Democratic alternatives to hierarchy — why so few?

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Abstract: Examples are briefly described of organizations that offer a perspective to complement the experience of industrial democracy in Norway and Mondragon. The examples are organizations choosing a structure and culture that minimize hierarchy. They provide a less-traditional approach to balancing political and socio-technical participation. To do so they devolve responsibility for coordination of effort and expertise to individuals and teams most directly providing the effort and expertise. This gives the individuals and teams high autonomy. Examples include a university class, action learning projects in community and organizational settings, and a voluntary self-organizing network of facilitators. In addition, a small sample of organizations from the larger sample documented by Corporate Rebels (https://corporate-rebels.com/) is also briefly described and compared. Finally, the examples are located within other, wider, changes taking place.

Keywords: balancing political and socio-technical participation, organizational structure, organizational culture, industrial democracy, minimal hierarchy, butterfly effect, paradigm shift

Alternativas democráticas a la jerarquía - ¿Por qué tan pocas?

Resumen: Se describen brevemente ejemplos de organizaciones que ofrecen una perspectiva complementaria a las experiencias de democracia industrial en Noruega y Mondragón. Los ejemplos son organizaciones que eligen una estructura y una cultura que minimizan la jerarquía. Proporcionan un enfoque menos tradicional para equilibrar la participación política y sociotécnica. Para hacerlo, devuelven la responsabilidad de la coordinación del esfuerzo y la experiencia a las personas y equipos que hacen ese esfuerzo y tienen esa experiencia de manera más directa. Esto da a las personas y equipos una gran autonomía. Los ejemplos incluyen una clase universitaria, proyectos de aprendizaje en acción en entornos comunitarios y organizacionales, y una red voluntaria de facilitadores autoorganizados. Además, también se describe y compara brevemente una pequeña muestra de organizaciones de la muestra más grande documentada por Corporate Rebels (https://corporate-rebels.com/). Finalmente, los ejemplos se ubican dentro de otros cambios más amplios que están ocurriendo.

Palabras clave: equilibrio entre la participación política y socio-técnica, estructura organizacional, cultura organizacional, democracia industrial, jerarquía mínima, efecto mariposa, cambio de paradigma

1. Introduction

This paper engages particularly with the tension between political and socio-technical participation and how to resolve it. My intention is to explore some examples that may suggest alternative theoretical and practical approaches. I draw on two different samples. One is my own experience over half a century in structuring academic classes participatively, and in the use of participatory action learning for large action learning programs in community and organization development. I also draw on the 25 years of existence of the Australasian Facilitators Network, a self-organizing network of about 800 facilitators in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. A second, brief, sample is drawn from the growing collection of trail-blazing organizations identified and documented by Corporate Rebels on their corporate-rebels.com website 'bucket list'.

Let me anticipate the conclusion I will later draw. As in the lead article in this issue by Johan Ravn and his colleagues (Ravn et al., 2023), culture is an important aid or hindrance to innovative structures. In particular, I conclude that existing and partly tacit assumptions about the nature of organizations, leadership, and coordination, are central. A widely held set of these assumptions can be characterized as the bureaucratic mindset. For people with such a mindset, I conclude that some promising alternative structures violate too many of their assumptions. The Ravn et al. article identifies many other aspects in its Norwegian and Mondragon examples. All are again relevant to the examples below, though only the aspects of organizational environment and of individual and cultural evolution are explored.

I too have assumptions. One of them that underpins my understanding of the different examples is explored below. It concerns organizational structure. Organizations can achieve large or complex tasks beyond the ability of unorganized individuals. They do so by coordinating the effort and expertise of multiple individuals and teams. Important questions follow from this idea — how is the coordination actually achieved, and by whom? Answers to this question open up some alternative ways of resolving the tension between political and socio-technical participation.

With this background, and the focus it provides, I now describe each of the examples. I begin with some of my own experience as learning facilitator and change facilitator. I also draw on my experience as the moderator of the email list that is the main coordination mechanism for the Australasian Facilitators Network.

2. Classroom and community participation

2.1. A university class

The example I draw on here was a fourth-year optional class in the final year of a four-year undergraduate program in psychology. The version I describe here evolved from many years of trial-and-error pursuing continuous improvement. My aim as course convenor was to bring democracy and participation to the classroom. For a little more detail see Dick (1991).

The starting point was very different. Initially, in the first week I tried to engage the learners in co-designing course content and process. The outcomes were disappointingly pedestrian. Each subsequent year I continued to experiment to find ways to improve learner

engagement and participation. Eventually I learned to facilitate the first four weeks of the whole-year course. In these weeks I helped learners prepare for week five, when we would co-design the rest of the first semester.

