Lighting up networks

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One morning we were talking about team building - as consultants we are often asked to take on team-building assignments and over the years have become quite good at it, but once again were feeling uncomfortable. Once again because the last time one of us was feeling uncomfortable about team building it gave rise to a similar conversation with David Casey which resulted in an article entitled 'Second Thoughts on Team Building'(MEAD, Vol. 15,1984). This challenged some basic assumptions about the purpose and role of team building, and it is beginning to look as if a fresh, and rather more fundamental challenge is emerging. To look at the nature of this challenge, we will start with examining the source of our discomfort.

- Many of the teams we work with do not spend much time together; multi-national, multi-disciplinary, interdepartmental - the very nomenclature applied to teams these days suggests multi-locational membership. In the old days teams who were responsible for managing something together could expect to spend a fair amount of time face to face, meeting formally and informally because of their proximity. Project teams were emerging, but even they were not so dispersed as in this age of ' internationalism', of ' globalism', and of ' flat' organisations.

- But of course organisations are not flat; this describes a trend, but of itself, flat, is a gross simplification. This was our second realisation; many organisations are very complex, multi-dimensional and fluid and even senior managers we work with find it increasingly difficult to picture how their organisations actually function. The form we have chosen to call ' organisation' is undergoing radical change. Gareth Morgan in his excellent book ' Images of Organisations' headed one chapter Organisations as Flux; increasingly ideas that once seemed abstract, even far-fetched are now helping some of todays' managers make sense of their current experience.

- In conventional organisations with more fixed, pyramidal structures, the team was largely defined by the structure. People were mainly clustered round tasks or functions into manageable units; both task and proximity were key design criteria for creating viable units with a clear sense of shared purpose and identity, and ' team building' was largely concerned with building on the twin

blocks of shared location and shared purpose to create effective working relationships. In this new context of more fluid, shifting, chaotic (in the scientific sense) organisational forms, the old idea of team loses much of its meaning. The purpose is no longer inherent in the structure; it is more often defined by someone in the organisation with a particular responsibility which he or she realises they can't achieve on their own, or by a manager who realises that his or her remit cuts across so many organisational boundaries that a ' team' is the only way, or because the need for coordination between countries or around strategic initiatives becomes apparent,. So people find themselves members of a number of different teams, many of which cut across the formal hierarchy of the organisation. In these teams membership is not stable, the boundaries that define the team keep shifting. A metaphor occurred to us; imagine the organisation as an enormous lightboard; suddenly the need to connect a number of dispersed lights into one circuit at a particular time, for a particular purpose, becomes apparent. At this point we began to muse on the nature of networks and how to really make them work; we started to question the whole technology of teambuilding and its underlying assumptions. How appropriate are these for building functioning networks, which is clearly the phenomenon we are dealing with?

Changing metaphors is always a helpful way to gain a new perspective on a familiar area and we began to compare the metaphors which underlie our usual way of looking at teams - as family groups, sporting sides, special task forces - with those available for understanding networks - electrical circuits, micro-chip technology, neural networks in the brain. The majority of team building is founded in a developmental, humanistic perspective, using models of healthy group dynamics pioneered in the early days of the ' organisation development' movement - so the work usually concentrates on building interactive skills, dealing with relationship problems, building openness and trust in order to take the group through the stages of group development . These processes are sustained by regular and frequent togetherness, the conditions for which are these days much rarer. A new metaphor is needed, hence the concept of networking has evolved. However this concept is very broad and can embrace anything from a network of professionals to a network of amateur literati. Our conclusion is that a particular kind of task-based organisational network is emerging which we will from now on refer to as a <u>network team</u>, and that in order for these to function properly we need to find **new** metaphors and perspectives, new ways of thinking to inform how we support them. We see many managers, faced with the need to establish a new multi-national, cross-functional team, large or small, deciding to "get everyone together" as a way of fostering a sense of belonging to a visible group of people. Our experience is that many network teams who have attempted to kick start the network by means of a ' team building' event are disappointed at the rate of decay of the apparent good effect. The process did indeed begin to develop the capacity

of people to work together but it did not help them understand how to meet the challenge of working apart from one another.

