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Freedom at work

Aim of blog

The purpose of this blog is to report on a discovery from social action research on how we do what we do when we live and work well together.

Social action researching

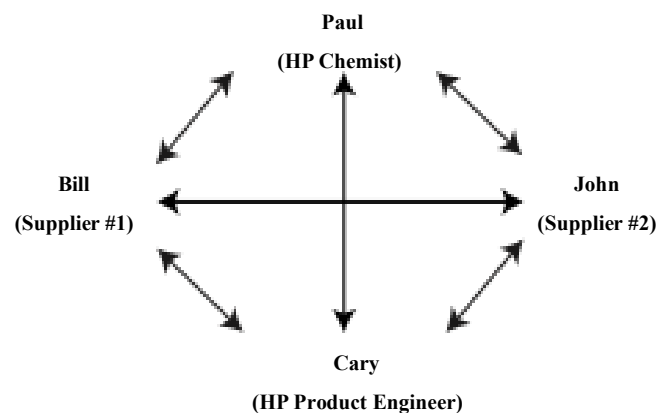
Humberto Maturana explained living systems as having both *structure* and *organization*.

Structure is the connections between the components. Think of this as the plumbing in a house.

Then there is organization, the water flowing through the house, and that which gives the system its identity. It's what we experience when we connect to the system.

For example, this is the structure of a supply chain network connecting HP Inkjet to its vendors.

And what does this tell us? It tells us a little about the cohesion of the network structure. The arrows pointing show direction. For example, Paul lists Bill as a collaborator (Paul -> Bill) and Bill lists Paul as a collaborator



(Paul ⇔ Bill). But a collaborator in what? How can we answer this? We answer this by listening to Paul, Bill, Cary and John explain how they do what they do, in this case, developing new knowledge of materials compatibility used to produce HP Inkjet cartridges [1]. It is through listening, that I understand the organization of the supply chain system and its impact on productivity. This network decreased new product development by fifteen weeks at a time inkjet printing earned a staggering \$926 million compared to \$490 million during the same quarter in the previous year [2].

Going back to Humberto Maturana, he explained how the structure of a system could change while the organization of a system was conserved. This led him to conclude that organization is invariant in systems. In the case of HP, the network of elastomer scientists and engineers discovering new material compatibilities continued to collaborate until their discoveries were successfully applied to new inkjet cartridges.

My social action research studied *structure* [3] and *organization* [4] of a network of employees, some with developmental disabilities working in Oregon manufacturing settings. New federal policies were just being put into practice and our data showed us how employees organized social support networks that dramatically improved the productivity and wellbeing of new employees [5, 6]. The manufacturing workers created their own onboarding process, while building telecommunications equipment. Humberto's explanations of living systems having structure and organization coincided with my social action research data. Humberto and I shared many coincidences. Another was his paper on intelligence published in his Laboratory of

