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Creating Collaborative Organizations That Can Persist: The Partnership Principle*

By Gervase R. Bushe

A number of top managements have come around to adopting a revolutionary attitude toward change, in order to bridge the gap between a dynamic environment and a stagnant organization . . . through a number of means, revolutionary attempts are now being made to transform their organizations rapidly by altering the behavior and attitudes of their line and staff personnel at all levels of management. While each organization obviously varies in its approach, the overarching goal seems to be the same: to get everyone psychologically redirected toward solving the problems and challenges of today’s business environment. (Greiner, 1967)

That quote from Larry Greiner, writing in the Harvard Business Review in 1967, is intended to remind us how, 50 years later, the issues that birthed the field of organization development are still with us. An invitation to write about the impact of new organizational forms on OD in 2017 immediately conjures issues of globalization, virtual teams, multi-culturalism, volatility and uncertainty, networked organizations, and so on. But I think these are simply new conditions that frame a set of issues that have been with us for as long as OD has been around.

For decades business leaders and academics have agreed that the command and control form of organizing we inherited

from a simpler, slower time cannot cope with the accelerated pace of innovation and the need for constant learning and adaptation. Yet the outlines of this new organizational form are fuzzy. We know that it relies more on smart and engaged employees making decisions and taking actions rather than waiting to be told what to do by their leaders. We know it requires creating collaborative relationships vertically and laterally, across boundaries inside and outside the organization. We know it means that we have to do things differently, but the track record of actually doing things differently is not that great. For most people, command and control organizing is still their common work experience.

A few years back, LRN, a consulting firm, hired the Boston Research Group and the University of Southern California to do a study of the impact of how companies are organized and make decisions and found, to no one’s surprise, that the more collaborative the organization the more successful it is (LRN, 2010). One result that caught my eye was how many people described their organizations as places where everyone could and did have meaningful input into decision-making. Of the 5,000 Americans surveyed, 24% of C-suite participants said their organizations were like that. But only 3% of middle managers and employees described their workplaces that way. A later, global study replicated these findings in other countries. What this says to me is that so many senior leaders want their organizations to be highly collaborative and empowered work systems that 1 out of 4

* This article is part 3 in my “Thinking about OD Differently” trilogy.

has convinced themselves it is. But most of us know that it is not true—not yet.

In this article, I will begin with a short history of how Organization Development has tried, and failed, to find the solution to the problem of sustained collaborative organizing. I will describe how our attempts have come in three waves—first a focus on leadership attitudes and skills, then a focus on techno-structural solutions for designing collaborative organizations and, most recently, a focus on culture and mindsets and the facilitation of large group engagement. I will argue that we have arrived at a time where most of what is called OD focuses on creating collaborative relations within facilitated containers, without much focus on how to create collaborative organizations. I think this has happened because we have not imagined solutions that integrate all three spheres—the individual, the techno-structural, and the cultural—simultaneously, and that if we are to find a way to create collaborative organizations that can persist, we will need simple rules that will integrate all three spheres of organizing (and I include power in the culture sphere). If you believe, as I do, that creating great organizations is the core purpose of OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2018) then this problem of how to design and lead collaborative organizations is a key issue in our field.

In the rest of the article I describe a possible solution that I have been thinking about that might just do the trick. I call it the partnership principle.

A Short History of OD's Attempt to Create Collaborative Organizations

The field of Organization Development was initially at the vanguard of this revolution in organizing. Emerging out of the intersection of humanistic psychology, group dynamics, and social change, the early phase focused on “participative management” and “democratic leadership.” Hugely influential at the time were McGregor’s Theory X (1960), Likert’s *New Patterns of Management* (1961), and Argyris’ “interpersonal competence” (1962). The T-group (Bradford, Benne, & Gibb, 1964) provided a powerful intervention that both in its

form and content, supported a change in most people’s skills and attitudes. Perhaps the first managerial HR “fad,” the 1960s saw many large, progressive American corporations send their leaders off to 1 and 2 week T-group training with the hope that this would change their organizations (Schein & Bennis, 1965).

