Creating and Empowering A Social System—Ours!

What Colette and I are presenting here is an essay on our approach to community development and a statement of appreciation for the field of "whole systems design" –a contemporary approach to building organizations.

I. A Whole Systems Design Approach
Three points outline our viewpoint of whole system design:
A. A **model is needed** for planning and coaching people.
B. **Teams are vital** and team building empowers individuals and keeps them steady through the duration of a project.
C. **The development of a learning community within an organization** liberates people's creativity and guides their energy.

A. Practitioners in whole system design find it important to use a model for enabling personal creativity and shaping social creativity. This model involves encouraging individual creativity and willingness to be trained in social creativity. We can release our enthusiasm for our own creative ideas when we know that our leadership will help everyone do this within a defined model for social creativity. Leadership must understand and value having a shared model of creative design. **This statement to you, "Creating and Empowering a Social System," is such a model for working with individuals, utilizing the methodology of small groups or teams, and having the shared goal of designing a whole and wholesome system for persons who are committed to working constructively and creatively.** *Constructively* refers to the willingness and ability to collaborate. *Creatively* refers to the way each individual is choosing to be true to his own creative insights and abilities. Similarly, *social creativity* involves the entire ensemble of persons seeing their wholeness much like individual musicians will themselves to be an orchestra. Using this metaphor, it can also be seen how various sections of the orchestra (percussion, strings, etc.) must help each other attain perfection. The section accomplishes this task by choosing a leader, for instance "the first violin," as its coach and trainer. Again using our music metaphor, the conductor often gathers these lead instrumentalists to help her experiment with interpretations and to explore the potentials of the orchestra.

Wherever creative people get together, be it in orchestras, dance troupes, sports, building construction, and so on, the following assumptions motivate the group.

- Everyone present is committed to being alert and in the **mode of performance**.
- Everyone present has appreciation of both the joys and costs of a performance orientation. They are usually **bonded by their need to be supported** while enduring the rigors of extreme concentration and effort.
- All persons in the creative assemblage are **respectful of creative abilities**, whether they come naturally or are hard earned.

- Both the individuals and the group-as-a-whole believe that there is great **social value** (human betterment) in their performance and that the value is increased through excellence.
- All agree that no matter what difficulties they face "the show will go on." For instance, the orchestra will be doing its work in spite of bouts of flu and colds. It will also lose key leaders at the worst possible time. There will be lackluster performances, and the conductor will at times have bad moods and unrealistic expectations. Yet, **the show does go on,** even using the unfavorable reviews as clues to improvement and motivation for excellence.
- This whole group of people know they survive only because of an **optimistic attitude.** The rigors of self and social discipline make humor and ease of relationship prime values. The best members are not only the most skilled but also those persons who are skilled at collaboration and training others. The tension of performance must be balanced by the satisfactions of personal improvement and social accomplishment. And, the whole thing must add up to having fun.

B. The designing of a social system not only focuses on individuals and the liberation of their creativity, but also requires the "clustering" of individuals for a variety of reasons. Sometimes these clusters are a basic unit of support and accomplishment in the system. In this case, the cluster must learn from the field of group dynamics how **to become a group**. The formation of a group, which is to be a home base for its members by providing support and guidance, involves appreciating and implementing group technologies. These technologies are sometimes simple processes and at other times are presented as experiences through which people discover what they need to learn and through which they learn it.

When a group does more than provide support for each other, that is, when a group takes on a task, it is best to call it a team. A team must divide its time between the maintenance of relationships, the support of each member, and the accomplishment of the task, evaluating and then re-approaching the task with improvement in mind. Teams must deal with both task and group maintenance. It is vital that teams create and assign roles related to:

1. Support of its members.
2. Maintenance of relationship and groupness.
3. Task-oriented roles such as supervisor.
4. There needs to be a coordinator of each team—coordinating the team with the remainder of the organization (developing a system).
5. Group members with specific duties.

