

# Collaborative Decision Making in Facilitated Groups and Other Organisations

HAMISH BROWN

## KEY WORDS

collaboration, decision making, dependency, development, facilitation, leadership, Moreno, organisation, relationship, role, role theory, social system, sociometry, subgroups

## Introduction

Developing collaborative approaches in organisational settings is very challenging. If collaboration were simple most organisations would adopt such practices with ease. However, this is rarely the case. I have spent nearly three decades working to find effective ways to bring about collaboration in organisational settings. This paper presents the approach that I and my colleagues from Phoenix Facilitation developed to make collaborative decision making in groups and complex organisational settings possible. It is based primarily on the Psychodramatic theories of sociometry and role theory. In this paper I will introduce you to three dimensions of organisational life that are central to organisational functioning and discuss how these dimensions relate to one another. I will present a diagnostic and descriptive model that arises from this approach, which assists in seeing and understanding the relational dynamics people in the organisation are experiencing. This model also directly assists in planning organisational change.

## Defining social cohesion

In this paper I use the term *social cohesion* quite a lot. Social cohesion is a measure that can be used to determine the level of group members' ability to choose each other positively under conditions of stress. Different levels of social cohesion are required depending on the purpose and function of a group. When social cohesion cannot be sustained fragmentation of the social network will be observed.

Social cohesion is an emergent property of the sociometry of the group in that it develops or changes in response to individuals' experience of relationships as they are enacted over time. Sociometry was developed by

Moreno for the purpose of making visible the specific criteria that make up the social relationships of a social system affecting the process of choosing and rejecting that emerges out of these criteria. Moreno was also interested in the development of social cohesion across a whole social system.

*The social health of a nation is dependent on its cohesion... Social interventions (such as sociometry, group psychotherapy and psychodrama) promise to transform areas of low cohesion into areas of high cohesion without sacrificing the spontaneity and the freedom of small groups... The cohesion of the group is measured by the degree of cooperativeness and collaborative interaction forth coming from as many subgroups and members as possible on behalf of the **purpose** for which the group is formed. (Moreno 1951)*

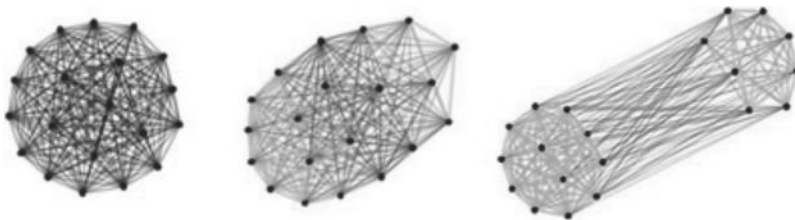
A group with strong social cohesion is able to withstand considerable stress from various sources, such as organisational restructures, while maintaining genuine positive relationships and getting the work of the organisation done. A group with weak social cohesion is rarely able to withstand organisational stresses and changes, which may also be deemed necessary because of the weak social cohesion. Such a group will tend to lose work focus or get caught up in organisational politics, sub-group infighting and unnecessary competition.

I am highlighting here that while sociometry is a micro measure to do with making the specific criteria that make up social relationships visible social cohesion is a macro measure to do with making the strength of social connections across a whole social network visible.

## Developing and maintaining social cohesion

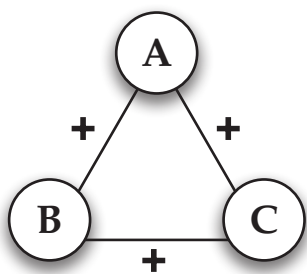
This section introduces triangular relationships as the smallest unit related to the development of social cohesion.

A group of researchers from Cornell University developed a mathematical model (Easley, Kleinberg, 2010) that shows how groups split into factions, which Bill Steel wrote an article about (Steel, 2011).

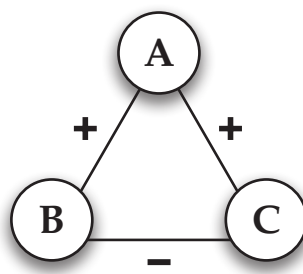


AS CHANGES IN INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS SPREAD THROUGH A GROUP, EVENTUALLY A SPLIT EVOLVES.