But as we entered the 1970s OD turned away from changing individuals as a way to change organizations. Research studies found T-groups did not result in much organizational change (Bowers, 1973). The consensus that emerged in

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the field was that while a T-group might change an individual, the organization they returned to would simply pound them back into the prevailing mold (Hornstein, Bunker, & Hornstein, 1971). And so the focus of OD turned to how to change the structure of organizations—the system rather than the individual (Burke & Schmidt, 1970; Friedlander & Brown, 1974). Notable influences were Likert’s (1967) System 4, Lawrence & Lorsch’s (1969) open systems model, and socio-technical systems (STS) theory (Trist et al., 1963; Emery & Thorsrud, 1969). STS, with its semi-autonomous work teams, was perhaps the most powerful at the time as it seemed to offer a proven method for creating team-based manufacturing organizations that were as productive as the conventional assembly line, but much better places to work. Many progressive corporations in North America and Europe began using STS principles; for example, all new North American plants built by General Motors between 1974 and 1980 were created by joint union-management design teams using STS

principles. The mid-1970s to 1980s was the golden decade in OD’s influence on organization design. The problem seemed solved until evidence began to accumulate by around 1990 that many successful STS designed organizations reverted back to “rigid structures” within 6-8 years (Miller, 1975; Polley & Van Dyne, 1993; Whitsett & Yorks, 1983). There is little consensus on why the use of semi-autonomous work teams appear unsustainable, with explanations ranging from lack of sustained skill development to poor fit with command and control corporate cultures to Mumford’s

(2006) argument that a much harsher economic climate of the 1980s and 1990s, with its downsizing and cost-cutting in a global economy, eliminated humanistic values from managerial cultures. Somewhat ironically, the more mechanistic approaches of Total Quality Management, Lean Production, and Business Process Re-engineering, appropriated some methods from socio-tech, like variance analysis and controlling variance at source, without the “socio,” and pushed organization development practitioners out of the organization design market. I know, I was one of them.

At about the same time as this was happening, the idea of corporate culture, which had gained traction as an explanation for organizational effectiveness, became a focus of OD (e.g., Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Deal & Kennedy, 1984; Schein, 1991) aligning with Burke’s (1982) earlier assertion that culture is where OD should focus. Along with this emerged a variety of OD technologies focused primarily on the socio-cultural aspects of organizing, like Appreciative Inquiry, Future

Search, World Cafe, and Art of Hosting to name a few. Large Group Interventions (Bunker & Alban, 1996), by and large, moved away from techno-structural issues and focused, instead, on increasing employee engagement in identifying issues and innovations they wanted to work on. While anecdotal reports of highly collaborative organizations appeared during this time (e.g., Semler, 1993; Stack, 1992), and recent suggestions push the boundaries of conventional organization design (e.g., Robertson, 2015; Kegan & Lahey, 2016) for the most part OD now fosters collaboration within the containers of facilitated processes without much attention on how to create organizations where collaboration is a day to day experience. See Schuman (2006) and Bushe & Marshak (2015) for examples of edited books where almost all the chapters follow this pattern.

A New Theory of Organization Design for a Post-Bureaucratic World

For the past twenty years, I have been paying attention to a form of organizing that I call “partnership.” Modifying a definition I first heard from Barry Oshry (1995), I define partnership as a relationship in which all parties feel responsible for the success of their common purpose. In the language of research, I have used this as a “dependent variable”—under what conditions do people in organizations create and sustain partnerships? What gets in the way of partnership, especially among people who want to be in partnership? Paying attention to the partnership principle has opened up insights into the dilemmas of collaborative organizing and why so many attempts by well-intentioned people to work collaboratively fail. It has also opened up possibilities for resolving those dilemmas. I believe that focusing on partnership will help us find solutions to the problem of how to create collaborative organizations that can last longer than 6-8 years. In the following I will share just a few ideas I have developed about that. My fear is that in a short article they may seem simplistic—it will be easy to think of why this or that “will not work.” My intent here is not to provide definitive answers, or a

comprehensive model, but to illustrate how paying attention to partnership as an organizing logic can lead us to new insights about collaborative organizations. I hope to show how a simple set of principles can be used to imagine the individual attitudes and skills, the technologies and structures, and the cultural assumptions, required to create organizations where collaboration is a daily experience. This can also create an agenda for OD education and practice.