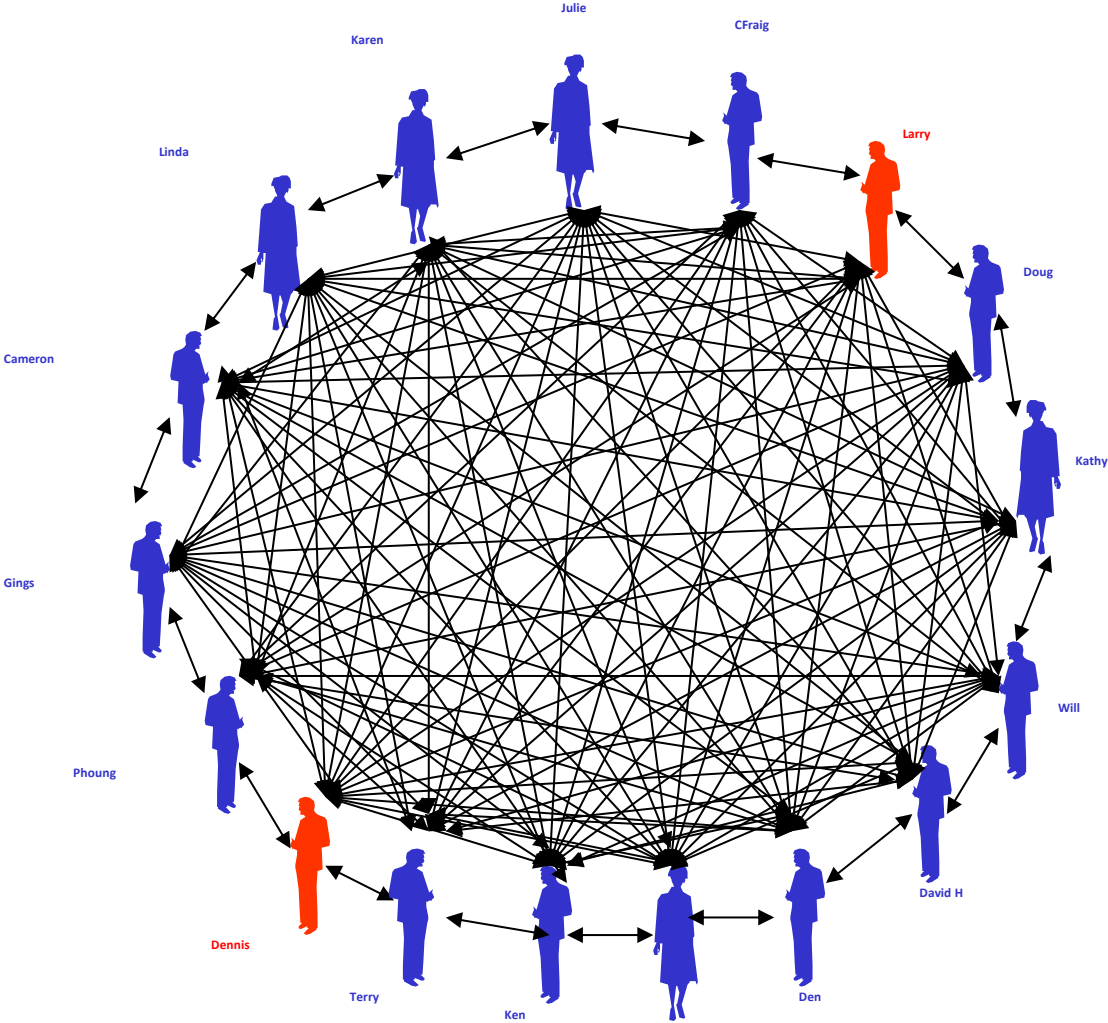
Experimental Epistemology at University of Chile. He and his co-author write that intelligence cannot be measured, nor can it be used for racial, social or educational discrimination because it is not a discrete property [7]. Their paper was published the same year I was collaborating with the University of Oregon's Center on Human Development and was hiring people who lived at risk of losing their life in state run institutions. IQ tests were used to remove people from their community without their consent and the community-based research I was practicing proved the theory of IQ wrong, and, that people held in abysmal conditions could learn sophisticated work tasks and be productive citizens. In 1980, seventeen years before we met in Brazil, we were both making the same claim – intelligence cannot be measured nor used to bring pain and suffering to others.

Social structure

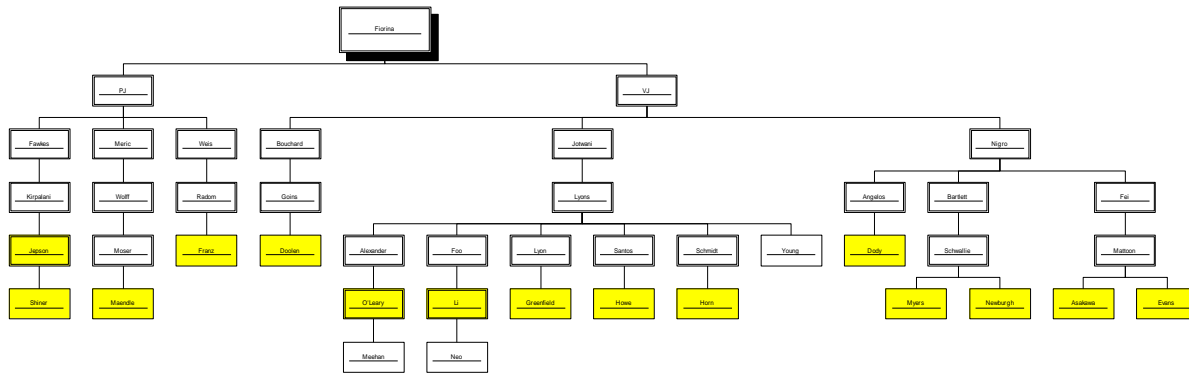
Perhaps the most well-known definition of organizational *structure* is the organization chart, a pyramid organized by function and rank. This is a tremendous simplification of what is actually going on. My research at NEC America Oregon Plant, proved that there are networks of networks of constantly changing conversations [8]. Some are causal greetings, others, learning networks and still others social support networks. These constantly changing networks can be shallow or cohesive. My particular interest is in the social network structure that brings forth wellbeing and value.

I have practiced and developed social action research in many companies around the world and the social network structure of collaboration, high performance and productivity is one where

everyone sees each other as a collaborator in working well together and producing value productively.



These networks span both rank and function (yellow shading) such as this social capital network of HP Inkjet engineers and managers improving quality.



Coherences

Humberto once said to me, *“Science is the explanation of the coherences of our daily living with the coherences of our daily living.”* To this he might add, while meeting the criteria of validity of the explanation put forth by the scientist. This had me wonder. What are coherences? I have concluded that coherences are regularities arising from our daily living. We all recognize them when they appear to us, like the first flowers of spring.

Understanding social coherences of living and working well together involves listening without judgement, anticipation, demands or analysis. It is a quality of listening to one person after another reflect on the question how do you do what you do when you are living and working well together? Some might call this qualitative research. Notes taken by the listener are shared with those they listened to meeting the criteria of validation. Once the listening is complete, all notes are read and re-read and coherences or regularities in the answer to the social action research question are revealed. These coherences define the systems’ *organization*.