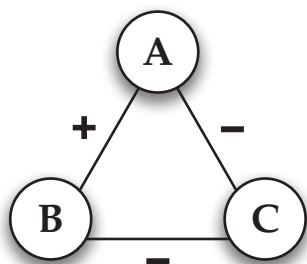
They demonstrate that...these triangles can be either balanced or unbalanced, depending on the particular mix of positive and negative relationships they contain. Once a certain percentage of negative relationships are present the group maintains social cohesion by splitting into subgroups; each sub-group being internally positive but negative towards the other group. This is a deterministic model that shows what happens but stops short of explaining how it happens. The mathematical equation shows that if the “mean friendliness” — the average strength of connections across the entire network — is positive, the system evolves to a single, all-positive pattern. “The model shows how to influence the result, but it doesn't tell you how to get there,” Kleinberg cautioned.



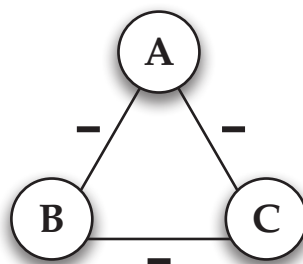
(A) A, B AND C ARE MUTUAL FRIENDS: BALANCED.



(B) A IS FRIENDS WITH B AND C, BUT THEY DON'T GET ALONG WITH EACH OTHER: NOT BALANCED.



(C) A AND B ARE FRIENDS WITH C AS A MUTUAL ENEMY: BALANCED.



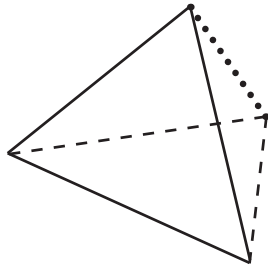
(D) A, B, AND C ARE MUTUAL ENEMIES: NOT BALANCED.

FROM “NETWORKS” BY JON KLEINBERG AND DAVID EASLEY

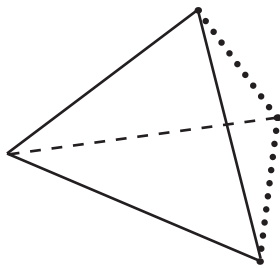
Social groups can be broken down into “relationship triangles” with four possibilities as illustrated in the diagram above. Each triangle of relationships must have either one or three positive edges to be considered balanced. Unbalanced triangles set off changes that spread through the group.

Take a moment to see if you can visualise the group as sets of triangles

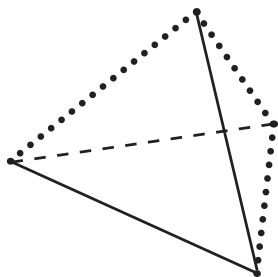
and picture this dynamic process of change with each relationship pair being affected by each relationship change they are connected to.



Depicted is a group consisting of four people this means there are six relationships. Each change in a relationship affects each of the other two people. The dotted line shows a rejecting relationship. At the point in time an event occurs that triggers this relationship changing from accepting to rejecting, the other two people will also be affected. Their relationships with each person in the system will be impacted



Here a second relationship becomes rejecting in response to the initial change. Whether further changes to the relationship matrix occur depends on the degree of openness and cohesion in the system and the capacity to learn from and respond to the experiences unfolding.



Now it is evident that the fourth person has rejected the other member of the initial rejecting pair. This is an unstable relationship matrix which the group will resolve by producing more positive relationships or by fragmenting into two subgroups. Each rejection is a separate event

however the series of events is connected through time as change occurs in the relationship matrix.

Wondering why triangles and why not some other shape? Triangles are the shape formed if you draw all the people in a group and connect each person to every other with a line to portray the relationship. Similarly, the larger the group gets the closer to a sphere the whole group will be when diagrammed this way. The underlying maths arises out of the triangles (formed by three people) and the choosing or rejecting in each relationship (between two people). It is worth considering whether a dyad is a group or whether the smallest group comprises three people based on the geometry. When a pair reject each other and move away there can be no sub-grouping process.