In these early weeks I clarified the limits to our freedom to design the course. In addition, I devoted much effort to building a strong sense of community within the class. Some activities addressed this directly. Some activities with other aims also included relationship-building components. Learner-chosen small groups engaged in intense relationship building within their group. The class also met, informally, with the previous year's class at a party at my home on the Saturday or Sunday on the first weekend. We also spent a weekend away (often under canvas) for learners to experience each other as real people, not as 'students'. The weekend was structured as half-work (or fewer attended) and half-play.

In week five we planned the first half of the course. There were three components to the day. First, the learners identified subject-relevant topics that would contribute to their own future work and life. In a second activity we identified the features of the learning processes we wished to use. Finally, small groups chose, from the class-compiled list, a workshop topic that they volunteered to design, facilitate and evaluate. From the chosen topics we built a week-by-week timetable.

For the rest of semester, a typical class consisted of one or two experiential workshops, each facilitated by a small group. Occasional sessions also reviewed our progress, agreeing on any changes. In the final week of semester (usually off-campus to achieve some distance from our regular roles) we reviewed the semester. We then designed our second semester program.

How did this achieve the coordination required within the class, and beyond? As mentioned, we addressed within-class coordination by choosing workshop topics from the whole-class list. How the groups operationalized and facilitated their workshop was then their own choice. Our early efforts to build community and relationships also helped coordination. To manage external interdependencies, we carefully observed University requirements.

A second example in this section consists of a series of community development programs conducted in a number of provincial centers in south-east Queensland.

2.2. Community revitalization

The Queensland government financed the program through the Queensland Small Business Corporation (QSBC). Provincial centers wishing to take part contacted QSBC, usually through their local council and local business organizations. The QSBC project officer then spent about six weeks in the community gauging their suitability, and the level of financial support warranted. During this time, she also set up a steering committee of local opinion leaders to help guide the program. (In retrospect, steering committee was not the best choice of label.)

After about six weeks I facilitated a one-day visioning and planning activity. Participants were a diverse group recruited from the community by the steering committee. They strove to include all local interest groups. For the visioning activity I used a modified and much-shortened version of Search (Emery, 1999). It asked participants to specify an idealistic vision for their community. They then identified a number of current actionable projects worthwhile in their own right and also consistent with the vision.

For each project, a participant volunteered to be a liaison person. Their only task was to recruit a small project team of people who fervently wished the project to succeed. Project teams usually consisted mostly or entirely of people who would directly benefit if the project succeeded. A slightly more expanded description of this community program can be found in Dick (2007).

The QSBC project officer and I continued our involvement. So did the steering committee, instructed not to 'steer'. Their task was communication, not control. They assisted with coordination between project teams and with the wider community. We made an effort to include the manager of any local newspaper or radio station on the steering committee. Foreshadowing a theme that I return to later, it was often a struggle to discourage the opinion leaders on the committee from trying to control the projects. They were accustomed to hierarchies in which senior people usually directed others.

As with the university class (above), projects were legitimized by being chosen by whole-community representatives. This aided within-community coordination, as did steering-committee communication. The QSBC project officer ensured that QSBC and government requirements were met. This provided the beyond-community coordination. Most project teams did achieve project goals because, as direct stakeholders, they benefitted from it.

Subsequent experience with action learning in other settings has also helped me to understand why so many of these programs did achieve their goals. (See also Dick, 2017.)

2.3. Other action learning projects

Applying action learning in other settings, I was less assured of the commitment of the project team members. As with the university classes, I learned to take initial control, later deliberately relinquishing it. In an extended first session with a project team, I pursued five objectives, now described.

First, and by far the most important, I helped team members to experience each other as whole human beings, not as occupants of their work roles. For this purpose, I facilitated the strongest relationship building activities that team members consented to.

Second, I sought goal commitment by encouraging project teams to own their project. They were asked to think of the goals as outcomes, defined in outcome terms. They were asked, "What will indicate to you that you have been successful?"

Third, project teams identified and listed other stakeholders. Teams displayed the list visibly whenever they met. Before making any decision, they consulted the list to check that appropriate stakeholders had been involved.

Fourth, I desired project team members to understand and own the decision making and problem-solving processes they used. This was to help them to share responsibility for their cooperation as a team. For this, I facilitated a process that developed two (occasionally three) guidelines for how they wished to work together.

The guidelines were worded to be specific, actionable, and easily monitored. Again, the team posted them visibly each session. At the conclusion of every session, they reviewed how well they followed the guidelines. When they consistently achieved a guideline, they replaced it with another guideline on another desired aspect of their process.