Proposition 1: Collaborative Organizations are Based on Micro-Relations of Partnership

Regardless of the structures, processes, and technologies we use to support collaborative work, unless the individuals engaged have a relationship where they all feel responsible for their common purpose, collaboration is not happening. Creating and sustaining partnerships takes some effort, so we cannot expect that everyone in any particular organization is going to be in partnership. And I have found that if you ask most people in any organization who they most need to be in partnership with they can pretty quickly identify a handful. I have rarely found this to be formalized in any way.

Presently, organization design grapples with the issues of collaboration in a couple of ways. The oldest is the principle of grouping roles that have the most interdependence into the same groups. Much of the action in re-designing organizations is ungrouping and re-grouping people to decrease the problems of mis-alignment that happen when people who have to work together belong to different groups. The rise of “team-based” organizations has a lot to do with the hope that putting people in the same group will increase their capacity to collaborate. A more recent solution is to have everyone be in the same group, or in other words, to have no formal groups. The theory here is that people who need to collaborate will self-organize into required groups that will disband when no longer needed. It appears that either solution will reduce certain barriers to collaboration (like when different groups have competing goals) but lots of teams fail to develop relationships of partnership, and whether

partnerships form in unstructured situations is an even more hit or miss affair. Later I will offer a different solution, but first we need to talk about “the boss.”

One of the most difficult areas to create sustainable partnerships is between levels of authority. When someone is “the boss,” a very predictable thing happens: leaders take on the responsibility and followers give leaders the responsibility. Partnership goes out the window. For the past 40 years Barry Oshry’s Power Lab and Organization Workshop have demonstrated to many thousands of managers the truth of that statement. You make any random, small group of people the “tops” of a simulated organization and within seconds they start taking responsibility for everything—often in seclusion because “we need to plan.” You demote those same people to the front lines and they happily sit back waiting to be told what to do, blaming their leaders when things do not work well.

Some have proposed creating collaborative organizations by eliminating hierarchy. Books that counsel reducing or eliminating hierarchy, allowing influence to emerge organically, have come in waves over the past 50 years. That may be possible and desirable for temporary, organization development events, where bottom up planning, strategizing, and changing are being done. But I am unaware of any follow up studies of organizations that claimed to operate without hierarchy that found they flourished. More often they had failed, or created hierarchy. I do not believe a lack of authority structures can work as a permanent state in an organization over a certain size. There is some evidence that our brains are hardwired so that once you have a group larger than about 150 it is beyond human capacity to operate in an unstructured workgroup (Gladwell, 2000). It may even be archetypically impossible to sustain. As a 20-something who believed we needed to create organizations without hierarchy, I was confronted with some brutal truths about the human condition during a Tavistock workshop where I discovered that our tribal minds live in terror at what might happen if someone is not “in charge.” Many people will aggressively create the illusion of authority and kill off

anyone who tries to point out it is a fabrication. And I have now lived long enough to see the carnage that breakdowns in authority can bring outside my privileged bubble of happy go lucky Canada. I have also discovered that hierarchies of influence must emerge if a group is to get something done. Bales observed that hierarchies organically emerge in groups in his experiments in the 1950s and I have been able to watch this process many times in the T-groups I facilitate. Over time only a few people are given enough influence to be able to move a group from deliberation to decision. No one without that authority can get a group to make a decision—if they try, the group ignores them. Only a few can say, “we’ve talked enough, let’s make a decision” and the group will comply.

There are many other lines of reasoning one could argue for why work organizations need hierarchy (but as Jaques, 1989, points out, not too much, just the right amount) and I do not think a practical theory of how to design collaborative organizations will do without it. So, given this strong propensity for hierarchy to get in the way of partnership, what are we to do?