### Sociometry and its relationship to social cohesion

Dr Jacob Moreno developed sociometry in the 1930's. His theories have been further developed and tested by many practitioners of the Psychodrama method since then. Sociometry provides a developmental and sociological understanding of the development of social cohesion that matches the basic principles of Easley and Kleinberg's (Easley, Kleinberg, 2010) mathematical model.

Sociometry provides:

1. *A method of measuring the relationships that make up the organisation of a social system.*
2. *A diagnostic method, aiming to classify the positions of individuals in groups and the position of groups in the community.*
3. *Therapeutic and political methods, aiming to aid individuals and groups to better adjustment.*

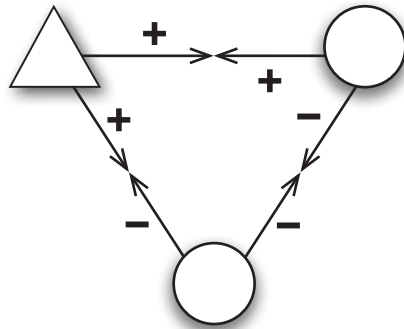
*In the complete sociometric procedure, all these methods are synthetically united into a single operation, one method depending on the other.*

Moreno noticed that people choose or reject each other based upon specific criteria. He noticed that these criteria are responses formed in relation to the specific way of being each person is enacting in response to the other. He termed these ways of being 'roles' and noticed that when a person enacts a role a response is generated in the other.

Role theory enables us to understand how members of a group develop the capacity to continue to choose each other under conditions of stress and sociometry the diagnostic methods to identify where in the group or social system this development is needed.

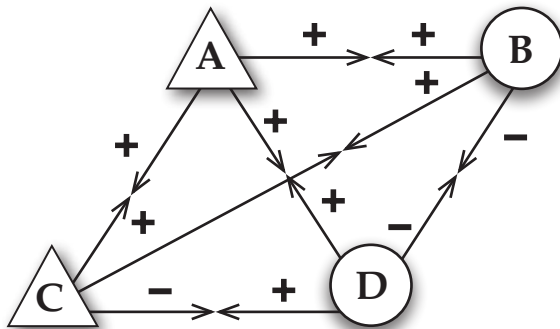
The diagram following is a sociometric diagram in which each person's positive, negative, ambivalent or neutral response to the other is shown. Here a relationship triangle is represented. It may be useful to name the role or way of being each person is enacting at the point in time that the diagram

is constructed, this enables us to appreciate that the positive, negative, neutral and ambivalent responses are specific to functioning a person is currently portraying or is a response that has become fixed based upon the functioning the person has previously portrayed.



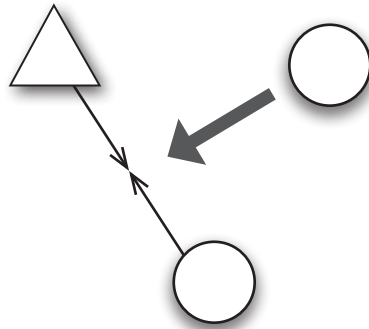
Here a man is positive to a woman who is also positive to him. This is a mutually positive dyad. A woman is negative to a woman who is also negative towards her. This is a mutually negative dyad. A man is positive towards a woman who is negative in response to him. This is a conflicted relationship. Note that using Moreno’s method we see each relationship comprising two parts.

Remember that social cohesion is a measure that can be used to determine the level of group members’ ability to choose each other positively under conditions of stress. Moreno’s role theory and sociometry, unlike the deterministic model of Easley and Kleinberg (Easley, Kleinberg, 2010) provides an explicatory understanding of social cohesion in groups and larger social systems. However, the two models provide coherent parallel descriptions of social cohesion and each supports the other.

