

ORGANISATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

Towards building a practice

The development sector, like any complex living system, is itself developing and changing over time. The present focus on organisations as the object of development interventions, services and resources is one of the significant shifts that has emerged in recent years. Increasingly the literature, training and discourse that shape the activities of the sector are promoting organisational approaches, methodologies, and tools. Organisational assessment, development, capacity building, and evaluation are becoming central to the practice of development organisations.

This paper challenges the development practitioner who intends to intervene into the lives of organisations to do so in ways that are genuinely developmental, and provides some guidelines.

The paper begins by taking a look at the concept of organisation from the perspective of the development sector. The practitioner is then introduced to an organisational approach and orientation that is in keeping with the purpose and values of the sector. The role of the development practitioner is explored by identifying some defining characteristics of a developmental practice. The final purpose of the paper is to share some ideas on where to start with building a set of tools and frameworks that will help practitioners as they engage with, and seek to gain a better understanding of organisations. It is hoped that in some small way this paper will contribute towards an increased consciousness of the importance of building a practice which is truly developmental in a way that gives real meaning to the word.

Organisation and the development sector

An appreciation of the importance of “organisation” is deeply embedded in the history of the development sector, and is spread across the widest range of approaches and persuasions. Those operating out of the more philanthropic approach have long been challenged to pursue efficient and effective organisation as a means of delivering resources and services. Good and capable organisations are judged to be those organisations that get as many of the most needed resources to those who need them most as cost effectively as possible. The development sector has borrowed much from the theory and practices of the business sector in its drive to become more efficient and cost effective.

Those at the margins of society, who have not relied on the philanthropy of others, have also long valued organisation as a means of achieving access to and control over resources. Mobilising and organising are at the very heart of initiatives that seek to address the fundamental power imbalances in society. This understanding of organisation draws more on the experience of political activism than on business acumen. From this perspective good organisation is measured in the extent to which it is participatory, inclusive, representative, and empowering. Empowering in the literal sense of having the ability to shift the balance of power in existing relationships.

Those organisations that use societal resources for development purposes are held accountable for how the resources are managed and applied, and for how society is benefiting as a result. Unless there is some conscious counterforce it is to be expected that the view of, and approach to, organisation held by those in control of the funds will tend to dominate and shape the sector they are funding. The learning from within the development sector itself suggests that the indiscriminate application of a business orientated view of organisation is dysfunctional. While aspects of good business practice have contributed much to efficiency and accountability, its over-emphasis on project driven delivery is a major threat to meaningful and sustainable development.

The challenge that faces the development sector is enormous. While not wanting to avoid the need to be efficient and accountable, it equally cannot avoid the fact that its purpose in society is fundamentally different to those of business and government. It is tasked to establish its own unique approach to, and understanding of, how to work with and through organisations in order to transform society. Objectives of the development sector go far beyond the efficient delivery of goods and services, to fundamentally changing the nature of the relationships between the givers and the receivers and between civil society and the state. If society is to change in ways that fundamentally change the lot of those presently living on the margins, organisations are going to have to become places in which people think and act very differently.

In order to justify its use of societal resources at the most fundamental level the development sector has to face a choice. It will either have to succumb to becoming a super efficient conduit for the delivery of goods and services from “the haves” to the “have-nots”. Not a sector in its own right, but an extension of the more dominant forces in society, created in their image. The function of the development sector then becomes a palliative means of minimising the most extreme excesses of a system driven by competition.

The alternative is for the development sector to continue the struggle to become increasingly effective in challenging and shifting the relationships of the dominant paradigm which shapes society. A sector that acts out of, and gives expression to, the more inclusive, caring, sharing and collaborative side of human nature. A sector that understands development as the process that seeks to move beyond relationships characterised by dysfunctional dependency or competitive independence towards dynamic and synergistic interdependence. In fulfilling its function in society the development sector needs to act out of, and promote, a very particular understanding of the concept of organisation

A developmental approach to organisation

The developmental practitioner’s practice is shaped in part by their understanding of, and basic orientation towards, organisations. An Organisation can be viewed simply as that which is created when a group of people come together in order to achieve a common purpose or objective. It is common to approach organisations from a functional and mechanistic perspective seeing them as simple delivery systems requiring certain critical and pre-determined elements or components in order to function effectively. A human creation that can be analysed, understood, and engineered to achieve its purpose with ultimate efficiency. Equally however organisation can be understood as the very essence of that which defines the social

nature of humankind; as the expression of the inherent need for people to act together in order to reach their full potential. Organisation can be seen as shaping people as much as being shaped by them. Organisation can also be explored much more broadly in the relationships that exist between all things, and in the patterns and processes that determine the interrelationships and interdependencies in nature.

