

"Identification of organizational patterns helps to normalize workers' experiences and reduces their individual sense of failure and isolation. By identifying both Strengths and Shadows, organizations can achieve a more balanced perspective and rekindle hope."

Trauma and Healing in Organizations

By Pat Vivian and Shana Hormann

THE NATURE OF an organization's work directly impacts the culture of the organization. An organization that provides services to traumatized individuals, families and/or communities is susceptible to becoming a traumatized system experiencing the cumulative effects of the work itself. Although the problems are often viewed as interpersonal or intra-personal, ones that could be addressed through better communication or clarity of roles and expectations, in fact they are deeper, embedded within the organization's system.

Our ideas are based on almost thirty years of experience as managers and consultants with "highly mission-driven" non-profit organizations across the United States. A highly mission-driven organization is one whose mission is compelling and pervasive, defining not only the nature of the work but also the approach to the work and the nature of the internal relationships. We have come to believe that there is a connection between the dynamics of the organization and the heart of the organization's work. The purpose of this article is three-fold: to explore the work-culture connection, describe a set of internal dynamics that frequently result, and offer ideas for OD practice.

WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?

An organization is a living human institution whose real existence is expressed through the hearts, minds, and hands of its employees, members, and volunteers. The organizational cul-

ture is the cohesion of values, myths, heroines, and symbols that have come to mean a great deal to the people who work there. Schein (1985, p. 6) defines culture as "the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken for granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment." These assumptions are learned responses to a group's problems of survival in its external environment and its problems of internal integration (p.9). This definition sets the stage for exploring the functions of culture and the connection between an organization's work and its culture.

WHAT FUNCTIONS DOES ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE PERFORM?

■ Organizational culture makes sense of our experience and provides answers, reducing our collective and individual anxiety. The culture provides positive problem-solving approaches for external issues and anxiety avoidance strategies related to internal relationships and norms. (Schein, 1985) The taken-for-granted assumptions that influence the ways in which group members perceive, think, and feel about the world stabilize the world and the organization's place in it. (p. 312) Individuals who recognize societal issues or human needs join forces to address them. Two examples: In the mid-1970's adolescents who ran away from home were viewed

negatively by the police, juvenile justice organizations, and social services. Girls could be locked up for having sexual relations, for being promiscuous, boys for incorrigibility. A group of individuals in Seattle viewed runaways differently and came together to start The Shelter, a center for runaway youth. They believed that teenagers ran away from their homes for reasons that needed to be identified and addressed, and that the youth needed a safe and supportive place to be. An organizational culture of non-coercive and respectful values emerged from that foundation. And in Seattle in the 90s, a group of people recognized the differential impact of HIV/AIDS on communities of color and the lack of resources available to address that impact. POCAAN (People of Color Against AIDS Network) was formed to address that disparity in a respectful and culturally competent way.

- Culture defines the identity of the organization and supports the experience of belonging, acceptance, and understanding.

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Identity rests on the core values, worldview, spirit, *raison d'être* of the organization. These elements define the boundary between what is inside and what is outside the organization and provide an identity for the members. It attracts and supports a group of committed individuals who demonstrate an emotional connection and attachment to the work.

In exchange for belonging and acceptance members take on the needs of the organization. "At the core of every culture will be assumptions about the proper way for individuals to relate to each other in order to make the group safe and comfortable" (Schein, 1985, p. 104). An internal society with its own norms develops and determines the extent to which there is room for difference.

- Culture offers a common language and way of thinking for members. The culture defines the basic framework and worldview of the work. It describes the context, purpose, and rationale, and communicates its values through its language. What outsiders might call jargon helps members understand each other quickly within a common practice framework.

WHAT IS THE WORK-CULTURE CONNECTION?