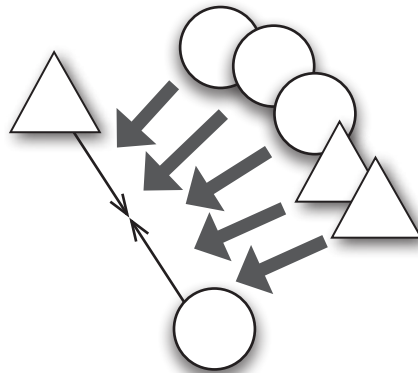


Here the representation of a second man C creates three more triangles (this doubles the number of relationships from three to six). It is evident that A is the only person whom everyone has a positive relationship with (Sociometric

Star), and that everyone except A is rejecting of D (Sociometric Isolate). As the number number of people diagramed expands it becomes clearer how Sociometry provides a diagnostic map that highlights where interventions can be made to increase social cohesion.



In this diagram a man and a woman are interacting in a group and a second woman is affected as she experiences each of the people and the relationship. Role development can occur for each member of the pair, for the relationship and also for the third person who experiences the self-presentation of the pair. This assists us to observe role development as a function of the triangles comprising a group at each point in time.



See how every person in a larger group is affected by the interaction. At this moment in time in the group process each person is in a triangular relationship with this pair, each is affected by the experience that occurs in the pair. Change in even very large groups is affected through the triangulation processes that go on in relation to the interaction of each pair. Leadership development in organisational systems can be affected through group work because of this triangulation of learning as a result of encounter. As people experience the development of relationship through the exercise of relational leadership capacities they are both provoked into a process of

development and observe the developing culture present in the system, these forces enable them to better adjust to the system and provide leadership within it.

This is a whole of system view that puts relationship development at the centre. It emerges through the pioneering work of Moreno, however, Murray Bowen provides a coherent parallel definition of differentiation as it relates to triangular relationships.

### **Bowen's triangling and its close relationship to Moreno's sociometry**

Bowen's focus is on patterns that develop in families in order to defuse anxiety. A key generator of anxiety in families is the perception of either too much closeness or too great a distance in a relationship. The degree of anxiety in any one family will be determined by the current levels of external stress and the sensitivities to particular themes that have been transmitted down the generations. If family members do not have the capacity to think through their responses to relationship dilemmas, but rather react anxiously to perceived emotional demands, a state of chronic anxiety or reactivity may be set in place. The main goal of Bowenian therapy is to reduce chronic anxiety by:

- facilitating awareness of how the emotional system functions; and
- increasing levels of differentiation, where the focus is on making changes for the self rather than on trying to change others.

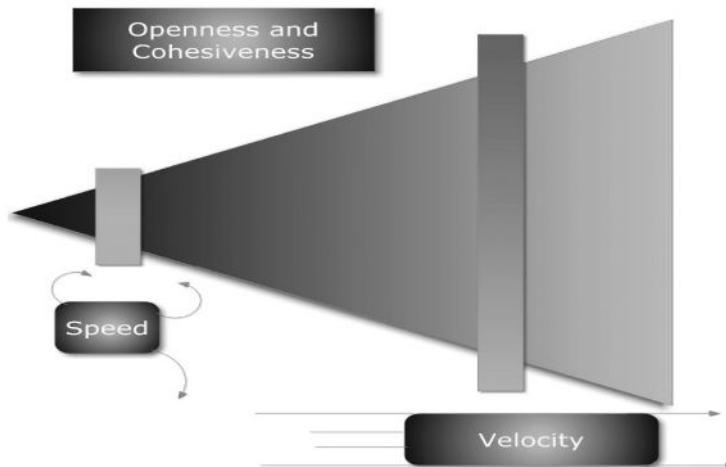
Bowen also describes triangles as the smallest stable relationship unit. The process of triangling is central to his theory. Triangling is said to occur when the inevitable anxiety in a dyad is relieved by involving a vulnerable third party who either takes sides or provides a detour for the anxiety. Triangles are linked closely with Bowen's concept of differentiation, in that the greater the degree of fusion in a relationship, the more heightened is the pull to preserve emotional stability by forming a triangle. Bowen did not suggest that the process of triangling was necessarily dysfunctional, but the concept is a useful way of grasping the notion that the original tension gets acted out elsewhere.