In approaching organisations from a developmental perspective it is important recognise that there is a virtually incomprehensibly complex set of interacting relationships that define any one organisation. The first grouping of relationships exist between the people that act together to form the organisation. As one works more intimately with organisations, and organisational change, there is an even more fundamental level of intra-personal relationship that impacts on organisational functioning. How certain key individuals relate to themselves (and are able to change the way they relate to themselves) can have a major impact on the development of organisations. The first level of relationship is therefore within and between the individuals who make up the organisation.

As the organisation itself begins to form and develop, its own unique organisational identity begins to merge. Organisations eventually take on their own character and identity to the point where individual members within the organisation externalise the organisation sufficiently to establish relationships with it. This then forms the second set of critical relationships – those that exist between the people that make up the organisation and the organisation itself.

The third formative grouping of relationships are those that the organisation has with others outside of itself. Here there are unlimited connections expanding outwards from the immediate beneficiaries and stakeholders to eventually connect to everything else imaginable . At the broadest meaningful level we speak of organisations relating and responding to the environments of which they are a part. At this level organisations are connected to sectors, societies, cultures, political systems, social paradigms and many other powerful forces that shape the world we live in.

In order to engage with organisations developmentally, the fact that they are complex, open (inter-connected) living systems cannot be avoided. In addition, as living systems, they are constantly evolving over time on their own unique paths of development. It is the understanding of this life path that lies at the heart of the developmental approach. All organisations have a unique past, a present and a future – all of which contribute to their present state and their future potential. Organisational development includes a process of inception and birth, ongoing processes of change, growth and crises evolving through different phases and eventually culminating in death.

Organisations develop their own unique character born of a complex combination of their component parts and the relationships between them, their purpose and ambition, their past formative experiences of success and failure, and their internal and external relationships. Organisations develop their own memory, language, habits, traumas, competencies and weaknesses. Organisations have a material observable and easily measurable aspect to them. They are formed both by a conscious and planned understanding and experience of themselves, but there are many forces that shape organisations that operate beyond the consciousness of those involved. The

organisation itself has a very important and powerful unconscious aspect to it (often referred to as the organisational unconscious or organisational culture) which plays a major role in creating its ultimate identity. And then there are the forces and influences that are so diverse, so complex and so many that it is impossible to remain conscious of them all the time.

To fully appreciate organisations there is a need to engage with them holistically. Perhaps the greatest contribution that anyone can make to the development of an organisation is to help it become more conscious of itself. Engaging with the whole organisation involves moving beyond the need to treat them as machines in a vain attempt to fully understand and control them. Organisations can only be fully appreciated when they are approached with the respect, awe and wonder which allows the practitioner to embrace their full complexity to the point of recognising the part of them which is spiritual. When they are truly respected and appreciated there is some chance that an organisation will reveal enough of itself to allow greater understanding.

The real challenge facing the developmental practitioner is to build a practice that is based on a developmental approach and orientation - a practice that equips them to work effectively with these levels of complexity. The developmental practitioner must resist the enormous pressures that encourage one to over-simplify things in order to “get the job done” – as all too often “fast tracking” the process means undermining real and meaningful development.

Some elements of a developmental practice

There is an immense gap between a developmental orientation and understanding – and the tools, techniques and methods that make up the practitioner’s “toolbox”. This gap needs to be filled by a conscious development practice. In this section some of the critical elements that might contribute towards building such a practice are explored.

In this age where immediate and quick solutions to highly complex issues are promoted there is little patience for the lengthy process of building a broad and rigorous practice. But experience shows that there is no substitute for a well informed, consciously evolving practice if the ultimate objective is to facilitate development.