Our experience also tells us that many so-called networks do not fulfil their expectations by not even getting to first base; before achieving higher purposes, such as learning or influence, an effective network needs to establish a communication system which, if we continue with the network metaphor, means building the circuitry. Because the existing communications paradigm is a human relations one we have paid insufficient attention, indeed trivialised the mechanistic necessity of connecting up the network, of thinking through what this means for a human system. However, even though the way a human network needs to function may be different from that of a traditional team, there is no reason to suppose that the human needs of individuals are any different. We returned to look at our familiar group development perspective to see how we could integrate it with the electronic, and other metaphors underlying networks, to create a new model.

Building the circuitry

Building the circuitry of a <u>human</u> system suggests deciding on the most appropriate and practical means for establishing regular communication. This involves mapping the network in terms of:

- <u>the kinds of communication that are required</u>. It soon becomes obvious to people that we are not here dealing with just the simple level of data that may need to be transmitted round the system , but of channels that allow people to genuinely <u>communicate</u> i.e. exchange interpretations of events, create shared meanings, satisfying their need to contribute, to be involved and to find out what is going on.

- <u>the different methods available</u> - telephone, electronic mail, facsimile, video conferencing, exchange of audio cassette and CDs, newsletters, computer notice boards and bulletins .... The capability to connect people in numerous ways already exists and is improving all the time. We tend to assume the issues here are technical and that people understand how to use communication media well and how to avoid the pitfalls (eg circulation lists that become ever longer and undiscriminating so that individuals are flooded with copies or their screens are overloaded with electronic messages; newsletters enthusiastically launched that tail off as people fail to contribute to them.) Developing competence in effective communication at a distance becomes the equivalent of the traditional emphasis on interpersonal skills in teamwork.

- <u>the need for habit and discipline</u>. This is the most liable to failure; getting human beings to commit to <u>regular</u> use of communication systems, often when they do not have any pressing need seems to be difficult, and is why many networks fail. The need is to build through regular use a sort of neural pathway; only in this way will patterns become established that can give members a sense of belonging to a team apart.

Having established a network which is connected up and capable of effective communication within itself, the next phase of ' lighting up the network' is to understand and activate its connection into the wider power system.

The Power System

All organisations have power systems; for networks to go beyond communication they need to identify, understand, and connect into the power networks, or power points. Networks, and indeed individuals may render themselves relatively powerless because they do not like, understand, or know how to connect into the political system. Dealing with power issues in teams was often called the storming stage of group development, when the dynamics of influence and leadership were often challenged and reconfigured. Again the human relations paradigm focuses on interpersonal conflict in face to face situations. Using the electronic metaphor, networks need help in understanding organisations as interconnecting systems and energy fields. What might this mean in practice?

Energising the system - connecting into the grid

- Network members need to understand how they exercise <u>power at a distance, creating spheres of influence</u> through reputation, through information and knowledge of the system of people who are stakeholders in the development of any initiative, through developing contacts and working relationships with peers, subordinates, subordinates of subordinates, bosses, customers, suppliers and more.

- This may sound rather like the dreaded "old boy network"- political savoir faire negotiating the corridors of power. Teambuilding has looked on this askance, observing how the informal power system in traditional organisations operated covertly to determine or even undermine what happened at formal meetings. The answer was to favour developing the capacity to work with power issues more openly in group settings. However when face to face meetings become a scarcity, people need different skills to influence and exert power effectively. <u>They need to have good mental maps of the dynamics of the power system and to make good decisions about how to tap into it resourcefully.</u>

- Recent developments in our understanding of organisations as dynamical feedback systems (Morgan, 'Images of Organisations'; Stacey, 'Strategy as Order Emerging from Chaos') also requires all managers, and network team members in particular, to become conscious of the political process whereby issues find their way onto the agenda and gain the attention and resources of the organisation. This means taking seriously the non-linearity and unpredictability in the way strategy formulation occurs in practice. The more dispersed the network, the less frequent the opportunity for all to meet simultaneously, the more obvious it becomes that strategy is the unfolding encounter between intention and chance. This is where chaos theory provides helpful analogies for understanding how patterns of order arise within highly disordered systems.