### **Interventions in the whole group for the development of social cohesion**

Opposite is a model I developed that describes the relationship between two dimensions of openness and social cohesion.

When cohesion is low (left hand side of the diagram) the range and type





of interventions a group will tolerate without becoming fragmented is low. If an intervention produces too much openness/exposure it will cause people to experience distress beyond what can be talked about or processed in the group. It will cause a decrease in social cohesion as people move away from each other, split into subgroups, or work to protect themselves or hide their true experience. As group cohesion increases the group members will be able to tolerate and even enjoy greater degrees of openness and this will produce greater cohesion.

This model assists us to consider what interventions will be helpful for a group at any particular point in time. To increase social cohesion, it is necessary to intervene in a manner that requires/produces more openness than is currently present but not so much more that the experience people have cannot be talked about in the group. As the group develops greater cohesion it becomes easier and easier for the group members to maintain positive open relationships with each other under conditions of stress.

A work group has a purpose or objective. Notice that the purpose and function of the group provides a context for the work of the group. The more challenging the purpose the greater the cohesion required to work effectively to achieve it. If the purpose presents little challenge and therefore little stress not much social cohesion is required for the group to become effective enough for the purpose to be achieved.

I consider social cohesion the single most important factor in group effectiveness. In fact, social cohesion is probably the most important factor in creating a healthy productive society because as cohesion develops so too openness develops. As cohesion develops people are more likely to be able to speak about their experience when challenging things happen to them and people are more likely to be able to listen and respond helpfully when people express themselves. People learn and develop greater resilience and

effectiveness in environments where they are able to talk and reflect openly on their experience and these capacities equate directly with the development of social cohesion.

### **Modes of decision-making and the scope for collaboration**

This section deals with how decisions are authorised and the scope for collaboration within this. There are three modes of decision-making; these are autocratic, democratic and consensual. These modes are essentially structural (organisational) forms that assign the power to authorise decision-making and are evident across all kinds of social organisation from the national political to the small group. Autocratic decision making effectively means one person is authorised to decide on behalf of others. Democratic decision-making means the majority decide while consensus decision-making means everyone decides together.

It is not uncommon to see different decision-making modes in place in different parts of an organisation. For example, large stratified organisations are essentially autocratic from the Chief Executive down with complex policies detailing what decisions can be made at which level and what must be escalated upwards, while the governance structures may work democratically or in the case of large corporations by vote per share rather than vote per person.

When organisations work together on a project decision-making is one area in which a working agreement must be reached. This is commonly called a multi-stakeholder situation. Sometimes multi-stakeholder processes are formed because of the need to reach an agreement across many organisations that all will commit to. This appears at first glance to be a consensus situation however very often legislation requires that specific bodies enact certain responsibilities and for this reason different organisations have differing authority in the decision-making process. The central first step in engaging in a facilitated process that includes decision-making is uncovering what mode of decision-making applies to which elements of the decision. Directly related to this is recognising who has what decision-making authority in the process.

Collaboration is best defined as involvement in decision-making. Each decision-making mode can be undertaken on a spectrum from non-collaborative to collaborative however the greater the involvement the greater the collaboration. In this context consensus involves the greatest collaboration by definition, however, a decision which is autocratically authorised can be made collaboratively through the open engagement of all people affected by the decision. Similarly, democratically authorised decisions can be made with a simple vote. Participative democracy is the movement toward using facilitated process to actively involve people affected by a decision in working together to produce a common solution. So, while some decisions are

authorised autocratically or democratically it is possible that the decision that is made has the broad agreement of all present. I call this collaborative decision-making and the associated facilitation processes, collaboration.

The essential key in collaborative decision-making is that the mode of decision-making is known by all involved. The greatest damage to the social cohesion required to work collaboratively occurs when people believe they will decide something when in fact a person, organisation or vote will decide. This amounts to being truthful and open about the nature of the involvement people are being invited into.

Most often social difficulties arise around misunderstandings about who will decide or differences about who gets to decide how the decision will be made. Public consultation is one area in which being clear and overt about who will make which decisions, and how each will be made, is important.

