

# Integration of Organisation Theory

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These papers were written as one of the written requirements for assessment as a sociodramatist. I live with my partner John and daughter Milly in a town called St Arnaud which is located at the edge of Nelson Lakes National Park. Criss-crossed through the park is a network of mountain huts which are used by trampers. It is the organisation of people in two of these mountain huts which I have used to describe the characteristics of open systems in the first paper. In the second paper I have described my analysis and interventions with the staff of a veterinary clinic.

## *Part A*

### Analysis of an Open System

This weekend I walked from Mt Robert carpark to Mount Angelus and returned via Hukere Stream to Lakehead staying at Bushline Hut and Angelus Hut.

Department of Conservation mountain huts operate as open systems in that there are no restrictions to who comes and goes. Trampers who do come are free to come and go at will. Although there is a voluntary payment system at DOC mountain huts – the fact of whether you have paid or not does not affect your right to enter the hut and stay in it. One factor which does however affect the system being open is the weather. People are free to walk out into bad conditions but more than often they remain in the



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hut until it is safe enough to proceed. Other members of the hut system have no authority to control the comings and goings of others who are not in their party. A trumper can, if they are prepared, choose to sleep in a tent or out in the cold in preference to staying in the hut. *One of the attributes of an open system is that members are free to come and go when they choose.*

## **In an Open System You Cannot Control the Membership**

The weekend we chose to go to Angelus Hut coincided with a long planned trip by local women along the same route. St Arnaud is a tiny village so it soon got around that we were going on the same weekend. I will mention two comments made to me before the trip with respect to the characteristics of open systems. Delia said to me: "Well I suppose the hut is big enough" and the comment from Annie was: "and you're bringing a MAN!" Some of the women were clearly looking forward to an all-women group with people they felt comfortable with and it was likely that they did not want John or I to be there at all.

One of the attributes of an open system is that members are thrown together sometimes against their will. Members do not have any choice as to who they are to be with – this is not under their control. They are forced to accept whoever turns up. However if it is too uncomfortable they are free to leave.

In this situation the two parties were in close proximity to one another – sharing eating, sleeping and socialising space. It is ironic that in an open system you may indeed end up spending intimate space with people who you would not normally choose on this criteria. I will give some examples of this. A couple goes up to Bushline Hut with expectations of a quiet night together in the hills. When they arrive they find 30 noisy high school students in residence. Or imagine bumping into your ex-lover in the supermarket with his/her new partner. *In open systems you cannot control or predict who else will be in the system and by and large you have to get on with them, put up with them, or leave.*

## **What is Allowed in an Open System**

The atmosphere when we arrived was welcoming. Although in an open system it is quite possible to ignore new-comers, or even be hostile to them (which happens if the hut is already full), on this occasion we received two polite hellos and curious looks from others.

*Introductions or other social niceties or rituals are not demanded of members in an open system.* Quite quickly John was talking to other men in the hut about their proposed route, the weather and where they had come from. Conversation centred around the various experiences of being in the mountains, tramping routes, gear, weather and huts. At one point John was talking intensely to a young man and I was moved to ask: "Do you know each other?" I was surprised to find that they had never met before. *This led to the conclusion that it is possible to get quite close to someone in an open system, that open systems do not lack intimacy. It is also possible, however, in the same system to ignore everyone and keep entirely to yourself.*

In both huts there were people with whom we did not exchange words with all evening. Most of those who were there were in friendship or family subgroups. Only one person had come alone. Most subgroups were flexible and while there was some movement between the groups by some individuals, in the case of others they never ventured out of the group they arrived with. A subgroup of four St Arnaud women left 'their' table and joined John and I for short periods, but most remained within their party. Later we joined them for talking and cards and we were easily accepted.

I noticed something interesting that is worth considering in the

context of an open system. When we reached Bushline Hut, John found that Rotoiti Lodge's private cupboard containing billies, stoves and sleeping bags had been broken into, and all the gear was gone. We began an animated conversation which had both the elements of privacy (in that we were acting as if no-one else was interested or involved) and at the same time was totally public (in that everyone had no choice but to listen in, and be warmed up to what we were talking about.) We acted as if the others were not listening, and they also acted as if they weren't hearing or weren't interested. The other people in the hut had made the conclusion that this was a private dialogue. I was surprised that no-one joined in. I concluded that there are only certain subjects which are public property in the culture of mountain huts – i.e. destinations, weather, maps, routes, gear, and food. When these subjects were raised anyone could join in without the need to meta communicate. For instance, John began talking to one person about Bushline Hut burning down 2 years ago. This generated quite a bit of interest from other people who were listening in, who without any meta communication joined in on the conversation. On other subjects the group norms created a culture of discretion and polite distancing. In an open system there is a collective culture which dictates those subjects which are public free-for-alls and those which are private. I will give an example of this attribute of an open system. At the greengrocers last week I was showing a girl two skinks which I