Fifth, I was keen to strengthen their individual commitment to the project team and project. I invited them to identify an individual learning goal. It was to be important to them individually, while compatible with project goals and wider organizational requirements.

These five activities aided coordination within each team and with the rest of the organization. As before, I initially facilitated sessions, later relinquishing control to give project teams almost complete autonomy.

The final example from my own experience is of a large completely voluntary group with a structure that is deliberately minimal.

2.4. Australasian Facilitators Network

The Australasian Facilitators Network (AFN) is a self-organizing network of facilitators in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. About 800 facilitators subscribe to an email list to maintain contact. A website also provides information on the AFN and its planned events. Some facilitators stay connected with the AFN through more local volunteer networks, including in the state capitals of Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.

The AFN has no Constitution and no office-bearers. Its continued existence relies on individual and collective initiative. As one example of how this has worked in practice, each year since AFN's creation in 1998, a group of people within the network has volunteered to design and facilitate an annual conference or gathering. This has happened every year.

Coordination within AFN is easily achieved because there are almost no necessary ongoing requirements for it. Every AFN member is a free agent. If someone wishes to initiate an activity, they identify any interdependencies and negotiate coordination with others affected. It also helps that AFN members are facilitators, many highly skilled. Most believe in participation and autonomy.

Over the 25 years of the AFN's existence, certain norms to assist coordination have developed. For example, for some time now it has been common practice that each conference or gathering includes one session for a 'general assembly', at which people contribute suggestions for future changes. Another common recent practice is that the organizers of the previous year's gathering offer support or advice to those organizing the next gathering. Any of these practices could be overturned if members decided to do it. Mostly, though, there is enough commitment to them for them to be respected.

Comparing my experience of the three different situations, all are characterized by high autonomy for individuals or small groups. The culture of the system helps to provide continuity, encouraging certain attitudes and mindsets. You will notice parallels between these examples and the organizations now briefly described. The emphasis in the descriptions is again on how coordination is achieved.

3. Trail-blazing organizations

3.1. Morning Star

Morning Star is a tomato-processing company based in California. It has about 600 members in the tomato-growing off-peak, and several thousand during the annual peak. There is an owner. Everyone else is a 'colleague'. There are no middle managers.

How is lateral coordination achieved? Colleagues identify who depends on them, and on whom they depend. They meet with each of these colleagues, one at a time, to negotiate how to manage their interdependencies. The resulting colleague letters of understanding (CLOU's) are posted on the company intranet, accessible to other colleagues. CLOUs are revised as needed, and at least annually.

Some guidance is provided to the negotiating colleagues by protocols and templates. For example, templates illustrate the expected content of the CLOU's.

3.2. Joint Special Operations Command

The US General Stanley McChrystal was appointed to command the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in Afghanistan in 2003. As he reports in his 2015 book Team of teams, he found his forces in Afghanistan unable to respond quickly enough to the agile Al Qaeda enemy forces.

McChrystal therefore set up an alternative structure, bypassing the usual defense hierarchy. At weekly sessions, people of any rank could interact directly with others of any rank, to coordinate activities. JSOC became more agile, able to respond rapidly to new intelligence, often within hours rather than days.

3.3. Buurtzorg

Buurtzorg is a Dutch home care organization. It consists of its founder, Jos de Blok, and (in Holland) about 800 independent nursing teams. Each team of 10 to 12 home care nurses provides home care within a defined geographical area. Within Holland it has about 10,000 members. Each team undertakes that if it grows beyond 12 members it will split in two. Each team is responsible for all aspects of its operation. For example, it finds its own venue, recruits its clients, and maintains its own profit-and-loss statement. (See also Nandram, 2017.)

A backoffice of about 80 coaches and experts provides a team with whatever help they need to achieve full autonomy. As a team is responsible for a specific geographical area, little between-team coordination is required. Coordination is with their patients and suppliers of services within their own area. There is contact between teams, mainly to learn from one another by discussing their experience. A shared website assists.

This very devolved structure without middle managers achieves low costs. Also, measured patient and worker satisfaction are high.

3.4. Haier

Haier is a very large high-performing and profitable Chinese white goods manufacturer. Zhang Ruimin became Haier CEO in the 1980 s. With constant experimentation he gradually converted Haier into a diverse and highly responsive organization by developing an innovative structure. Now an organization of about 80,000 people, it consists of a large number of small microenterprises, each of between 10 and 15 people. A microenterprise pursues high quality service and high customer satisfaction with a specific product or service. Within this purpose, it is fully autonomous. Haier is now regarded as the world's leading manufacturer of household appliances. Cao (2018) describes it in detail.

