Creating Caring Organizations

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Human systems are often perceived as monolithic social structures in which individuals can only adapt and cope. Actually, social systems are both designed and maintained by individuals. The structure of a human system can be changed in deliberate ways when individuals take personal responsibility for the system and collaborate with one another. Consulting psychology is a powerful vehicle for building and rebuilding organizational structures and cultures in ways that deliberately provide healthy and supportive social environments for members. One step in this change process is the definition of the desired social environment. A few elements that may be relevant in this context are reviewed.

Human organizations like families, schools, religious groups, and businesses are essential to the human experience. They shape our lives and our characters in the most basic ways. A majority of people spend most of their waking lives operating within human organizations. Consequently, it is natural for those in the helping professions to be concerned with the processes, structures, and cultures that comprise the organizations in which people live and work. Systems theory continues to be the predominant conceptual model for analyzing and understanding human organizations (Beer, 1980; Fuqua & Kurpius, 1993; Fuqua & Newman, in press; Kilburg, 1995). Systems theory conceptualizes the structural elements of the system in complex patterns of interdependency within the organization and the environment in which the organization exists. Organizations can become very large and complex, and the environments in which organizations exist and operate are almost always complex.

"Organizations are a lot like the people who belong to them. Once born, they experience the wonder of growth and development" (Hardy & Schwartz, 1996, p.1). It is not surprising to encounter concepts like "character of an organization," and there may be some value in applying that concept (Levinson, 1997). A more common practice has been to refer to the *culture* of an organization. Nowadays, the term is in very common usage and seems to include everything about the organization. One of our concerns about the concept of organizational culture is that it is so inclusive and poorly defined that one might as well talk in terms of organizational "personality." In some respects, the term culture has come to be a general term that only fools people into thinking they understand the complexity of the organizational system. The lack of meaningful operationalization of the culture construct is interesting in itself but digresses from the central theme of this article. The point being emphasized here is that organizations have characteristics that are relatively stable and enduring. This stability can be healthy or not, depending on the circumstances.

Coming from a background of social learning theory, Bandura (1997) characterized the relationship of people to systems in the following manner:

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> Human adaptation and change are rooted in social systems. Therefore, personal agency operates within a broad network of sociostructural influences. In agentic transactions, people are both producers and products of social systems. Social structures—which are devised to organize, guide, and regulate human affairs in given domains by authorized rules and sanctions—do not arise by immaculate conception; they are created by human activity. Social structures, in turn, impose constraints and provide resources for personal development and everyday functioning. But neither structural constraints nor enabling resources foreordain what individuals become and do in given situations. For the most part, social structures represent authorized social practices carried out by human beings occupying designated roles. (p. 6)

Although we acknowledge that social systems have considerable influence with individuals, we also believe that social systems are essentially under human control. Of course, individuals within a system may have limited control, but our general experience has been that people have a great deal more control over the systems within which they work than they wish to acknowledge. In fact, one of the principal goals of consulting psychology must always be to encourage, enable, and empower individuals to take responsibility for the social systems in which they live and work.

> We believe that systems theory has failed at times to meet its potential for producing human good. Too often, systems theory has become an excuse for personal failures, leading some to believe that people are products of their environment. It is actually quite to the contrary. The greatest potential of systems theory is to empower individuals to singularly and collectively take responsibility for the systems in which they work and live to the end of building and re-building human systems that are more responsive to human needs. (Fuqua & Newman, in press)

Consider the observations of Winum, Ryterband, and Stephenson (1997): "Despite all the talk and expense, most organizational change efforts have not achieved the intended result. Failures have been noted in multiple areas of organizational performance" (p. 7). Perhaps this is so, at least in part, because people are prone to try to solve the wrong problems. "In fact, consultants are often asked to help continue solving that same wrong problem, that is to collude in displacing attention away from deeper, more painful, and often taboo issues" (Stein, 1996, p. 17). Argyris (1990), in a particularly helpful way, pointed out how dysfunctional defensive routines in organizations can become, especially because they lead to enforced silence about errors that are occurring in the organization. Even worse, people are not allowed to discuss the fact that the errors are undiscussable. Thus, the organization can be locked into a perpetual pattern that creates and maintains errors and, consequently, ensures that no further learning can occur.

