, and feedback mechanisms that contribute to these discrepancies. An evaluation based upon the systems approach is more meaningful than a limited assessment of behaviors, contingencies, causes, and effects. Consultation should take stock of multiple systems of interaction. The assumption is that if other systems are involved, they will be affected indirectly through consultation. Properly trained in systems theory, the consultant can more readily be concerned with transactions across several systems (McDaniel, Wynne, & Weber, 1986).

The workplace has a need for human systems consultants—trained in family systems theory, general systems theory, communication skills, counseling skills, organizational dynamics, and management—who could counsel, diagnose, and implement change. These individuals have an important role, alongside of other types of professional consultants, in bettering the workplace.

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