Put learning at the core

Because of the complexity and ever-changing nature of the process of development itself there can be no end to the knowledge and skills required in becoming an effective development practitioner. Despite the fact that there are more and more courses that provide education and training for practitioners, it is inconceivable that a point could ever be reached where learning can stop. For those organisations and individuals committed to building developmental practice there is no alternative but to build the learning function into the practice itself as a core process and competency.

To put learning at the core of organisation it is firstly important to view all existing planning and review processes primarily as opportunities for learning. Processes such as performance appraisal, progress reporting, supervision, planning, monitoring and evaluation are but a few obvious examples of opportunities for learning that are all too

often overlooked. It is important to adopt an appropriate action learning methodology that will constantly inform, deepen and improve practice (see reading list for references to action learning).

Own the power you have

The first implication of a developmental perspective for practice is that we do not bring development to organisations, but intervene into existing development processes. Intricate processes which often started long before we became involved, and ideally continue long after we have withdrawn.

A critical step in building an effective and responsible development practice is to be fully conscious of the power with which development practitioners intervene into the lives of organisations. I have often seen organisations seeking more meaningful ways of building the capacity of “partner” organisations than through funding. The disturbing part of this is that many of them seem completely oblivious of the profound impact that “good” funding practice can have on building the capacity of an organisation. Even more disconcerting is their inability to see how ill considered use of funds can incapacitate and often destroy organisations. They seem to find it difficult to face fully the power inherent in their existing role and seek to move on to playing other roles without having really built a competent practice.

But it is not only funding interventions that have the power to deeply affect organisations. A seemingly innocuous organisational assessment or evaluation has the ability to profoundly threaten and undermine, or alternatively to inspire and inform an organisation. “Helping” an organisation with strategic planning has as much chance of crippling through confounding and confusing it, as it has of achieving increased efficiency by bringing clarity of purpose. Often the power to undermine development processes is heightened by the fact that there is an unequal power relationship between those intervening and the recipients of the intervention. Very often those wishing to “develop” organisations or “build their capacity” are linked to the source of funds that sustain the organisation. Increasingly traditional funding organisations are themselves getting involved in building the capacity of their partners.

But development organisations routinely involve themselves in even more defining ways in the lives of other organisations – by giving birth to them. As a means of extricating themselves from dependency relationships, organisations and practitioners are increasingly involving themselves in forming organisations, in the belief that they will be able to move on leaving effective and independent organisations behind. This is happening at all levels, from creating structures at community level to taking responsibility for addressing local needs, to international agencies that have been operational in delivering services in many foreign countries trying to set up “indigenous” delivery NGOs. Unless we draw deeply on our learnings and failures of the past we will continue to replicate the dysfunctional dependency created through the patronising “handout” mentality of the past. Only this time the dependency will be institutionalised between organisations.

If there is any chance of the development sector achieving its stated purpose of shifting the power relations in society it will have to learn to intervene into the life processes of organisations with great skill and care. Both as agencies of development and as individual practitioners we have to take full responsibility for the power that we have, and for the dependencies that we create.

Recognise yourself as your most important tool

A developmental practice starts not with tools, techniques and methodologies, but with the person who is using them. The good development practitioner takes their own development seriously, and strives to become increasingly conscious of how their inner processes impact on the work that they are doing. Just as the organisations we are intervening into are on their own unique paths of development, so are we. We too get stuck, regress, fall asleep, encounter crises, grow through them, are forced to face ourselves and become more conscious, and occasionally let go of our old ways of doing things in order to take on the new. If we do not take our own development processes seriously, what right do we have to intervene into the lives of others?

The development practitioner needs to constantly be reviewing, improving, and adding to their range of skills and techniques. But, as importantly, they need to be spending time exploring those less conscious factors that impact on the way they relate to the world. We speak of the development sector as being “value driven”, but what does this mean in practice? Are these values made conscious in the practitioner so that they can consciously form the foundation to their approach and orientation to their work? There are many unconscious assumptions, beliefs, and biases that impact directly on how we approach our work. As an example, an assumption that is often unconscious is where one stands on the age-old debate on structure versus agency. Believing that ultimately people are shaped by the structures, systems and processes of society will provide a particular foundation and orientation towards practice. Holding the belief that individual human beings ultimately have the ability (and responsibility) to come together to shape the structures and organisations of society, will provide quite a different point of departure. A consciousness of these types of underlying assumptions is important to a practitioner.