Consulting psychology, and, more generally, organizational development, which is less well-bounded (Beer & Walton, 1990), has not realized its potential in organizational helping because of a narrow focus on problem solving or a limited focus on strategic processes. We would like to suggest that a major goal of organizational development ought first to be to determine what kind of organization should evolve from the perspective of community identity. If one only helps organizations solve problems at a given point in time, little persisting impact is likely. Fundamentally, people need to become the masters of human systems, which too often seem impervious to individual efforts, whatever the role and status of the individuals in the system. Given that human systems are largely the direct products of human activity, this must be reasonable goal.

In the past 10 years, the unprecedented financial growth in the United States might have led one to expect that organizational life is good. Not so. Rising concerns about deviant and aggressive behaviors are apparent (Griffin, O'Leary-Kelly, & Collins, 1998). There are very good reasons to be concerned

about rising levels of incivility in the workplace (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Corporate strategies like downsizing, outsourcing, restructuring, and mergers have created a very different climate for the relationships of employees with their work organizations (Kanter, 1989; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999). Decreased job security coupled with increased technological requirements and information accessing have created a more stressful work environment in general for millions of people working in organizations. The increased level of technology in communications and production has contributed to an increased sense of personal isolation for many workers, which can also stimulate stress while distancing access to traditional sources of social support.

The idea that organizations ought to represent caring environments and that consultation ought to be a means of fostering caring structure and behavior seems harmless enough. You might be surprised at how much hostility the idea can generate. Our students often think the idea is too idealistic. Colleagues are more likely to view the notion of a caring organization as "soft," a label that we know has often been used to refer to a process orientation in consulting (Burke, 1993). In this case, however, we think the term means something akin to "naïve." So-called hard consulting is more attractive to people who are trying to be successful in a competitive business climate. We know that some people have raised the possibility that consultants ought to have a master's of business administration (MBA), including consulting psychologists:

> At a recent conference attended primarily by consulting psychologists, someone made the remark that "maybe every consultant should have an M.B.A.," or something very close to this idea. It reflects awareness by those who consult in organizational settings that business models for management are different from psychological models for helping and change. The proposal responds to the common perception that organizational consultation is influenced heavily by management practices and perspectives. (Fuqua & Newman, in press)

Maybe the consulting psychologist has something else to offer. For example, Kilburg (1995), in integrating psychodynamic and systems theory, suggested that "Psychodynamic theory provides very useful information about the human side of organizational behavior" (p. 32). Atella (1999), from an existentialist perspective, wrote "It is not surprising that the individual who is more committed and connected to self and others has greater health, effectiveness, and well-being" (p. 131). If consulting psychologists are merely successful in emulating business managers, a greater potential for building more effective organizations from the perspective of quality of life enhancement might be lost or seriously compromised. More is possible.

What is it that drives the services offered by consulting psychologists? There is an impressive research base supporting the efficacy of specific interventions. Gibson and Chard (1994) reported a meta-analysis that included 1,643 consultation outcomes and reported an overall moderate effect size for the interventions. Blanton (2000) reported that consultants are more influenced by their experience than by the research findings. Experience is often difficult to distinguish from other cognitive structures, such as values and attitudes. Certainly some principles, like that of inclusion, are key concepts in organizational consultation.

> It is a very important observation that mistreatment of the less powerful members of an organization is not only immoral. It is extremely poor organizational strategy. *Any lack of inclusion of the least powerful members of an organization will lead to reduced functioning*. While special consideration of those with restricted access to power is a moral mandate for psychologists, it is also an essential component in building effective organizations. (Newman, Robinson-Kurpius, & Fuqua, in press)

Beer and Walton (1990) said it very well regarding organizational development as a field of practice:

> Organization development is concerned with improving performance; however, because of an equal concern for the well-being of people, practitioners of organization development assume that the best way to achieve both outcomes is through trust, open confrontation of problems, employee empowerment and participation, the design of meaningful work, cooperation between groups, and full use of human potential. (pp. 154–155)

This concern for the well-being of people ought to be the foundation of consulting psychology.