Identifying a new opportunity, Haier members create a microenterprise. Each microenterprise manages its internal interdependencies. It also enters into other agreements as required, either within Haier or elsewhere. In other words, it identifies an opportunity offering performance and profit, then manages it directly.

These trail-blazing organizations, and the many others documented by Corporate Rebels, are more than usually effective. Joost Minnaar (2019a) has documented this on the Corporate Rebels website. All or almost all are characterised by high financial performance, satisfied customers, and employee enjoyment. Very few are imitated. On the Corporate Rebels website, Thomson (2021) asks, "Why are rebels so rare?"

Some organizations documented by Corporate Rebels have adopted a successful less-hierarchical structure, and then later reverted. Minnaar (2019b), one of the founders of Corporate Rebels, lists five examples of these 'poster boys of the future' that 'revert to traditional models'. He attributes the reversions to a change in leadership, a looming crisis, or both. Minnaar and the other Corporate Rebels founder Pim de Morree have also written a book about their experience (Minnaar & de Morree, 2020).

As I intimated earlier, I conclude that much of this is because the new structures violate assumptions held by many people about organizational governance and structure. Partly tacit, those assumptions are less accessible to conscious reasoning.

This conclusion fits within a wider set of considerations. In particular, there is a key difference between what I call indirect coordination and direct coordination. In the former, coordination is provided by someone other than the people whose behavior is being coordinated. In the second, those with the interdependencies are themselves responsible for coordination.

To situate the examples within a wider literature, I now consider in turn the effects of evolution and complexity.

4. Evolution, individual and collective

Three elements of our evolutionary inheritance seem particularly relevant in explaining a common reaction to some of the newer organizational structures. Two of the elements are part of the sociological concept of homo duplex — that we are both individuals and social beings. The distinction is credited to Émile Durkheim (1914). He believed that individual inheritance determines who we are. Our sociality, on the other hand, he attributed to social teaching, especially via religion.

Present understanding suggests that is only partly true. Systems do socialize their members into certain behaviors. However, it also makes sense to regard sociality as at least partly a natural aspect of who we are. Our species once mostly lived in small, egalitarian hunter-gatherer groups. Christopher Boehm (2012) reported some of the evidence for this, from past and present tribal groups. The same social tendencies have been documented in non-human social primates and some other species (Walraven, 2019), though usually less prominent than individual competitiveness.

Obviously, traditional evolutionary selection partly determines human nature. Individuals whose qualities best fit their immediate environment survive to have more progeny. Sociality is also due to survival, in this case of the whole tribe. Individual survival is more likely if their tribe survives. Individual selection is thus a component of evolution of all species. Our species, on the other hand, spent most of its existence cooperating within tribal hunter-gatherer cultures — for 200,000 years or more. Then with the advent of agriculture about 8,000 years ago individualistic competition again became valorized. The industrial revolution of about 200 years ago amplified that trend.

What, then, of the third component I mentioned? It is depicted in much of the work by Chris Argyris, especially with Don Schön. Together they wrote an important book on individual links between beliefs and actions (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Four years later they extended their models to apply to organizations (Argyris and Schön, 1978). The heart of their approach, especially in Argyris's hands, is a simple but counterintuitive notion. In Argyris's own words:

> "Although we say we value openness, honesty, integrity, respect and caring, we act in ways that undercut these values —not just once in a while, on very rare occasions, but regularly and routinely—whenever we face threatening or otherwise difficult situations." (Argyris, 2010, p. 11).

It is now understood that some primitive parts of our brain have a fast connection to our senses. Sensing threat they can take over the brain and control our reaction. This is the response that Goleman (2011) popularized as the amygdala hijack. Our conscious brain is not involved. It may even sometimes be blind to what is happening.

All this is about who we are, as individuals and as a social species. It helps to explain why we structure social systems as we do. Meanwhile, as this has been occurring the world may be on the verge of becoming less stable and less predictable.

5. The global trajectory of increasing complexity

For nearly two decades, futurists such as the Millennium Project team (Glenn, Florescu & the Millennium Project team, 2017) documented global developments. As they watched, the world accelerated and continues to do so. This constrains what future organizational structures may be possible. Complexity theory explains why.

Edward Lorenz, mathematician and meteorologist, illustrates this point. In the 1970 s he drew attention to the consequences of high complexity on predictability. The title of his 1972 conference paper attracted the attention of his colleagues, and more widely. His paper title (1972) asked, "does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?" The incident that triggered his own understanding is an illustration.