Team building is a vital aspect of organizational behavior. Yet it must also be recognized that a number of aspects of team function—standards, norms, and guidelines-- are provided for the team by the organizational **system.**

C. A third contribution from the field of whole system design is to help us understand what a social system is and how it can be altered for better--or damaged. In fact, the literature indicates that when an organization is not proactive in stating its vision, mission, goals and

methods, it will become vulnerable to individual manipulation and the attrition of energy. Peter Senge[1] presents the viewpoint that organizations should and must create a learning organization within their corporate structure, a community of co-workers who work together across all dividing lines and hierarchical taboos in order to obtain a sense of the whole. Every individual must develop a feel for, and a concern about, what the organization is attempting to accomplish and to see his part in furthering the mission. A learning organization may be seen as a network of persons scattered throughout the organization, who are working to understand the whole and share appropriate information throughout the organization. **This network of people in learning mode becomes an infrastructure generating and dispensing information and suggestions for productive change.**

The word *infrastructure* is important in organizations. Some of the infrastructures of a house are its electrical system and it's plumbing and heating systems. Infrastructures in organizations provide similar functions throughout the whole organization. There is, for instance, a financial system that must include an accounting of all money not just some of it. Similarly, there is usually a personnel system that is uniform throughout the organization. Other typical infrastructures involve communication, transportation, purchasing, and human services, such as supervision and training. These infrastructures are sub-systems and each connects parts of the organization to the whole.

Another word is also important in discussing the wholeness of the organization-as-system: *culture*. Culture includes many elements, most of which are intangible: the company's vision (or lack of it), the employee's attitudes, the company's reputation and market viability, the employee's participation in policy making, the organization's social responsibility, and whether or not employees are involved in a union. Consider also, the percentage of male to female employees, the presence of minorities, and the policies of the company around health insurance, retirement, and other benefits. Consider also whether the organization's workplace is old or new, well kept or not. Notice also how people are dressed, whether music is allowed in work areas, and whether are encouraged to take breaks or vacation holidays. What is used to motivate workers, and how are they reprimanded? Culture refers to the people environment as the real place—the experienced place—where people work. Other words used to describe the cultural environment are: *climate*, *morale*, and *working conditions*.

In summary, the intentional design or redesign of an organizational system involves these three activities: **first,** the activity of valuing its members or workers by recognizing their worth and utilizing their creativity. **Second**, designing involves connecting people to each other, helping teams to utilize the technologies from group dynamics to efficiency planning. **Third**, the organization must present itself as a unified system and show each member and group how they are to be related effectively to their small group and to the system as a whole. It is this third element-empowerment-that contributes a sense of purpose to each part of the whole system.

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[1] Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Disciple: The Art and Practice of Learning Organization*. Doubleday/Currency, New York, 1990.

II. Empowerment as a Core Process

After reading this paragraph, pause for a few minutes to reflect on what it is that our organizations do to make you feel better about yourself and the work you do. For instance, they learn your name, spell it right, and address you in a way that you prefer. They respect your need for a sense of individual dignity and contract with you clearly. They also learn your background, including your interests and skills. By utilizing you well, they add to your sense of worth.

A. Empowering the Individual

The empowerment of individuals is most important when an organization is experiencing conflict or is in a process of change. Let us imagine a community as it gathers its citizens to discuss changing the route of a freeway. They are informed regarding the proposed changes; told of a meeting where they might be heard, and are welcomed by an appropriate leader. After the leadership has related some history and clarified the proposed changes, it becomes clear to all that many differing viewpoints are represented in the room. At this point, it is important to recognize the value in each viewpoint by helping individuals to be part of a small group (5 to 25) of persons with similar viewpoints. Each group is encouraged to select its own convener who is asked to make sure that every individual is given a brief opportunity to state a viewpoint and concerns. When all have identified their concerns, the group is asked to select a spokesperson to represent the group and its range of opinions. Usually, this spokesperson is asked to sit on a coordinating group, which will carry on further discussions in the presence of (or accountable to) the total assembly.

Notice that each individual has been informed, invited, welcomed officially; and, each person is placed in a small enough group that she can be heard and her position clarified by others. Also, each individual participates in selecting a representative leader and has an opportunity to view a process of coordination and public debate. It is vital to democratic process that each individual feels empowered in such a manner and recognizes the training that is needed to trust such a process. Remember that individuals have an opportunity to offer leadership and to rigorously negotiate for elders who they know and trust. This is practical grassroots democracy. The training must involve encouraging each person to support the leadership that has been selected and to stay in touch with that leader's experience of leading.