had caught in a jar. Two women in the queue who were strangers to me piped up in a superior way saying: "They are everywhere – there are thousands of them around" – as if to say "Why are you talking about a lousy skink". I remember being



shocked by their nosiness and felt like saying: "Mind your own business – this is between me and my friend.

In an open system there aren't the same controls on speaking that there are in closed systems. People are free to be rude, nosy, obnoxious and bad mannered. The restrictions typical of closed systems around who should speak and when, are lifted. What is seen as inappropriate, rude, going above your station or lack of social graces in a closed system, is allowed in an open system.

I noticed that Jerry had the freedom to alternate between writing a letter, joining the map and compass study, talking, eating or going off to bed all according to his own warm up. *In an open system a person can follow their own warm up and do whatever they like in their own timing. They are not restricted by the rules, or protocols that influence members of closed systems. The greatest restriction in an open system is that of the lack of spontaneity and expression.*



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## **Roles in the Open System**

In an open system certain roles and role relationships get going and other roles become very difficult to maintain. The roles demonstrated *within* parties were to do with developing friendship and intimacy; COMPANION, COACH, PLAYMATE, AFFIRMER. However, the roles *between* parties were those of INFORMATION GIVER, INFORMATION RECEIVER, YARN SWAPPER, BRAGGER and MOUNTAIN GUIDE OF THE YEAR. There were many “been there done that” conversations which left me bored and irritated due to the symmetrical role system, and the lack of intimacy it produced. I was noticing that certain roles were

underdeveloped such as social investigator, and metacommunicator. There was little genuine and empathic interest in the other person displayed. Active listening was the precursor to self-listening. I will give an example of this in relation to a conversation I had with a man who had left his 6 month old baby at home with his wife because the child was too little to bring into the hills. I found myself biting my lips with some difficulty, because I was bursting to be a SUPERIOR BRAGGER, by telling him that we had come up to Angelus in the winter with our daughter Milly when she was only 9 weeks old. Instead I became a social investigator and found out a little more about his value system. The over-use of the role of TELLER OF BEST MOUNTAIN

STORY OF THE YEAR produced a competitive and repetitive dynamic. In contrast to me, John became stimulated by the information which is passed around. He adds the information to his reservoir of knowledge about the hills of NZ and uses it to stay alive. John enters into this culture with an animation and enthusiasm that he often lacks in other social gatherings.

### **Conclusions**

Open systems are those systems where people are free to come and go at will. People cannot control the membership of open systems and they are forced to accept whoever turns up or leave. In an open system there are few external rules or protocols affecting how people behave. There is a free choice to do as they please. The main restrictions placed on people come from the cultural norms and belief systems that they bring with them around expressiveness. The roles that develop between party members differ from those enacted within the party itself. Roles between parties are mostly to do with information giver and receiver to do with routes, weather and gear. Roles within parties were about sharing an adventure with friends.

## ***Part B***

# **Analysis of a Closed System**

### **Introduction**

The organisation analysed is typical of many small scale professional partnerships such as accountants, doctors, lawyers, veterinary surgeons and engineers who come together to provide a service primarily for profit. In this scenario the partnership began in 1983 with three partners and today five partners employ four 'lay' staff. The growth of business has meant that the informal 'family' business structures which worked well for years, are now inadequate. The partners have not attended to their relationships, direct confrontation over difficulties is avoided, and there is a lack of group cohesion. There is a growing disharmony in the relationships between professional and 'lay' staff resulting in an unhappy and grumpy atmosphere. Large gaps are also found in managing staff, leadership and decision making, and quality assurance.

For the purposes of publishing this paper I have re-named the organisation the Ocean Legal Centre. Paragraphs in italics signify conclusions I have made about closed systems from the observation and analysis.

I will describe the Ocean Legal Centre as an example of an organisation that operates as a closed system. It is closed on the basis that the attendance of members is based on certain criteria, i.e. partnership agreement, employment contracts and job descriptions. Staff are under

expectations to stay at work for specified hours, to work according to their job descriptions, and to follow their employers instructions. Staff and partners are not able to come and go from the workplace at will.