Finally the development practitioner needs to be particularly conscious of the relationship between themselves, the system they are intervening out of (their own organisation, society, or culture) and the one they are intervening into. Equally they need to be very aware of the nature and quality of the relationship between themselves and those with whom they are working. There are inevitably a combination of issues involving power, culture, gender, race, age, language and past experiences of relationship that will impact at both the individual and organisational levels. The issue of relationship is fundamental to the most basic orientation of the development worker. It is in the changes in the quality and nature of relationship over time that the success of developmental intervention is ultimately measured. In order for the relationships in which the development practitioner is involved to develop over time the practitioner is deeply challenge to let go of the ways they related in the past. This entails high levels of self-awareness and conscious personal development.

Understand organisations as processes in time

We have already explored how one can view organisations from a developmental perspective. This approach highlights the need to relate to them as always being in the process of becoming, never static, never complete, always caught in the tension between the need to stagnate and the need to reach their fullest potential. And ultimately only achieving either state in death.

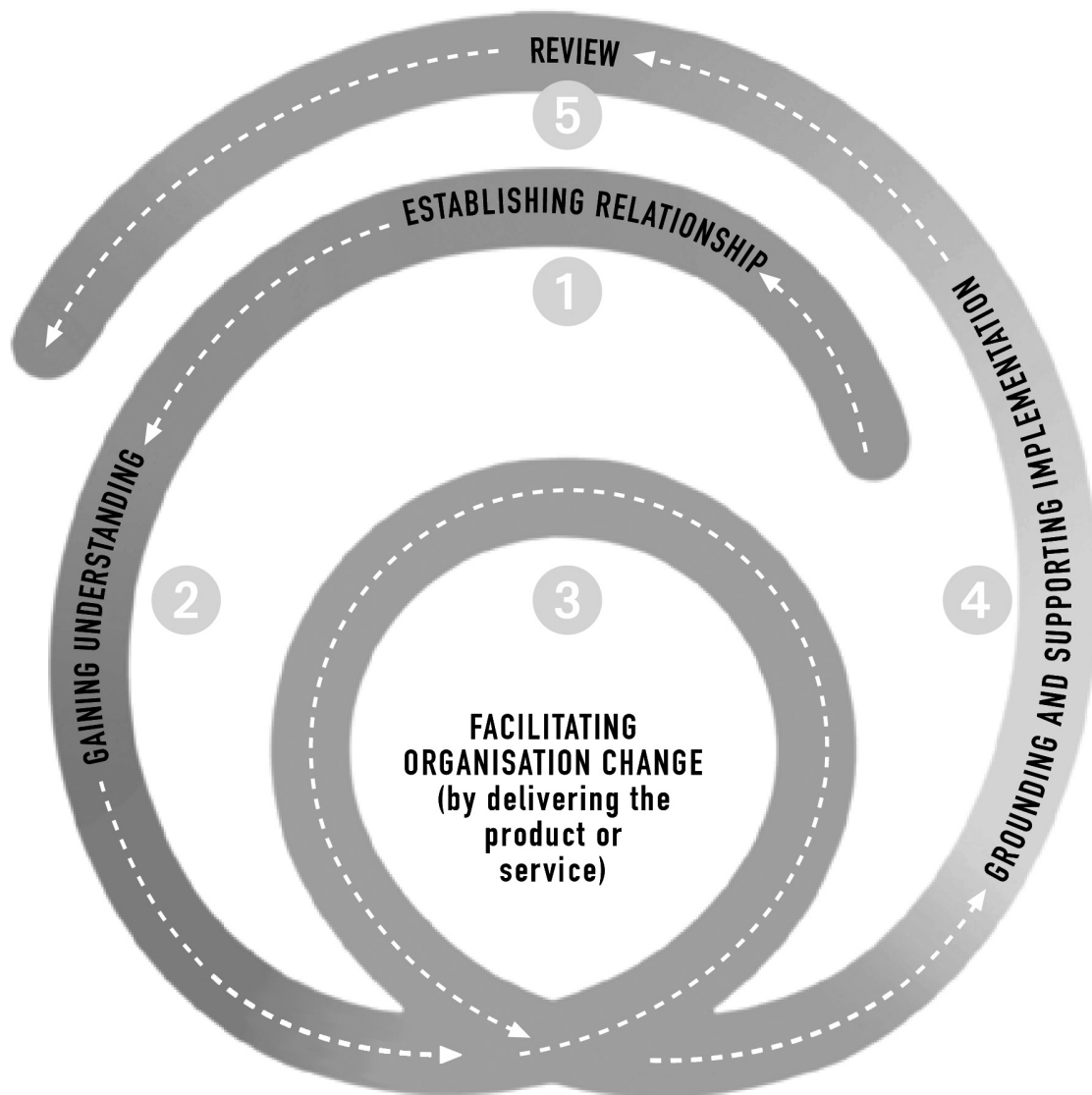
To avoid repetition it is sufficient to point out that the practitioner needs to have the ability to look at and understand organisations over time, and also in the moment. The two processes are quite different. The one involves tracking and understanding the significance of the unique path and history of the organisation as it has evolved over time. The other process of understanding an organisation in the present involves the ability to apply a range of different models that focus on different facets and aspects of organisation, reveal its unique nature and the potential and limitations that exist within it. The importance of the dual focus is that present organisational limitations and challenges must be understood in relation to where it is on its own unique path of development. The non-developmental alternative is to understand and judge organisations in relation to ideal models drawn from other organisations in different situations that are considered to be more “advanced”.