- We think that the work of highly mission-driven organizations directly influences the culture of those organizations. For example, crisis-response organizations tend to have crisis-oriented management, workers in victim-advocacy agencies tend to report being victimized by structure and internal dynamics, anti-oppression organizations tend to create cultures highly sensitive to any oppression dynamics within the organization. Furthermore we think that some organizations suffer from trauma and that traumatization influences the organization's culture. A women's health clinic that is bombed because it offers abortion services suffers trauma directly. Other organizations, however, experience trauma over time as the result of several factors. A traumatic beginning or history might initiate the pattern of trauma. Victims or survivors of crimes often started sexual assault service agencies, domestic violence shelters, and chapters of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Their efforts were frequently met with the community's hostility or denial of the problem. Connected to the work itself, organizations and their members are exposed continuously to the pain and suffering of others (a phenomenon known by several names- we prefer compassion fatigue). Eventually, the dysfunctional internal dynamics, which develop from the culture, begin to reinforce the organization's trauma.

HOW DOES THE WORK INFLUENCE THE CULTURE?

- Out of the work emerges the "creation story" for the organization.

The story of how an organization got started – who was

involved, the setting and circumstances, the challenges- is usually powerfully retold in reports, orientation materials, rituals, and celebrations. That story often has an element of the heroic; that is, the organization was often started against all odds, against denial of the problem, against active resistance and disbelief in the wider community.

- The need perceived by the founders and the impetus to meet that need are the foundation for the organization's "moral narrative."

An organization's moral narrative is its value-based story about the need for its existence and the rationale for its work. Its development begins with the creation story, forming its foundation, but it also changes over time as organizational members refine it and the refinements become part of the narrative. The moral narrative and the members' articulation of it mutually reinforce each other and solidify the story. If an organization's beginning was traumatic, its members might perceive the wider environment as an uncaring or even dangerous place.

- Both the creation story and the moral narrative communicate the expected (right) way to accomplish the work.

Members of the organization hold values and standards that they want to see manifested in the world. They also hold an expectation that all the work of the organization exemplifies those values. For example, sexual assault centers hold strong core values related to their work. These values have been forged in response to an historical pattern and current tendency to hold the victim responsible for his/her assault or victimization. In particular these centers value expertise that comes from those who experienced the assault over expertise from other sources, such as professional training. They also value treating clients with respect, which includes being listened to, believed, and responded to in a supportive way. These core values are also reflected in the expectation that staff listen to, respond to, and support one another, setting the stage for problematic internal dynamics, which we will take up later in this article.

- The nature of the work names the struggle or challenge and creates expectations about individual identification with the work.

The struggle or challenge is often revealed in an organization's mission. This compelling statement communicates how essential and important the work is. Frequently these mission statements communicate an uncompromising intention about social change. Here are two examples:

Support-Heal-Educate-Prevent:
Helping the Community STOP Sexual assault
(*Sexual assault services program*)

No More Victims. No More Victimizers.
(*Children's anti-violence training group*)

- The work is perceived to be a higher calling and provides individual and collective identities as a result of participating in the struggle.

Individuals are attracted to the mission and work for a variety of personal, professional, and values-based reasons. Personal reasons include a sense of belonging, connection, and affection; personal empowerment; and perhaps even an unconscious need for self-healing. Individuals also discover that their personal experiences and qualities have an important place in their professional lives. Professional reasons include knowledge and skill development, training, and an orientation to service. Values-based reasons include commitment to social change and an altruistic desire to give back to and be a part of the community or group being served.

Workers develop an intense emotional connection to their clients and to their own identity as part of the struggle. The needs of the clients and the organization become the needs of the workers. Individuals end up taking on the mission as their life work and become psychologically identified with it. Organizational identity and worker identity merge in the extreme cases, especially in highly traumatized systems.

- The highly mission-driven work creates an intense emotional culture, and the emotional nature of the mission seeps into that culture. The culture and work mutually reinforce each other over time.

An "emotional field" (Friedman, 1985) comes from the intense feelings individuals bring to the struggle as well as the normal development of emotional interdependency in any human system. Furthermore the essential place of empathy in the work reinforces relationships characterized by empathic concern between workers and their clients as well as between co-workers. The interplay of these factors intensifies the emotional field. In a traumatized organization the emotional intensity may reach extremes that interfere with day-to-day functioning.