The concern that psychologists share for the well-being of people applies very reasonably to the work setting (Adkins, 1999; Ilgen, 1990). The major theories of motivation lead to the conclusion that supportive social environments with work that is attractive to employees are critical to building effective organizations, but most organizations do not accomplish these elements (Katzell & Thompson, 1990). It is clear from research that perceived organizational support is an important variable in strengthening an individual's relationship to an organization (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Eisenberg, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990). The importance of self-determination strategies in organizations has been vigorously researched for years (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989). Furthermore, it is clear that perceptions of organizational fairness have significant effects on citizenship behaviors of organizational members (Moorman, 1991). This is the point: Helping others take personal responsibility for building consistently caring, nurturing environments that respect individual needs and preferences in cooperative and socially supportive environments is the ultimate goal of organizational consultation. Furthermore, the perception that social process issues interfere with performance in terms of productivity, broadly defined, is a misperception that only serves to inhibit organizational learning and development. From a slightly different perspective:

> The point being made here is that we have learned that emphasizing either profit motives or social interests independently is naïve. These dimensions are intricately related. Consulting psychology practiced in the marketplace can lead to increasingly humanized work settings that will be optimally profitable. In this context, the fact that most consulting contracts are awarded by those in management positions may lead to conflicts of interest within the organization. The consultant can find him/herself in the position of helping to develop management strategies that may increase profitability at the cost of employee welfare. Is this an activity in which psychologists should participate? Does this violate the ethical principles? Should we use behavioral science to help manipulate employees into positions not in their best interests? (Newman et al., in press)

Every consultant ought to consider these questions before engaging in contractual obligations in the marketplace.

Elements of a Caring Organization

Although systems theory and the concept of organizational culture reflect the potential complexity of human systems, there are some relatively simple and familiar concepts that are essential elements of caring organizations. Actually the term *caring organization* is somewhat misleading. People must care for one another. We use the term *caring organization* to refer to systems where personal concern about the welfare of others and self is the norm. It is interesting that most of the elements we are able to identify that we consider essential to building and maintaining caring organizations are relatively simple, familiar ones that are already in common usage. Understanding the concepts must be far easier than maintaining them in practice as consistent elements of social systems. It is apparently much easier to use what we have learned about the relationship of organiza-

tional structure to individual behavior to excuse personal and collective failure than it is to take personal responsibility for the systemic features. Our experience has been that most people are far more aware of the ways in which the system has failed them than of the ways in which they have failed others in the system. The assumption of personal responsibility for the cultures in which we live and work is essential to healthy living. For systems theory to realize its potential in terms of improving the quality of human life, it must become a conceptual platform for taking personal responsibility. In the following paragraphs, some characteristics we believe to be most essential to caring cultures are presented.

Gratitude

Rhatigan (1996) suggested that "Being thankful reminds us that many of our blessings have not been earned, but are, rather, the product of people in our present and past" (p. 70). Focusing a reasonable amount of energy on the positive circumstances that surround us is very healthy. That is not to say that gratitude should blind us to problems or difficult circumstances, but that problems and concerns exist in a broader context. Structural conflicts and hostilities are more difficult to maintain in the context of sincere gratitude. Constructive attitudes toward the blessings in our circumstances, earned or not, are contagious. Chronic bitching and blaming, justifiable or not, is much less likely to impair individuals in the presence of sincere gratitude. Consultants can model thankfulness and they can more directly focus the attention of others on the topic. For example, a consultant might pose the following questions: What is good about this place? What are you grateful for in this organization? The absence of gratitude can be diagnostic on several levels.

Forgiveness

Elsewhere we have described a significant professional experience that introduces the concept of forgiveness in the organizational context.

> We have already indicated that people are often unaware of the structure of the organization they exist in and are often isolated in ways that discourage them from understanding their interrelationships with other units. In very dysfunctional systems, people will very often experience and describe structural issues as something external to them by which they are being victimized. Usually the most difficult structural issues are actually "*in*" the people, but that is not the common perception. This point deserves an example. A middle level manager was describing some very difficult conflicts operating in his organization across several hierarchical units. He had a great deal of energy for discussing the conflict by which he and others were being persecuted. He had a great historical "cause and effect" explanation for the conflict. When asked if he would like for "forgiveness" to be an important part of his organizational culture, he became very quiet. (Fuqua & Newman, in press)

The quiet was a reflection on the realization that he had some significant responsibility in the situation that had been reframed as an unforgiving culture.

Forgiveness is an essential component of every healthy social system. It is not possible to live and work together without offending one another. Sometimes the offenses are not only unintended, but also unknown to the offender. Consider for just a moment what the fruits of unforgiveness might be: anger, conflict, mistrust. Mistrust is often a reciprocal experience, and once conflict becomes embedded in the structure of an organization, it is much more difficult to resolve. In environments where forgiveness is scarce, high-risk social interactions must exist. Who has not offended someone unintentionally? Expecting the forgiveness of those you work with is a freeing experience. It leads very naturally to a tendency to forgive others. Forgiveness ought to be a social norm in every organization.