Freedom and autonomy

I have studied coherences in 11 companies located in the US, Japan, Puerto Rico, Chile, Sweden, the UK, Pakistan, and China. Most organizations were scientific and engineering oriented. The most frequent answer to my question about working well together is that employees and managers had *freedom and autonomy*. The social action research participants answering in this way:

- *Some managers are micro managers but Greg lets us go.* Cholestech, Hayward, Ca
- *I've never felt micro-managed here. There is trust that you are here to do your best and nobody has to watch over you. You could pick any moment in any day and see exactly what I am talking about.* Biosite, San Diego, Ca
- *Tim's point was that if you are profitable you have autonomy and if you are not you lose your autonomy.* Free and Clear, Seattle, Wa
- *There's not the barriers of the large corporations and we've given our employees the freedom to fix problems.* Cascade Medical Center, Cascade, Id
- *There is truly a community here. It doesn't feel like a hierarchy. There are personal connections instead of hierarchy. We can talk to anyone at any time and that is freeing.*
Hyphn, Portland, Or

How does freedom and autonomy arise at work?

At the Society for Organizational Learnings 1st annual meeting at Amherst, Ma. Humberto offered this explanation.

Besides language, there is another peculiarity about human beings, namely that we are loving animals. Now I know that we kill each other and do all those horrible things, but if you look at the story of the transformation of Shell Oil, or other similar transformations, you will see that it is a story of love. The problems of Shell Oil were solved through love, not through competition, not through fighting, not through authority. They were solved through something very, very different. They were solved through the only emotion that expands intelligent behavior. They were solved through the only emotion that expands creativity as in this emotion there is freedom for creativity. The emotion is love. Love expands intelligence and enables creativity. Love returns autonomy, and as it returns autonomy, it returns responsibility and freedom in us. [9]

Humberto, with his co-author Gerda Verden-Zoller described the evolution of human history arising from the emotion of love.

What we distinguish in daily life as we distinguish emotions are kinds of relational behaviors, not particular doings. And what we connote biologically as we speak of emotions referring to ourselves or to other animals, are body dynamic dispositions (involving the nervous system and the whole body) that determine what we or they can do or not do, in what relations we or they can enter or not enter, at any moment. As a result, different emotions can be fully characterized as different domains of relational behaviors or as dynamic body dispositions for relational behaviors. For example, love is the domain of those behaviors or dynamic body dispositions through which another arises as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself, aggression is the domain of

those behaviors or dynamic body dispositions through which another is denied as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself, and fear is the domain of those behaviors or dynamic body dispositions through which one moves away from the circumstances in which one finds oneself. In these circumstances, love is not a virtue, or something special, it simply is a biological phenomenon as the domain of those behaviors through which social life arises and is conserved; it is simply the biological dynamics that constitutes trust and mutual acceptance in body and spiritual relations of nearness and intimacy [10].

If freedom is the most frequent coherence discovered in social action research, the second most frequent coherence is *caring for each other* followed by *openness, communication and being recognized*.

Love needs not to be learned, it can be allowed to be or it can be denied, but needs not to be learned, because it is our biological fundament and the only basis for the conservation of our human beingness as well as our well being. Love is not a virtue, indeed love is nothing special, it is only the fundament of our human existence as the kind of primates that we are as human beings. At difference from love, aggression needs to be cultivated or it fades away as we meet each other in the simplicity of our humanness. [10]

Where and when does freedom and autonomy arise at work?

Accepting Humberto and Gerda's explanation we can answer the question, *How does freedom and autonomy arise at work?* Loving is the nature of our humanness and the

foundation of our social relational behaviors. It does not need to be taught or transformed into some kind of new age organizational theory, because love is not a theory but the relational behavior of living and working well together, and the source of innovation, productivity, and high performance.

Now we have a new question. Where and when does freedom and autonomy arise at work? Is it a designed space? In the same Scarborough, Maine lab that invented the H1N1 diagnostic device, and later, the COVID diagnostic device, research scientists answered this question. When asked how they work well together they answered, *"There's always cake."* I had watched the scientists meet while eating cake. This was the space where they all talked casually about their results and next experimental steps. Having cake together, was the space where they collectively coordinated their work tasks. You see, they occupied two spaces. The first space was physical, the laboratory, individual cubes, and a table for the cake. The second space was a psychic space arising in a network of conversations where everyone accepted everyone else as a collaborator. This tells us that love occurs when it is free to occur in most any physical setting such as coffee and tea shops, company social activities, lunchrooms, school playgrounds, and wherever people are free to collaborate and coordinate their collective actions together. Because love is an emotion that comes naturally to us, love does not need an teacher, consultant, scientist, or a theory, model, framework, or algorithm. Love occurs not when we explain love to others but, as Humberto Maturana has said, when we let others appear as they wish to appear in our daily living in our daily living.

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