

*The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses*

# FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS



**C. Margaret Hall**

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# **Formal Organizations**

**C. Margaret Hall**

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## FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS

It has long been recognized that emotions have a strong influence on behavior in organizations as well as on family interaction. A wealth of organization theories and management systems have been developed to assist managers in utilizing human emotions in constructive ways. However, these organization theories and management systems have conceptualized emotion as an intrapsychic phenomenon rather than as a systemic response to others and a network phenomenon. Bion (1948) and a few others (Bennis and Shepard 1956, Schutz 1958) have described emotional processes in groups, but their basic emphasis is still on individuals and couples and not on the “systemness” of the group as a whole. According to the individual or couple orientation, a single person under pressure does not respond “normally”; this premise does not imply that the whole system is anxious. Although many authors have noted the impact of stress on groups, these conditions and responses are usually discussed in individual terms.

If groups malfunction, the problem is usually believed to be the result of a specific organizational or social influence rather than the expected response of a group to emotional tension or trauma. Organization theories and strategies based on this segmented view of the system have frequently been unproductive. Managers are often faced with situations where individuals appear stable, where the norms and social structure seem viable, and where the organization and technology are similar to those of successful organizations elsewhere; but at the same time, these situations may manifest high levels of absenteeism, much turnover, alcoholism, conflict, and breakdowns in communications. The Bowen family theory, when applied as a systems theory to formal organizations, pinpoints emotional tendencies and processes in complex organizations and suggests ways to deal with them effectively. The following discussion describes several Bowen family theory propositions in terms of their usefulness for predicting behavior in formal organizations.

## **Change in Emotional Intensity**

Change in the emotional intensity of a group, the most significant component of all modification processes, occurs in a predictable

sequence of events. When one member of a given system shifts the functioning position of self in the group, a period of general disruption and reactive responses from other follows. These responses constitute a strong emotional pressure on the person differentiating self to change back to the former functioning level. If the individual trying to change self maintains the new functioning position and simultaneously remains in emotional contact with group members, the others eventually accept the person's new level of functioning and gradually change their way of relating to this person. Owing to the predictability of this sequence of events, a change in the functioning of one group member can modify the functioning level of the whole group.

The same predictable sequence of change can occur when an employee or a manager leaves a work group to undergo human relations training and then returns to the group after training. This person's attempts to relate more openly, more directly, or more independently to associates is likely to meet resistance, even if all members of the group intellectually approve of the employee's or manager's changed behavior. Others' reactions are frequently baffling to the trainee, who cannot understand what is happening when the

newly acquired skills fail at producing positive results.

The Bowen family theory as an emotional systems theory suggests that a member of a work group can expect resistance and negative reactivity to a changed posture and that this response may be followed by considerable disruption and dysfunction in the system as a whole. Other members need time to react, readjust, and adapt their own positions and relationships to the trainee and to each other. Maintenance of contact by the trainee is difficult because of the system's automatic tendency to develop cut-offs in relationships during periods of high anxiety.

Managerial skills cannot eliminate this strong emotional process, and they may also be unable to control it. The established patterns of behavior are blocked by the change of one organization member, and it takes time before an effective adaptation by the whole group can be achieved. In the interim period of adjustment, relationship anxiety usually overloads the system and precipitates conflict, dysfunction, or projection to the individuals perceived as "problems" by the more powerful members.



The degree of resistance to change or disruption following change in a work system or formal organization depends on the degree of fusion among group members. An emotionally intense work group, whose members are extremely involved with each other, experiences more disruption than a more loosely related work group. An organization's high level of anxiety and its accompanying characteristics of overly dependent relationships magnify the phenomena of "blocking" or "overload" precipitated by a change in a member's functioning.

Bowen's concept of fusion may be compared with the idea of group cohesiveness originally developed by field theorists (Lewin 1951) and extended by Festinger (1954) in his theory of social comparison processes. Kelman's (1961) idea of the identification process also suggests similar meaning elements. However, these ideas, which generally include a cognitive acceptance and enthusiasm for other members or for the goals of the group, are distinct from the Bowen concept of fusion. Bowen's emotional systems theory suggests that fusion in relationships is not recognized by participants in the togetherness and that fusion inhibits or restricts autonomy.

## Loss of a Key Member

When an organization experiences the loss of a significant member, the system frequently responds with unproductive behavior and relationship problems. The severity of these symptoms largely depends on the emotional importance to the whole of the person who has left the organization. Shock wave phenomena or interrelated sequences of disruptive behavior may occur in conditions of temporary as well as permanent loss.

In a formal organization, the loss of a key member through death, dismissal, or voluntary withdrawal frequently results in conflicts, inefficient production, or low morale among the remaining members. Organizational problems following reassignments of work responsibilities are frequently used as rationalizations for these dislocations in the system. Even if no overt organizational problems follow in the wake of a loss, however, conflict, inefficiency, or low morale tends to appear. These dislocations in the relationship system result whether the person the system loses was positively or negatively significant in the system.