Developing network teams

What does this mean for facilitating the development of network teams? We began to explore the implications of our thinking for working with a network in its early stages. How to make best use of the precious time it did have to spend together?

- We have already found that asking people to recall how they dealt with certain "critical incidents" in the life of the network can be a useful way of freezing for a moment the complexity of the network in action, in order to understand how it is sustaining or developing its culture. This idea can also be used to reveal what the communications needs of the network really are and how they can best be met. We have noticed that attempts to plot this in an abstract and logical way regularly defeats people. It is just too complex, fluid, and multi-dimensional a problem to be solved by a group of people gathered round a flipchart. (No doubt information technology is already, or shortly will be available to help in the task, but this doesn't remove the problem of what data to feed in.) It seems to be more useful to ask clusters of network members to recall critical incidents and unpick who communicated with who about what and how. Visually plotting the flow of communication, influence and power in relation to a number of significant actual "incidents" and discussing what was learned in each case achieves several outcomes:

- People may begin to perceive the network in terms of an energy field in which patterns of interaction arise, create certain effects (partly intentional and partly unpredictable) and then give way to new patterns. Some patterns will be shortlived and one-off, others will occur and reoccur tracing familiar pathways in the network that become more likely the more often they are used. People

may learn how effectively they are functioning as individual nodes in the network and how the network itself functions as a whole. Early work in identifying individual needs in the network begins to give way to the emerging needs of the network itself. In effect the network is beginning to do the work of the norming stage in group development which will lead to an increasing capacity for self-organisation, which is what we mean by a performing group.

Network Intensives

By way of summarising, we would like to offer an example how to we might work with a network team to ensure that some effective patterns, and ways of relating and communicating are established. We would hold say a two-day event which we might call a 'network intensive', as an opportunity to 'shrink' the network, to shorten communication channels, to take it through the stages of development but from a different set of assumptions and a recognition of an expanded set of tasks.

The first task, using the critical incident method described above, would be to begin to get a sense of the emergent networks, those patterns of relationship which tended to repeat themselves around particular activities. Two processes would be going on in parallel here; one would be learning about the critical activities in the ever-shifting strategic agenda which were currently significant for this group; the second process would be discovering the relevant networks of people who either were, or could be participating usefully in these activities.

At the end of this phase, a number of networks will have identified themselves around some strategic activities. The next task consists in ' building the circuitry', in establishing the kinds of communication required, deciding on the most appropriate methods, and committing to a set of 'habits' of communicating. Colin Hastings in his recent book entitled 'The New Organisation: Growing the Culture of Organisational Networking', describes in some detail the way networks in Digital make use of the available technology, and also notes the tendency towards information overload.

The **forming phase,** in which networks are identified and individual communication needs are located within networks is thus quite a complex process. The equivalent of the **storming** phase we have described as ' connecting into the grid' when the members of a network need to map out the power system in order to understand how to mobilise and influence it.

The **network intensive** is designed to institute and accelerate the forming and storming phases in the context of establishing a network. They differ from

conventional teambuilding events with their often rather static configurations. This type of event would provide an opportunity for small groups to form, make commitments and disperse with ease; for individuals to make personal contacts, sort out difficulties, and make contracts; for networks to take shape and begin to assume their own energy. The event would probably be experienced as a rather chaotic form of "milling around". However its overall purpose would be to discover some of the inherent and emergent patterns in the organisational system, and thus return people to their workplaces with an expanded, or new perception of the networks to which they belong, richer mental maps of the system, and an enhanced capacity to shape and influence how it functions .

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