- The creation story and moral narrative can reinforce a separation of the organization from the larger society.

When the wider community responds with denial or outright hostility to an organization's founding, organizational members experience themselves as different, apart, even marginalized, and tend to assume little or no support for their organization. A continuing gulf frequently leads to the development of protective boundaries and consequent isolation of the organization. Many times this situation is experienced as "us versus them", and sometimes the community and the organization become polarized.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON INTERNAL DYNAMICS?

The interaction of the above factors creates and sustains a strongly felt organizational culture. That culture in turn breeds a set of internal dynamics that are both functional and dysfunctional for the organization and its members. Culture develops explicitly and implicitly and is passed on from one generation of workers to the next through a process of socialization.

Because the influence is both explicit and implicit, contradictory assumptions can become embedded in the culture without members of the organization being aware of them. If their development is implicit, their influence on internal dynamics is often hidden.

Using our model of “Strengths and Shadows” (see figure 1), we explain some of these dynamics and describe three ways in which they play out in organizational life.

We use the word “Strength” to refer to values and assumptions that support an organization’s successful accomplishment of its mission. We use the term “Shadow” to mean elements that are denied, rejected, hidden, and undiscussable. These elements frequently hinder either accomplishment of the mission or the organization’s sustainability. Also, Strengths may be overly relied on or rigidly and/or inappropriately applied; Shadow elements often as a result. In addition other qualities or Strengths that might be useful to the organization remain underdeveloped. Strengths and Shadows are bound together. For example, in many service organizations *Commitment to the Work and Client-Centered* (Strengths) create a susceptibility to *Over-Functioning* (Shadow).

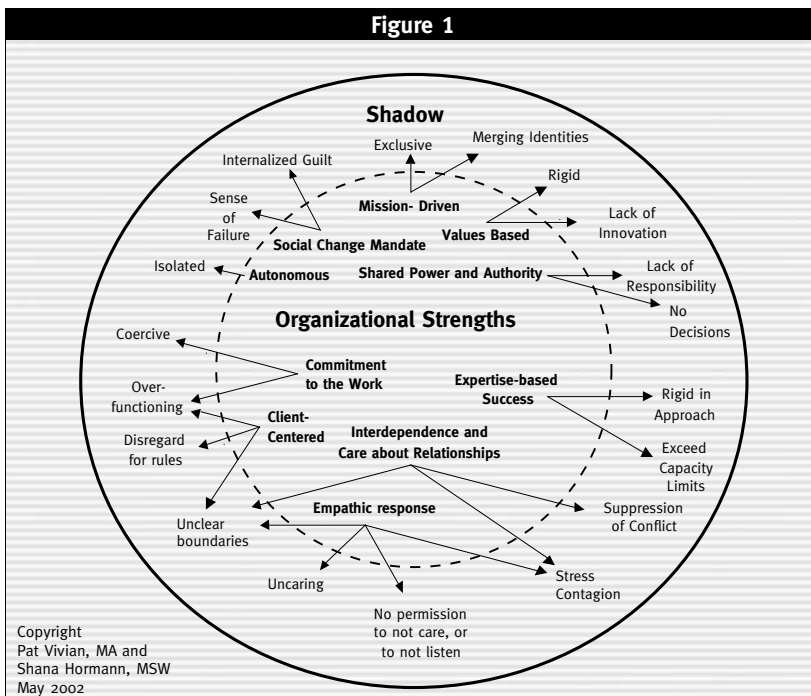
Both Strengths and Shadows become part of the culture. Explicitly they are incorporated into value statements, policies, standards of practice, and recognition and reward systems. Implicitly they develop through collective norms and interpersonal dynamics. Both Strengths and Shadows arise from choices about where to focus attention, how to respond to crises, and deliberate and/or inadvertent role modeling by leaders. Contradictions emerge, and rationales are developed to explain them. Over time both the contradictions and the explanations become part of the Shadow dynamics of the culture, what Argyris refers to as “defensive routines.” (1993)