Proposition 2 (Techno-Structural): Collaborative Organizations have to Design Partnerships into the Organization’s Structure

One of the main, hugely significant, innovations of the bureaucratic form of organizing was the invention of the “role.” In feudal and tribal societies people are mostly born into the jobs they will occupy for their lives. But with the invention of the role, jobs were no longer tied to a person, they were tied to the role. Different people could move in and out of the same role. It is hard to imagine now what a huge shift in thinking that was. Even by the time of the first world war, in Britain, whether you could be an officer in the military depended mainly on your birth.

Today the idea of role is so ubiquitous most people use it as the basis of organizing without question. Ask anyone to design an organization and most will start by creating roles. These roles will be arranged in a hierarchy of which role “reports to” which role. Attempts to create more collaborative,

team based organizations simply move the role from individuals to the group as a whole, which really is not that different. I propose something different—that we identify and formalize the key partnerships needed to make the organization successful. Just as nature develops more complex forms, not by throwing out early forms but by layering upon them, I imagine designing organizations by identifying the roles, and then adding another layer of complexity by formalizing which partnerships are connected to those roles.

A fully partnership-based organization will map out the key partnerships that are required between roles and design the organization around them. This shifts the focus of organizing from individual roles, to relationships between roles, and forces us to map out the key relationships required for the collaborative organization to function effectively. Things like goal setting and resource allocation then work through the partnerships, not the roles. Such collaborative organizations will not rely on everyone being in partnership, and not all relationships need to be partnership-based, so that there will be a blend of role-based and partnership-based organizing.

In a partnership-based organization, authority is negotiated, and control is managed through promise-making and promise-keeping. Authority is the ability to make decisions and take actions that others will comply with. In a collaborative organization, there is more, not less, authority in the sense that more people are authorized to make decisions and take actions. In a partnership-based organization, some of that authority will be tied to position/role, but some of that will be worked out, and continuously shifting, as partners agree on the best way to accomplish their common purpose.

In a partnership-based organization leaders cannot simply tell subordinates what their goals or deliverables are. That is a sure-fire way to remove any sense of responsibility for outcomes. I can imagine a partnership-based organization using a top-down, bottom-up process of promise-making. Essentially this involves leaders describing their strategic intent and what they want from their partners lower down

in the hierarchy. Those partners then talk to their other partners and decide what they can and cannot promise their leaders. Promises, and the authority required to act on those promises, are then negotiated.

Just as whether or not a role will be executed effectively depends on the skills of the person occupying that role, whether or not partnerships will be executed effectively depends on the skills of the partners *to be in partnership*, particularly the lead partner when there is one. Leading a partnership-based organization is more complex than a command and control one, because now we have to really take people into account.

Proposition 3 (Individual Skills): In Collaborative Organizations Leaders Act as “Managing Partners” and Subordinates Act as “Associates;” Managing Partners use Managerial Processes That Support Associates Feeling Responsible for the Success of Their Common Purpose.

In *Clear Leadership* (Bushe, 2009), I describe how our normal ways of thinking and treating each other create a condition of “interpersonal mush,” where people make up stories about each other and instead of checking them out, act on those stories as if they are the truth. Overtime, the stories become more negative and ultimately destroy partnership. I argue that the interpersonal mush that is endemic to organizational life is one of the main reasons why our attempts, so far, to create collaborative organizations generally fail. In that book, I provide a set of skills for how partners can learn from their collective experience, clear out the mush, and sustain healthy, effective partnerships. These are skills for “leading learning in the midst of performing” and I believe are essential “partnership skills” for working in, and for leading others in, a collaborative organization.

But they are not enough. In addition to leading learning, leaders need to manage performing. A collaborative leader is still expected, by those above them and by those below them in the hierarchy, to ensure that performance is executed as efficiently and effectively as possible. The dilemma is how to do that while creating and maintaining relationships with “subordinates” where

everyone feels responsible for the success of their common purpose. We need to re-language the managerial function and the idea of “subordinate” while keeping what is essential about authority and hierarchy. An image I am using is that of “managing partner” and “associates.” In my research, I have found a consistent set of outcomes people want their collaborative managers to ensure: we all want to

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know what our goals, individually, and collectively, are. We all want to know who is doing what. We all want good, timely decisions made. We want to believe that resources are being allocated fairly. And we all want our peers held accountable for their results. In a partnership-based organization, the managing partner does not so much do these things as make sure they are done. For example, they identify what decisions need to be made and by when, and then engage their partners in making those decisions. In instances where the group cannot come to agreement, they may make the decision themselves because of time limits and external demands, and their partners will be happy they did. But for the most part, managing partners, to sustain partnership with their associates and not create a situation where the associates say “OK boss, you are in charge, tell me what to do,” facilitate clear agreements based on having a common purpose.

