Types of Problem

PROBLEMS AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

The main problem in the study of « problems » and the organizations attempting to solve them is that the environmental context of organizations is changing, at an increasing rate, and towards increasing complexity. In many cases, the changed texture of the environment is not recognized by the executive body of an organization until it is too late. It fails entirely to appreciate that a number of outside events are becoming connected with each other in a way that leads up to irreversible general change. The first response to this situation is to make an her-culean effort to defend the traditional approach. When this does not succeed, many upheavals and changes in approach take place, until a « redefinition of mission » is -agreed, and slowly and painfully the organization re-emerges with a very much altered programme, and some-thing of a new identity.

It was this experience and a number of others not dissimilar, by no means ail of them industrial (and including studies of change problems in hospitals, prisons, and in educational and political organizations), that gradually led two scholars, F.E. Emery and E.L. Trist, to feel a need for redirecting conceptual attention to the nature of the organization environment *. They isolated four « ideal types » of organization environment. An attempt has been made below to define the four types of problem which may be associated with each of the four types of organizational environment described by Emery and Trist.

Type 1 : Docile, isolated problems.

The simplest type, of problem is relatively isolated. This means, that it is in effect « contained » by an organized and orderly environment. An organization is there-lore free to locate such problems and move towards them, attack, and eliminate them. Because such problems are randomly distributed, there is no necessity for an organization to make any distinction between tactics and strategy. The optimal strategy is just the simple tactic of attempting to do one's best on a purely local basis. The best tactic, moreover, can be learned only by trial and error, and only for a particular class of local, environmental variances. This means that organizations can easily adapt to each new problem as it is located within their domain.

F.E. Emery and E. L. Trist. « The Causal Texture of Organizational Environments ». Human Relations, vol. 18 (1965) p. 21-32.

Type 2 : Docile problem groups.

The situation becomes more complex when the problems are no longer isolated, but are grouped or clustered together in certain ways. The solution to a problem in one part of the structure may be compensated by some increase in strength of some other part of the problem cluster.

An organization under these circumstances can no longer afford to attempt to deal tactically with each new environmental variance as it occurs. Some form of strategy is required. The organization needs to know how to manoeuver in its environment around the problem cluster in order to find the most useful method of attack. To pursue a goal under its nose may lead it into part of the field fraught with danger, while avoidance of an immediately difficult issue may lead it away from potent-ially rewarding areas.

The organization has to learn to concentrate its re-sources, organize them in terms of a general plan, and develop a distinctive competence in handling certain types of problems. Organizations under these conditions, therefore tend to grow in size and become hierarchical with a tendency towards centralized control and coordination. -
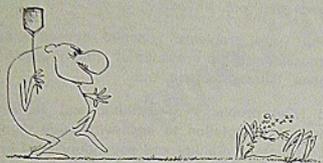
Type 3 : Dynamic interactive problems.

This is a situation when changes in one problem area give rise to changes in another problem area. The situation is complicated because it is no longer possible for an organization to assume a that it can act without taking into account other organizations. Several, or even many, organizations may be concerned with the same group of interacting problems. The solution of one problem by one organization may create several new problems for other bodies.

The goal of one organization may be the same as the goal of another organization. Noting this, each will wish to improve its own chances by hindering the others, and each will know that the others must not only wish to do likewise, but also knows that each knows this. Unfortunately, this attitude is not only applicable to profit making organizations, but also to non-profit organizations. Thus two organizations with the same non-profit objective (whether it be « development », « refugee-relief », etc.), will not always be purely cooperative in their relationships with one. another. As soon as one organization feels that the other is infringing upon its « territory », it starts, indirectly, attempting to hinder the other.

It now becomes necessary to define the organizational objectives in terms of capacity or power to move more or
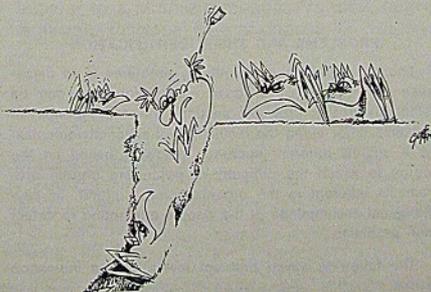
Docile Isolated Problem

Docile Clustered Problems
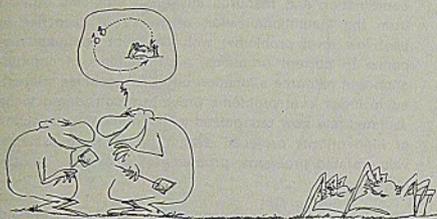
Dynamic Interactive Problems

Aggressive Interactive Problems

less at will, i.e., to be able to make and meet competitive challenge. This gives particular relevance to situations in which stability can be obtained only by a certain coming-to-terms with competitors, whether enterprises, interest groups, or governmental agencies. One has to know when not to fight to the death.