B. Empowering the Group or Team

Just as individuals are empowered by information or knowledge, and by being recognized by official leadership operating within a rational process, so also groups are empowered by being given a **formal purpose.** The group is further empowered through selecting its leadership, documenting the work of the group, and requiring accountability from its representative on a council or other such coordinating body.

Groups or teams are also empowered by the whole organization by being reminded that each group is a part of a system that relies on it to operate within clear processes that are respectful of individuals, leadership, **and the system.** Thus, one contribution of the system is that it offers communication principles and helpful ground rules for group function. The system empowers its groups and is in turn empowered by those same groups. This involves a mutual empowerment of the functions each provides.

C. Empowering the Whole System

Individuals have a tendency to become so involved in the work and relationships of a small group that they forget the purposes of the larger organization and the challenges the organization faces in participating in a still larger system of governance. Our democratic society presents to us a system of governance that spans a spectrum of functions extending from an individual's participation in a small local group through neighborhood district, to city and county, state and region, to national and international levels of political activity. A common bumper sticker reads, "Think globally and act locally." Citizens operating at a local level are most effective when they remain aware of the contributions being made at each level of governance. To be effective in part of an organization requires being knowledgeable about the whole organization and its interfaces with other organizations. Any organization is in reality a system of organized groupings. Success in any venture requires collaboration among many people at several levels of political and social responsibility.

Consider now what it is that unites one part of an organization to another: a leader links his or her own group to the whole enterprise. Also, written communications in-form and in-struct all persons in an organization regarding how to think and act in concert with one another. Remember our use of the orchestra as an analogy. ("You must follow the music and know the score!") In facilities such as office buildings, offices are usually arranged in some order so that a process can be completed with a minimum of trouble. The organization usually provides a list of telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for efficient communication. Nowadays, many transactions, even financial ones, can be handled electronically. Notice that leaders, mailings, buildings, telephones, and computers are the most common illustrations of infrastructure. The efficiency of an organization is often measured by the viability of its infrastructures. Change within the organization usually involves altering infrastructure, thereby improving the ability of the organization to act as a more coordinated whole.

The wholeness of an organization is attained through the embodiment of its mission and goals. Wholeness is also expressed through well-designed processes and trained leaders, which impress an individual with the organization's competence and empower that individual to feel competent as well. An important goal of any organization should be to create a work environment, a culture that values people feeling good about doing business together. This must be a declared value of the system and reflect cultural patterns of respect for each other's time, feeling, needs, and goals.

D. Empowering the Process

By process, we refer to any flow of activities that moves toward a goal or fulfills a purpose. Our modem society has become very process-oriented because the average citizen has come to know and understand when a process is working or has broken down. This public sophistication with process orientation forces us to differentiate between *problem* (involves a process breakdown that can be fixed) and *issue* (a need to change the process being used). Problems are usually solved quickly. However, issues reoccur because societal needs and personal desires change from time to time, usually requiring a change in the process itself. Organizations must learn to differentiate between solving problems and discussing issues. Issues cannot be resolved

quickly. They need to be discussed more deeply and re-examined in the light of changing social realities.

Most communities would benefit from identifying the issues that can be counted on to resurface on a regular basis. Illustrations are: population growth, changing technologies, fears about rising crime rate, sexuality, the conduct of politicians, and economic unrest. It would be best for a community to create task forces to discuss such issues in depth and to recommend standard processes for dealing with issues whenever they arise.

Any system of governance stabilizes itself by designing processes with great care, using them routinely and applying them to issues with a confidence born of preparation, which has been done beforehand—prior to a crisis!

E. Empowering Leadership

A trained and effective leadership is generally conceded to be the most valuable asset possessed by any organization. It takes years for a leader to know his constituency. Further, it takes a lot of experience to learn how to respond to attacks or crises in a mature and non-anxious manner. For this reason, any organization finds itself committed to the support of its leaders, even to the protection of leaders who find themselves in the midst of trouble. Yet, because of the thoroughness and quickness of media coverage, it is becoming increasingly difficult for organizations to anticipate crises and to act wisely. Literature is reminding us that leaders with the most potential are declining public responsibility in order to avoid the exposure and ridicule often involved in running for public office. Obviously, we must find better ways of selecting, training, empowering, and protecting leadership.