Encouragement

Everyone needs some encouragement even though there are individual differences in this regard. In dysfunctional organizations, people seem to be much more aware of their personal needs for encouragement than the needs of others. Helping others understand and assume some responsibility for social encouragement is an important change goal. In the absence of adequate encouragement, psychologists are well aware that some people will develop covert methods of seeking encouragement that easily become dysfunctional. If people rely too heavily on vertical encouragement, competitive norms may become inhibiting. Horizontal encouragement (peer encouragement) is potentially more abundant and is based on the assumption that encouragement is everyone's responsibility. Informal encouragement from peers is powerfully motivating and reciprocal. It quickly can become normative, which ought to be the goal. Encouragement is not reinforcement in the sense that a person's need for encouragement may be independent of their performance. Encouragement should serve to inspire and give hope, confidence, and courage when it is useful or needed.

Sensitivity

Being susceptible to the experiences and conditions of others is a fundamental social virtue. It is also a commitment that requires discipline. Taking the time to express interests in others by asking how they are doing changes the social climate. It creates not only an opportunity to seek support and understanding, but also a normative expectation. Certainly sensitivity will sometimes lead to respecting others' privacy, but often the expression of social concern is therapeutic. It is ironic that large organizations can become lonely, isolating environments. An active personal commitment to attend to the experiences of others is basic to creating caring environments. In dysfunctional organizations, sensitivity is either actively suppressed or misguided.

Compassion

Sensitivity to the experiences of others is fundamental, but in caring organizations, sensitivity leads very naturally to compassion. When suffering is experienced, compassionate people are compelled to share the experience in supportive ways. Alleviation of suffering is a strong drive when compassion exists in a substantial way. Although compassion is a personal virtue, enough compassionate people committed to alleviating suffering can and will create compassionate environments. Unfortunately, personal suffering can be interpreted as a competitive advantage or social sport in the absence of functional compassion.

Community

There is a constant tension between individual interests and common interests in an organization. Cooperative efforts often fail to produce win–win outcomes, and individual compromises have to be made. In caring organizations, personal responsibility is the mechanism by which the community interests are maintained. Members are constantly aware of their personal interests, the interests of the community, and the relationship of the two sets of interests. There must be a good balance between the needs of individuals and those of the organizational community. When power or force must be applied to subject personal interests to community interests, something precious can be lost—that is, dignity and the sense of personal responsibility to and for the community. In a healthy community, individuals are constantly aware of their contribution, that is, how the nature, quality, and timeliness of their work behavior influences the experience of others in the organization.

Tolerance

People are very different in terms of needs, interests, and experiences. Even at the individual level, people change over time, at least occasionally needing some extraordinary consideration. Sometimes this consideration has real costs in time and energy to others. Appraising others' impact in a social environment with a rigid set of expectations across time or across individuals leads to unhealthy tension at both the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. Furthermore, intolerant environments are limiting in terms of the breadth of perspective available for task accomplishment, problem solving, and the like. Tolerance, as a cognitive and behavioral condition, is a personal choice and responsibility. Tolerance must be founded in a deep respect for the worth and dignity of others. A group of individuals committed to working in a tolerant environment can build tolerance into the structure of their organization. In a caring organization, tolerance is a public, valued, normative condition that must permeate organizational structure.

Inclusion

Consultants are well aware of the notion that including stakeholders in a change process encourages appropriate ownership and leads to increased motivation. Inclusion also can increase the sense of community in an organization. As the sense of community grows, isolation and alienation at the personal level is inhibited. By encouraging community identity through inclusive strategies, the talents, skills, knowledge, and perspectives of individuals can be focused on organizational development. As a consequence of these factors, inclusion is a good change strategy. Also, people are social creatures with social needs, many of which are primarily met through work. Even mean, irritable, grumpy people have social needs. Inclusion facilitates the healthy expression of social needs at both the group and individual levels. Personal affirmation and a sense of social dignity are supported by inclusion and undermined by exclusion. In this way, people may leave the work setting as more complete human beings.