Differentiate between product and developmental process

We all intervene into the lives of organisations in different ways generally defined by the products or services that we bring. The intervention of the funder; the organisation development consultant; the evaluator; the capacity builder; the trainer; the community development fieldworker; the information systems specialist; can all impact profoundly on the life of an organisation. In order for the intervention to be developmental the practitioner must distinguish clearly between the service (or product) being delivered, and the process, or the way in which the service or product is delivered.

It is the process which will determine whether successful delivery of the product results in increased sense of helplessness and dependency, or an increased ability to gain access to and control over these and other resources. Developmental practice can only be built if the steps and activities required in this process are conscious.

The diagram below suggests that it is helpful to think of a developmental intervention process as having the five essential steps.¹



¹ Although helpful to use such diagrams as guidelines to thinking and practice it is important to remember that interactive social processes tend not to be strictly sequential or linear, and the categories created are not discrete. It is, however vital that each of these elements of the process are separated out in order to consciously build the skills and the procedures required to ensure that each of them takes place. Each of them is a necessary part of a truly developmental practice.

Establishing relationship → gaining understanding → facilitating the change (by delivering the product or service) → grounding and supporting implementation → review.

This simple cycle emphasises the fact that successful developmental interventions start with (and are built on) relationship and end with a review process that leads to learning. Gaining understanding precedes any delivery of product or service. A very significant connection is drawn between facilitating change and delivering product and service. In developmental interventions of any sort the delivery of product or service is not seen as an end in itself, but as a means of contributing towards change. As previously suggested the type of change that is considered to be developmental is measured in the shifts in the nature and quality of relationships over time. The step of grounding and supporting implementation is crucial in ensuring that the recipient of the service does not remain dependent on the provider.

The next section explores in more detail the first two of the steps, with most emphasis on ‘gaining understanding’ of organisations, including some basic tools. There is a lot to be said, and learned, about the other steps but they become more specific to the type of product or service being delivered. For instance someone intervening into an organisation to bring about change through training would approach steps three and four very differently from someone intervening into the life of an organisation as a funder.

Getting down to practice

It has already been emphasised that ongoing action learning needs to be at the core of practice, but it is not acceptable to blunder into the lives of people and organisations in order to get experience without having an adequate level of skills and competence to start with. This section is not intended to provide the practitioner with the basic skills, but to provide some guidance in establishing the range of knowledge and skills required to get started. It is essential that the practitioner intending to intervene developmentally into the life of an organisation possesses more than one ‘organisational assessment tool’ which is mechanistically applied.