Furthermore partners and staff are expected to show loyalty to the organisation and work toward making it profitable.

I will conclude by identifying the attributes of a closed system as discovered through analysing the Ocean Legal Centre.

*A closed system is one where the membership is restricted and members are unable to come and go at will.*

## Background

George, a partner in the practice had become aware of staff complaints and illness. He put the problem down to the 'stress' due to high demands on the professional staff. George recommended to his partners that my company, Conflict Management Ltd, conduct an evening with the purpose of *'having a full discussion about how the workplace is operating from everyone's viewpoint.'*

This analysis is the result of four meetings.

1. The first was a preliminary interview with George where I defined the purpose of our work, and asked questions about the sociometry of the firm, decision making, leadership and management structures operating.
2. This was followed by a meeting with the staff and partners as a group. The purpose of this meeting was to identify those forces that assisted the team to work well together, and those forces that work against teamwork, and to put into place any changes that would improve the group's functioning. During

the evening the staff set out sociograms of the team, they role reversed with members of the team, and talked directly to each other about what is working in their communication and what is troubling them in their communication. Decisions were made to improve team cohesion and communication.

3. Next we met with the 'lay' staff to get an open system of communication going amongst themselves and between them and their bosses.
4. We have also since worked with the partners to improve their management structure and define their roles and responsibilities.

## People in the Organisation

Four partners operate two Legal Centres, one based in the suburb of Totara, and the other in Riverville. George has sole charge of Totara Legal Centre with a legal secretary and office worker. The three other partners Susan, Alan and Liam work at Riverville Legal Centre with three 'lay' staff. Susan, George and Alan have worked together for years, and for the last seven years they have operated the business partnership. Liam was bought in as a 'new' partner two years ago. Gina was employed as an office worker at Riverville Legal Centre seven years ago when the new partnership began. Two years ago she was joined by Nita who works as a legal secretary and Sally who is a receptionist. Recently they have employed another school leaver part time office assistant.

## How the Work Load is Managed

The lawyers believe because they share profits they should be equally involved in all aspects of managing

the business. In reality some lawyers work harder than others. Liam is resentful that he does more work than Alan and that he is often doing the time consuming cases which take him outside normal hours. Susan and

*In an open system members look more broadly for solutions to the inner conflicts produced by doing a distasteful task or being bored. They are not bound to work according to a job description, they can go elsewhere, direct their requests to openly helpful people, refuse to do something and chose to do those things that they enjoy. There is more free choice in an open system.*

George also think that Alan is selfish, and selective about his work. They think he does only those tasks he likes best, thereby avoiding the more time consuming case loads. Alan is defensive about this because he thinks that his work with the smaller clients is equally difficult and important. He holds the belief that each lawyer should do what they are confident to do, and what they have the experience to do.

*These tensions of equal pay for equal work are influenced by the fact that this is a small closed system*

*where decisions about who does what are not allocated according to what each person naturally warms up to, but by a system of fairness, shoulds and oughts. This causes inner tension which in a closed system is coped with by avoidance, over burdening of unwilling people, and a consequent emphasis on fairness, justice and equality.*

A further example of how, in a closed system, the natural warm up of individuals is over-ruled by job requirements is evidenced by how the office staff avoided reception. Up until recently the job descriptions of the 'lay' staff were written in a general way so that each staff member was able to do the work of each other. The office workers drift away from the front desk leaving phones ringing for inordinate lengths of time because they do not like to interrupt the lawyers who are often grumpy and unapproachable. The receptionists direct the calls to the lawyer they perceive to be most 'receptive'. Liam is consistently the most approachable and therefore the office staff direct most of the telephone enquiries to him. This further increases his workload and frustration. On one day when all the lawyers were busy and irritable, the office staff drew straws to choosing who would approach a lawyer.