Organisational change is another area where social cohesion is assisted by being clear and overt about who will decide what. Processes which appear to invite the broader staff group into involvement in decision-making while actually retaining decision-making authority cause significant damage to social cohesion, often called damage to trust in this instance. Often the perceived difficulty for the decision-makers is in some vital information being too sensitive to share broadly meaning that broader involvement cannot be meaningful unless a clear overt approach is worked out.

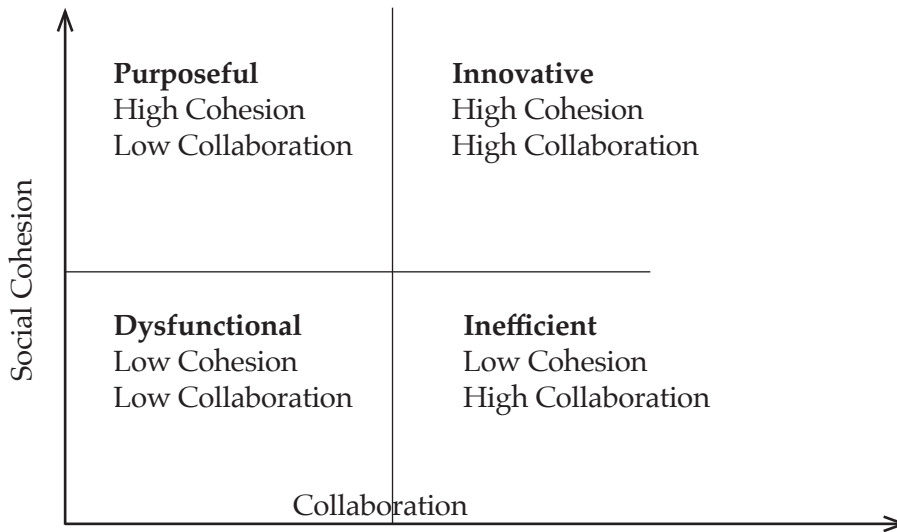
### The illusion of 'buy in'

Many dysfunctional organisational dynamics relate to a confusion of these three decision-making modes. For example, the common managerial phrase "get buy in to a decision" generally indicates the person has an acceptance that social cohesion is important coupled with a belief that if people feel like they decided, they will own the decision someone else has made. Unfortunately, 'getting buy in' is often done by obscuring the decision-making mode and for this reason can lead to an unintended consequence of damage to trust as people feel manipulated. In many organisations this approach is so ingrained that people no longer expect their opinions to have any real meaning to those in positions of power. The solution is not to shift to consensus which is often structurally impossible and brings many other challenges but to get clear about how genuine collaboration can be facilitated. Collaboration is not 'buy in', it is getting clear about exactly what genuine involvement in the decision people can have and then designing a process to assist them in having this involvement.

The decision-making modes are not value based positions. One useful thing about this framework is that it assists us to separate the different forces that act on people as they exist in their organisation. For example, autocratic does not necessarily mean dictatorial, dictatorial includes one person deciding and little or no collaboration and no consideration (or only

utilitarian consideration) of social cohesion. The form that these three factors of, cohesion, collaboration and decision-making take, has a significant effect on the functioning of the organisation and the experience of its people.

### Organisational archetypes arising from the notions of social cohesion, collaboration and decision-making



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL COHESION, COLLABORATION AND DECISION-MAKING

The value of these categories is that they enable us to recognise some classic or archetypal organisational forms.

As we think about how social cohesion, collaboration and decision-making interact in organisational contexts it is evident that they can be placed in a grid. Any specific organisation can then assess where they are on the grid and this can be used to open up a conversation about development. Generalisations can be made about the organisation as a whole as has been done below. However, any specific issue an organisation faces can be plotted and each issue and/or division in an organisation may track differently. Being able to say ‘we have discovered we are dysfunctional in this specific regard’ can be the beginning of an empowering process of change. Similarly, being able to identify that division X is highly innovative we can begin to appreciate how they are operating differently to the rest of the organisation and thus their success can be more easily replicated.