Because relationship is so central, not only to the whole development process, but more particularly to the practitioners ability to understand organisations, a few pointers will first be given to provide focus to what is required to build and maintain developmental relationships. The focus will then shift to what is required as a basic platform from which to build the ability to improve the practitioner’s understanding of organisations. There are now so many organisational assessment tools available that it is becoming difficult to decide which one to choose. In the section entitled ‘Gaining understanding’ some of the key elements of any truly developmental conceptual framework for understanding organisations will be shared. For each element a basic introductory reading will be recommended. A broader bibliography for further reading is also included.

The last section will move beyond the conceptual to the more practical level of skills and abilities – from the ‘thinking’ to the ‘doing’. The aim will be to simply highlight from our experience, what we have found to be the most helpful practical skills that need to be consciously practised, in order to build a developmental practice.

Establishing relationship

Relationship is at the heart of development itself. The developmental intervention takes place through relationship. The nature and quality of the relationship will have a major effect on the quality of the intervention, and the extent to which it achieves developmental objectives. As already mentioned, there is a good case to be made for using changes in the nature and quality of relationship over time as the most meaningful measure of development. To the developmental practitioner the establishment, building, sustaining, and terminating of relationships is central to their practice.

The following list represents some of the qualities and abilities required of the practitioner in order to establish developmental relationships with organisations. Through such relationships a greater understanding will be achieved, which in turn will result in more informed interventions.

- An in depth knowledge of yourself, and the agency you represent, including the power you have and your own needs that you will be meeting through the relationship.
- Sensitivity to how you are perceived and experienced by others and what you represent to them.
- The ability to articulate clearly and honestly who you are, your purpose and intentions.
- The ability to listen consciously, deeply, actively and with empathy in order to appreciate the purpose and intentions of others.
- The ability to build trust through being worthy of trust in all that you do and undertake to do.
- The ability to negotiate agreements (contracts) that honestly reflect the interests of all parties and encourage co-ownership.
- The ability to allow and encourage your relationships to change over time. Accepting dependency where it exists and taking responsibility for steering relationships towards independence, and ultimately interdependence. Recognising that termination can at times contribute much to the development process.

An inescapable reality is the fact that forming and maintaining trusting relationships not only takes time, but takes quality time. Often organisations find it difficult to justify this time as it does not immediately produce results. Development practitioners have to find ways to build the time it takes to establish and maintain the quality of relationship required into their time-frames. If they do not manage to do this, and to confidently justify it to their funders – they will forever undermine their ability to be effective. Organisations which employ development practitioners must build the reality of the time it takes to facilitate real development into every aspect of their being and their practice.

Gaining understanding

The success of an intervention into the complex life of an organisation will depend to a significant extent on the knowledge and understanding the practitioner has of that particular organisation, as well as of organisations in general. When intervening into organisations in order to facilitate change it is important to understand the unique nature of the organisation, as well as why it is the way it is. In order to facilitate positive developmental change it is also necessary to understand what will be required for the organisation to let go of its old ways in order to take on the new.

Below are some guidelines that can help in making more conscious what is required of the practitioner to gain greater understanding of, and appreciation for, the complexity of organisations.

1. View organisations and human individuals holistically as open systems defined by internal and external relationships and processes. Understand that the “organs” that perform the different functions that comprise and define “organisation” are in their turn composed of human individuals in relationship. Communities, nations and human society as a whole in turn comprise organisations in relationship.

It is very helpful for the practitioner to have some basic knowledge about systems theory. For more advanced reading the whole field of the “new science” is providing fascinating insights into the interconnectedness of all things. Authors like Fritjof Capra have brought together the scientific, the philosophical and the spiritual dimensions of systems thinking. Margaret Wheatley has applied much of the cutting edge new science thinking to organisations.

As an inspiring introduction to applying a systems approach to understanding organisations I would recommend the first chapter in **Margaret Wheatley’s book titled Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe** (see reading list). The title of the chapter is “Discovering an Orderly World”.

To whet your appetite I quote two lines:

“Each structure has a unique identity, a clear boundary, yet it is merged with its environment. At any point in its evolution, the structure is noticeable as a separate event, yet its history is tied to that of the larger environment”

2. Both individuals and organisations are constantly evolving through different phases of development. They both need to be understood in relation to where they are on their own path of development. There are libraries written on human development. The practitioner intervening into organisations has to accept that ultimately the capacity of organisations is directly related to a combination of individual human behaviour and group dynamics. The development we are involved in is ultimately human development. The committed practitioner must accept the lifelong task of learning about the human condition.