Leadership is a key issue. It is not just a problem to be solved through occasional elections; it is an issue, which must be addressed in every organization on an on-going basis. We must regularly ask and answer the question: What do I/we want from our leaders?

F. Empowering Organizational Development

Organizations go through changes. Frequently, they change for the worse. People refuse to support them and they are put out of existence. Our beloved community is close to such a an experience. However, organizations with good and wise leadership plan their changes; they develop an ability to learn about their own organization. Our organizations could plan and implement changes, coming from the insights we have into "the Hoff problem."

Today most organizations seek to be in an intentional process of organizational development every 3 years. Communities must be developed, and for that to happen leaders need to inspire and educate members of the community regarding the advantages of planning change, developing leadership, and doing the work of organizing, which begins with claiming a mission and setting goals. Our development in The Association and Convocation depend on our empowering our organizations development by breaking through the stuckness and resolving the unpleasant dynamic between organizations and the Hoffs.

III. Remembering the Importance of the "Whole"

Community is a word human beings use to acknowledge they are connected to each other in many ways and at several levels. When community relations are studied deeply, there is a growing awareness of layers or levels present in people's experience of community life.

1. The most fundamental connection involves the way citizens share in the natural world, the geography, climate, and weather of their ecological region. People are often deeply affected by hot summers or hard winters and are bonded to each other in their response to ecological and environmental crises**. We might call this the ecological level of community life.**

2. Secondly, we live in American society that is one society among many on our globe. As citizens we are afforded the protection of laws and are provided the opportunity to represent ourselves through elected political officials who operate at the state and national levels. This **societal level of our life is characterized by order—political order.** This societal power and law is experienced as necessary yet remote from the individual's personal awareness. Perhaps it is like the foundation of your house—something that is important yet largely unseen except in emergencies. This level of society, the national and international world, was once quite remote and unreal to human beings. However, our contemporary society is becoming more deeply affected by national and international concerns because of the way the media bring this world into our homes. We have a growing consciousness of our inter-connectedness.

3. **The third level of community life is much more present to our routine consciousness—this is relationship.** Human beings tend to ignore the ecological and societal levels in favor of valuing a relatively small cluster of persons who make up family and a friendship group. When individuals are asked about their lives, they usually respond by talking about their relationships and what is happening within those relationships.

4. **The fourth level of human community is cultural**. Over time, any group in relationship to each other is *going* to develop routine activities. These activities which people share together must accomplish many important purposes, such as providing welcome to infants, attention to children, rights of passage for youth, marriage for adults, and a basis for companionship for all concerned. And it is a community's culture that provides comfort in bereavement and guidance in crisis. *Our culture reveals the values and attitudes we have toward a whole range of human experiences.*

5. With the passage of time and increasing organization of cultural activities, culture routinizes its expression in **programs and performances** and manifests organizations that foster creativity in individuals and in groups. This programmatic level of a community's life creates many organizations such as those we see in the arts, sports, and a large variety of hobbies or pastimes—clubs, associations, galleries and activity centers, with their teams, bands, orchestras, and chorales.

6. The next level of community life gathers up all the preceding levels and organizes them. This is the **world of local politics**, grassroots movements that are committed to coordinate and deliver the benefits of society. People are most aware of the federal government through the daily rounds of their postman. The state becomes real to a

citizen when getting a driver's license. Local governments impact citizens through schoolteachers, policemen, and firefighters. It is at this level of grassroots organization and political involvement that all of life is monitored and critiqued.

7. The simplest illustration is this last layer of organization is perhaps illustrated by a City Manager who is an **administrator** hired by the city council as a staff person to actually do the work which they have been elected to see done. The local scene has quite a variety of persons who are employed and deployed, usually because they are professionally trained to do so. At the local level there is often a mix of agency bureaucrats and locally elected officials, all needing to know each other and work together if they want to succeed.

