

In this paper a thirty-year quest to introduce family systems theory ideas to professionals in the Pittsburgh area is recounted. The original idea which involved others grew to become a permanent educational organization. My thinking on how leadership functions evolved in the course of this venture. The stages that this project covers, the ideas behind the project, and its most salient features are reviewed.

Traditionally it is assumed that a leader is one who has to act on others. Even in instances when it is recognized that a leader interacts with others, the avowed purpose is to monitor directly and influence their actions in keeping with organizational objectives. The present example examines a method by which leadership is exercised from a blueprint of principles. Actions are based on those principles rather than on arranging, managing, or otherwise influencing relationships with others.

A cursory review of organizational literature defines leadership as an individual theoretical construct. On the one hand, leadership is defined as a set of psychological and behavioral characteristics. Models come from history, politics, and group theory, to name a few. The connections between a leadership role and an organization are established primarily by how much consonance there is between the leader and the goals of the organization. The notion of "power" or the capacity to influence others seems to be quite central to these definitions. Exceptions are the book, *Understanding Organizations* (Sagar and Wiseman, eds. 1982) and some of the literature on family owned businesses. In the latter the role of the entrepreneur and transitions, especially succession, seem to be the main foci. The bulk of both organizational and corporate literature describes goals which mirror the strivings of society at large (and, by extension, what a leader should attempt). At the risk of oversimplifying, emphasis is on success, profitability, and the bottom line.

Leadership, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as the combination of evolving ideas occurring within an environment in interaction with people. Leaders and others establish a reciprocal arrangement; the leader is the person who charts the direction and others recognize the value of the enterprise and become part of it for varying lengths of time.

Ideas, in this case a whole theory of human behavior known as Bowen theory, are central to the exercise of leadership. Bowen theory turned to evolution for its model, frequently studying other species to understand what is natural for groups about leader selection. In the study of whole families Murray Bowen was able to see a natural group in action and described its characteristics in detail. Leadership is one of the functions that give families a direction. Leadership emerges from the unit in interaction and is patterned following a dynamic interactional exchange involving all members. Bowen theory extends the scope of how the family leader emerges to multigenerational patterns and how they are transferred from one generation to another. Thus that leadership exists is true in all families. But how the leader emerges is determined by the interaction within the family unit. The concept of differentiation assesses individual functioning and accounts for how individuals interact and occupy different places in a group. Differentiation accounts for the fluctuations of families and their members (and may be extended to other human aggregates) and the differences in functioning of the unit and of its members. Individuals are in continuous interchange in a series of interlocking triangles, the building blocks of emotional systems.

Bowen defines the leader as inextricably linked to a set of conditions. A leader emerges, but the timing of that emergence is guided by pervasive patterns of human interaction geared toward keeping the entity whole. Using the theory as a blueprint, predictable patterns in the functioning of human groups and their institutions become visible and provide a way for a leader to establish goals and to operate within these human systems. Responses to change and pitfalls along the way are knowable and may be anticipated. The person in charge may anticipate and thus be more prepared for the reactions, responding more appropriately or cogently to the situation.

What follows in abridged form are some of the salient elements that coalesced to put me in a leadership role. The antecedents of my journey stretch far into the past. The initial thirty-year life span occurred within an extended South American family who, although not as colorful as the one in Garcia Marquez' One Hundred Years of Solitude, had some of the same ethos and commands. In 1960 my nuclear family moved to the United States. I was first exposed to Murray Bowen's developing ideas about family functioning at Georgetown University, and they were consonant with my previous experience. I studied the concepts and applied them to my own family and assumed that I would continue to put them into practice upon my return to Chile, I remained in Pittsburgh instead. The physical location is secondary to the intellectual/emotional search.

Stages of the Journey

The first stage, groundbreaking, lasted nine years. It represents the efforts of one person, in an environment that previously did not know of Bowen theory, to establish a system to make this body of knowledge known as a distinct and viable method of exploration and research. The second stage, the takeoff stage, lasted approximately ten years. During this period a beachhead was developed and a distinctive method of teaching family systems emerged. Receptive ears (attached to humans) were found who first learned and then assisted in the dissemination of ideas. The third stage, or consolidation, now in its tenth year, was punctuated by the creation of an organization, the Western Pennsylvania Family Center. The original objectives were continued but from a central and more stable, permanent location conducive to the growth of original goals. A more permanent home would facilitate the search for new vistas.

I held a leadership position until about four years ago. Some of the aspects of the search and the ensuing growth will be represented as organic. As in most transitions, it is most appropriate to regard succession as part and parcel of other events. In this instance the move toward succession as part and parcel of other events. In this instance the move toward succession was an anticipated one, necessary to both institutional goals and to preparing for changes in my family. The view toward a change in leadership had been there since the beginning. It was part of a shift from identifying programs based on individuals to pursuits grounded on overall missions and goals. Subsequent to my resignation as Director three deaths occurred in my family. Concomitantly, offspring pursued their own life courses. As for myself, I think of the present stage, for lack of a better term, as rehearsing solitude and, perhaps, being mindful of the philosopher Plato's dictum as "practice dying." I will add that, based on past history, "practice dying" will be a rather active pursuit.