The problem consequences of a loss in a formal organization may

be exacerbated by the timing of the loss. When the level of organizational strain is high, additional tension from a loss may easily result in disruption and dysfunction of the system that is markedly out of proportion to the objective reality of the situation.

Advance awareness of the probability of a loss, together with an application of effective managerial strategies, may minimize the impact of a loss. In some instances, it is possible to control the timing of a loss or to provide constructive ways of dissipating emotional tensions resulting from a loss.

## **Concept of Responsibility**

If a significant group member functions responsibly, other members of the group become correspondingly responsible for self in their feelings, thoughts, and actions. In Bowen's family theory, the concept of responsibility refers to behavior consistent with inner beliefs and convictions and motivated by personally selected goals. A responsible person maintains meaningful contact with as many group members as possible. Responsible behavior is characteristic of a differentiated individual, and to some extent this concept of

responsibility for self may be compared with Maslow's concept of self actualization (1954) and Riesman's idea of inner directedness (Reisman, Glazer and Denney 1950).

The Bowen definition of responsibility provides an alternative to the concept of responsibility used in most management literature. Traditionally, management at least partly defines responsibility for self in terms of accepting responsibility for the behavior of others. from the viewpoint of emotional systems theory, this kind of behavior is considered overresponsibility and consequently irresponsible. Feeling responsible for others enmeshes them in tight dependency relationships that diminish their opportunities to act autonomously in any given situation.

Emotional systems theory, when applied to organizations, essentially predicts that managers will be more effective if they relinquish their emotional control over others. A manager provides guidance to others through the example of responsible behavior rather than through transmitting emotional pressures to other members of the organization. Under these conditions, subordinates are allowed to be more responsible for self. The automatic spread of responsible

action in a group is endemic to an emotional system. The decreased emotional involvement of a manager with subordinates allows all members of the system to mobilize emotional energy previously used to maintain dependent relationships. When emotional demands on others are minimized, overall productivity is increased. The goals of an organization and an individual are not necessarily in conflict (McGregor 1960). In the absence of dependency bonds, the worker's behavior will be more goal-directed and oriented to both organizational and personal objectives. Managers must maintain meaningful emotional contact with subordinates to maximize responsible behavior in an organization.

## Triangles

When there is conflict between two members of the same group, a third person is triangled into the twosome to lower the level of anxiety in the relationship. In most triangles, or three- person relationship systems, feelings are invested primarily between two of its members. When there is conflict between the *Formal Organizations* 175 two members of the feeling-invested twosome, the preferred and more comfortable position in the triangle is that of the outsider. When

the twosome manifests intense positive feelings, the emotionally preferred position in that triangle is generally that of a participant in the fused twosome. However, the outsider is consistently more autonomous than either of the feeling-invested twosome. An individual is able to function more effectively in the outsider position than in the intense twosome, regardless of whether the feelings in the twosome are positive or negative.

If the inclusion of a third person in the emotional field of a dyadic conflict does not effectively reduce the level of tension in the relationship system, a fourth person is brought into the emotional field. If there continues to be no effective resolution of differences or conflicts between the two key members of the emotional field, the surplus anxiety may be projected to the third person who becomes scapegoated or victimized, or the tension is internalized by one of the original two parties. The person who internalizes the stress tends to become dysfunctional in relation to the group.

This triangling process and the related adjustments to undifferentiation and anxiety frequently surface in an organization. People are unable to keep tension to themselves in families or in other

social contexts and automatically involve others in the tension, especially when anxiety is high.

The person in the outsider position of a triangle may or may not see self as more autonomous than members of the twosome. Individuals who become too involved with each other face the serious risk of overloading their 'relationship, especially when emotional tension in the broader relationship network is high. Undifferentiated individuals are frequently drawn into conflict dyads as they are particularly responsive to emotional tension, and automatically satisfy the emotional demands of others. Young members of a work team, new members, women, or other dependent members in the system are most apt to be caught in the emotional entanglements of others.

Projection occurs when parties to an unresolved conflict "victimize" an individual who is in the lower ranks of the administrative hierarchy. Projection frequently occurs without awareness on the part of the one who is being scapegoated. If two executives are unable or unwilling to work out a conflict, the most uncomfortable one in the twosome directs anxiety and anger to an unsuspecting and less important member of the system. Whenever the

conflict between the executives intensifies, feelings are projected to the more vulnerable member of the system, who is low in the hierarchy. As a result, several junior members may mysteriously quit, they may be fired, or they may manifest chronic symptoms of emotional distress. These circumstances evolve in ways disproportionate to the external realities of the jobs of the individuals concerned.