By their very nature organisations can be no less complex than human individuals. Understanding how they develop through different phases over time can contribute enormously to understanding why they are behaving in a particular

way at a particular time. Very often, what are identified as organisational problems are more meaningfully understood when it is recognised that they are symptoms specific to a particular phase of development. In their basic toolkit the practitioner must have some frameworks that can assist them in making sense of why individuals and organisations are acting the way they are at a particular point in time. It is also vital to know what is appropriate and functional during a particular phase of development and what is not.

As introductory readings here I would recommend two short papers used by CDRA to introduce the concepts. They are simply entitled **The phases of individual human development**, and **Phases of organisation development** (both attached as Appendices I and II). Just a small note of warning that the paper on individual development is typically 'western' in its bias and needs to be adapted to make it culturally appropriate in different situations.

3. At any one moment in time you need to be able to identify and understand the different elements of organisation that contribute towards healthy and effective functioning. There are many different models and frameworks used as tools to assess organisations which break these elements of organisation up into smaller and smaller functions and activities. All of these are based on a fundamental understanding of how organisations function. The following is a fairly basic version of what is required for a group of people to come together in an organisation to combine their efforts in order to achieve a common objective:

An effective organisation has:

- An understanding of the world it operates in and on. A sense of how and why the world is the way it is, and how it could be.
- An attitude towards the world which includes an acceptance of some responsibility for the world being the way it is, and a belief that it is possible to contribute towards change.
- Clarity on what the organisation wants to contribute to the world – what it wants to achieve (its core purpose).
- Clarity on the broad nature of what the organisation does in order to achieve the above change and the essential steps in the process (core process).

(The above four points collectively contribute a lot to the core identity of the organisation and are closely related to the leadership function that results in the organisation “doing the right things”).

- Clarity on the more specific activities and tasks required to form the basis of the “work” that the organisation does.
- A realistic assessment of what people and skills are required (human resources).

- The ability to allocate and delegate tasks. Who does what, and who needs to relate to whom? (basic organisation).
- A quality of communication and relationships that are required in order to work together effectively as a team.
- Appropriate structures, systems, processes and procedures to co-ordinate efforts and remain accountable.
- Physical and financial resources.

(The lower end of this list represents the domain of management which focuses on how the organisations should “do things right”).

It is critical for the practitioner to deeply internalise and constantly build on their own model or framework that most meaningfully helps them understand organisations. Only then will they be able to choose amongst all the many tools available and adapt them to meet the specific needs of a particular job.

Again as an introduction I recommend a basic CDRA text that we often use, entitled **Organisation diagnosis using levels of complexity**. (It is included as Appendix III.) As a more comprehensive guide to assessing organisations I suggest **Partnering to Build and Measure Organizational Capacity** (see reading list).

Practical skills or abilities

Ultimately the developmental practitioner needs the ability to engage with, comprehend, and capture in some meaningful way the unique nature of the whole organisation in all its complexity. For this purpose the rational, analytical, reductionist approaches favoured by the science of the past are not adequate. Breaking organisations up to fit into boxes on checklists; or putting their parts onto scales with number values attached is not sufficient. The whole can simply not be fully understood and appreciated by reducing it to its component parts. Its uniqueness and complexity can only be fully captured by using more creative means.

In our sector this is really at the “cutting edge” of new thinking. Developmental practitioners need to start risking and exploring some of the methods that have been developed throughout the ages to capture and represent the less tangible and measurable relationships between human beings and their world. Where the ability of the old science to explain and make sense of the world starts to diminish, the creative and artistic abilities take over. Those working at the cutting edge of organisational development are starting to use skills such as characterisation, drawing, painting, storytelling and a variety of other means of using the more imaginative and creative human abilities to capture and describe complexity. Many of the people in the communities we serve have been doing it for centuries.

In order to explore, capture and understand the full complexity of organisations we have found that we need to re-discover and use more consciously some of the most basic abilities we have.