Laying the Groundwork (1966-74)

Ideas. In the 1960s family systems theory, as it was known, had expanded from the studies of families with a schizophrenic offspring and a clinical focus, to an extension of the principles to all families. The scale of differentiation came into being then, quickly followed by "differentiation of self in the family of origin" and the concept of interlocking triangles. From Bowen's initial articulation of the seminal idea of the family as a unit, new concepts came into being.

Environment. Psychiatry and the mental health community in Pittsburgh in the middle sixties did not know about family therapy. My beginning expertise stood out even before I became a formal part of a family therapy clinic. In fact, it was the early acknowledgement by others of this viewpoint that led to my being hired by the largest psychiatric establishment, Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic. Thus, the environment was initially curious and receptive to the ideas. Originally family systems theory was presented as a body of knowledge, first as an elective course to psychiatric residents and then to community mental health workers. As it became clearer what making these principles basic to one's work (and moreover, to one's life) signified, the instructors combined systems ideas with traditional psychoanalytic and group ideas. In effect, systems theory became diluted at best and "washed away" at worst.

Individual. For myself my initial intent was to maintain a systems perspective in an otherwise traditional milieu, namely, the human sciences and the human services which functioned overwhelmingly out of individual paradigms. In professional meetings Bowen had advanced the belief that where he was concerned he knew of no individual who had been able to stay current with family systems ideas as a whole in a different environment (not

based on systems premises). An extension of the dictum was that it would take more than one person to establish firm grounding. Premonitions notwithstanding, this first stage was one of flying solo. Clinical practice with families lent some aid, in that studying many families validated the theoretical construct for me and also became a vehicle by which to practice increasing emotional detachment. Family systems literature, periodic attendance at conferences and individual systems consultation on family and other systems were also crucial at this stage. The environment, although recognizing some value to systems ideas, homogenized them to fit with traditional individual views. Parenthetically, despite an effort to keep me in their midst, my point of view was amalgamated with the rest and lost its distinctness and its potential contribution. Clinical practice was the exception. A sense of aloneness and even futility would surface at times. The image of "rowing upstream" came to mind.

Interaction. There are the predictable issues involved in introducing a different variable into an environment. My overall response to the quest was how difficult and protracted the whole grounding process had become. Intellectual knowledge of systems theory did not make navigating much easier. Another variable was anxiety. Most of the time I underestimated both the power of group togetherness and my own reactivity to occupying an outside position. In short, I overestimated my own capabilities. If I go back to the metaphor, "At high tide I swallowed a lot of water." All in all, groundbreaking represented an enlightening, humbling, and sobering process.

Review. The unfolding process could be regarded as one of "organic growth." It consisted of a vision or a rough intellectual sketch, the details of which could take place in a variety of ways. It was predicated on the assumption that the vistas which emerged would point toward further steps. Teaching a part of a traditional cadre subverted the ideas, for the most part, and neutralized my usefulness. I knew then that finding a forum where systems theory would stand on its own was crucial if the efforts were to be continued. Changes in the environment provided that opportunity.

Takeoff Stage (1974-85)

One factor which led to this new stage, the takeoff stage, was that family systems ideas had grown and become part of the family therapy movement. At the same time, Bowen reaffirmed the connections of the theory with the natural sciences.

In Pittsburgh, a long-standing ideological and organizational history was discontinued when the largest psychiatric hospital -- ensconced in psychoanalytic theory and also involved in primate research -- replaced those frameworks by one whose objectives promulgated eclectic psychiatric teaching and practice and mostly pharmacologically based research. A family therapy clinic was created in 1974 of which I became a part. This new shift offered the opportunity for a distinct (although mostly mobile) basis of operation in the form of a course for professionals to study their families.

The new situation offered many more alternatives. In effect it became a laboratory to study ideas, leaders and individuals in interaction. From a theoretical standpoint, the goals were to conceptualize family systems theory further as well as to evaluate the teaching/learning interaction; in other words, to extend and refine how the ideas were understood and presented. In terms of the participants, objective were to determine who were the people who applied to the course, who embarked in the course of study, what were observable applications of their learning, and who broadened their field of vision to add their efforts to the common undertaking -- in sum, how one learned about learning.

One outcome was that those with unusual motivation made their thoughts known. Those who offered to become part of the course became instructors. Three years after the first course was offered trainees planned and executed the first Pittsburgh Family Systems Symposium. the courses and symposia, although operating on a shoestring continued to exist into the next stage. Paradoxically, the lack of outside support reinforced motivation of those who were interested.

Although I became a leader from the onset, I had not coached an extended family before and I regarded the exploration as a reciprocal undertaking. Furthermore, I saw coaching on extended family as an extension of how I had practiced family therapy -- another method by which to test family theory and my understanding of it. About four years into the course I realized that, frequently, learning about extended family was seen as a way to "fix" the family; it was used as a technique. A corollary was that learning for most participants was regarded as an application rather than an opportunity to enlarge one's understanding of systems. This realization resulted in the addition of lectures and other exercises that would aid in a better mastery of the field of study.