Charity

Benevolence toward others is highly valued in our society, at least at the philosophical level. In competitive situations, however, it can be scarce. On a day-to-day basis, we often fail to practice giving. There are many ways one might give to colleagues or coworkers. Sometimes performance recognition can be a gift of great importance and effect. Communicating appreciation to others for their contributions or for who they are in general is a way of giving. Making a commitment to give to others regularly is a powerful personal commitment that changes environments. Certainly, there are constantly those in our work environment who have basic needs for recognition and a sense of worth. The gift itself has great personal meaning. However, the gift also changes the giver. Giving requires a sensitivity and compassion, and it certainly enhances the experience of community alliances. Accepting responsibility that one has the power and opportunity to give is a life-changing experience. In turn, it will change organizations.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our list of elements of caring organizations is not exhaustive. These conditions are familiar, common, and nontechnical ones that are, at least formally, valued in our culture. Yet few existing organizations could be characterized by these conditions. Why? As we reflect on the conditions that comprise caring organizational environments, we are reminded of years of promotion of the core conditions in counseling and psychotherapy. Actually, we have never given up our belief that experiencing a genuine, warm, attentive, caring relationship with another person is

essential to being nurtured in any setting. The competition between the common factors approach and the medical model for explaining counseling and psychotherapy outcomes has focused this issue even recently. We agree with Wampold's (2001) conclusion:

> Clearly the constructs used to investigate the commonalities of therapies are not independent. Empathy and the formation of the working alliance, for example, are intricately and inextricably connected. Nevertheless, continued conceptualization of and research on the commonalities of therapy are critical to understanding the scientific bases of psychotherapy and to augmenting the benefits of these treatments. (p. 211)

Certainly the therapeutic relationship and the core conditions are important aspects of the common factors that are associated with increased health. Similarly, we believe that the cultural dimensions of healthy organizations must be conceptualized in ways that individuals can understand and take personal responsibility for implementing.

The economic and political realities that organizations are faced with can contribute to more competitive and hostile environments. The historical management model for organizational life has focused necessarily on the idea of productivity as it relates to profit. The traditional capitalistic model has held that if profits can be sufficiently built and maintained, an increased quality of life can be afforded for all. Traditional organizational development models held the opposite view, that is, by increasing the quality-of-life dimensions in organizations by humanizing structures and processes, organizational effectiveness in the form of productivity will be enhanced. There are many examples of organizational disappointments based on each of these two models. The enlightened view is that the distinction between quality of life and productivity is a fallacy. Productivity and quality-of-life characteristics are integrally and inextricably related in the structure and people that comprise the organization. Effective organizations have learned to integrate these conceptual models into a more realistic systemic view.

So what should the role and purpose of consulting psychology be in helping organizations? Certainly we favor one that includes a clear and consistent focus on how to help organizational members take personal responsibility for designing and achieving the kinds of organizations that tend to optimize the quality of life for members. One risk is that consulting psychology may become an adjunct to the traditional management model. Typically, managers at relatively high levels in organizations will control the financial resources necessary to support external consultants. Entry into an organization at the top levels may be shaping, to some large extent, the kinds of problems that consultants are helping to address. That is not necessarily inappropriate, but it is, at least at the extreme, a market-driven model for the profession. An important question remains: How does the management-oriented agenda relate to quality-of-life dimensions? In cases where organizational leadership and management motives are altruistic, issues related to social welfare ought to be easily addressed. In cases where the management agenda is egocentric, the general social welfare may be poorly served. How should a consultant behave under these circumstances? More important, do we wish to reduce consulting psychology to a tool for pursuing management goals and objectives, or is there a greater social function we can serve?

Along these lines, executive coaching represents an interesting development. Admittedly, executive coaching may just be another term for counseling (Tobias, 1996), perhaps one that is more palatable in the business world. Clearly executive coaching, to be very effective, must focus on the team and systems levels at times (Kilburg, 1996; Kralj, 2001), in which case broader benefits may be realized. From a different perspective, though, one has not read much about blue collar coaching. Why not? One might argue that executive coaching involves concentrat-

ing additional resources on the already privileged. Most would agree that, with unlimited resources, a lot of good could be accomplished by focusing psychological resources on the work needs of line staff. Line staff clearly do benefit from understanding systems theory and the concept of interdependence. Most managers have some workable grasp on these concepts already. It is possible that helping line staff focus on their broad responsibility to, and interdependency with, others in the organization would enhance the probability of collaborative functioning within and across units. This typically improves the functioning of the organization in addition to simultaneously improving the quality of work life for the involved staff. Most people who work with dysfunctional organizations would attest to the fact that the dysfunction is often found in dysfunctional patterns of behavior at the line level and above. More effective organizations would surely result from open access of line staff to organizational consultants. Of course, we have to remember that resources are not unlimited. We leave the reader with the following question, one that we believe needs to be answered at the personal level: As a social resource, how should consulting psychology be focused?

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