The inner circle in our diagram represents the Strengths developed by the organization to meet its mission and sustain itself. The outer circle represents the Shadow elements of organizational life. The arrows connect the related Strengths and Shadow elements. The boundary between the organization and its environment is drawn as a solid line to show its relatively closed nature; the boundary between the Strengths and Shadow elements is drawn as a dotted line to show its relatively fluid and open nature. While in our experience many highly mission-driven nonprofits experience these dynamics, traumatized systems, which tend to develop very protective boundaries between organization and environment, experience them most intensively. As we have shared this model with colleagues in nonprofits, they have responded immediately with recognition. “You are describing *my* organization.”

We have noticed two general patterns related to these internal dynamics. One is a tendency to focus on Strengths alone rather than a complete picture of organizational dynamics. Little criticism of the organizational efforts to achieve its mission is allowed, and overused Strengths as well as Shadow characteristics are denied. We think this comes from organizational members’ experience of the difficulty in achieving their mission, and a consequent need to affirm themselves, the work, and the struggle. The second is the tendency of other organizations to experience ONLY their Shadow side because dysfunctional dynamics have so intensified that members have forgotten their Strengths. In this case routine cynicism and apathy set in, and individuals feel little responsibility to try to make changes.

The next section identifies three specific patterns we see occurring in organizations as a result of the Strength-Shadow dynamics. *They are recurring conversations with no resolution, groupthink, and stress contagion.*

Figure 1



■ Recurring conversations with no resolution

The same conversation occurs over time between the same or different individuals, sometimes with a lack of awareness about how often the topic has been discussed. Each time the conversation occurs either no resolution is reached or resolution is reached but quickly dissipates without action being taken. Several Strengths/Shadow pairs might account for this pattern. First, the Strength, *Interdependence and Caring about Relationships* with its Shadows of *Conflict Avoidance* and *Unclear Boundaries*, predisposes those within the organization to seek harmony or at least to avoid disharmony. Limited verbal disagreements are tolerated, but the basic differences are not worked through, and no closure is reached. Members persist in their image of harmony and reaffirm their care for each other and the importance of relationships. Secondly, the Strength *Shared Power and Authority* with its

Shadow *Lack of Decision-Making* encourages expenditure of group energy on process and obscures the need to reach an outcome. Progress, action, and achievement all suffer when these dynamics occur.

■ **Groupthink**

Groupthink refers to the tendency of group members to share common assumptions and worldviews. Consequently they do not realistically assess alternative perspectives or courses of action. Groupthink develops as strong norms influence and sometimes dictate internal relationships as well as relationships between the organization and its environment. The combined Strengths of *Commitment to the Work* and *Mission-Driven* and the perception that the external environment does not care about the need or those served reinforce the Shadows of *Merging Identities* and *Coercion*. Uniformity of perspective and normative behavior both interfere with healthy questioning of the organization's mission and approach. Distrust of the environment makes it easier to reject input and feedback, reinforcing the uniformity. Innovation is neither sought nor valued.

Rigidity of Approach, the Shadow of *Expertise-Based Success*, and *Suppression of Conflict*, the Shadow of *Care about Relationships* and *Interdependence*, reinforce normative behavior. Disagreements, criticism, and blame are personalized or politicized because members have no other frameworks within which to understand differences. Some suppress their dissenting views because they believe no one will agree with or support them. Other individuals say their piece but do not really expect change. Individuals who do not act according to explicit or implicit norms are isolated, marginalized, and scapegoated. When the tension of being different becomes too great, the individual leaves the organization. In some circumstances they are treated as if they have betrayed the struggle and rejected the mission and their co-workers. Traumatized organizations, often perceiving the environment as hostile, place even greater emphasis on internal support and camaraderie. This experience makes them highly susceptible to groupthink.