Below is an organizational diagram. Specifically, it is the organizational curve for a typical community-based organization. It is from the study of the development of community-based organizations that cultural anthropologists and social scientists have come to recognize that there is a very similar organizational curve for most local communities. That is, community is built layer upon layer. For instance, the history of Big Brothers and Big Sisters shows how everything started at a relational level, when professional agency staff, attempting to serve youth in crisis, gathered adults from the community to help them. The relational energies created when professionals, young people, and adult volunteers begin to work together on a social problem is immense. In one locale after another organizations developed with sensitivity to local culture and needs. They created a range of programs that seemed necessary, raised the funds to support their efforts, and then chose professional administrators experienced in the work of their agency to provide on-going, stable, leadership.

IV. An Illustration of Community Development….
The Goodenough Community provides a useful illustration and understanding of the process of community development. The community began as a relational phenomenon. After about three years of gathering at a Human Relations Laboratory, those continuing in relationship began to express themselves in a culture carrying the flag of the Human Potential Movement. Eventually the community began to offer programs and provide simple social response--birthday parties, moving parties, and acts of support and compassion. Eleven years after the community was founded in relationships, it organized through formal incorporation. Ten years later the community began to wrestle with hiring professional administrators. The diagram presented here describes the history or development of the Goodenough Community but more accurately describes the usual organizational curve of any community-sensitive corporation that might also be called a social service agency. There is value in reflecting on this diagram, paying particular attention to how one layer is built on the other. It must also be noted that once a community has recognized these seven levels of its existence, the community becomes responsible to continue the development of each level, and to encourage people to learn from the organizational processes on each level.

Once a critical mass of persons interested in the Goodenough Community became interested in conserving their investment and organizing a stable system of governance there was a

commitment to organize. Since approximately 1988, this community has been focused on organizational processes and leadership development.
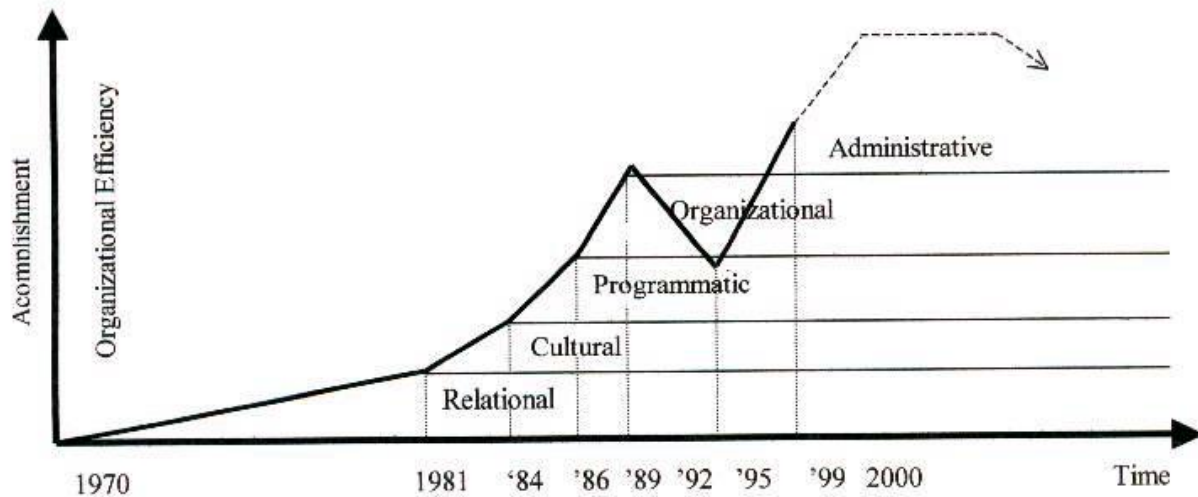

Figure 4

This diagram represents the usual organizational curve of a typical community-based organization, using the Goodenough Community as a model.

In Conclusion

As Colette and I see our situation, there is far more that is encouraging than discouraging. Many of you seem to be much happier in your lives, more fulfilled in your development and more skillful in the way you handle specific leadership tasks. Specific events (True Holidays), and specific growth-oriented processes are well-responded to and have a heart-warming impact. Sahale seems to bring excitement and hopefulness to many of us. Our day to day finances are almost manageable with the adjustments we are now making and there are a variety of people looking to us for affiliation of various kinds. Colette's leadership seems well-received is some areas.

The steps to resolution and renewal might involve repairing matters at the various levels of community life:
- At thelevel of relationship
- At the level of culture
- At the level of program
- Athe the level of organization
- At the level of administration

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