### The Archetypes

Jung compared the archetype (the preformed tendency to create images) to a dry river bed. *The rain gives form and direction to the flow. We name the river,*

*but it is never a thing located any place; it is a form but it is never the same; it is always changing. But it is a river, and we know that rivers ultimately flow into oceans which are symbolic of the unconscious. (Jung, 1936 as cited in Wilmer, 1987)*

## Purposeful

The purposeful category contains at least three organisational forms; Militaristic, Charismatic, Cause Based. These can be differentiated through the way high cohesion is generated.

### *Militaristic organisations*

Organisations that are high cohesion low collaboration may have developed cohesion through a collective perception of an external threat. This is easiest to see in military organisations where the perceived threat is very real. It is also evident in many corporations in which perceptions of threats to a company's market position by a competitor can cause people to pull together and accept a common leader that makes decisions quickly on behalf of the whole. Issues of authority and dependency are managed through a clear chain of command and stratified decision making. Militaristic organisations also include organisations that orient positively to competition and an internal motivation to compete pulls people together and forms a basis for performance. A rugby team is a good example of this kind of organisation. However, you will notice that a rugby team is competing against an opposing team and the dynamic that generates cohesion is the same.

It is worth highlighting that since the development of the militaristic organisation and its associated organisational forms of stratification and chain of command it has been adopted in most organisations around the world and forms the basis of most management thinking. For this reason, most people have primarily experienced being part of organisations of this type, and individuals and societies have become habituated into thinking of militaristic organisation as if it is ubiquitous.

Once set in motion stratified organisations have what I think of as a sociometric quirk. People are sophisticated enough to work out how to fit in and thrive in any given social context, in a stratified system sustaining a positive relationship with senior people is effective. So people tend to privilege the criteria upon which they value their leaders, often discounting criteria that would place them at odds with the leaders. This may be partially a result of coercion but that is not necessarily so. It is also helpful to see that people are participating in a manner that makes sense to them. If they want more influence or to feel less coerced that may be less a systemic issue and more an issue of role development. If you look at it this way then it is evident how the stratified system creates and sustains cohesion over time.

### *Charismatic organisations*

Organisations that are high cohesion low collaboration may have developed cohesion through charismatic leadership. This is in evidence in the evangelical churches where the congregation is highly cohesive in response to a loved leader's representation of God. Issues of authority and dependency may be maximised with child-like followers and a god-like leader as in a cult. It is also possible that the tendency to depend on the charismatic leader provokes a developmental process in the membership that is facilitated within the organisation so that gradually these issues are resolved and the organisation becomes collaborative.

### *Cause based organisations*

Some organisations generate high cohesion via commitment to a cause. Often these organisations also have charismatic leadership and sometimes they are collaborative. Issues of authority and dependency may be projected outwards onto a world that is perceived as needing changing or bad authorities that are perceived as needing to be pulled down.

### *Innovative organisations*

An organisation that is run in a highly collaborative manner where most decisions are made with the involvement of those affected will tend to maximise the members sense of responsibility for their involvement. When there is also high cohesion the membership will subsequently act with greater degrees of autonomy and self-direction. Issues of authority and dependency are less likely to be the focus in this kind of organisation as openness will be high. Because people are involved in thinking about how the whole functions and contributing with others who have different thoughts to them, they will maximise their ability to have unique notions. The capacity to learn and benefit as a result of difference is developed in an organisation of this kind.