In the interactions with the institution and the broader environment, progress was slow and often precarious. Despite the fact that courses were well received and well attended, there was no assurance from one year to the next if they would continue. Subtle thwarting of the efforts were visible in that endorsement of any project (with some notable exceptions) meant that the whole enterprise had to be planned, financed, and carried out as a distinct and viable endeavor. As tensions in the institution grew, there was negative projection toward questionable ventures; the course and accompanying accoutrements were no exception. Continued existence and support became less reliable over time. My observation of the larger entity, plus direct feedback from readings and knowledgeable others, made it obvious that the degree of autonomy and opportunity to grow would not continue.

I resigned my position as staff member in the early eighties after approximately ten years in the organization. Shortly after my resignation the family therapy clinic was discontinued, a further demonstration that the institution as a whole based the decision, at least on the surface, on financial considerations; in other words, family therapy was not thought to hold great promise. My association with the entity continued mostly through the annual conference and symposium which parenthetically were held at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic until this year. Soon after I separated from the institution interested individuals who were potentially more instrumental in planning for the future convened as a think tank. Goals were discussed: (a) the need to build a more stable operating system, where things were not dependent on the vagaries of an administration which was not committed to family systems ideas or willing to support those who were. (b) The need to be directed toward identifying any future program on the basis of ideas rather than people. (c) The need to lengthen the program to more than one or two years, and rather, offer an educational environment which would allow people to pursue ideas as far as they wished. (d) A chance to gain broader exposure as a way for motivated trainees to surpass what had been set as yardsticks heretofore.

Then and now it is easier to witness readiness than to put words to it. If the present description is accurate, the creation of the Western Pennsylvania Family Center was a logical corollary to what came before. Roughly twenty years have elapsed since the first course was designed.

Prior to its actual creation at least a handful of people had asked to be part of an organization if one were ever created. A couple of efforts in the past had started but not prospered. Six professionals became the original founders. Initially there were no outside sources of support, although after a couple of years there were sizable grants made. Institution building was probably similar to most such undertakings. Central preoccupation included establishing internal coherence as reflected by faculty, syllabus, programs, and members and subsequently engaging in board formation. After five years I stepped down from being director of the Center. A succession process was announced and, after alternatives were considered, a new director, Cynthia Larkby, emerged as the leader.

What was learned from the quest? The Western Pennsylvania Family Center will have been in existence for ten years this coming September. As far as ideas, individuals -- both in scope and reach -- have gone further than at any previous time. The three presenters at this conference provide a sample for how each one is grappling with the possibilities. In April of 1994 individuals who took the first course on extended family in 1974 came together for a reprise. The subject of that meeting was explored in a paper presented at an international meeting of family therapists. The composite was illustrative of how the long view of human behavior changes with a systems perspective. For the next symposium this coming June former trainees have been invited to present their ideas and results have been promising. The long quest provides a different gauge by which to measure movement. Thus, whether looking at oneself, fellow faculty, or students, fluctuations over the course of many years can be viewed more accurately in terms of establishing overall functioning.

Those people who form part of the organization know that responsibility for oneself and toward others is fundamental; moreover, they become cognizant of the fact that individual initiative is highly valued. They are not subject to the hiring and firing that seem so prevalent in society at large. All things considered, participation in the Center, whether by faculty, participants in courses and programs, or as part of the membership has slowly increased.

As all human aggregates, this new entity is not outside the laws of human functioning. Anxiety, a common denominator in all human associations, is part and parcel of the proceedings. Although ameliorated by the knowledge of systems, its presence is visible on many occasions. Ebbs and flows, as evidenced by responses to external and internal pressures, are present but amenable to change. There have been critical junctures but they have been successfully resolved. Individual fluctuations are also present. A given individual may excel while another one flounders or seems frustrated. A few times the organization has seemed to flourish while one person appears burdened. Yet, the original founders are still viable and no person has been extruded.

In an organization whose theoretical model of differentiation may one talk of emotional process or even of group process? While I held the position of director I assumed that my views were different from those of the group and I operated out of that assumption. The existence of a "rumor mill," often an intrinsic part of any entity, is mostly quiescent, at least internally. Needless to say, at times there seems to be a faint rumor and -- dare I say it? -- distinct noise.

On the subject of leadership, however, the creation of the Center has allowed individuals to realize leadership on a variety of fronts. On this score it may be useful to note that despite the change in my titular and organizational role in the Center I have had the opportunity to perform many different functions and my participation has been unambiguously accepted.

There is still much to be done. Research, an avowed goal for many, is only now becoming more probable than possible. In closing I reflect that if a paramount objective of this organization -- devoted to learning -- is to foster the advent of a new generation of scholars, interested professionals, and lay persons, the first few steps have already been taken.

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