On his modest computer Lorenz had programmed a weather simulation. With 12 interacting variables it generated realistic simulations of weather events. On one occasion, Lorenz noticed an interesting pattern in the computer printout. To watch it again as it developed, he keyed in the 12 values from a point in the printout and restarted the program from that point. The printout followed a somewhat different, and eventually very different, trajectory. This was surprising. Computers are deterministic machines. Inputs determine outputs.

Then an important realization dawned. He had typed the values of the 12 variables to the three decimal places visible in the printout. Internally, however, the computer worked to a precision of six decimal places. A dramatic conclusion follows. Changing the input variables by no more than one thousandth of a unit eventually generated different outcomes. Expressed differently, the system of 12 interacting variables was essentially unpredictable.

To say this differently again … In a system even with many elements, but not very interactive, linear and reductionist methods of analysis can be effective. One or more experts with appropriate expertise can understand what happens. Planning is possible. Beyond a certain level of interaction this is no longer true. The situation has become unpredictable. In an unpredictable situation, trial and error must replace planning. In the large and growing literature on complexity, I find David Snowden's formulation very practical (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Snowden & Rancati, 2021).

It seems to me that many current organizational decisions are based on assumptions that are a reasonable fit for a less complex world. Peter Senge (2006), inspired by Argyris, called these assumptions mental models. Such traditional mental models, I propose, inhibit organizations from adopting some recent successful experiments in organizational structure. The mental models support traditional ideas about organizational culture and structure.

6. Conclusions

The examples I've described share some recurring features. In all, hierarchy has been minimized or avoided. Coordination is mostly achieved directly by those carrying out actions, not indirectly by someone else. This may also have the effect of reducing the total amount of coordination required.

It may be this feature that discourages many organizations from imitating. I wonder if the cooperatives described in the lead article by Ravn et al., operating as they do as a hierarchy, appear less violating of assumptions and thus less risky. If so, this can be an important advantage of hierarchy.

Two other subsidiary issues may warrant mention. First, in some situations there are wider interdependencies and requirements to be honored. What then? My experience has been that most people are comfortable having specified limits that constrain their autonomy.

Second, most examples on the Corporate Rebels bucket list were initiated by a single person, or occasionally a small team. The initial shift is typically driven by a person who assumes control, and later deliberately relinquishes it, as I now do. My own examples illustrate that during the initial phase, negotiating expectations with participants can increase participant support for change. Sometimes, skills or understanding must also be developed.

Let me now briefly address six issues proposed to me by the editorial team for this special issue of the journal. I think all are important.

First, can we learn from existing and prior examples? From the examples I have described, not fully. Direct imitation assumes that organizations are very similar, and the world predictable. We've seen that this often isn't so. General features of prior successes may be taken as a guide. If a situation is almost certainly unpredictable, some trial and error is also necessary.

Second, Mondragon and Norway illustrate that culture is important. My examples convey a similar message despite their structure being different. I suggest above that industrial democracy combined with hierarchy may be less culturally challenging to existing mental models than the Corporate Rebels bucket list organizations.

Third, how relevant are unions? In experiences I've not discussed here, I've found that direct involvement of local union officials can be helpful, and sometimes necessary. Uninvolved, they may respond in an adversarial manner. (In an earlier career path, I was for a time a local union representative in addition to my role as a draftsperson.)

Fourth, a key theme in the lead article by Ravn et al. is the balancing of cultural and sociotechnical systems. This has been a theme, not always transparently, in my own discussion. The way in which structures achieve the balancing is important. People with greater autonomy can control their processes and equipment, not be controlled by them.

Fifth (and related to the first), documented start-ups and other transformations eventually achieved success often only after a period of trial and error. Could they have avoided the trial and error by learning from existing examples? For me, the answer is — only to a limited extent. In a sufficiently complex world, I believe the future is too unpredictable. In this, I think futurists and complexity theorists would agree.

Sixth, what about the issue of scale and scaling? Does it matter? There are logical reasons to assume so. Consider the trivial example of adding one person to an existing team of three. Formerly there were three pair interdependencies to manage. Now there are six. Following Dunbar (e. g. 1998) I used to assume that an upper limit for shared decision making was about 150 people. In fact, as most of us associate with more than one organization or community, I thought that 150 was usually too many. The examples above demonstrate that this need not be so. Scale is an issue, though it can be sidestepped.

Finally, let me place all of this within its broader context. If the rate of change continues to accelerate, we may approach a major transition point — a paradigm shift. I think that most systems will then face a choice. They can attempt to honor their existing mindsets and persist with traditional approaches — which I expect to fail. Or they can embrace what I see as the most likely structural paradigm for the future. They can replace much (though not all) conventional planning with trial and error and restore more autonomy to individuals and teams.

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