Type 4 : Aggressive interactive problems.

In the final stage of complexity, the interactive problems do not merely respond unpredictably to the actions of the organizations tackling them, but appear to have a momentum and aggressive initiative of their own. They increase or decrease in importance and manner of inter-action without it being possible to determine the original cause of the change. The organization's environment may now be called «turbulent» and the assumptions upon which the organization - bases its action are threatened by this turbulence. The « ground » is in motion.

For organizations, these trends mean a growing increase in their area of relevant uncertainty. The consequences which flow from their actions lead off in ways which become increasingly unpredictable : they do not necessarily fall off with distance, but may at any point be amplified beyond all expectations; similarly, lines of action that are strongly pursued may find themselves attenuated by emergent forces.

This turbulent environment demands some new form of organization that is essentially different from the hierarchically structured forms to which we are accustomed. Whereas Type 3 problems require one or other form of accommodation between like, but competitive, organizations, whose fates are to a degree negatively correlated, turbulent environments require some relationship between dissimilar organizations whose fates are basically, positively correlated. This mains relationships that will maximize cooperation and which recognize that no one organization can take over the role of «the other» and become paramount. It is in this type of environment that matrix organizations should be considered. (Matrix organizations were discussed in an article in « International Associations », 1971, March, p. 154-170).

PROBLEMS AND THEIR IDENTIFICATION

Another approach to identifying problems is to distinguish different levels of ease with which they can be detected. In the previous section, the four groups of problems differ along the dimension of simplicity/complexity. A slightly different approach below is based on the degree to which the difficulty of perceiving certain problems is inherent in the organizational, cultural, or psychological assumptions of the people attempting to detect such problems.

The following seven problem levels are an indication of this :

1. First level problems : direct consequence of lack of adequate economic resources, e.g. malnutrition, disease, rich-poor gap, etc.

2. Second level problems : social consequences and repercussions of the presence of primary problems, e.g. refugees, illiteracy, crime, etc.

3. Third level problems : economic and social consequences of adaptation to an environment modified by the presence of primary and secondary level problems, e.g. population explosion, impoverization of social structures, urban decay, mental health, delinquency, discrimination, etc.

4. Fourth level problems : organizational (or societal) coordination and resource allocation problems (arising from the institutionalization of organized response to past low level problems) which prevent adequate response to current problems, e.g. problems of coordination and resource allocation between agencies interested in lower-level problems previously considered to be isolated and now recognized to be interacting, selection of high priority projects, design of adequate systems, value-related problems, problems of relevance, credibility, etc.

5. Fifth level problems : conceptual, psychological and cultural problems (deriving from the difficulties of communication in the fragmented environment characterized by the presence of fourth level problems) which prevent decision-makers and their supporters from being able to justify inter-territorial, inter-disciplinary or inter-jurisdictional solutions — thus reinforcing fourth level problems and positions, e.g. problems of meaning of same terms in different cultures or disciplines, problem of establishing criteria of relevance to a spectrum of disciplines and interests, problem of focussing on the interdependence of disciplines and interests, problems of defining integrated closed systems.

6. Sixth level problems : conceptual and cultural problems opposing awareness of society as an ongoing integrated process with a multiplicity of social entities and sub-processes in ecological balance — providing a framework for the solution of fifth level problems.

7. Seventh level problems : problems deriving from lack of awareness on the part of social entities of their particular positive and negative functions in the social process in which they are embedded —namely feedback sensitivity of organizations, disciplines and individuals.

The first two levels are generally recognized within governmental programmes, the third in the more far-sighted government programmes (e.g. Unesco), the fourth level by those studying the problems of planning and decision-making, the fifth level and above are only noted in isolated studies and analyses of the social crisis.

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