■ **Stress Contagion**

The Strength of *Mission-Driven* fosters its Shadow of *Merging Identities*, and the Strength of *Social Change Mandate* fosters its Shadows of *Sense of Failure* and *Internalized Guilt*. Coupled with the various motivations individuals bring to their work, these dynamics frequently lead to acute or chronic stress. The Strength of *Empathic Response* with its Shadow of *No Permission to Not Care or to Not Listen*, sets the stage for stress contagion, individuals picking up stress from each other. (Braiker, 1986)

Both *Commitment to the Work* and *Client-Centered* (Strengths) lead to *Over-Functioning* (taking on more than one's reasonable role while others take on less), which in turn increases stress. Finally the very Strength of the organization's *Expertise-Based Success* with its Shadow *Exceed Capacity Limits* causes the organization to overfunction in relation to its environment.

Stress contagion is the manifestation of these dynamics. But it is also a vehicle through which stress becomes embedded in the organization's culture and is passed on to new employees who have not been there long enough to experience their own emotional exhaustion. In this way the dynamic occurs at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels.

Implications for OD Practice

Organizational members tend to see these patterns as interpersonal or intra-personal problems, rather than systemic dynamics. Problem solving or improvement practices focus on individuals and their behavior. Little organizational learning occurs, and the patterns persist. Individuals end up being depleted, and the organization's sustainability is threatened. New ways of understanding and addressing these dynamics can help organizations see these patterns and intervene systemically.

HOW CAN OD PRACTITIONERS ASSIST ORGANIZATIONS?

■ **Shine Light on the Shadows**

The OD practitioner can hold the tension and anxiety in a way that helps organizations begin to feel hopeful about making changes. Organizational members become more ready to explore their experience using these frameworks, which allow for discussion of the inherent tensions without assigning blame to individuals or roles. They also help members remember their creation stories, the source of their inspiration and current strengths.

Practitioners reframe the task from problem-solving to seeing the situation in a new light. The task is not eliminating the Shadow but rather recognizing it as a starting point for systemic analysis and insight. Identification of organizational patterns helps to normalize workers' experiences and reduces their individual sense of failure and isolation. By identifying both Strengths and Shadows, organizations can achieve a more balanced perspective and rekindle hope.

■ **Reduce Stress Contagion**

Practitioners can help organizational members recognize both the inherent stress in highly mission-driven work and the stress from their own commitment and expectations. They facilitate structured experiences to help members recognize and interrupt patterns of personalizing and projection (an unconscious process of disowning one's own quality or behavior while simultaneously noticing that same quality or behavior in another person.). Practitioners help groups surface and change the norms that lead to stress contagion, and encourage boundary setting that says "No" to over-functioning. Finally they strongly encourage organization-wide conversations about the organizational capacity and limits and support realistic prioritizing.

■ Coach Leaders to Embrace Organizational Strengths and Shadows

Practitioners can help leaders to develop awareness of their individual Strengths and Shadows and to use that insight to notice and name organizational Strengths and Shadows. They can help leaders can better understand the roles they play in shaping organizational culture and changing dysfunctional dynamics. Finally, they can coach leaders to convene and facilitate conversations about these dynamics in open and non-defensive ways. Leaders learn to ask thought-provoking questions to surface the group's deepest beliefs and assumptions.

■ Reflect and Learn from Experience

The more self-aware an organization is about its own Strengths and Shadows and organizational culture, the less likely it is to be trapped in polarized perspectives. The OD practitioner can facilitate exploration of the organizational values inherent in its creation story and culture. This allows organizational members to understand more fully the organization's Strengths and to create change strategies in alignment with those strengths and values. Using this self-awareness, the organization can open its boundaries to the external environment, increase information flow and energy, and move from protective to collaborative relationships.

Understanding the work-culture connection is the first step an organization can take to free itself from dysfunctional dynamics and heal from trauma. The organization can then be more open to change while affirming its mission. Healing and sustainability emerge from a deepened respect for their values and understanding of their organizational culture. They are ready to write the future chapters of their organizational story. ■

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