*In an open system members look more broadly for solutions to the inner conflicts produced by doing a distasteful task or being bored. They are not bound to work according to a job description, they can go elsewhere, direct their requests to openly helpful people, refuse to do something and chose to do those things that they enjoy. There is more free choice in an open system. In a closed system, members employ tactics of avoidance, subversion or subterfuge in order to do the work*

*they find most enjoyable or avoid work they dislike.*

## **How Conflict is Dealt with Amongst Partners**

The professional staff have difficulty in relating to each other particularly regarding sensitive issues like the different hourly contributions Alan makes to the business and how much time partners are working in lunch hours, evenings and weekends. Susan in particular withdraws from direct confrontation with Alan and complains to George and other lay staff about his behaviour. Susan and George are afraid of the unpleasantness that may result if they tell Alan clearly what they are upset about. When George (on behalf of Susan) confronted Alan some years ago, tempers got hot and Alan made the counter accusation that Susan was the slack one. Since then George and Susan are both guarded and indirect with Alan. In short they avoid the tricky issues.

*This complaining, scapegoating, nit picking and fear of confrontation is typical of a closed system. In an open system there is less fear of open communication. In a closed system there is fear and caution. In an open system where people can come and go at will there is less concern about offending someone. For instance at a taxi stand I have seen people become quite abusive of each other. This pussy footing around each other for fear of causing offence is an attribute of a closed system. Conflict is dealt with by means of winners and losers, avoidance, accommodation, back stabbing or complaining.*

## **How Conflict is Dealt with Amongst Staff**

Gina by virtue of her age and experience considers herself the

unofficial office 'senior'. Nita and Sally are twenty or so years her junior. Nita and Sally have a strong relationship with one another making a subgroup of two who communicate easily. This leaves Gina isolated. Gina criticises the two other women for being inefficient and slack, and distances herself from them – an interesting mirror of the tensions amongst the partners described earlier. The two younger women find Gina difficult, bossy, unhelpful, superior, defensive and territorial.

*In a closed system complaints generate counter complaints – the problem is often to do with someone else. Complaints appear to be circular and have the effect of fragmenting the team and causing paranoia and distrust.*

A particular complaint was that Gina doesn't show others how to use the computer systems, and is obstructive when asked for assistance. In a closed system people seek limited solutions to these sorts of difficulties. In an open system Sally might seek computer training elsewhere or look further afield for help. In this closed system she looks only to Gina to teach her and becomes frustrated when Gina does not co-operate.

Gina's abilities are turned against her co-workers making a competitive dynamic. She exercises her authority by control, superiority and put downs.

*In a closed system territories get defined and protected and the growing abilities of co-workers are seen as a threat to the ownership of the territory. In an open system there is greater access to a wide range of people and members can seek people who show respect for achievements. Therefore there is not such a need to guard or jealously protect territory.*



## **How the Lawyers Respond to Pressure**

The lawyers are experiencing an increasing work load, cramped working conditions, more staff to organise, increasing complexity in the market, and the need to be constantly available to clients. Lawyers compete to use computer terminals to access files. They are also pressured by the fact that a new legal practice is soon to be opened nearby by a competitor. Each lawyer responds to the challenge differently. Liam warms up to being an overburdened work horse then gets withdrawn and sullen. He eats his lunch in the car with the windows wound up. He harbours resentment toward Alan. George and Susan sympathise with him. They all withdraw from Alan. George becomes the distant worried social worker who listens to everyone's problems. Alan becomes a grumpy malingerer who avoids work by arguing that he hasn't the experience to take on the large clients.

There is an atmosphere of being on the back foot with respect to new demands – that events are overtaking the partners and they cannot keep up. When the situation gets overwhelming one of the lawyers (usually George) will rise up at a meeting to meet the challenge and attempt to pull the others out of the abyss. Good intentions are forged, quick decisions are made, solutions found and for a short time all is well. George warms up to being a visionary/Messiah who will resolve the problems for once and for all. Susan becomes an over-enthusiastic busy bee. Alan reluctantly resolves to be more involved but keeps himself apart. Liam enters into the plan enthusiastically but with an edge of cynicism. They end up with a long list

of things to do, are very enthusiastic for a while, and then as the day to day pressure increases they get hopeless and the good intentions vanish.

This rising up and giving up causes considerable internal pressure, which the lawyers describe as 'stress'. When this pattern repeats itself over a period of time it produces lack of motivation, nit-picking, scapegoating and a general air of hopelessness, alternating with determined effort. In meetings there is a constant warming up and warming down, as someone would rise up to express an idea, only to lose it as soon as someone rose up with a new idea. Ideas at meetings are like balloons constantly rising and bursting.