This adds another level of complexity to the managerial function, and probably requires leaders who are at post-conventional stages of human development (Cowie, 2013; Laloux, 2014; Torbert, 2004). Just as the industrial revolution created organizations that required humans to evolve to conventional levels

of ego development, I believe the post-industrial revolution we are living through requires new forms of organizing that in turn support the widespread evolution to post-conventional stages of development. I believe that supporting this kind of developmental growth is much more important for leadership development today than teaching communication skills or strategic planning models (though

sometimes we can disguise developmental courses as skill building courses).

However, we face a dilemma in OD that every organization has a leadership culture, a set of taken for granted expectations about how leaders should think and act. You can teach people new ways of thinking and acting, and they may want to use those new ways, but it is unlikely that they will be successful doing so if the culture is not also changing to support them showing up differently at work.

***Proposition 4 (Cultural):
In Collaborative Organizations, Shared Beliefs and Values Support and Promote Clarity, Authenticity, and Personal Responsibility Within Shared Concern for Our Partners' Welfare and Success.***

So much could, and has been written on the organizational cultures required for collaboration to flourish it's hard to know where to start. My contribution has been to point out the implications of the idea that everyone creates their own experience, and as a consequence everyone is having a different experience (Bushe, 2006; 2009a). In a partnership, everyone's experience is a valid as anyone else's, regardless of hierarchy, and this leads to ideas about alignment, coordination and learning from

our collective experience that are very different from conventional managerial, and in some cases, Organization Development approaches.

Take, for example, how we think about learning from our collective experience. The conventional image is a leader initiating a conversation with his or her group about something that happened in the recent past in order to identify what worked well, what did not, and what to do in the future. The problem with that process is that everyone had a different experience, and the first thing that will happen is a subtle, or not so subtle, conflict over who had the right experience. More likely there will not be any conflict, since obviously, the leader's experience is the right experience, and for those who had a different experience any sense of responsibility for what comes next, and sense of partnership, goes out the window. I propose that organizational learning occurs when the variety of experiences are understood and the interpersonal mush eliminated, without any need to decide who had the “right” experience (Bushe, 2009b).

Some of the cultural assumptions that flow from the insight that partners need to acknowledge that they will always have more or less different observations, thoughts, feelings, and wants (my definition of experience, Bushe, 2009a), and that support partnership-based organizing, are things like:

- » Everyone has a right to their own experience.
- » We do not need to be having the same experience to work together.
- » Learning from our collective experience is more about allowing the variety of experiences to be heard and not about agreeing on which one is right.
- » Statements like “people have to buy into the vision” just shut down people with a different experience.
- » When we create the illusion that people share the same experience by making it uncomfortable to voice a different experience, we create interpersonal mush and destroy partnership.
- » People feel a deeper sense of belonging and commitment to a group or organization when they believe they can

express what they really think, feel, and want, accentuate their differences, and be accepted, not be punished for it.

- » if I do not tell people what is going on in my head, they will just make up a story about it and treat that as if it is true. And the story they make up will likely be worse than the reality.
- » I create my experience, not you. You are responsible for your actions and your results but you are not responsible for my experience.
- » When a leader holds others responsible for his or her experience, they force people to hide what they really think, feel, and want.

Trying to copy a specific structure or process that worked in organization A into organization B will almost always fail because human systems are meaning-making systems and it is the meaning people make of managerial actions that determine their fate. What can help, however, are logics of organizing that can be tailored to local conditions and that can inform decisions about the individual skills and attitudes, structures and processes, and organizational cultures that need to be designed, enabled and managed.