Effective triangling and multitriangling may sufficiently reduce relationship tensions to prevent them from developing into overload, dysfunction, and projection. A supervisor who is aware of a work system's tendency to triangle and to project anxiety to others under stress can deliberately triangle self into a conflictual twosome. If the supervisor refrains from taking sides in the conflict, tensions are lessened and the probability that one of the conflicting members internalizes the anxiety, becomes dysfunctional, or projects tension to a third party is effectively decreased.

## **Repetition of Behavior Patterns**

Past patterns of behavior in an organization, such as the different



ways in which the group has dealt with seniority, sex, and race, have a strong impact on present patterns of behavior in the same organization. Individuals can begin to neutralize or even to reverse the strong automatic influence of past patterns of emotional dependency by becoming aware of them and by consciously counteracting them through modified emotional inputs in the system.

Traditional management and human relations theory view stress phenomena as emanating from individuals. However, the Bowen family theory suggests that once behavior patterns become established in an organization, they are automatically perpetuated by the participation of all group members. Even when new people join the organization, they generally respond cooperatively to the strong emotional pressures to conform to the organization's established patterns of interaction.

The perpetual inclination of groups to reinforce past patterns of behavior in the present influences the resistance to change in organizations, such as changes in the position of women or blacks. Strong resistance continues to occur, even when all members of an organization affirm that they are intellectually receptive to change.

The organization has an automatic emotional tendency to try to maintain the old system of comfortable established relationships and secure equilibrium.

Managers are more effective if they are aware of the repeated patterns of behavior in their organizations. Emotional dependencies and interactions between young and old, men and women, blacks and whites, and professionals and nonprofessionals should be observed and diagramed wherever possible. Managers can also profitably realize that changing the structure or policies of the organization does not substantially modify established emotional patterns. The system persists in its efforts to perpetuate the given emotional equilibrium, despite whatever innovations are introduced. People still continue to respond more or less the same way toward each other, whether or not job titles or reporting channels are changed.

Conscious efforts to modify the emotional inputs given to an organization are necessary to facilitate change. The emotional relationships of at least one member of the organization must be effectively changed, or the system will persist in its established relationship patterns for many generations of corporate life.

Changes in the emotional inputs to an organization may have a temporarily disturbing effect upon general productivity and satisfaction. If women, blacks, or young people in an organization initiate changed dependencies and behavior, this shift may disrupt traditional patterns and may precipitate some degree of emotional distress. Instigators of the changes may be pressured to return to their former functioning by the resistance of other members of the system.

Changes in the core groups of an organization, where members are the most emotionally involved with each other, are more instrumental in bringing about changes in the whole group than changes in peripheral groups or in groups that are low in the established hierarchy. A sustained change anywhere in the system eventually affects all members of the organization, as long as emotional contact with the whole is maintained by the changing individual or group.

## Conclusion

A conceptualization of formal organizations as emotional systems opens up numerous avenues for investigation. This new frame of

reference focuses on the nature and intensity of emotional relationships within an organization, as well as on the dependencies and coalitions that develop in small groups and wider networks. The influence of losses in the organization, the isolation of certain groups through cut-offs in the communication system, and tensions resulting from incompatibilities between the goals of the larger group and individual members' goals are some of the many potential areas of research for family systems theory and applications. The emotional consequences of change in organizations could also be explored.

Emotional systems theory begins to articulate a prediction of the degree of resistance to individual and group change and also suggests a means to minimize resistance. These concepts also further an understanding of those who resist change in a variety of formal organizations and other social settings.

Among the more specific contributions of the Bowen family theory and the emotional systems orientation to formal organizations are conceptualizations of superordinate and subordinate relationships, the influence of seniority in organizations, the difficulties a member encounters in becoming autonomous in relation

to the group, and patterns of problem solving, training, evaluation, and informal communication. from a systems perspective many organizational conflicts and tensions are considered particular manifestations of the two major emotional forces of togetherness and individuation.

Emotional systems theory suggests that the frequency of interaction within organizations heightens their emotional intensity. The goals, policies, and structures of an organization are frequently manipulated in response to pressures from the emotional system, even though administrative moves are usually described in terms of furthering the “rational” goals of the organization. Emotional systems theory can be used to delineate some of the rationalizations that disguise the reactivity of the underlying emotional system of an organization. The Bowen theory can also be used to cope with an organization’s resistance to new goals or policies and structural changes. However valid and necessary these modifications are, they pose a threat to the emotional equilibrium of the system.

Emotional systems theory offers a “person-centered” rather than an “object-centered” approach to management. The concepts can

enhance administrators' understanding of their organizations. Problems such as conflict, absenteeism, productivity slowdowns, low morale, and individual inadequacies are viewed as system characteristics rather than as individual behavior. Since any member of an organization can influence changes, emotional systems theory provides managers with a useful new conceptual instrument with which to influence action in their organizations.

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