*Due to the fact that the lawyers are in a closed system they are bound to stay there and sort it out. The alternative would be considerable financial and professional loss. In an open system the individuals would have more freedom to come and go at will and form other relationships which produce spontaneity.*

## **How the Staff Deal with Pressure**

The lay staff feel the pressure of either not having any direction, or having too much direction from too many bosses. Up until recently they have not had employment contracts or job descriptions. They have had four bosses making it difficult to get answers to simple staff issues such as holidays. In response to the external and internal pressure described above, the lay staff alternate between loyalty, and wanting to leave. There will be a spate of illness and unhappiness followed by enthusiasm for the organisation. Nita gets to be worried and anxious about her future, and Gina gets possessive about her territory. Sally complains

about Gina to George and Nita. They all seek strong and consistent leadership in the lawyers, but fail to accept their own authority. When there is a heavy workload they approach the lawyers with reluctance. They withdraw from both Alan and Liam, and pussy foot around Susan. They do not take the lead easily and are constantly referential to the lawyers. This causes considerable frustration in both the lay staff and the lawyers.

*In this closed system some people are designated leader while others are subordinate. Subordinates can only look to those designated 'leader' for guidance and authority. The roles are not exchangeable or flexible so that a subordinate would not naturally exercise leadership in situations when it is called for. In an open system there is less rigidly defined roles. You can look many places for leadership, reject leadership and exercise your own ability to lead and manage.*

### **Sociometric Links**

George has a central sociometric position in the organisation based on his roles of social worker, visionary, and organiser. In his position of sole charge of the Ocean Legal Centre he is in a unique position to observe his colleagues and to hear about the difficulties in Riverville. He takes the role of watchful concerned father who steps in at times to sort things out.

Gina has weak links with all staff except Alan. Alan's only positive relationship in the organisation is with Gina. They have good discussions. When put in the context of the links the professionals have with each other the significance of the relationship between Alan and Gina becomes clear. They are in a sub-group of companions in a world

of people who don't understand or appreciate them. They are isolated from the rest of the staff on the basis of being misunderstood, different from, and at odds with the others. In this organisation two people with weak links with others make strong links with each other.

*Two people forming a sub-grouping like this is more likely to occur in a closed system than an open one. In a closed system staff seek allies and compatriots within the organisation. In an open system one could seek understanding and companionship from other people outside the organisation.*

### **Leadership and Decision Making**

The blocks in the communication are exacerbated by the fact that the lawyers have partners meeting as infrequently as three monthly. These meetings are, according to George, the correct forum to make decisions that affect the partnership. However, it is not uncommon for decisions to be made unilaterally by one partner without consultation with the others. No one lawyer takes responsibility for convening meetings or running meetings. There is no partner responsible for staff issues. The partners demonstrated their discomfort with taking leadership by acting as if they do not want to take the lead. Making tentative suggestions is common, and there is a lack of follow through. Consequently decision making is weakened and peer confidence does not build.

*This dynamic is influenced by the fact that this is a small closed system where showing initiative is suspect and taking the lead may be judged as superior behaviour. Members do not act in a self directed way or become authorities and the group gets pulled down to the lowest level of*

*operating. In an open system those with leadership ability come forward to lead, or are sought out to lead by others in the system. There is much more allowing of people to lead and show initiative.*

## **Conclusion**

Ocean Legal Centre is a closed system based on the fact that people are not free to come and go at will. By analysing the organisation I have identified certain attributes of a closed system.

## **Attributes of a Closed System**

1. The tensions between what one has to do as part of one's job and what one would like to do is resolved by some members using tactics of subversion, avoidance and malingering and others becoming overburdened. Moral issues such as fairness of contribution and equality become much discussed topics. There is complaining about laziness, selfishness and zealousness.
2. There is concern that direct confrontation will cause offence and result in a fight. Conflicting styles of work and work values are dealt with by indirect complaining, scapegoating, nit-picking, avoidance (or pussy-footing around), back-stabbing, triangling, or ganging up. This results in a competitive fragmented team, where there is an atmosphere of paranoia and distrust.
3. Members seek solutions within the closed system to problems they face and come up with a paucity of options. Solutions become in-grown and often the simple solution is the preferred one. Territory is to be guarded jealously because it is believed

that here are limited resources which cannot go around everyone. Therefore all members cannot get their needs met within the system.

4. Self directedness is not encouraged. Instead leadership is exercised by either rising up, taking control and being superior alternating with a giving up and hopelessness.

Roles such as leader/subordinate are inflexible regardless of the natural warm up which exists. Those who take initiative are either suspect (acting in a superior way), or expected to be the saviour.