- » Partnership works better when I do not try to fix or change your experience so that I can have a better experience (e.g., feel less anxious, sad, upset, etc.).

This is not close to an exhaustive list, it is just intended to illustrate the kinds of cultural assumptions I think will be needed to make partnership-based organizations work. Over the past 15 years I have had a number of opportunities to work with organizations to develop the partnership principle in their leadership skills and cultures. One documented case, of a southern California health-care provider, saw its externally measured “employee partnership” scores move from the 61st to the 91st percentile of American hospitals during the time I worked with them (Bushe & O’Malley, 2013). Now I am waiting for a client interested in adding in the technological component.

Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed that a key issue in Organization Development has always been how to design sustainable, collaborative organizations. I have proposed a way forward by thinking of them as a network of micro-relationships of partnership, where each person in the partnership feels responsible for the success of their common purpose. I do not believe that any specific structure or technology is “the solution,” since any solution to the problem of organizing people always creates a new problem” (Bushe, nd). Trying to copy a specific structure or process that worked

in organization A into organization B will almost always fail because human systems are meaning-making systems and it is the meaning people make of managerial actions that determine their fate. What can help, however, are logics of organizing that can be tailored to local conditions and that can inform decisions about the individual skills and attitudes, structures and processes, and organizational cultures that need to be designed, enabled, and managed. I have found that if I help people stay focused on “how do we sustain relationships where people all feel responsible for the success of the common purpose,” while grappling with the day to day problems at work, solutions will emerge that sustain collaborative organizing.

I hope that I have made a good enough case for interesting you in the idea of partnership as an organizing logic that could help us re-imagine what a

collaborative organization might look like and help Organization Development fulfill its 50-year-old project of creating organizations that are effective, humane and socially responsible.

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Gervase Bushe, PhD, is the Professor of Leadership and Organization Development at the Beedie School of Business, Simon Fraser University. He is an award-winning author of over 80 papers and three books on organization development, leadership, and teamwork. In 2016 the UK based HR Magazine added Bushe to their list of the 30 most influential HR thinkers in the world. His latest book, co-edited with Robert Marshak, is *Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change*. He can be reached at bushe@sfu.ca.

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Collaborative Partnerships should promote the creation and development of European networks in the field of sport. The EU can thereby provide opportunities for strengthened cooperation among stakeholders, which would not have existed without EU action. Collaborative Partnerships should also foster synergy with, and between, local, regional, national and international policies to promote sport and physical activity and to address sport-related challenges. Within the framework of Collaborative Partnerships Partnerships are still not mainstreamed as an approach, and there is an insufficient enabling system that can systematically develop partnerships at the scale thatâ€™s required to deliver the SDGs. Secondly, many of the ones that do exist are far from fully delivering on their potential. This may be because they are not the right approach for the context or they may not be set up and running as efficiently and effectively as they need to be.Â partnerships in terms of the main purpose of the collaboration and the nature of the relationship between the partners. Collaborative provision involves the delivery of Rose Bruford Collegeâ€™s (RBC) programmes or modules in partnership with an approved external organisation which formally assumes a level of responsibility for the delivery, assessment or resource provision. 2. Any external body with which RBC wishes to enter into an arrangement to deliver collaborative provision, must be formally recognised by RBC. Collaborative leadership is an increasingly vital source of competitive advantage in todayâ€™s highly networked, team-based, and partnership-oriented business environments. Yet few leaders have been trained to lead collaboratively, especially those at more senior levels who climbed the organisational ladder in a different era. In this paper we describe key practices of collaborative leadership and identify critical leadership competencies associated with it, highlight common barriers and suggest next steps for companies interested in developing leaders who can collaborate to transform business f partnerships are initiated by institutions that carefully avoid inviting those partners they consider too difficult to be helpful for short-term solutions. Such institutions risk missing an opportunity to achieve wider understanding and approval of their policy. Secondly, partners should have equal rights â€“ and in cases where they donâ€™t, this should be agreed to as a partnership principle. For example, to devise a strategy it is absolutely necessary that all relevant actors agree on 1) the underlying analyses and 2) on the overall targets and principles derived from those analyses. But it is u