Organizational Paradigms

Throughout human history the living system of human organization has created many ways of organizing itself to get work done. We notice that these ways of working together can be captured within four organizational paradigms.

Each of these paradigms is alive and familiar to us, and each has its strengths and weaknesses.

When we are designing process, projects and organizations, it is worth paying attention to the different roles of these paradigms so that they can be used wisely.

Circle – Our oldest organizational form. In a circle, people come together equally to provide a multiplicity of perspectives on something. Circles are powerful for reflection, for harnessing collective insight and for making decisions. To work, people in circles need to have equal access to information, power and responsibility.

Hierarchy (the triangle) – Hierarchy is another ancient form. When things need to get done and someone has more responsibility than others, hierarchy is an efficient way to channel action. In a small and dynamic hierarchy, a leader (example Project lead) is assisted by others. The others don't need to have the same information as the leader in order to do the work. Someone(s) has the role of coordinating the work.

Bureaucracy – Despite its bad rap, the gift of the bureaucracy is that it can bring stability and efficient ways of distributing resources. Bureaucracies that work well act like irrigation systems, ensuring that all parts of an organization are “watered” and that resources don't flow too fast. To slow down the flow, bureaucracies retain accountabilities from the bottom to the top in exchange for a flow of resources from the top down. This form, used wisely, is a brilliant adaptation of the way energy flows in a natural system.

Network – Networks are formed by actors who actively choose to be in relationships with others. Actors are autonomous and only engage in relationships that mutually serve partners. Networks are incredibly fast ways to organize complexity. In nature the network is the prevalent form of sustainability. Increasingly, human networks are becoming the prevalent form of organizing on the planet led and abetted by the internet. Networks thrive when sharing and reciprocity is present.

Huge amounts of work can get done very efficiently by networks, because actors can find exactly the partners they need for any given time.

The Fifth Paradigm – What could the next paradigm in human systems be? How will we integrate these four systems in a post-networked world? As we work with each of these four paradigms, we get hints about what it might be like to work at the next stage of human evolution.