

What is an organization? Why study organization theory?

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In the text “Organization Theory,” author Mary Jo Hatch (1997) uses the word organization in two ways: first, she refers the concept of organization as a broad descriptor (e.g. a library might use the Dewey Decimal System for its “organization” schema), and second as a reference to associations, institutions, businesses or other groups with a specific purpose (e.g. the library *is* an organization). For this essay, we are interested in defining the latter usage. As she points out in her introduction, organizational theorists are not unified in their approach to or understanding of organizations. There are many different examples that illustrate the evolution of organizational theories. However, Hatch (1997) proposes that it is worthwhile to study these theories because they not only encapsulate the history of human ideas, but also provide a student with “flexibility and adaptiveness which can’t hurt you in times of complexity and rapid change” (p.4).

While it may be hard to definitively say what an organization is, it is easier to say what it is not. For instance, I identify myself as a vegetarian. However, simply because the group I identify with has a distinct set of cultures and practices, this does not mean that we, the members of that group, constitute an organization. Vegetarians as a group are not automatically part of an organization because anyone can decide to stop eating meat, anywhere, for any reason, and without any institutional accountability. In order for a group with similar goals or beliefs to become an organization, members of that group must agree to cooperate and must coordinate with one another in a prescribed manner on a regular basis. If I were to join PETA, then I would be both a vegetarian and a member of a vegetarian organization. However, currently I am not under any obligation to do so in order to remain a vegetarian. Therefore, an organization is not simply a group of people bound by a similar objective or viewpoint. An organization is something more: the word organization implies that there is a holistic system, that members of this system are in some way committed or obligated to it, and that the system is arranged according to some kind of designated design or structure.

It is through this structure that theorists hope to influence organizations: either by attempting to mold them with ideas, or deconstruct them to expose weaknesses. As Hatch (1997) explains, “you will want to know the theories that others are using and how to create your own so that you can more consciously (and conscientiously) participate in these processes” (p.6). For instance, it is good to be aware that a company that perceives itself as mechanistic, that is, as stable with specialized parts, will be averse to change

while an organization that is structured organically will likely be decentralized and require employees to have great flexibility (Hatch, 1997, p.76). The form that the conceptualization of an abstract idea, such as an organization, takes often determines its manifestation.

An organization without any organizational structure or metaphor is not just chaotic -- it creates a vacuum. At a previous place of employment, our library director was suddenly removed from the workplace and there was no initial attempt to replace her or to reorganize or clarify staff roles. The immediate result was that: (1) certain functions that our organization previously performed either were indefinitely delayed or cut altogether, and (2) many staff left for other jobs. As there was no attempt to reorganize or replace personnel after subsequent staff-members left either, the situation quickly deteriorated. It was only when a professional library consultant met individually and collectively with staff and presented a complete plan for restructuring that work-flow and attitudes began to improve. Without an organizational theory, both the members of the organization and, more importantly, the mission of the organization -- helping our patrons -- ground to a halt.

In her work *Illness as Metaphor*, philosopher Susan Sontag (1989) warns readers against totally embracing a particular conceptualization of an abstract idea, however, because metaphors can be clumsy, inaccurate, and even dangerous. She explains, for instance, that cancer victims are often said to be at war with their cancer; the cancer “attacks” them, there is a “struggling” immune system, the patient is a “brave fighter,” and so on. However, the negative side of this seemingly innocuous idea is that it creates a false sense of guilt. If there is a war on, then there is also a winner and a loser. This means that a patient who “loses the battle” or “gives up the fight” is weak and deficient, or worse, guilty of desertion. In reality, just as a patient with cancer is just a patient with cancer and not a victim or a soldier, cancer is not an aggressor with a specific intent: it is a biological phenomenon. In her essay, “Strategic Planning at the Multnomah County Library: The Past as Prologue,” Jeanne Goodrich (2000), deputy director of the Multnomah County Library, recognizes the implications of different conceptual perspectives when she points out that a “fundamental concept is exemplified by the authors' [of the PLA's 1998 “Planning for Results”] differentiation between an older planning metaphor (the road map) and theirs (building and renovating a house). This new metaphor suggests not a round trip but the creation of something entirely new. It also suggests a lot of hard work rather than a more or less carefree vacation” (np). Hatch (1997) believes that this Postmodern viewpoint of organizations does not necessarily point to their destruction. Instead, it exemplifies a mental agility, one that can see through the fragmentation of different viewpoints and powerfully maneuver around, between, or through them (p.366-369).

References

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