The ability to question

As with all things, questioning is being turned into a science. Books are being written about it . It is the essential ingredient of all interviews, questionnaires and surveys – the most basic tools for gathering information on which to base understanding. As children we all used questions incessantly as a means of making sense of a complex world. The right question in a trusting relationship remains the most effective way of gaining insight. The wrong question will add to confusion and even undermine relationship. It is a real skill to find and use the right question at the right time - a skill that needs to be consciously practised and developed.

The ability to listen and observe

Deep purposeful listening and observing for the purpose of gaining insight and understanding into complex systems is based on what we do unconsciously every day. We have wondrous abilities to use all our senses to connect with information that is complex beyond measure. This information is filtered through our emotions, our experiences, our biases and our relationships, but this subjectivity, our “gut feel” or intuition, can add much to our insight when there is consciousness.

Listening in particular has enormous power within it. Real active listening can inspire people to see and hear things in themselves that they were not conscious of. It can help people gain insights that surprise themselves. The simple act of listening can bring warmth and life to situations that had become stuck and rigid. But again we need to consciously build and develop these abilities in order to be able to access and use the insights they are capable of achieving.

The ability to bring meaning

It is of little help to gather information if you do not have the ability to use it to help others make more sense of their own situation. Here we need to develop our abilities to separate elements and then bring them back together in pictures that people can understand in new and more meaningful ways. We need to help them grasp the whole rather than baffle them with breaking everything up into smaller and smaller parts. There are many ways of building pictures that are enormously powerful. In facilitated processes we make a lot of use of actually drawing pictures, using colour, and pattern. There are other creative and artistic ways of building complex information into meaningful images using music, movement or sculpting. But most often we are challenged to paint our pictures with words. This is a crucial ability. We need to re-learn the ability to write and tell stories, to use metaphor, to re-discover the power of myths, legends, fables and children’s stories to convey complex concepts and deeper meaning.

An endnote on tools

Having already recognised that tools are often acquired before anything else, it is not by chance that this paper has avoided recommending one simple tool for understanding organisation. Tools are readily available; easily acquired; and dangerous if not used consciously and with sensitivity as part of a broader development practice.

Tools, models, methodologies and techniques cannot in themselves guarantee developmental interventions. There are, however, those that tend to bring organisations to life in order to deal with their full complexity, and those that can only deal with those elements of organisation that have been reduced to lifelessness. The true craftsman or artist has a range of tools but will have reached the point of discarding the gimmicks and the unhelpful clutter. Those with broader understanding of their craft will choose their tools in relation to the unique demands made in each situation. The truly experienced will adapt or create tools in response to the specific needs of the job. The impostor changes the job to suit the tools that they have and know how to use.

In the development sector we are looking to the organisations of the future to pioneer ways of acting and ways of relating that are beyond our present experience, living only in our imaginations and intentions. We cannot afford to try and force the organisations we are working with into moulds created by the very forces that are causing the intractable problems our sector is attempting to address. We need to take the best from the successes that have been achieved, but it is the role of our sector to break new boundaries, challenging particularly those that restrict real and meaningful development.

It is our task as development practitioners to embrace organisations as the means through which people become collectively inspired and able to realise the creative and collaborative potential that lives within them.

This paper was prepared for the Swedish Mission Council by James Taylor, who is a consultant and director of the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) in South Africa.

CDRA is a non-governmental organisation advancing learning about development processes and the art of intervention.

CDRA aims to bring about and support development practice amongst organisations working towards those forms of social transformation that most benefit the poor and marginalised.

Visit CDRA's website at <http://www.cdra.org.za>

Email : info@cdra.org.za

READING LIST

ACTION LEARNING

Taylor, J., Marais, D. and Kaplan, A. *Action Learning For Development : Use your experience to improve your effectiveness*
Juta & Co Ltd, South Africa, 1997

CDRA Annual Report 1998/99 *Development Practitioners : Artists of the invisible*
and 1999/2000 *The High Road : Practice at the centre*
Available on CDRA's website www.cdra.org.za

SYSTEMS THEORY

Capra, F. *The Web of Life : A new synthesis of mind and matter*
HarperCollins, UK, 1996

Capra, F. *The Tao of Physics : An exploration of the parallels between modern physics and Eastern mysticism*
HarperCollins, UK, 1992

Wheatley, M. *Leadership and The New Science : Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe*
Berrett-Koehler, USA, 1992

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