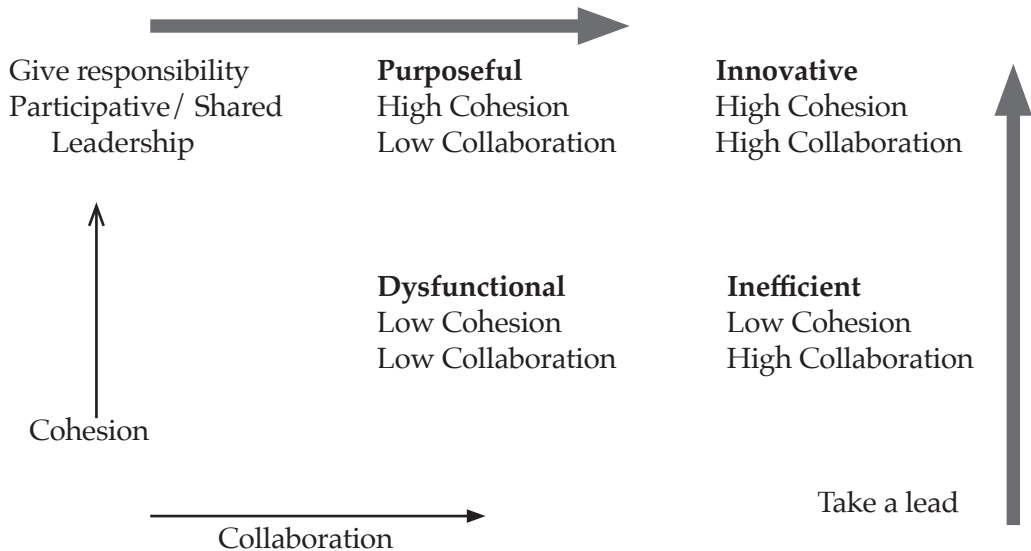
### **Dysfunctional**

Organisations that are dysfunctional will have high staff turnover; cultural surveys will indicate a lack of engagement. Issues of dependency and authority will be expressed as passive resistance to decision-making and change or overt and covert hostility. Bullying may predominate as frustrated and ineffective managers attempt to lift poor performance. The membership may have a profound inability to think for themselves or act in proactive ways. Sometimes social cohesion develops as a revolution against the leadership. The dynamics of revolution have been evident in some countries run as dictatorships, in organisations it is common to see restructure or the breaking away of a subgroup to form a new company.

## Inefficient

There is a common misperception that involvement in decision-making is necessary for social cohesion, or that collaboration necessarily produces high social cohesion. Organisations are sometimes structured to make decisions by consensus for this reason. When social cohesion is low working to make decisions by consensus is very slow because genuine consensus involves the power of veto and people who do not have enough trust to be open with each other will tend to exercise this right because they are frightened that their point of view will not be taken into account by others (this can result in a kind of reversion to autocratic functioning). Also, when social cohesion is low people have more difficulty valuing difference and this includes recognising when content experts need to have a greater input in the outcome of a decision. Issues of authority and dependency tend to be responded to with endless circular conversation in the absence of strong respectful leadership.

## Personal authority and organisational leadership



Perhaps counter-intuitively, at the largest level of meaning-making when social cohesion is low the social system benefits most from strong respectful leadership, including centralised decision-making what Sandra Turner termed 'Good Authority' (personal communication). On the other hand, when social cohesion is high, innovation will best be served through shared leadership. However strong leadership and centralised decision-making tend to make evident authority and dependency dynamics in the group in the areas where there is limited differentiation in the membership. Rather than perceiving the leadership style as problematic these archetypes assist us to perceive a relationship between leadership and the development of

differentiation (as defined by Bowen and Moreno) which produces greater capacity across the membership to sustain positive relationships under conditions of stress.

Once we can think about social cohesion, collaboration and decision-making modes as separate forces that interact, issues to do with the effects of the exercising of power can be more easily understood. This paper has been highlighting that there is a strong relationship between decision-making, the exercising of power, social cohesion and personal issues to do with reactions to authority, including perceptions of power. The tendency to depend on those that exercise power and the need to trust those that exercise power on our behalf is central to these issues and the effectiveness of organisations. It has been presented that addressing the issues of differentiation and the development of effective role functioning is central in producing organisational effectiveness.

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**Hamish Brown** began a journey as organisational facilitator in the same year he began training as a psychodramatist. Later he completed a Masters Degree in Dispute Resolution and then completed his certification as a psychodramatist. In 2008 he founded Phoenix Facilitation with some colleagues. Phoenix Facilitation is a company specialising in applying Morenian methods in organisational contexts.